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Book Review:

Class Cultures in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe

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Class Cultures in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe by Dražen Cepić, 2020, Routledge.

Despite many calls to ‘bring class back in’ to the analysis of societal relations in the post-Yugoslav and post-socialist space, empirical work placing class at the centre of the analysis remains scarce. Dražen Cepić’s book “Class Cultures in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe” is a welcome addition to this lacuna. As Cepić himself argues, while class is seen as an outdated concept from the socialist-era, people nonetheless implicitly use their own position in the system of socio-economic inequality as a frame of reference (p. 13). Based on his dissertation work at EUI, he investigates changes in social class after the transition from socialism, how class is viewed by people of different classes, and the various mechanisms of class closure and how they affect people’s social identities. By employing a qualitative network approach via in-depth interviews, Cepić is able to shed light on various aspects of social life related to the class dimension, including the realm of values, identity building, and friendship making.

Theoretically, Cepić grounds his discussion of class in Pierre Bourdieu’s class distinctions via habitus, but importantly combines Michèle Lamont’s work on symbolic boundaries with Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot’s work on “orders of worth” (p. 19). Whereas Bourdieu saw people as prisoners of habitus, and Boltanski and Thevenot saw them as resembling jugglers, capable of voluntarily switching between different orders of worth, Cepić highlights the importance of Lamont’s approach, which emphasises situational factors less, instead exploring how people themselves elaborate on the criteria they use when evaluating themselves and people around them (p. 21). Cepić is thus able to focus on the class dimension while exploring identities, feelings of self-worth, meaning, and symbolic boundaries, which actors draw while evaluating the people and things around them (p. 2, 13). In doing this, he explores the private, intimate dimension of class boundaries, where class is taken as a problem of day-to-day existence rather than an abstraction.

The main research questions thus involve both micro-level issues of class positions in various manifestations in post-socialist Croatia, as well as the broader question of the extent to which the socialist project of destratification was successful in the long run. On the micro level, Cepić examines how people feel about and present themselves vis-à-vis others. The main assumption behind the work is that what people think about us is as important as what we think about ourselves; therefore, understanding identity-making and social relations needs to focus on both how individuals assert identities, but also how they seek validation of this identity from others (p. 14). On a broader level, Cepić investigates the extent to which the socialist project of egalitarianism and destratification left lasting marks on Croatia today.

Methodologically, Cepić relies on 65 in-depth interviews with upper-middle class and working class respondents in Croatia, using the technique of grounded qualitative social network analysis. This means that he asked interviewees to list the top 20 people they saw as important in their lives, and had the interviewees draw an ‘affective map’ of these relationships in terms of their importance and closeness, using the NetDraw software (Borgatti). The interviewees were then asked about the details of their relationships, the background, affective aspects, and so on, and were also asked general questions like – what is the essential feature shared by all or some of the people in the network, what are they proud of, what do they share or not share, what does the respondent see as their main advantage, and so on. The focus on ‘important people’ allowed Cepić

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to examine the broader field of sociabilities, not just friendships but also kinship, neighbourhood, and workplace realms, while asking questions about the nature of the relationships allowed Cepić to capture their values, views on money, cultural consumption, how they understand success, how they draw boundaries, etc., without asking about class explicitly. At the end of the interviews, Cepić also asked about how the relationships had changed since the 1990s, and asked respondents to reflect on their own childhood and relationships, which allowed him to capture how these relationships changed through time. The sample is occupation-based, drawing respondents from two groups: the upper-middle class (doctors, finance professionals, architects, social and cultural specialists) primarily from Zagreb, and the working class (17 respondents), drawn primarily from textile, electric and oil factories in Zagreb and Čakovec.

The book is structured in four parts. The first part, given in Chapter 2, focuses on the Croatian upper class. Cepić looks at the role culture plays in drawing symbolic boundaries: how culture is used as an 'order of worth' or legitimizing principle in the construction of self-worth, symbolic boundaries, and actual social networks of upper class people. In his interviewee's responses, he finds evidence for both culture as an intellectual stance and a guarantee of cosmopolitan values, but also as a means of drawing negative boundaries. He shows that "what by convention is called culture, presents one of the unifying patterns that has the potential to explain variations in the processes of constructive subjective and objective boundaries between the classes" (p. 24). Chapter 3 continues by examining the new class of post-socialist entrepreneurs, their narratives of success, and how they adapted to the new regime. Here, Cepić looks at those individuals who were able to grasp the possibilities of the new system, in which income dispersion expanded, the labour market was transformed with new jobs and opportunities, and new class distinctions in the domain of consumption were made. He argues that the transition laid the basis for expanding inequalities, enabled new patterns of shaping social ties and new mechanisms of social closure (p. 61).

Cepić also focuses on the working class, whose account is given in Chapter 4. This chapter asks how the working class, or the 'losers' of the transition, responded to the challenges of the new system, along with unemployment, decreasing incomes, and deindustrialisation, and how this transition is reflected in their feelings of self-worth. In this way, the chapter echoes Michèle Lamont's *Dignity of Working Men*, which focused on the strategies undertaken by blue-collar workers in the US and France to maintaining a sense of dignity and self-worth, but showing the additional complexity of the post-socialist context, where Cepić's interviewees went from being exemplars of socialist virtue ("back then, we felt like gentlemen"; "you *meant* something, people looked at you with respect", p. 93) to 'near pariahs' in the new system. Cepić skilfully portrays what happened to those left with little to capitalise upon, in sharp contrast to the interviewees in the previous two chapters.

Finally, friendships and social capital as class privilege are explored in Chapter 5, which focuses on those friendships that transgress class boundaries, asking what holds these cross-class friendships together. Whereas during socialism, aspects of the system such as cheap tickets to theatres, cinemas, parks, sports events among others, allowed for cross-class sociability, in post-socialist societies, differences in material circumstances largely led to a homophilic structure of friendships. Yet, Cepić shows that present-day post-socialist societies to a certain degree still continue to be influenced by their state socialist past, arguing that the egalitarian tradition of Yugoslav socialism and its corresponding 'order of worth' provided an appropriate environment for interclass friendships (p. 114). The last chapter, Chapter 6, returns to the larger question of whether the socialist project of destratification was successful. He concludes that: "the post-Socialist transition should be regarded as a complex process containing multiple and overlapping social and cultural structures, and providing different motivations and means of action, enabling agency and allowing actors to be something more than a mere 'effect of the structure'" (p. 25). While the consolidation of the capitalist system has indeed crystallized social classes and introduced new forms of class closure, Cepić shows that some of the egalitarian legacies of the old regime are still alive and well, as enduring socio-cultural structures persist "both in a sense of failing to build one's feeling of self-worth on a class basis", but also in cross-class friendships.

Overall, the book is an excellent addition to our understanding of the evolution of class and class cultures after the transition from socialism. With rich narratives from both “winners” and “losers” of this transition, and a novel focus on relationships and social networks, the book greatly contributes to our understanding of the ways in which ideas about class are viewed by both working class and middle class people, and the extent to which people’s social identities are shaped by ideas of economic success, culture, and friendship networks in today’s post-socialist Croatia. Cepić manages to avoid the pitfall of presenting the ‘upper’ or ‘working’ class as a fixed, culturally determined group, instead highlighting the complexities and intimate ‘lived’ dimension of people’s lives, as well as the points of contact and contradictions between these worldviews. The methodological approach is novel and effective, giving an excellent pointer to other scholars interested in ethnographic explorations of class. What can be pointed out as perhaps the only weakness is the absence of additional chapters applying this theoretical lens and methodological approach to other post-socialist contexts, to better explore the extent to which Cepić’s findings in Croatia are indicative of broader post-socialist legacies, or can be tied to specific socio-cultural constellations of the Yugoslav model of socialism.

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