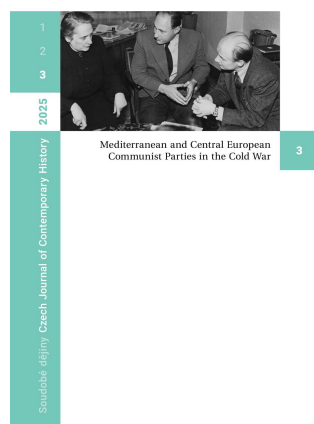


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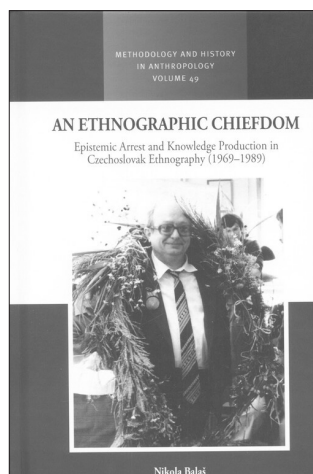
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On “Epistemic Arrest” and Different Forms of Capital A Bourdieusian Analysis of Czechoslovak Ethnography

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BALAŠ, Nikola:

An Ethnographic Chieftdom: Epistemic Arrest and Knowledge Production in Czechoslovak Ethnography (1969–1989).

New York, Berghahn Books 2024, 356 pages,
ISBN 978-1-80539-674-1.

In this book, Nikola Balaš, examines the recent history of the discipline that has been referred to in Czech as *národopis*, *etnografie* and *etnologie* in different periods of the twentieth century. Moreover, after 1989, the discipline also had to define its position in relation to sociocultural anthropology, which happens to be the author's own disciplinary background. The book thus joins a recent wave of interest in the history of Czechoslovak ethnography; apart from Jiří Hlaváček and Hana Bortlová-Vondráková's earlier oral history of the discipline,¹ *An Ethnographic Chieftdom* has been published almost concurrently with Marie Bahenská and Lydie Petráňová's Czech-language collective volume on ethnography and folkloristics in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1989.² However, the present

¹ HLAVÁČEK, Jiří – BORTLOVÁ-VONDRÁKOVÁ, Hana (eds.): *Mezi státním plánem a badatelskou svobodou: Československá etnografie a folkloristika ve vzpomínkách pamětníků*. Praha, Academia 2018.

² BAHENSKÁ, Marie – PETRÁŇOVÁ, Lydie et al.: *Horizonty bádání: Etnografie a folkloristika v českých zemích v letech 1945–1989*. Praha, Academia 2024.

book's significance extends beyond a mere chronological account of the developments – and taxonomical changes – the discipline underwent in socialist Czechoslovakia. Its ambition is to interrogate the mechanisms of scientific knowledge production in state socialism.

A central tenet of this inquiry is Balaš's assertion that the discipline of ethnography – the preferred term employed during the period of normalization in the 1970s and 1980s, where the book's primary focus resides – was characterized by "epistemic arrest". This term refers to what Balaš sees as a lack of a "culture of contention" within the discipline that would drive forward knowledge production and enable individuals within ethnography to further their positions. In other words, ethnographers seldom engaged in critical debates concerning each other's work in a manner reminiscent of Western anthropology, a field with which the author draws parallels. The book posits that this dearth of critical engagement can be attributed to the field's power structure. To demonstrate this, Balaš offers a Bourdieusian reading of the development of ethnography and convincingly demonstrates that bringing Pierre Bourdieu's sociology to the study of state socialism offers an illuminating interpretive frame for this period.

Adopting a perspective informed by Bourdieu's field theory, *An Ethnographic Chieftdom* explores the practice of normalization-era ethnography not only in terms of its intellectual production, but also via other factors, particularly the different types of capital that enabled individuals to secure and further their position within the discipline. This is because, in contrast to Thomas Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions,³ which Balaš also extensively discusses in the book's first chapter, Bourdieu's field theory views the field of science as being produced not only by epistemic forces, but also by a variety of other factors.

Consequently, Balaš contends that within the context of late socialist Czechoslovakia a number of significant sources of power, or forms of capital, exerted influence over the scientific field. Of these, the most important – though not all-important – was what Balaš terms "party capital". Membership or candidacy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*) was a determining factor in facilitating career advancement, yet Balaš persuasively demonstrates that it was not necessarily a prerequisite for obtaining employment in scientific institutions or even publishing scientific works, as other forms of capital could also play a significant role.

Another type of capital that could present significant advantages for its bearer was what Balaš calls "clandestine capital", meaning contacts with the *Státní bezpečnost* (State Security, or secret police), including being an agent or informer.

³ KUHN, Thomas: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1962.

This form of capital, however, is arguably given least attention in the book. While the author claims that such clandestine capital could further one's career, little evidence is provided – for instance through records of the Security Services Archives (*Archiv bezpečnostních složek*) – that would illustrate this claim with specific examples.

A totalitarian interpretation of the socialist period would see party and clandestine capital as the two most important sources of power. *An Ethnographic Chieftdom* puts forward the argument that such an account would be limited, as other types of capital were also available to actors within the field. The Bourdieusian framework allows the author to effectively dispel the assumption that critical discussion was stifled by the dominance of Marxism-Leninism as an intellectual and political paradigm, held in place by a repressive apparatus. Conversely, the utilization of alternative forms of capital afforded considerable flexibility in the nature of scholarship that could be pursued within the discipline, unencumbered by the strictures of Marxism-Leninism. At the same time, the book also counters the equally widespread interpretation of politically unorthodox practices within state socialism as "islands of freedom" (*ostrůvky svobody* in Czech). Such a view, Balaš suggests, places too much emphasis on the actions of individuals, overlooking structural conditions, which field theory can help explain.

A notable method of compensating for the absence of party capital was ethnographic capital, which encompassed professional expertise and mastery of the discipline. Using specific examples, Balaš shows that this did matter, revealing that scientific works were published not merely as lip service to the prevailing Marxist-Leninist ideology, but as scientifically valid in their own right, drawing upon alternative intellectual sources. The practice of aligning one's findings with the prevailing ideology was predominantly adopted by individuals aspiring to managerial positions within the field. However, it was not a prerequisite for activity in the field as such. The book demonstrates the author's familiarity with the extensive collection of ethnographic works produced at the Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (*Ústav pro etnografii a folkloristiku Československé akademie věd*) and the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies (*Katedra etnografie a folkloristiky*) at Charles University, the two institutions on which the author focuses. Balaš is thus partly an insider, as he is now affiliated as a researcher and lecturer with both successor institutions to the abovementioned Institute and Department. However, as a scholar of a younger generation, he is not a contemporary witness to the events he recounts and thus maintains analytical distance from the subject matter. Despite the focus on Prague, the text also acknowledges the separate domains of Moravian and Slovak ethnography, though these are not the subject of detailed analysis. Much of the book rests on thorough and convincing readings of ethnographic production published in the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, a significant source of power was social capital or, in other words, the various informal ties, obligations, favours and other practices necessary for “getting things done”. The book’s argument posits that this form of capital caused a disruption to the autonomy of the field of ethnography, “because its existence contributed significantly to diverting ethnographers from engaging with each other by means of critical discussion” (p. 263). It therefore helped create the conditions for what Balaš terms “epistemic arrest”. One could, of course, remark here that the power of social capital in the form of informal economies of favour over the importance of economic capital was characteristic of late socialism as such, whether speaking of the field of scientific knowledge production or, for example, the provisioning of consumer goods. In this sense, a Bourdieusian framework can be useful also for analysing different aspects of state socialist social realities.

Importantly, Balaš’s argument for epistemic arrest does not equate to asserting that the prevailing paradigm in ethnography was positivism. On the contrary, the book goes to some length to illustrate that “even the most descriptive works can be shown to have represented their subject matter in relation to a particular ethnic (or national) culture or tradition, a particular social (that is, class) culture or tradition” (p. 166). The argument presented in the book suggests that the phenomenon of epistemic arrest occurred because the need for mutual criticism and competition among scholars was not a prerequisite for advancing one’s career in the field. This could be achieved more effectively by the use of party, social or clandestine capital.

The pivotal figure in this narrative is Antonín Robek (1931–2008) – the “chief” of the late socialist ethnographic world in Prague. Robek presided over the two prominent institutions of Prague ethnography: the Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and the Department of Ethnography and Folklore Studies at Charles University. Robek was instrumental in the functioning of the field, leveraging significant party capital and serving as its ideological guardian.

While the book is focused on a specific field and a particularly dominant figure within it, it has the ambition to contribute substantially to our understanding of the production of scientific knowledge in late socialism in general. This is perhaps also one of the pitfalls of the book, as so much within the field of ethnography seems to rest on the very specific persona of Robek. Despite Robek’s central role as “chief”, readers are presented with limited personal information about him. In addition to the various forms of capital examined by Balaš, it is conceivable that other, so-called soft factors may have contributed to Robek’s attainment of his exceptional status. Though Robek is described as possessing charisma, his personality is not extensively discussed, leaving readers to ponder the nature of his character. Was he approachable and generous or strict and

overbearing? Did he exude authority in personal contact or was he informal in interactions with others? Readers can make some subjective inferences from the photograph on the cover of the book, which shows the bespectacled and balding figure of Robek draped in a wreath-like folkloristic artefact, looking somewhat amused or possibly also slightly embarrassed and perhaps even undignified, depending on how much one wants to read into his expression. It is reasonable to hypothesize that for an individual who has been so deeply involved in a specific academic discipline over an extended period, the manner in which his presence was perceived and experienced by his colleagues also played a significant role in that particular field. However, the book does not provide much insight into this aspect.

Another question the persona of Robek raises is the extent to which such a large accumulation of power was typical also of other academic disciplines in late socialism and whether there the concentration of different forms of capital was not in fact more diffuse, which – it is possible to hypothesize – probably had effects on how those disciplines were practiced. The final part of the book, which attempts to extend the argument about epistemic arrest to Czech academia more broadly, is perhaps the most thought-provoking. It is, of course, always possible to propose counterexamples, and one is mentioned in the book itself: Czechoslovak economists, in contrast to ethnographers, critically debated various economic concepts and, as a number of studies have by now shown, were conversant with Western economic paradigms and critical of the prevailing planned economy well before the collapse of state socialism in 1989. This prompts the question of which factors influenced the field of economics to yield outcomes that contrast with those observed in ethnography. A similar analysis of different scientific disciplines would likely reveal somewhat different emphases on different forms of capital. But to understand where those emphases lay, it would, arguably, be necessary to look beyond just the structural forces and take into account various idiosyncrasies of personality or material conditions.

In the book's final chapter, Balaš posits that the structure of Czech academia in general hinders critical debate even today. This is an acute observation which has much to do with the field's small size. Within a setting where individuals are personally acquainted with one another, informal ties – the power of social capital – are likely to yield better results than the merits of seemingly free intellectual debate, which in such a setting is never free from personal concerns and relations in any case. A case in point is the discipline of historiography, which has seemingly produced lively debates in the past decades on the totalitarian vs. revisionist interpretation of state socialism. Yet, I would argue, these discussions have been less the mark of genuine critical contention and more a proxy expression of a political conflict, where the past is used to demarcate ideological positions in the present. This conflict is moreover coloured by numerous personal allegiances

and antipathies in the field.⁴ We may thus ask whether the significance of social capital over other forms was characteristic only of late socialism and whether it continues to play a very similar role even today.

Overall, *An Ethnographic Chieftdom* is an important and illuminating contribution to the history of knowledge production in state socialism. The book presents a theoretically-driven argument, yet is meticulously researched in terms of sources, based on extensive archival research as well as interviews. While historians tend to proceed inductively from their sources before arriving at theoretical conclusions, as an anthropologist, Balaš demonstrates how a well-chosen theoretical framework can reveal new perspectives on historical circumstances. As such, the book offers a valuable contribution to understanding the complex interactions of power and knowledge in state socialism.

Keywords:

Czechoslovakia; state socialism; normalization; history of science; ethnography; folkloristics; Pierre Bourdieu; Antonín Robek

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⁴ Some aspects of this conflict were recently analysed in SUK, Jiří (ed.): *Dějiny v exekuci: Jak přemýšlet a psát o komunismu*. Praha, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2024.