

2014

Review of Andrews, Ernest, ed. "Legacies of Totalitarian Language in the Discourse Culture of the Post-Totalitarian Era"

Richard Holtzman

Bryant University, rholtzma@bryant.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/histss_jou

Recommended Citation

Holtzman, Richard, "Review of Andrews, Ernest, ed. "Legacies of Totalitarian Language in the Discourse Culture of the Post-Totalitarian Era"" (2014). *History and Social Sciences Faculty Journal Articles*. Paper 73.

https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/histss_jou/73

Andrews, Ernest, ed. *Legacies of Totalitarian Language in the Discourse Culture of the Post-Totalitarian Era: The Case of Eastern Europe, Russia, and China*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books (2011). 216 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7391-6465-5 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Richard Holtzman, Associate Professor of Political Science, Bryant University.

“Totalitarian language” and its grip on the discourse cultures of communist countries have received a significant amount of scholarly attention in past decades. But what of the continued presence of this language in mainstream post-totalitarian discourse after the reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s? According to its editor, Ernest Andrews, this volume is “the first scholarly work to attempt a comprehensive and fairly detailed look into the lingering legacies of the communist totalitarian modes of thought and expression in the new discourse forms of the post-totalitarian era” (6). The book offers a range of engaging case studies aimed at addressing this gap. The contributors focus on the ways in which political elites in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and China continue to draw on this language to augment their own power. These studies succeed in illuminating the resiliency of dominant discourses amid changing political and social contexts. However, despite the quality of these case studies, Andrews does not provide the analysis and conclusions necessary to make this volume more than the sum of its parts.

As Magda Stroinska argues in her contribution to this volume: “The fall of the Berlin Wall two decades ago and the collapse of the communist system in most of Central and Eastern Europe do not necessarily imply that the study of totalitarian frame of mind and its linguistic representations should be put aside as no longer relevant or relevant only for historical analysis” (51). Indeed, taken collectively, the chapters in this volume make a strong case for the important contributions that linguistic and discursive analyses can make to our understanding of post-totalitarian regimes. By identifying and tracing the legacies of this language, the authors are able to clarify the constitutive roles that these legacies continue to play in post-communist nations—politically, socially, ideologically, and psychologically. And underlying their investigations, of course, are substantial normative concerns about the accompanying legacies of Stroinska’s aforementioned “totalitarian frame of mind.”

Andrews’ Introduction identifies general conceptual categories within which to situate the case studies. Most importantly, his chapter identifies the defining characteristic of totalitarian language (also referred to as “Newspeak” and “politically-correct language”) as its Manichean reduction of reality to “a good versus bad representational schema” (1). Andrews also identifies some of the semiotic manipulations that help perpetuate this discourse culture. These include making any word or object “meaningful” by attaching an identifier that situate it within the “good versus bad” schema; verbal-stylistic devices that employ euphemism, inflated language, and flattery to render aspects of reality more agreeable; strict norms regarding the “proper” use of language; and the use of ready-made stories that draw on stock phrases and technical vocabulary. The semiotic system constructed through these techniques largely broke down in the lead-up to and aftermath of the historic changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the post-totalitarian discourse that emerged did not fully shed all remnants of this language. Nor, as the authors in this volume persuasively argue, would it have been advantageous for political elites in these countries to do so. Totalitarian language, it seems, still holds significant influence and power.

The volume consists of nine chapters (in addition to the Introduction), each offering an analysis of a unique case study of a post-totalitarian regime. Refreshingly, the methods employed and the sources of data analyzed across the cases range widely as well. In the first chapter, Marek Skovajsa explores continuity and change in the language of Czech sociology since 1989, finding it largely free of linguistic elements from the past regime. By contrast, Stroinska's engaging chapter identifies a "new form of propaganda rhetoric" and its resultant "linguistic-conceptual traps" in the political discourse of post-communist Poland. Matthew H. Ciscel addresses the contested meanings of "democracy" and other key words, and their polarizing impact, in the disputed Moldovan elections of 2009. In the fourth chapter, Cosmina Tanasoiu finds the predominant linguistic patterns in the public discourse of post-communist Romania to be a dynamic mix of rigid vocabulary and communist idioms with a post-communist lexicon. Drawing on George Orwell's concept of "Newspeak," Rossen Vassilev argues that the "new openness of the post-communist language of politics [in Bulgaria]...cannot obscure the many similarities of speech, spoken and written, with the totalitarian period (114). Through a range of sources, Andrejs Plakans identifies three "intertwining" legacies that suggest lingering Soviet influences on language and the socio-cultural environment in Latvia. In Chapter Seven, the evolution of the language of Romanian media since the early 1990s is tracked by Marius Dragomir and Norina Solomon, who argue that post-communist media reacted so aggressively against the "wooden language" of the communist era that it plunged into the antithetical extreme of vulgarism. In her exceptionally well-researched chapter, which serves as a something of the analytical heart of this volume, Ekaterina Levintova traces the evolution of the official ideological discourse in Russia from the late Soviet period to the post-communist regime. Her findings identify the durability of the conservative discourse articulated during the Brezhnev era, its continuity in the language of contemporary political elites, and the challenges it raises for liberal discourse. Fengyuan Ji's final chapter shifts focus to China to examine the Chinese Communist Party's paradoxical use of "language as an instrument of persuasion and coercion in intra-Party matters...[while abandoning] the attempt to enforce linguistic engineering throughout the whole society" (184).

The quality and richness of these diverse case studies are the primary contributions of this volume. What it importantly lacks, unfortunately, is any sort of analysis and conclusion by Andrews that draws the significance out of these chapters and re-presents these findings in a systematic way. There is neither a concluding chapter nor a section in the Introduction that makes an effort to identify shared themes, a theoretical framework, or even a suggestion as to what the nine case studies might tell us when taken as a whole. This absence is particularly important considering, as Andrews clearly highlights, that the continuing presence of totalitarian language in post-totalitarian discourse—and with it, the totalitarian frame of mind—has largely remained unexplored. This book creates an essential space for future studies, but it could have more effectively established some of the defining research questions in this area by identifying theories or general conclusions that might help scholars frame their research.

The contributors to this volume represent a range of academic disciplines, including political science, European studies, linguistics, social theory, history, languages and culture, and include two journalists as well. Perhaps this diversity made Andrews hesitant to impose too much theoretical order on these contributors' case studies. However, as a result, the reader is left with

important unanswered questions, such as: Is there something particular to totalitarian language or some aspect of its developmental history that can explain the resilience of these linguistic legacies? Or rather, should we be looking to political or cultural, rather than linguistic, influences to explain the continued presence of this language in post-totalitarian discourses? Political elites are identified as perpetuating defining aspects of this language for self-interested purposes, but why does it still resonate with the citizens of these nations? Regarding their respective discourse cultures, what empirical similarities can we observe among the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and China? What differences? And so on. This volume is worth reading for its engaging and in-depth case studies alone; but without offering a theory or analytical framework that can be applied and assessed by future studies, its lasting contribution may be limited to identifying a neglected area of study, rather than charting a clear way forward to systematically explore this potentially fruitful topic.