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The Skeleton at the Feast

Contributions to East European Anthropology

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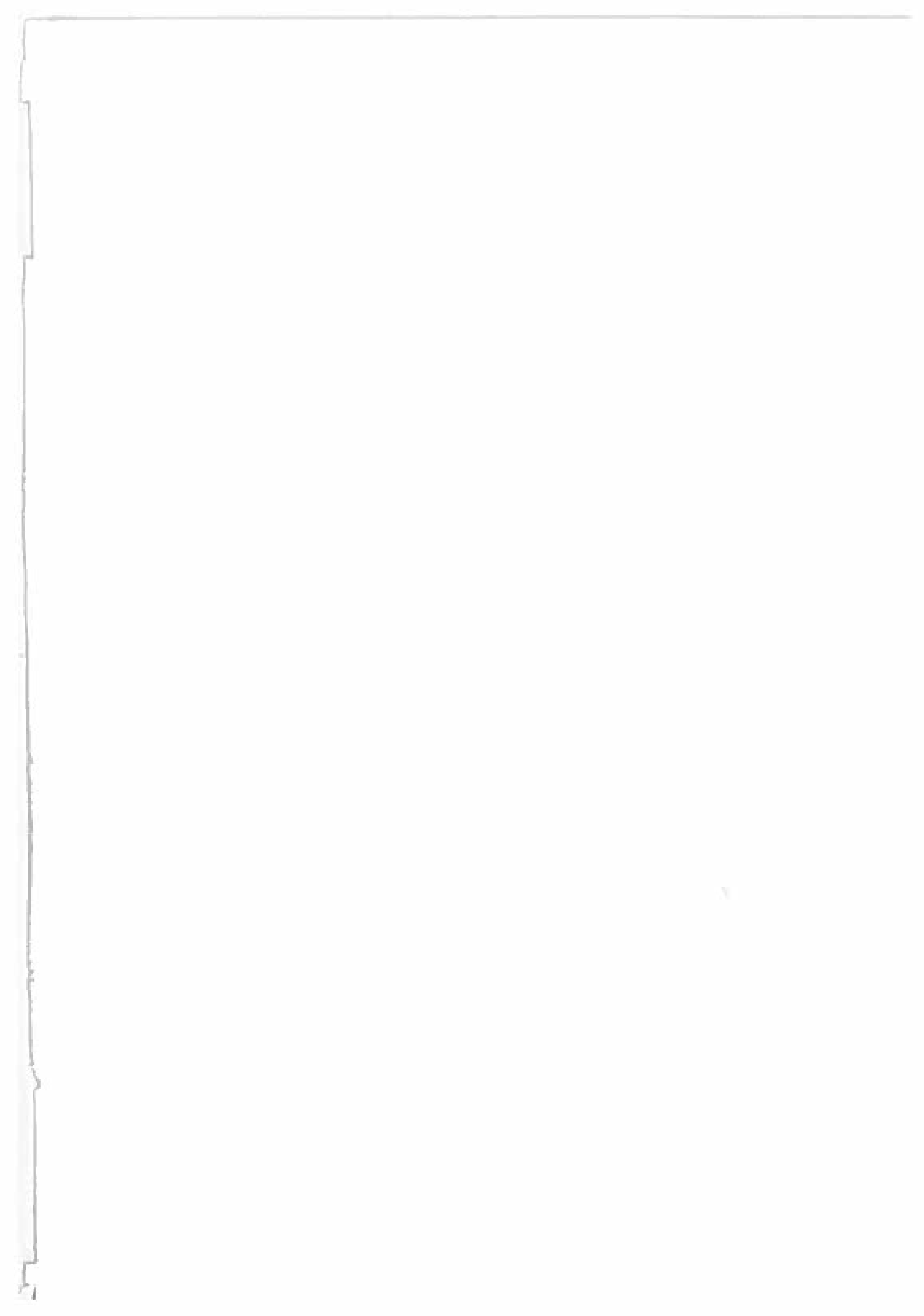
to the memory of

Ernest Gellner



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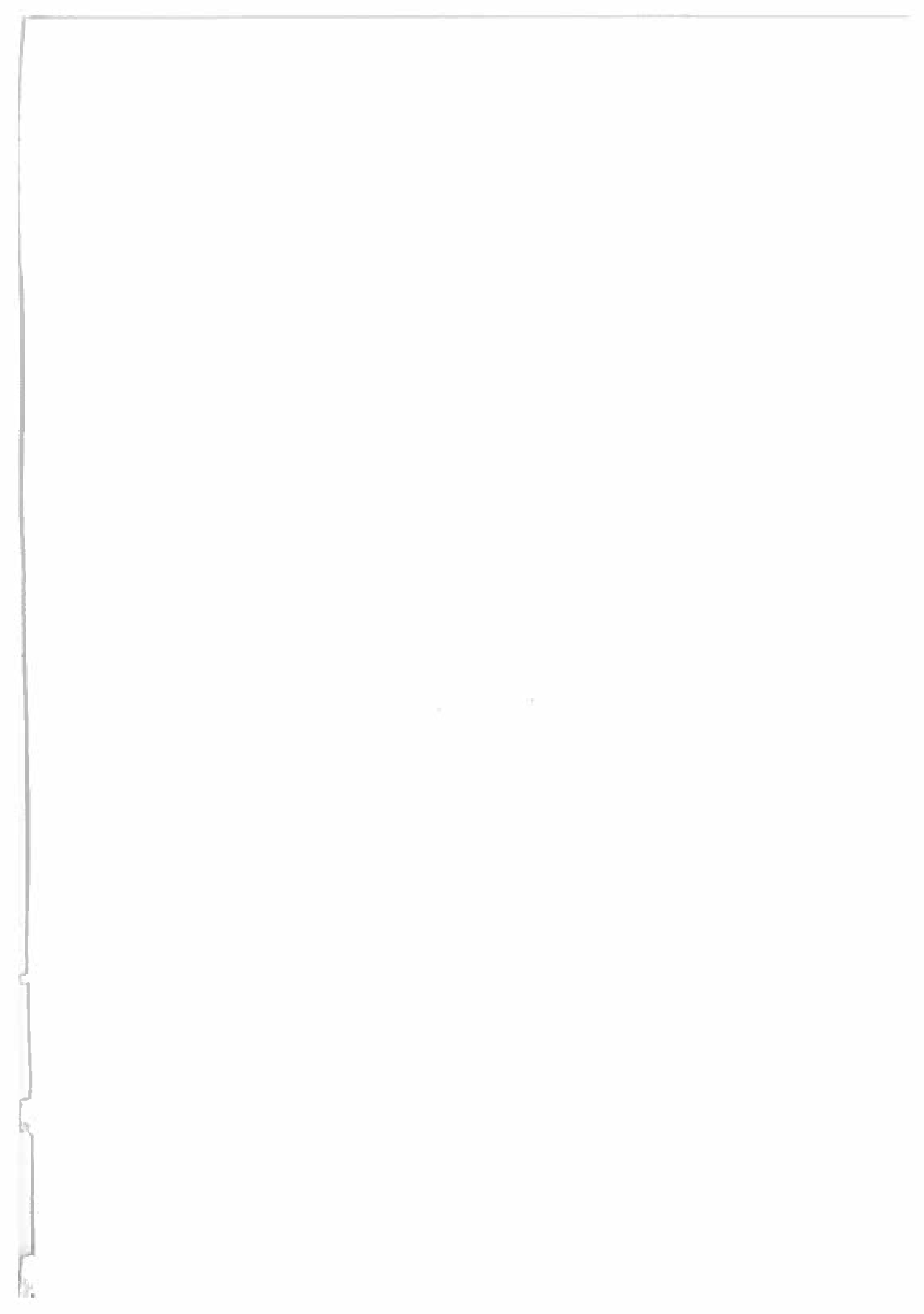
Though we disagreed on many matters, my work has been greatly influenced by Ernest Gellner. This collection was to have been presented to him in Prague on his seventieth birthday, on 9 December 1995. His sudden death on 5 November is an enormous loss for anthropology, and especially for all those who were privileged to know him and to work alongside him.



Preface

Most academics have enough unfinished articles, embryonic book chapters, and ephemeral conference papers to fill several drawers or filing cabinets. They also have the sense to leave them there. In offering the present collection to the reader I have resisted the temptation to exhume every manuscript fragment dating back to graduate student days. Instead I have selected only those which seem to me now, in the mid-1990s, to have some potential value for those interested in Eastern Europe, and more especially in the anthropological study of this region.

The book is divided into two parts. The first five chapters began life in 1987 as drafts for a volume that would both introduce the anthropology of Eastern Europe to other students of anthropology and, at the same time, serve to show specialists in other disciplines the contribution of anthropology to the understanding of this region. This was to be a joint project with Dr. Steven L. Sampson, but for various reasons it was never completed. My selection of materials in these chapters is personal, perhaps idiosyncratic, and the coverage does not pretend to be comprehensive. For the present publication I have undertaken some revision and updating, and I have plundered the work of a few more colleagues. At least passing reference is made to most countries of the region, but it will be obvious that the twin centres of my anthropological universe are the villages of Tázlár and Wisłok, presented in more detail in Part Two. In Part One I have managed to dispense with notes, but each chapter is followed by some suggestions for further reading. The main focus is on the socialist period, but some account is taken of more recent developments. There is no single unifying theme, but my approach emphasizes throughout the importance of economic and political factors for understanding social and cultural life in this region.

The essays in Part Two have not been significantly amended for this volume. Although there is much, particularly in the earlier pieces, that I might express differently today, it seemed preferable to leave them essentially as they stood and to present them in chronological order. In a

few places I have indicated in a note how my views have changed since the time of writing.

Chapter Eleven, sub-titled *The Skeleton at the Feast*, was delivered as an Inaugural Lecture at the University of Kent at Canterbury in May 1993. By this time the triumphalism that had followed the demise of communism in Eastern Europe was already starting to wear thin. Taking the problem of Eastern Europe's 'transition' as one of my examples, I took the opportunity of this lecture to sketch out a more general statement of the social anthropological enterprise. This 'philosophy of anthropology' is a very simple one: it might almost be termed an anti-philosophy. It reflects my motivation and justification for switching into anthropology in the first place, after undergraduate studies in which I had begun to specialize in Eastern Europe within the disciplines of politics and economics. The limitations of those disciplines for understanding social life as it was actually lived in Eastern Europe in the age of the Cold War led me to choose social anthropology as the necessary antidote. Learning local languages and carrying out long-term field research offered the best hope of going beyond stereotypes of 'totalitarianism'.

It was a bonus to discover that the principal founder of this research tradition in modern British social anthropology was himself an East European – Bronislaw Malinowski. This Malinowskian tradition has come in for sustained criticism in recent decades. I do not pretend that it has answers to all the questions that contemporary anthropologists wish to address. But I do believe very strongly that the solid empirical base of Malinowskian anthropology offers the best way to correct bias and misrepresentation of the 'Other': in this sense, Eastern Europe provides a particularly striking example of the problems of representation that bedevil all the human sciences. These challenges have to be met if understanding of social life in this region is to advance beyond abstract stereotypes. The need is no less urgent now that 'totalitarianism' has been replaced in the post-socialist years by the new vogue terms of 'civil society' and 'market economy'. In short, social anthropology is the skeleton at the post-communist feast.

Several of the pieces gathered in Part Two were prepared with wider, non-anthropological audiences in mind. Most of Chapter Seven was written during fieldwork in Poland in the first, explosive year of *Solidarity*. It was intended to provide a corrective to some over-simplified western images of that complex movement (see also Hann 1985). Chapters Six and Ten are also closer to journalism than to anthropology, or perhaps to the genre that Hungarians call *sociography*. I worked for a year as a language editor for the *New Hungarian Quarterly* in 1979-80. They published versions of the pieces that are included here as Chapter Six, but insisted on toning down some of my discussion of increasing social inequality in the village of Tázlár. They paid me my first ever fee, which was most welcome, but I was left feeling very guilty about agreeing to the changes. So I am happy to present the original draft here.

But this was nothing compared with the problems of censorship I encountered with the same journal (by now restyled *Hungarian Quarterly*) a decade later. Following the collapse of communism I was asked by the new Editor, a former colleague, to prepare a short piece outlining my impressions of what is termed by Hungarians the 'system change'. When I submitted the text which appears here as the first part of Chapter Ten, it quickly became obvious that he could not publish. This periodical was still subsidized by the government, which clearly expected staff to present a more positive image of the shift to a market-dominated economy. I was invited to rewrite the piece with a more positive slant, but declined. (I am happy to be able to report, however, that under a new socialist government the journal is flourishing again. It is now providing English-language audiences with fine critical insights into Hungary's post-communist society as well as wide-ranging coverage of culture and the arts.) Another detail of marketization is pursued in the third section of this chapter, originally drafted for a newsletter at the University of Kent. The second section of this chapter contains some detailed discussion of Tázlár families, in essence fieldnotes, which are best read alongside the essay later published as 1993c. The bibliography will direct the reader towards other related publications that shed further light on the many perils and

paradoxes of post-communist societies, and which provide more evidence for the interpretations advanced in the short pieces presented here.

Chapters Four and Eight are concerned with ethnicity and nationalism. The latter, prepared for a workshop at the University of London in 1987, introduces work in South-East Poland which, as I see with the benefit of hindsight, was pivotal in the development of my research interests. I went to Poland with the aim of carrying out a comparative study of peasant farming, following my doctoral work on the socio-economic structure of a Hungarian village (some reasons for the choice and some provisional conclusions are outlined in 1980b). It transpired, more by accident than design, that the area in which I eventually settled for fieldwork in the Carpathians had been populated in the past by peasants who were not ethnically Polish, and whose religion, too, distinguished them from their Polish neighbours. This pattern had been disrupted by tragic events in the 1940s, though some fragments of the indigenous population had since been able to return to their homeland. I concentrated on the contemporary social structure of the village in the resulting monograph (1985), but in later work I have become much more interested in these ethnic and religious specificities. In the post-communist period these have again become very visible, presenting what many see as a fundamental challenge to the new civil society (forthcoming d, e).

I have included as Chapter Nine a polemic against certain trends in contemporary anthropology which have become even more pronounced in recent years. The first section of this chapter was presented at a session on 'the anthropology of anthropology' at the twelfth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Zagreb, 1988. The second section was drafted with the 1989 ASA Conference on 'Anthropology and Autobiography' in mind, but the paper was left unfinished. At a time when many anthropologists have become pre-occupied with the skeletons in their own cupboards, in this chapter I expose a few of my own – but only in order to reaffirm the general guiding principles outlined in Chapter Eleven. The prime concern of our subject must be not with authorial subjectivity and introspection, but with charting and understanding social realities, and above all the realities that govern

the lives of 'ordinary people', those whose life worlds remain impenetrable to other traditions of enquiry. These key points are recapitulated in Chapter Twelve, which is largely a travelogue, supplemented by some observations made at the 1995 World Congress for Central and East European Studies in Warsaw. Several participants at this Congress sought to initiate an anthropological critique of recent western interventions in Eastern Europe, and to illustrate their concerns I reproduce in an Appendix a summary evaluation of some British 'technical assistance' to Hungary.

My overall conclusion is that the anthropological study of Eastern Europe already has many achievements to its credit – but so far not many have noticed, either within anthropology, or in the area studies literature, or among policymakers. So a great deal remains to be done.

CMH

Canterbury, November 1995