
Book Review

Michal Kopeček and Piotr Wciślik (eds.) (2015) *Thinking through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*. Budapest, New York: Central European University Press. 599 pages.

There is an amazing collection of publications considering the democratisation of post-communist countries that present different aspects of this process in detail. The Central European University Press published a collection of eighteen articles on Central European intellectual history edited by Michal Kopeček and Piotr Wciślik. This book, however, is rather different from previous publications. It tries to explain the peculiarity of transitional and future-oriented politics of historical optimism in Central Europe. It presents how long-lasting regional willingness of emancipation clashed with social, economic and political conditions of transformations that had been deeply influenced by Soviet ideologies and understandings.

The volume is a study of political thought in-between the Communist pasts and the Liberal futures. It discusses political visions of states and societies under construction, still post-communist, post-socialist, post-Soviet or postcolonial, but not yet consolidated as liberal democracies based on human rights protection, free market economy and the rule of law. Therefore, as the editors state, the objective was ‘to understand the added value of an intellectual history of post-socialism’ (p. 2) – even if the aim is not innovative, it is valuable to consider how post-communism may be theorised in a wider context of modernisation (Silova, 2010). As a result, the book delivers an insight into the construction of transitional political mythologies in Central Europe, and also discusses the way in which interpretations of the past and imaginations of the future were inspiring the political visions of the transitional elites.

Although the editors claim that they focused on drawing a portrait of post-1989 intellectual history in Central Europe, the book seems also to have some other objectives. In the introduction, Kopeček and Wciślik (pp. 4-8) present their perspective on transitional studies that focuses on dependencies between academic narratives, social imagination and projected futures. They claim that theory-building in Central European social sciences was a politicised process of describing ‘what ought to be’ rather than empirical and evidence-based investigations of ‘the peculiarities of the social, cultural and intellectual context of the individual polities’ (p. 7). It is easy to agree with their observation. Their argument goes beyond this critique – they continue with a quite biased statement that political science was not able to deliver an explanation of the transition as it was committed to pro-democratic teleology. On the other hand, they believe that sociology and social anthropology ‘were by definition

more critical to the transition policies and ongoing social processes' (p. 8), thus scholars were able to observe the changes in the social structure and 'to capture, describe and analyse crucial contemporary social and cultural phenomena with the larger historical development' (p. 9).

Kopeček and Wciślik's perspective on transitional studies leads them to a delimitation of the main areas of post-communist intellectual history in Central Europe. They include a dichotomy between the winners and the losers of transformations, strategies of capitalism-building, the formation of new elites, identity politics and rewriting collective memories. They consider this list as unfinished, and they claim the authors' task was to 'show how political ideas worked in this environment and how they originated, migrated, transformed and behaved within the region' (p. 11). It is intellectually refreshing that the book attempts to deconstruct basic assumptions of transitional studies, but for a political scientist, it is hard to agree that the democratisation can be discussed without a general context of its objective: the establishment of a consolidated democracy. I think that the editors paid too much attention to the post-communist component of Central European identities, while they did not notice that these transformations were mostly fueled by future-oriented and hope-driven politics of optimism that has been limited in the book to 'the transfer of allegedly well-tested liberal democratic and market-based economic model from the West to the East' (p. 16). As a result, the constructed mosaic of ideas, ideologies and paradigms is explained as a cultural response to post-communist conditions and implementation of Western-like political and economic standards, while a focus on the inventing of possible futures and politics of hoping is rather reduced.

It is clear that motivations behind Kopeček and Wciślik's book are not limited to a description of political and intellectual debates in post-1989 Central Europe. The editors introduce their understanding of the post-socialist transitions that discusses the transfer of ideas in the long-term perspective and the broader sociocultural context of regional dynamism. The book's 'hidden' objective is to prove that intellectual history, not political science, can discuss transitional ideologies in a purely academic manner – however, its methodological framework is rather blurred, and the structure of individual chapters is different; thus, it is impossible to judge, if the declared superiority of intellectual history is justified. In fact, I believe that the book has not proved that political science is a less academic way to investigate transformations in Central Europe – the presented chapters are rather descriptive portraits of various ideological traditions in post-communist countries and neither research design nor applied methodologies are presented to the reader. The publication is an amazing source to understand ideologies, paradigms and values behind transitional policies, but its explanatory value is low. In general, the authors focus on answering the question 'what?' and thus they fail to inform the reader 'why?'. Of course, I understand that the editors want to describe their publication as unique, innovative or

groundbreaking, yet, it increases expectations towards the publication, and in this case, the expectations do not match the book's contents.

On the other hand, there are some clear values of Kopeček and Wciślik's book. It is well-structured, what makes the intellectual portrait of post-communist Central Europe clear and complex. The editors grouped chapters in five sections – the first four consider major ideologies (liberalism, conservatism, populism and the left) and the last one discusses politics of memory, politicised remembrance and strategies of dealing with the past applied in the region. Of course, the structure might still be questioned. The editors do not explain why the authors do not discuss nationalism as a separate ideology or why the section on leftists integrates both post-communist left and new democratic movements. Quite more controversial is the inclusion of the last section on post-1989 politics of memory. I have to emphasise that, as a researcher of transitional remembrance policy-making, I highly appreciate these four pieces, but as a political scientist I cannot understand the reason why this topic is discussed, while other 'thematic clusters' such as the myth of European (re-)integration, civic society-building, imaginations of the national 'Ideal Self', strategies of transitional justice, transformations of social justice and visions of common Central European identity are not included. The only presented explanation of this limitation cannot be recognised as a convincing argument, as the editors express their opinion 'that the thematic field of >>politics towards the past<< was worth signalling out due to its defining nature for the political cultures and thus also intellectual history of post-socialism' (p. 20). I argue that 'politics towards the future' are even more significant to understand transitional politics. Moreover, all remembrance narratives might be considered as future-oriented because they are channels of an identity-building (Wawrzyński and Marszałek-Kawa, 2017: 114-116; Wawrzyński, 2017: 295-298).

Assessing the reviewed book is tough. I am sure that Michal Kopeček and Piotr Wciślik have delivered a valuable and informative publication that can be described as a complex guidebook to the intellectual landscape of post-communist Central Europe. It offers educated and detailed considerations of ideologies in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, and some introduction to debates in Croatia, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. It includes a complex analysis of the (re-)emergence of constitutionalism in Central Europe by Paul Blokker and two comparative chapters on the politics of memory, the first on the remembrance of communists by James Mark, Muriel Blaive, Adam Hudek, Anna Saunders and Stanisław Tysza, and the second on a regional regime of remembrance by Zoltán Dujisin. These all are significant and unquestionable values of Kopeček and Wciślik's book.

However, as I mentioned before, the publication also has some shortcomings. Firstly, it is fueled by a dislike of political science and a belief that intellectual history is a more academic way to explain political transitions. Secondly, it is based on a vision of democratisation as a sociopolitical process that does not include the context of its

general objective – an establishment of the consolidated democratic regime. Thirdly, it lacks comparative perspective as just a few of the chapters offer any cross-national evidence or discussion. Fourthly, it is not clear how the research design was achieved, e.g. why there is no analysis of the Romanian post-communist left or Polish populist movements or conservatism and nationalism in former Yugoslavian countries. Moreover, why does the section on politics of memory only discuss the cases of Hungary and Slovakia whereas dealing with the past were also highly important political issues in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Poland, Romania and Serbia? Finally, the book's title is quite misleading. The editors claim that the book considers 'East Central Europe', but some parts of the region are not discussed at all – the authors do not address the intellectual history of post-Soviet countries (Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova and Ukraine), the ambiguous framework of Austrian politics after 1989, or other post-Yugoslav countries. It is clear that there is very little of the East in their delimitation of 'East Central Europe' (Halecki, 2000; Magocsi, 2002).

Even if there are some aspects in which the reviewed publication may be criticised, I recognise it as a very informative and valuable contribution. It should be suggested as the obligatory reading for courses on the ideological landscape of post-communist nations. I highly recommend it to all scholars and students interested in democratisation in Central Europe or transitional studies. I believe this well-edited and well-published book fills a significant gap in the international literature on the post-1989 intellectual history and post-socialism in general.

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