

**Nature and national identity after communism. Globalizing the ethnoscape** by K.Z.S. Schwartz; University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2006, 288 pages, \$60.00 cloth, \$27.95 paper ISBN 0-8229-4296-8

In her book on Latvian conjunctions of nature and nation Katrina Schwartz explains and illustrates in detail how generations of Latvians have understood their particular relationship to nature and, moreover, how that particular nature has become an embodiment of what it means to be Latvian. The book also analyses the local responses to Western programmes of nature conservation during the era of post-Communism. Homelands are according to Schwartz constructed by infusing physical terrain with national meaning, transforming landscape into 'ethnoscape'. Historic sites are correspondingly naturalised and natural features historicised, a process which turns the surrounding nature into habitats and ancestral homelands.

Schwartz's approach is linked to two parallel debates on nature and nations. First, as part of the studies of nations and nationalism, it examines the social construction of nature as a means, and a forum, to develop national identity. Second, informed by the traditions of political ecology, it analyses the influence of particular Latvian discourses of environment and homeland on international ecological concerns.

Schwartz's view is grounded on constructivist thinking, but at the same time she underlines the continuity of the ways of seeing nationhood. For her it is not something endlessly fabricated anew. The inherited ways of talking about the nation and the homeland delimit, as she states, the conceptual universe within which Latvians typically think about themselves and their land. The history of Latvian nationhood is a history of competition over nationhood, it is a struggle for control over the imagination about community.

*Nature and national identity after communism* offers readers two competing tropes of Latvian identity. The agrarian inward-looking identity stems from the early German *Heimat* traditions of homeland studies, much influencing the politics of the first republic, i.e. the nation of farmers, during the inter-war years. The international and liberal identity is grounded on Latvia's past as a seafaring culture, looking across the Baltic Sea from the cosmopolitan capital of Riga, but it also utilises the metaphor of a bridge, or crossroads, seeing Latvia as a multiethnic link between the western and the easternmost Europe.

Schwartz develops her argument by concentrating on the national discourses run by intellectuals, politicians and other key individuals of Latvia's past and present. She starts with the national awakening of the 1850s and continues with the radical reforms of the peasant state of the 1920s and 1930s. Thereafter she concentrates on the collectivisation under the Soviet rule (1940-1991) and finally ends with the post-Soviet years of orientation toward the West. The historical part is then followed by a few case studies on rural-environmental issues, focusing both on nature conservation along the Baltic Sea coast and the forest sector in general.

The historical development of nature conservation on the Baltic Sea coast is identified as part of the broader international trends in environmentalism. The book presents the difficulties, but also successes, in forwarding Western ideas of national parks and protecting homeland traditions during the years of Soviet rule. Latvia joined the

World Trade Organization in 1998, NATO in 2002 and the European Union in 2004, and the quick Western integration also intensified the environmental co-development, both inter- and non-governmental. The agrarian production in Latvia could not compete with imported foods offered by the opening markets and this became a deep disappointment to the rural strategists aiming at reconstructing the rural backbone of the country. In addition, the EU subsidies for farmers to protect the environmental and cultural values, instead of producing food, emerged as a matter of broad confusion. The turn from exporting butter and bacon to exporting wilderness and biodiversity was received with ambivalence, and it also brought along confrontations between green developers, traditionalists and industrial actors.

A similar tension took shape in forest politics, where the initially German-influenced tradition of efficient forestry, later modified by the industrial Soviet model, met troubles with the new pressures of immaterial production. Considering for example wetland forests valuable as such, instead of seeing them as the targets of a draining programme, became a matter of dispute not only between the various schools of internationalisation, but also between generations. Many homeland defenders also found it difficult to learn valuing their own heritage as a green development asset.

Katrina Schwartz's book is well balanced with theoretical and empirical elements. It also succeeds in running a discussion through substantial matters, including matters that are important from the local points of view. She bravely raises the question of folk traditions and continuity in the theoretical debate which is rare today in the constructivist branches of political and socioenvironmental studies. The concentric side of sociospatial development is respected (see also Jürgenson 2004) and not annihilated by the currently popular visions of global relational co-dependence.

Only a few critical questions need to be highlighted here. The forest question is for some reason left in the margins of the book, only emerging as an issue in one chapter at the end of the book. This is surprising when one thinks about the leading role of forest industry in Latvia, covering 20-35 percent of export value during the 1990s. Forest production was also regarded, as one of Schwartz's informants puts it, as 'the most Latvian' sector of the economy during the Soviet years. The overlooking of the forest question also becomes striking in the historical chapters that superficially pass the German and Russian models of forestry. Especially the Soviet system of forest use, which was constituted of three categories of protection and use, is left without proper reflection.

The eastern connection is thus undeveloped in *Nature and national identity after communism* and so is the northern connection. When opening the debate on the national awakening in Latvia, Schwartz discusses the early Baltic peoples as a branch of Indo-Europeans but forgets that many of the small groups of peoples north of Latvia, including for example the Estonians and also the Livonians in one of her study areas, belong to a non-Indo-European group, that of Finno-Ugric speaking peoples. The mistake is corrected later in her case study on northern Kurzeme National Park but, in general, the northern dimension is left strikingly unexamined in Schwartz's book. This, of course, only mirrors the main lines of internationalisation Latvia has been broadly connected to before and during the period of national awakening, and especially in the post-Soviet years. The Western emphasis perhaps also reflects the author's current position as assistant professor of political science at the University of

Florida. The personal Latvian-American link explains much of the rich content and fluent English the book is written with. The book really deserves a broad audience among all those interested in detailed historical and political analyses of ethnic and environmental issues in concrete local-global settings.

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### **Reference**

Jürgenson A, 2004, "On the Formation of the Estonians' Concepts of Homeland and Home Place" *Pro Ethnologia* **18** 97-114.