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***Death of the Father:
An Anthropology of the End in Political Authority***

John Borneman, ed. (Berghahn Books, 2004)

As I write this review in June 2005—midway through the second term of George W. Bush, son of a former president and head of a paternalistic administration—it certainly seems appropriate to consider the place of “the father” in modern politics. *Death of the Father* is a remarkably consistent volume in its methodology and substantive approach, reflecting intensive, long-term collaboration between its contributors. In each of the book’s six primary chapters, detailed below, an author examines the end of regimes organized around a charismatic and authoritarian male leader: Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, Hirohito in Japan, Ceaușescu in Romania, Tito in Yugoslavia, and Stalin in the Soviet Union. While the volume is labeled an “anthropology of the end in political authority” and many contributors are anthropologists, the ethnographic approach associated with anthropological inquiry is largely implicit. Most of the volume’s authors ground their analyses in years of participant observation, interviewing, and other kinds of ethnographic work, but little of that work appears in the chapters themselves. As a result, the authors do not set themselves the goal of examining how citizens of the nation-states under discussion interpret and differentially transform the paternalistic logics of authority they experienced or continue to experience.

In place of such accounts, the authors share a broadly psychoanalytic approach focused on state discourse and national society taken as a whole; they are concerned to examine the modalities by which leaders and their associated state bureaucracies used rhetorics of fatherhood and family to implement their rule. The focus is on rich historical overviews of each case under discussion. The detailed retelling of, say, Mussolini’s career or Ceaușescu’s fall from power might seem overly basic to the area specialist. However, as someone whose expertise lies outside all of the nation-states examined in *Death of the Father*, I found such careful chronologizing helpful and feel that it makes the book useful not only to scholars but also to those teaching advanced undergraduate and graduate courses in political theory, political anthropology, and other similar fields.

A psychoanalytic approach unites the chapters theoretically as the chronological framework does in a substantive sense. Borneman’s introduction, “Theorizing Regime Ends,” sets out the psychoanalytic architecture that is applied with notable

regularity throughout the volume. Borneman covers a range of topics as he asks what common patterns might be found in the rise of totalitarian regimes oriented around the figure of the father. Borneman draws on a range of theoretical frameworks, leaning heavily on those of Foucault, Agamben, Lacan, and Anderson. The distinction between the *pater* (spiritual father) and *genitor* (reproductive father) in Roman law is developed and becomes a theme addressed throughout the volume. An interesting question for future extensions of this project will be the possibly productive contradictions between the historic and geographic specificity of the case-study mode of argumentation the book employs as a whole and the decontextualization that psychoanalytic approaches often entail. Claims such as the “nostalgia for Edenic conditions is always also a yearning for reentry into the Imaginary, for a return to a mother-child bond” (16) suggests a kind of decontextualized human being quite at odds with the situated specificity of the rest of the book’s chapters. Yet such a mode of argumentation does provocatively highlight the significant similarities in paternalistic regimes throughout the modern era, suggesting ways in which notions of fatherly authority shape authoritarian governmentalities—for instance, the curious way in which so many of these regimes were at pains to emphasize that their father-leaders (Hitler, Stalin, etc.) were poets, scientists, artists, and so on, in addition to being heads of state.

Following Borneman’s introduction, Chapter 1, “From Future to Past: A Duce’s Trajectory,” by Maria Pia Di Bella, examines the rise and fall of Mussolini and Italian Fascism. Pia Di Bella turns attention to various ways in which Mussolini drew upon images of fatherly authority, as well as the deep connections between Fascism and the Futurism movement in the arts. Chapter 2, “*Gottvater, Landesvater, Familienvater*: Identification and Authority in Germany,” by John Borneman, explores Hitler’s rise and fall. More than any other chapter, Borneman discusses the heteronormativity that undergirds the “rule of the father,” focusing particularly on German fascism’s cultivation of homosociality as well as its obsessions with the homosexuality that such homosociality often entailed. Chapter 3, “Two Deaths of Hirohito in Japan,” by Kyung-Koo Han, examines both the social death of Emperor Hirohito as a divine figure and ultimate ruler at the end of World War II and his physical death in 1989. Comparing these two deaths leads to interesting analytical insights concerning the paternalism of Japanese Imperial rule.

The movement from the 1940s to the 1980s in Chapter 3 provides an implicit transition to the next set of chapters in the volume, which examine the fall of communist states in the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter 4, “The Undead: Nicolae Ceaușescu and Paternalist Politics in Romanian Society and Culture,” by David A. Kideckel, investigates how Ceaușescu’s “acceptance and ultimate destruction by the Romanian people is best explained by his use of fatherly images and paternalistic practices grafted on to Romanian cultural conceptions and relationships” (124). The important place of Elena, Ceaușescu’s wife, in this dynamic is also addressed (many of the book’s chapters examine the role of wives and

mistresses but a specifically feminist analysis is largely implicit). Chapter 5, "The Peaceful Death of Tito and the Violent End of Yugoslavia," by Tone Bringa, probably has more ethnographic data than any other chapter but employs the same form as the other contributions, tracing the history of Tito's rise and fall. Bringa pays special attention to the contradictory attitudes of many "Yugoslavs" to Tito's life and the complex dynamic of nostalgia, reverence, and revulsion that characterizes contemporary memories of his rule. This dynamic is evident in most chapters, and well-suited to the psychoanalytic approach dominant in the volume. Chapter 6, "Doubtful Dead Fathers and Musical Corpses: What to Do with the Dead Stalin, Lenin, and Tsar Nicholas?," by John S. Schoeberlein, rounds out the volume. Noting that "the paradox of succession follows from the fact that to succeed the father is to usurp his position" (202), Schoeberlein provides a wide-ranging chapter that covers nearly a hundred years of Soviet and post-Soviet rule and explores the relationship between memorialization, legitimation, and fatherly authority.

The book is accompanied by a website, as discussed in Borneman's preface. This illustrates the benefits and perils of linking books and websites: the website includes maps, audiovisuals, and other information that provides interesting context to the book, but the website has not been updated since 1999 (on it, for instance, Borneman is still listed as an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Cornell). This does not, however, detract from the overall importance of this book and this project. *Death of the Father* is a significant contribution to a range of interdisciplinary conversations concerning political authority in the modern era, and an excellent example of how long-term collaboration can produce insightful scholarship. Each chapter in the volume has its own agenda and unique intellectual stamp, yet the shared theoretical frameworks and methodologies employed lead to a consistency of tone and argumentation that gives the volume a striking coherence of vision. May the insights to be gleaned from this volume prove helpful as we face new global paternalisms and attempts to render the heteronormative family not just a metaphor but also the only legitimate form of cultural citizenship.