

Reviews

Aleksandar Bošković (2021), *William Robertson Smith* (Oxford: Berghahn), 120 pp., Pbk \$24.94. ISBN 781800731585, Hbk \$145. ISBN 9781800731578.

William Robertson Smith (1846–1894) is a household name in standard histories of anthropology, but his work is little known outside specialist circles, and he is even less read. It is therefore very appropriate that one of the first books in Aleksandar Bošković's new series on anthropology's ancestors should be devoted to Smith. The book, written by the series editor himself, provides an excellent overview of Smith's life, his contributions notably to the study of religion in its social context, and his legacy in twentieth-century anthropology.

The main focus of Smith's research was in Semitic studies. Learning Hebrew and Arabic, he drew on biblical and other sources to elucidate the context in which the world of the Old Testament had emerged. Although a minister in his native Aberdeen and a fervent believer, Smith was tried for heresy in 1880 following a series of articles that indicated that the Old Testament was clearly the work of many authors with distinct styles, and – especially – that talked about animal worship and sacrifice in the Middle East. He won the case, but was relieved of his teaching duties. As a result, Smith was free to pursue wider scholarly interests.

Smith was by any standard a major figure in the intellectual life of late Victorian Britain. He held several academic posts, towards the end at Cambridge, and was editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for six years. He was also a popular public lecturer and a prolific author. It is also a matter of relevance that unlike many of his contemporaries Smith was not a mere armchair anthropologist or scriptural scholar, but travelled on several occasions to Egypt, Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula, collecting ethnographic data. He would later be accused of peddling Orientalist stereotypes, but Bošković shows effectively that Smith's studies in the cultures and languages of the Arab-speaking world were meticulous, systematic and had an emphasis on change and variation, quite contrary to the characteristics typically attributed to Orientalists after Edward Said.

That Smith believed in social evolution is more difficult to counter, but it needs to be pointed out that virtually every social theorist at the time did in one way or another. Smith believed, wrongly, that



Arabs had been matriarchal until their conversion to that new religion Islam, but in fact myths of original matriarchy persisted in anthropology and cultural history until the early 1970s.

Bošković's book consists in nine relatively short chapters, the final five in particular delving into Smith's published work and legacy. Unlike several of his contemporaries, Smith only had a peripheral interest in the alleged evolution of kinship (although he did publish a book called *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*), and he wrote next to nothing about technology as a measure of social evolution. Rather, his work is largely devoted to myth, religion and ritual and their mutual connectedness and embeddedness in social life. One of his most important contributions in this domain, to which Bošković returns on several occasions, consists in his social contextualisation of religion, thus making comparative research on religion a sociological and anthropological concern rather than a matter for philology and scriptural studies. Smith may also have been the first to argue that ritual precedes myth, both logically and chronologically. His writings on sacrifice, moreover, had a strong impact on his younger friend and later famous author on myth and ritual, J. G. Frazer, who chose to dedicate the first edition of *The Golden Bough* to Smith.

Bošković, who is a seasoned theorist of myth in his own right, has produced a very readable, useful book about the little-known work of one of the scholars on whose shoulders twentieth-century anthropologists are perched. It should nevertheless be mentioned that the connection with those shoulders are sometimes difficult to discern, as in Chapters 5 and 6. Enlightening and authoritative in their own right, these chapters describe anthropological theories about myth and ritual, often without showing their relationship to Smith's work. To this reader, one of the most fascinating parts consist in Chapters 2 and 3, which describe Smith's travels in the Arab-speaking world, quoting from his notes and showing how his work – unlike, for example, Frazer's – did indeed have an ethnographic basis.

Smith's legacy may be fading from sight, but it can be traced throughout the history of anthropology for more than a hundred years. His insistence on the sociological and contextual study of religion, his giving priority to ritual practice over mythical beliefs, his work on sacrifice and distinction between the sacred and the profane, which would later be used by Émile Durkheim to great effect, are sufficient to ensure him a place in the canon. Bošković has also excavated fruitful connections between Smith and contemporary Scandinavian

philologists which contribute to ensuring him a place in biblical studies as well as anthropology.

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Christiana Constantopoulou (ed) (2020), *Crisis' Representations: Frontiers and Identities in the Contemporary Media Narratives* (Leiden: Brill), 190 pp., Ebk. \$192 ISBN 9789004439559, Hbk. \$192. ISBN 9789004439542.

This volume brings together European sociologists to unravel the role played by contemporary narrations of the economic and refugee crisis, as they have mobilised every aspect of social storytelling over the course of the last decade throughout Europe.

Why could a volume on ongoing 'narratives' of the crisis (either in media discourse or in filmic creations) be very interesting for the sociological analysis of the contemporary everyday life? Because in as much as the different (mass and social) media reflect the dominant ideas and representations, it becomes essential to analyse the meaning of their narratives to even begin to understand the relationship (or 'inexistent dialogue') between official political discourses and popular myths (whose most notable one seems to be the valuation of prosperity so actively promoted by the mass culture and the cultural industry's products).

The narration of the crisis, apart from the strict economic analyses (but it is known how much the economic analysis depends on ideology), has mobilised all the aspects of social storytelling during the last decade, and dominated the European political and media discourse as well as relevant artistic creations; yet, as far as the artistic creations are concerned, even in a period of economic crisis (like the one lived in the European South), audiences are not very 'friendly' towards productions criticising the social inequalities which best reflect the new political landscape.

The chapters of the volume are case studies of the different aspects of 'storytelling'. Contributors include Amalia Frangiskou, Evangelia Kalerante, Laurence Larochelle, Debora Marcucci, Valentina Marinescu, Albertina Pretto, Maria Thanopoulou, Johanna Tsiganou, Vasilis Vamvakas and Eleni Zyga. There are case studies of different discourses such as the value image of Europe, social media hate speech, and the reception of 'outside Europe' soap operas (e.g. American, Korean and Turkish) as well as analyses on the protest films

(which, in the end, have not been as successful as the highly rated popular products that are the soap operas).

It is very interesting to read all these case studies, each one of them lighting a different point of contemporary storytelling (either ‘official’ or ‘popular’). It can be roughly said that, despite the ongoing inequalities and other social difficulties, contemporary audiences seem to counterbalance their misery with the dreams of happiness provided by the (somehow ‘permanent’) myths of popular cultural products.

The above attitude is partly due to the ideologies still sustaining politics nowadays; for instance, the European Unionist political ideologies embraced by most parties in the South of Europe only hide the geopolitical inequalities between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’; the Southern European political parties are very much focussed on the Right/Left radicalisation (which in fact is ‘oppositional’ only on issues that are not very ‘important’ as far as it concerns the social and political situation of Europe).

In modern societies, where reigns the ideological distinction of different ways of thinking in ‘rational’ (e.g. science, politics) and ‘irrational’ (e.g. religion, myth, art) categories, when the ‘rational’ discourses fail to reflect the social reality, other narratives can be chosen in order to at least make it endure (even if they are not considered as socially ‘plausible’ and even if they differ from those belonging to the official versions). This is why the ‘storytelling’ of popular shows can be revealing when taken into consideration in order to understand modern feelings on identities and borders (the relation to the Other in time and in space). Thus, liquidity and hybridity become the sustaining bases of a universal popular ideology (contesting the dominant one and yet unable to become politically meaningful).

Because of all this, it is easy to understand the low level of influence of ‘protest movies’ (also called ‘qualitative’ or ‘experimental’ and apparently addressing only a very specialised ‘public’); they play a rather ‘marginal’ role (being unable to suggest politically subversive behaviours); the influence of the mass culture together with the insufficiency of political discourses to include different values contributes to the popular conviction that ‘change’ is impossible after all.

Some readers might eventually qualify several chapters of this volume as ‘simplifying’ the issue, because they are somehow distanced from the dominant contemporary research approaches deifying the technological factor and at the same time devaluating the importance of social dynamics as well the social involvement of mythical discourses; nevertheless ‘mythical discourses’ often try to assess some

constant variables – as Claude Lévi-Strauss would have called them – related to power, death and eventually ‘fate’ (which Erving Goffman has taken into account in his ‘game theory’). The case studies of this volume question identities and frontiers (mainly resulting from the economic crisis felt particularly in the South of Europe) and analyse their reformation or rearrangement in the field of diverse contemporary expressions both ‘fictional’ and ‘political’; they also show how ‘new realities’ can be vested with old myths and how myths are powerful even if ‘realities’ change.

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Julie L. Drolet (ed) (2019), *Rebuilding Lives Post-Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press), 263 pp., Pbk. \$46.95 ISBN 9780190942199.

Rebuilding Lives Post-Disaster is a multi-author volume edited by Julie L. Drolet, which opens up a truly important up-to-date topic of disaster response to natural catastrophes such as wildfires, earthquakes, tsunamis and landslides. In the Introduction, Julie L. Drolet and Amy Fulton argue that the number of disaster events have recently dramatically increased globally due to climate change, population growth, increased urbanisation, unsustainable development, growing social and economic differences and other factors (3–4).

Not only does this volume offer insight into these pressing issues by providing methodological insights, theoretical concepts and particular case studies, it also attempts to offer practical solutions and recommendations. Apart from the above-mentioned issues, the contributors address questions of disaster risk reduction, long-term disaster recovery and gendered construction of vulnerability and resilience. To summarise the objective in Haorui Wu and Julie L. Drolet’s words: ‘The project aims to foster participatory action and change through community-based research (CBR) and international comparisons to better understand how to address the challenges in long-term disaster recovery’ (37).

Rebuilding Lives Post-Disaster is a result of an international research project carried out in multiple localities worldwide. Disaster response and recovery in this project is discussed and examined in the contexts of Australia, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and the United States. The volume’s editor, Julie L. Drolet, is a professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary

in Canada, and she is also the principal investigator of this research partnership, in which she has co-operated with a number of other co-investigators.

The volume consists of three main parts. Part I, titled ‘Rebuilding Lives Post-Disaster Partnership’, consists of the Introduction (3–16), a review of the current literature on disaster impacts and definitions of the key concepts (17–36) and a discussion about the methodology of the research project (37–50). The research is anchored in qualitative methods including interviews and focus group meetings, and it was committed to upholding community-based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR) principles, which link resilience and sustainable development in various ways (37).

As the title suggests, Part II, ‘Country Case Studies’ (53–185, Chapters 4–10), presents seven principal country case studies of various environmental hazards based on field research. Chapter 4 (53–67) brings an analysis of numerous wildfires in British Columbia, Canada, in the summer of 2003, during which thousands of hectares of forest were destroyed. Chapter 5 (68–90) shows that another serious environmental hazard in British Columbia consists of landslides, using the example of the Johnsons Landing Landslide of 2012. Chapter 6 (91–108) focusses on Florida and the resilience and role of women during such environmental hazards hurricanes and floods, to which this southern state is prone.

Subsequently, the impacts of catastrophic climate events on mental health and well-being are examined using the case of Australia in Chapter 7 (109–129). The remaining three chapters of this part of the volume explore natural disasters in Asia. Chapter 8 (130–147) discusses post-tsunami recovery in South India, Chapter 9 (148–166) brings the reader insight into the role of women in rebuilding their lives post-disaster in Pakistan and, finally, Chapter 10 (167–185) investigates women’s agency during the 921 Earthquake in Taiwan in 1999.

Part III offers lessons learnt during the post-disaster interventions and from the recovery and reconstruction initiatives (189–258). This final section consists, apart from the Conclusion, (Chapter 14, 242–258), of another three chapters. Chapter 11 (189–203) highlights the importance of women in disaster response and discusses how to support their mental health and well-being after disasters.

Chapter 12 (204–225) describes the aftermath of the Wenchuan Earthquake and China’s subsequent strategies of both physical and social reconstruction. Last but not least, Chapter 13 (226–241) discusses the experience of social workers from the Australian

government's service delivery agency Centrelink and their involvement in frontline responses to various disasters including the terrorist attacks known as the Bali Bombings in 2002. This experience later helped Australia deal with domestic catastrophes of natural origin, one of the largest being the Black Saturday Bushfires in 2009.

Rebuilding Lives Post-Disaster is an important contribution to current knowledge on disaster risk reduction and post-disaster recovery. Not only does the volume give us hope that these crises can be effectively addressed, but it also offers particular guidance and tips to the various practitioners and professionals in the field of disaster management and recovery. The volume can be recommended to social workers, researchers, various governmental and NGO practitioners as well as students in the field of social work, development studies, humanitarian intervention and disaster relief.

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Eszter Krasznai Kovacs (ed) (2021), *Politics and the Environment in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers), 344 pp., Hbk. \$82. ISBN 9781800641334.

The book *Politics and the Environment in Eastern Europe* is a valuable collection of chapters written by various authors from different states of the EE region put together by political ecologist Eszter Krasznai Kovacs. This edited volume consists of twelve articles divided into three groups, all concerning the 'contemporary dynamics of environmentalism across EE between people, the environment and the state identifying associated movements, practices and relations, and sketching out contemporary systems of politics and affect'. All of the articles explore these relations through close ethnographies and engagements with local, extant forms of environmentalism in this region.

The first part of the volume contains articles concerning environmental movements, their emergence and evolution, but also their connection with the government and corporate actors in Hungary, Czechia and Poland. The first chapter, written by György Pataki and the editor herself, is based on the notion that the deliberate dismantling of Hungary's environmental sector in the last decade has facilitated the exercise of authoritarian political institutional arrangements and those of global market actors (private corporations). Arnošt Novak writes about a similar social constellation in Czechia, but he

introduces us to (the history of) resilience through the environmental movements and the threat of their radicalisation. Novak concludes that those processes are not happening just because of political opportunities, but also because of the agency of individuals and groups seeking the best possible solution in a state of (what is perceived as an) emergency. Similar groups of environmentalists are battling for a post-carbon transformation in a clash with the pro-status-quo-oriented coal industry, which is the research topic of Mikuláš Černík's article, which bridges the cases of Czechia and Poland. In the Polish case, government policy is not in sync with environmentalists' goals, as argued by Jana Hrczkova, who looks at the concept of urban gaps and the Jazdow activist movement.

The second part of the collection consists of articles in which authors discuss the important part that the environment plays in the construction of local cultural identities in Poland and Romania through everyday informal practices. These practices are shown to lead to a variety of formal political involvement that is more often than not fueled by nationalistic motivations. Blasa Lubarda shows how far-right entities are reinterpreting their environmentalist agenda to cast away the 'eco-fascist' label that they have not only in Poland but in the whole EE region. Alexandra Coțofană and Imola Püsök both discuss Romanian examples of identity construction through local environmental activism. In her article, Coțofană examines the construction of the famous anthropological insider/outsider distinction through social media by looking at how the landscape, specifically mountains, is used in nationalist and indigenous rhetoric. Meanwhile, Püsök focusses, in her article, on the mining region and the construction of meaning and value through a community's connection to their environment, which has not been consistent through generations because of changes in local environmental and political discourse.

The final and third part of this volume is dedicated to articles that discuss more particular influences on and interventions in policies, frameworks and agendas concerning the environment through local practice. George Iordăchescu challenges the concept of nature as wild and the preservation practices and politics of recent EU strategy narratives, in which the EE region is depicted as a green periphery. Again, we have outsider ideas and insider enablers, but the consequences of these enablers and these ideas mainly affect the lives of local communities. This implicit position is problematised in Renata Blumberg's article about EE food systems, where the centre of development is based on the notion that the 'East' is inferior to and needs

to learn from the ‘West’, and also in the article written by Jovana Diković concerning the development of villages in Serbia. The key problem in this developmental strategy is the lack of involvement of local perspectives and ‘ways of doing things’. A vivid illustration of developmental failure is provided by Éva Mihalovics, in collaboration with her main interviewee; they show us how, using the example of beekeeping, a promising local idea fails when not shifted towards the existing price scheme, or more precisely, the local ‘ways of doing things’, which consist in pricing commodities at the exact value that they have on the global market. And this means that sometimes the *authenticity* of the commodity needs to be adjusted, as June Brawner shows us through the study of Tokaj wine and the transformation of its taste that was caused by the force of Western consumerism, which brought with it the devaluation of local production methods.

All of these chapters, written by early career academic researchers from across Eastern Europe, depict complex entanglements between (authoritarian) government, civil society, global organisational regulations, local practices and corporate actors in the environmental field. Amidst the various definitions, conceptions, priorities, perspectives and interests of the relevant ‘stakeholders’, social science must include the specific location of the region as well in the understanding of this relationship between ‘nature’ and people.

The notion of the EE region always being behind (the ‘West’) culturally and economically has led to the possibility of outside intervention, and while this intervention is facilitated by increasingly authoritarian governments, the role of civic environmental movements and local communities is being diminished and their agency repressed. It is important to recognise and explain those processes further while learning from the example that this edited collection has set.

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Ulrich Kasten and Grażyna Kubica (2021), *Das Männerlager im Frauen-Kz Ravensbrück, sowie Lagerbriefe und die Biografie des Häftlings Janek Błaszczyk* (Fürstenberg, Germany: Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien), 184 pp. Pbk. €18. ISBN 9783942883726.

This book is the result of co-operation between a Polish (Silesian?) social anthropologist and a German teacher and journalist. For Ulrich Kasten, the book under review is primarily about the Ravensbrück

Concentration Camp, the history of which he has been researching for many years. For Grażyna Kubica, it is a book about her grandfather, where the most important threads are connected to the complex social history of Cieszyn Silesia, the region from which she comes. This collaboration is an example of writing public family history.

In his review of Alison Light's book *Common People: The History of an English Family* (Penguin 2015), which portrayed the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in England by tracing the history of the author's family,¹ Ben Highmore used the term 'public family history' to mark the difference between that book and the countless works that have sprung up on the wave of interest in genealogy. Public family history is not simply a catalogue of names, dates, occupations and events, but a social history written from below and from within, showing the processes through which social life is created and the feelings that accompany them. Kasten and Kubica's book concerns silent, unknown parts of family history that lead to a study of blank spots in the history of concentration camps and of Cieszyn Silesia. It is based on materials found in private and state archives and newspapers, as well as on interviews with family members.

The starting point for writing the book was a stack of letters that Janek Błaszczyk wrote to his family from the Dachau and Ravensbrück Concentration Camps between 1940 and 1942. He was a plumber and fitter born in 1893 in Ustroń, not far from the present Polish–Czech border, and murdered in Ravensbrück in April 1942. The KZ Ravensbrück is known first and foremost as a women's camp: the fact that a men's ward was built there in 1941 is the starting point for Ulrich Kasten's reflections. The men's camp was set up as a reservoir for the workforce needed to expand the women's camp's material base; men, above all construction workers, were sent there from other concentration camps. Ulrich Kasten describes the camp's organisation, everyday life and especially the relations between various groups of prisoners. Kasten also raises the issue of the complicity of the local population and certain groups of inmates in Nazi crimes.

The chapters written by Kasten provide insights into life and death in concentration camps that usually slip beneath public attention. He writes about the role and fate of *Sonderkommandos*, the differences between various concentration camps (prisoners sent to Ravensbrück from Dachau 'longed for' their former camp) and between different groups of prisoners, the practice of parcel and money sending and receiving, the fate of camps after the Second World War and, above all, the practice of letter writing. The most interesting aspect of this

exploration is his analysis of hidden messages in letters that prisoners were allowed to send to their families. Although the letters were highly censored and written only in German, they were nonetheless a means of sending instructions as to how to prepare claims for release, information about the real conditions of life in the camps, and updates on the health of prisoners and the like. Surprisingly, the camp authorities provided the conditions to enable their writing: there was even a special stationary set which had to be used by the prisoners. Kasten also draws the reader's attention to the aesthetics of Janek Błaszczyk's letters, that is, to the neat old German handwriting, the flawless grammar and the deep humanity which shines through the simple sentences that he formed.

Grażyna Kubica's contribution is divided into the presentation and analysis of Janek Błaszczyk's letters and to his biography. The biography begins with the story of the Polish State Independence Medal that he received from the Polish president in 1938 for his efforts on behalf of the Polish state in Silesia, above all, for his participation in the Polish–Czech conflict after the First World War. According to the author, this medal could have been a direct cause for his imprisonment by the Germans and deportation to the Dachau Concentration Camp.

As Błaszczyk's life story cannot be understood without at least a rudimentary knowledge of the situation in Cieszyn Silesia, the author begins the chapter with a general presentation of the history of this region, and a few lapses (e.g. writing about a German [*Deutsch*] and Slavic presence in Silesia, instead of Germanic [*Germanisch*] and Slavic one, when talking about the fourteenth century) were not avoided. But the part concerning the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history is extremely thought-provoking. It exposed for me a great number of blank spots in my knowledge of Silesia, and opened up paths for posing further research questions. As my father was also Silesian, the blank spots I identified would probably be different from those encountered by readers with no background in the region. I was not surprised to read about photos of *Wehrmacht* soldiers in family albums: I was rather surprised that their uniforms had been cut out. I was moved by the way in which the author reveals to the reader her anxiety or even fear of finding in the newspaper and archival materials information which would indicate that her grandfather's participation in the events of 1918–1921 involved the direct, physical persecution of supporters of the Silesian movement. He was a declared and devoted Pole in a region that had a very complex history of state belonging and self-identification. It seems that the sympathies of his granddaughter

are not as firmly located. The narratives focussed on objects, particularly photographs, make this chapter an easy and informative read.

This is a very personal, but not sentimental book. Anthropologists often dig into the biographies of their interlocutors, trying to reach deeper layers, memories and social connections. In this way, private lives are presented as immersed in political and social processes. What is readily done with the biographies of strangers is much harder when it comes to one's own family's past. Kubica places her own grandfather and other members of her family at the centre of such an examination. This is a difficult task, both emotionally and socially: the author writes that she not only looked at her grandfather's biography with trepidation, but also encountered reticence on the part of some of her relatives. It is difficult to dig into Silesian biographies, as we do not have established, easy-to-follow narratives in the frame of which to talk about them.

Beyond the contribution to the field of public family history, this book is an invitation to investigate the lives of the prisoners as parts of broader social networks, stretching in time and space beyond the time spent in concentration camps. This is a promising avenue for anthropological research, which until the present has focussed either on concentration camps as sites of memory or on experiences of life in the concentration camps themselves. This book by Kasten and Kubica does not explicitly propose a new theoretical framework; however, it points to an approach which sees concentration camps not primarily as exceptional places where the life as we know stops, but as nexuses linked through broader social networks in time and space.

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Note

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/19/alison-light-common-people-review-genealogy-social-history> (accessed 25 August 2021).