Book Reviews

Ljiljana Šarić, Karen Gammelgaard and Kjetil Rå Hauge, eds.  
Transforming National Holidays: Identity discourse in the West and South Slavic countries, 1985–2010 (Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture).  

The transformation of national discourse and holidays throughout the historical changes of Eastern Europe after the Cold War is attentively analyzed in Transforming National Holidays, a collection of twelve essays on the results of research by various authors edited by Ljiljana Šarić, Karen Gammelgaard and Kjetil Rå Hauge.

The essays offer in-depth perspectives on the historical contexts in which European national culture was revitalized by societies in search of a new identity after the communist era.

The line of interpretation chosen by the editors stresses the relationship between collective identities and the representations of the nation. It evaluates the changes of national holidays during the transition from the Cold War to the new Europe, and contributes to the international debate on collective memory and its influence in society. The nine Western and Southern Slavic countries mentioned in the book provide a diverse environment. In addition, they are tackled with a strong and clear methodological frame, whose main features are shown below, and this makes it a helpful tool for scholars interested in the topic.

History, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and literature join together in this book to offer a wide spectrum on the subject. The transnational setting used by the authors is today fundamental to researchers interested in national-oriented topics such as national holidays. Since Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan’s call to go beyond Pierre Nora’s French-influenced interpretation of the sites of memory and their rituals (Winter and Sivan 1999: 1–5), any analysis on the matter must consider the limits of a national perspective.

Furthermore, the editors provide a specific range of questions, asking the authors to define, for example, the relevant agents responsible for the making of the public discourse about a usable past related to the commemorations, the role of linguistic patterns along public speeches and mass media, or the main topoi in the different national public events. Thus, a wide collection
of conceptual tools became prominent instruments to demonstrate their usefulness. Among these are Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Fairclough 2001), Dramatistic Pentad (Burke 1989), James Wertsch’s (2002; 2008) semiotics approach to collective memory, and Aleida Assmann’s (2009) model for approaches in dealing with the past.

The twelve essays included in the publication show an adequate level of integration and conjunction, although they differ not only in the national festivities they cover, but in the kind of analytical framework they apply as well as the typology of sources. The contributions can be divided into different categories. Geographically, half of the reports concern former Yugoslav republics, while the remaining essays are related to other countries of the wider region. It is possible to recognize a group of essays focused on public speeches, another dealing with newspapers’ front pages, and a third group based on a broader set of sources.

As previously stated, the book involves a historical context in which European national culture was revitalized by societies in search of a new identity after the communist era. This means that there was a widespread tendency of revaluation of past traditions, or the same “invention of tradition,” particularly concentrated on pre-1945 political issues and events, or on symbols and languages from the Christian heritage.

Among the main facts recounted by the authors, there is the changing relationship between religious and political holidays (Šarić, Hałas, Hauge, Bielicki). Bosnia-Herzegovina represents the unique case where it is impossible to appoint a national holiday (Mønnensland), because of the presence of different ethnic and religious identities in an unstable political system.

Another very valuable theme developed here is the role of myth and its function in the nation building process. Kjetil Rå Hauge underline this aspect in the Bulgarian context, exploiting Arve Thorsen’s (2000) observation on the mythical dimension of civic celebrations, and Marko Soldić, reflecting on the Macedonian Ilinden, develops a useful application of Donald Tuzin’s (1997) treatment of creation of myths, as well as Levi Strauss’ classic structuralist approach on the subject.

The European Union and its influence on the construction of the post-communist identities is present everywhere in these pages. Not surprisingly, it seems that a reference to the EU is often used as a rhetorical screen to cover up the most nationalist public discourses. This is particularly evident in the essays on Poland (Hałas, Ensink and Sauer), Serbia (Šarić), Croatia (Pavlaković) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Mønnensland).

The transformation of the national discourse on the history of the nation shifts through time, as reported by all the essays, but two authors provide