

# **HOW DO LEADING SCHOLARS FROM CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE ASSESS THE STATE OF THEIR REGION POST-1989?**

**ELŻBIETA HAŁAS, NICOLAS MASLOWSKI (EDS.),  
*POLITICS OF SYMBOLIZATION ACROSS CENTRAL  
AND EASTERN EUROPE***

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Symbols are different from signs. The latter merely point the way to go. Symbols are more pressing. They can stir you out of your seat, get you on your feet and put you on the march. Every successful agitator or leader has a handy pack of symbols in their briefcase to wave around their head when addressing an audience. Evidently, symbols can be dangerous. Their typical mix of accommodating ambiguity and nagging urgency gives them multiple capacities – not least to soothe, unsettle, excite, or terrify. Often all at the same time.

Evidently, politics and symbols go together. Elżbieta Hałas and Nicolas Maslowski explore this relationship in *Politics of Symbolization across Central and Eastern Europe*. They have produced an excellent collection of papers on the politics of symbolisation across Central and Eastern Europe. The resulting text is a smoothly integrated theoretical and empirical survey. It is focused on the political transformations that have occurred since 1989.

The collection brings together scholars from Croatia, Estonia, Poland, Slovenia, Serbia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, and the Nether-

lands. Its range is impressive, encompassing both the body/mind interface and the interplay between sociological mechanisms and historical forces.

The editors' introductory analysis of semiosis, the process of creating, expressing, and symbolically objectifying meanings, is superb. Well integrated, compact, and comprehensive, it moves with ease from French pragmatic sociology to the Platonic *Organon*. This introduction is complemented by contributions from Hubert Knoblauch, Peeter Selg and Paul Blokker in the first section of this collection, entitled "Spaces of Semiosis and Politics of Symbolization."

The themes of spatiality, sociality, symbolisation, and politics are prominent. Knoblauch sees the corona crisis as part of an ongoing refiguration of spaces, centred on tension between closed containers and unbounded networks. Selg dissects the European migrant crisis as a "wicked" problem challenging political semiotics. Blokker decodes the Polish constitution as a core symbolic framework orienting the continuing struggle within democratisation.

Three other sections follow, each of three chapters. In "Time and Semiosis of History: Symbolic Conflicts of Remembering and Forgetting," Lube Jurgenson explores the politics of memory through the symbol of the tree: a shelter for fighters, victims, righteous witnesses, and hopeful ecologists. Joanna Nowicki shows that symbols can be divisive. Museums trigger contention between the spirit of forgiving reconciliation and the unforgiving cries of those smarting from historic wounds. Halas locates the politics of symbolisation within systemic transformation in Poland. She expertly dissects the complex polymorphism of the transformation time.

In "Symbolic Construction of Communities: New Beginnings and New Divides," Ulf Hedetoft explores religious symbolism and historical analysis in the contrasting populist politics of Poland and Hungary. Anna Pless and Dick Houtmann broaden the focus, examining cultural fissures and value shifts across Europe. They show that moral traditionalism and authoritarian politics are not reducible to each other. Nicolas Maslowski skilfully explores the many applications of former dissenters' symbolic capital in post-1989 politics.

Finally, in "Symbolic Politics of European (Dis)Unification," Laure Neumayer considers the relative moral gravity of Nazi and Stalinist episodes of deliberate mass killing. Valentin Behr explores another comparison: between the EU's liberal values and Polish conservatism with its transnational extensions. To conclude, Rok Zupancic, Faris Kocan, and Iris Ivanic look at Bosnia-Herzegovina's ambivalent response to the EU,

which upholds democracy and human rights but undermines the claims of singular ethnic identities. Fittingly, this final chapter symbolises the broad range of the book's compass, taking us from Bosnia to Brussels. The reader can plot many pathways through these chapters, but whichever journey they take they will acquire increased knowledge and understanding of the strength and diversity of this vitally important region of the European continent.

**/// Dennis Smith** – one-time Vice-President of the European Sociological Association, studied modern history at Christ's College, Cambridge, and sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His most recent book is *Civilized Rebels: An Inside Story of the West's Retreat from Global Power* (2018). His many publications range across social theory, urban history, globalisation, the role of emotions, and the dynamics of social displacement. He is emeritus professor at Loughborough University.

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