
These two volumes are the product of two conferences organized by the international Center of the Eberhard-Karls University of Tübingen, Germany. Held in Tübingen in 1992 and Visegrad in 1993, they brought together scholars from the Czech Republic, Germany (both the West and the former German Democratic Republic), Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. Like most collections of conference papers, the contributions are of uneven quality. While some of the chapters are polished pieces of scholarship, others still seem like raw conference papers. Nevertheless, these volumes have considerable merit because of the quality of the best contributions.

The political culture volume, edited by Gerd Meyer of Tübingen — one of the leading German political scientists working on Eastern Europe — is devoted to exploring the subjective-cultural aspects of the recent period of democratic transition (1989-92) in East Central Europe. It contains essays both in German and in English. The first section of the book, a long essay by Meyer, does an excellent job of summarizing the various factors which have contributed to changes in values, mentalities, behaviors and the like in the period following the collapse of Communist regimes in the region. The remaining papers are divided into three sections: "Democratization of Political Culture: Historical Foundations and the Search for a New Identity," "The New Publicity and the Role of the Intelligentsia," and "Civic Movements, Electoral Behavior, and the New Party System."

The most interesting work is to be found in the last section. The highlights here include an excellent analysis of the foundational elections of 1990 in Hungary by Gábor Tóka and Radosław Markowski’s analysis of non-voters in Poland. Also quite interesting is an analysis by Lubomir Brokl and Zdenka Mansfeldová of how the poor fit between electoral outcomes in the Czech lands and Slovakia in 1992 contributed to the dissolution of their federation. Stanislaw Gebethner’s examination of the Polish party system at the time of the parliamentary elections of 1991 usefully tracks the complex development of the polity there, and Frantisek Svátek’s piece on the new political elite of Czechoslovakia places the dissolution of Civic Forum and the ongoing quarrels of Prime Minister Klaus and President Havel in a helpful cultural context.

This first volume would have been improved by studies that tackled the question of political culture in the more systematic and empirical spirit of Almond and Verba’s Civic Culture or Inglehart’s Culture Shift. Such works are classics because they use culture to explain important political phenomena (e.g., democracy in the case of Almond and Verba; weakening of the classic pattern of class-based politics in industrial democracies in the case of Inglehart). Considering that the conference on which this book was based occurred in the summer of 1992, this is perhaps too much to ask. However, those hoping to find this kind of systematic analysis of political culture will have to wait until such research has the time to come to fruition.

The legitimation volume, edited by Andras Bozóki, a prolific Hungarian political sociologist, returns to the same cultural issues to study democratization, but focuses on the question of legitimation in order to consider the prospects for consolidation. As in the earlier volume the contributions are organized thematically. The first section, "Democratic Legitimacy: Approaches
and Concepts," includes another wide ranging overview by Gerd Meyer and a provocative essay by Rozóki. This latter piece is particularly good in conceptualizing politically active components of society in different phases of the history of postwar East Central Europe and in clarifying different attitudes toward political authority. It is a useful think-piece for treating questions of order, stability, and legitimation.

The following section on "The impact of the Past on Democratic Transition" looks at political culture and the question of legitimation in historical terms. There are three pieces here (by Benno Ennker, Irma Hanke, and Ellen Krause) which delve into the legacy of authoritarianism in Germany (Imperial, Nazi, and Communist) and provide a solid and focussed discussion of the difficulties of overcoming a troubled past. This section also includes a piece by Máté Szabo which breaks new ground by discussing how a change of political system (in this case in Hungary) has altered the political possibilities for social movements.

The last two sections of the book "Democratic Legitimacy and Political Culture" and "Creating Democratic Legitimacy? Perceptions of Social and Economic Issues," are dominated by studies that use public opinion polling, values and attitudes surveys, economic and occupational data, and other quantifiable indicators to study the problem of legitimation in new democracies. Here certain authors run into problems with their data sets. In particular, the pieces by Markowski and Tóka go too far in trying to tease results out of data that do not seem well-designed to answer questions on legitimacy. For instance, Markowski finds that his substitute measure for legitimacy, trust in institutions, is strongly correlated to satisfaction with the political system. While he recognizes that this finding seems tautological, he abstains from addressing this problem. It strikes me that demonstrating that this result is more than trivial should be central to his interpretation of his findings.

Tóka, relying on the same data set also finds that what they have collected is not sufficient to distinguish between support for an individual government from that for the system generally; thus he cannot really get at an essential aspect of legitimation in democracies — that it is possible for an individual government to lose support without compromising the legitimacy of the system. One of Tóka's central findings is that economic factors explain a large part of support/lack of support for democratic governments in East Central Europe. Again this is a problem because support based on economic performance does not build legitimacy which consists of a moral commitment to or an affinity for the political system.

Another limitation of this sort of research is that it attempts to make generalizations on the basis of a single sample taken at a fixed point in time (in this case October 1991). The problem with this is that all four countries studied (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic) were at different stages in the process of reform. For example, Poland was nearly at the nadir of its recession because it moved earliest and most decisively to reform its economy. It also was in the middle of a highly divisive electoral campaign. Surely, data collected from a month like this needs to be treated with care. While Tóka does make periodic attempts to take account of process or individual case variables, he does not do so systematically.

Finally, one needs to ask how a data set collected less than two years after foundational elections in most of the cases studied can be used to generalize on questions of system legitimation. Clearly, if such data collection, if specifically designed to get at the question of legitimation, is repeated over time and takes into account case-specific contingent variables, it stands a good chance of saying something profound about legitimation. As it stands now, its findings