

Balázs Trencsényi, Maciej Janowski, Mónika Baár, Maria Falina, and Michal Kopeček, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe, I: Negotiating Modernity in the 'Long Nineteenth Century'*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2016, 687 pp., bibliog., index

Being the first so ambitious attempt at describing the political thought of the area spanning from Estonia to Bulgaria and from Ukraine to Czech Republic, this book is impressive not only in its size (another volume is forthcoming!). The broad glance of the diverse subject-matters tackled, the consistent application of a comparative perspective, and the homogeneous, pleasantly readable style (a real rarity for a multi-author publication) are admirable. The five authors originally intended to write “a genuinely transnational intellectual history” (p. 1), one that would reinstate East Central Europe’s desired place in the history of political thought; a book that would be free from discursive autarky, as otherwise typical for local scientific traditions. There is no doubt that the design has been delivered successfully: this extremely rich and competent compendium will certainly be an indispensable companion of researchers specialising in local (and, hopefully, not only local) intellectual traditions.

The volume is comprised of a short introduction and four extensive parts covering the great ideological formations: the Enlightenment, the Romanticism, the Modernism, and the crisis of Modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These sections are divided into numbered chapters (three to

five in each), consisting of shorter subchapters. None of the smaller or larger sections of which the book is built is limited to a single country or nation. The story unceasingly leaps from one place to the other, rarely staying in one country for longer than several paragraphs. The authors follow the ideas being presented, based on the apt assumption that nations inhabiting a region and wrestling with similar problems have to do with, broadly speaking, similar ideas. Such an approach brings, at times (better to say, almost everywhere), astonishing comparisons or juxtapositions; certain phenomena appear in a different than usual context. Comparative concepts of ‘national revivals’ in the former half of the nineteenth century, or the formation of modern political movements, are more common to the earlier literature (both threads, though in a more restricted geographical reach, are covered, for instance, in a popular book by the Polish historian Henryk Wereszycki entitled *Pod berłem Habsburgów*¹). The reader accustomed to one of the local canons of the history of political thought will find much more astonishing the proposed broad and inclusive definition of the late Enlightenment age – a concept that logically complements the stance recently expressed by one of the authors in the trilogy on the history of Polish intelligentsia.²

An important factor that revises the comparative pattern is the timeframe of individual intellectual formations that differed by country and culture. The fundamental assumption behind the book is that the political thought developed diachronically in the region concerned. While the ideological formations tended to occur there usually in a similar sequence, the time intervals were longer or shorter: Hungary would have always preceded Albania, to cut the long story short. The authors recognise this fact and adapt their storytelling method to it, by quitting the classical chronological order, among other things. Such a way of (re)arranging the enormous material is legitimate and does yield the expected effects, facilitating the understanding of ideas and attitudes of the political actors being described. At some rare moments does it turn into a somewhat irritating manner, as if the authors expected that every single essential and repeatable political phenomenon has to have a counterpart in every (at least, in every larger) country. Such is the case, for instance, with the description of the historiographic output of Myxailo Hruševsky. As we can read, “in the absence of a normative Romantic synthesis of Ukrainian history”, Hruševsky “could not play the role of the critic of Romantic myths.

¹ Henryk Wereszycki, *Pod berłem Habsburgów. Zagadnienia narodowościowe* (Kraków, 1975).

² Jerzy Jedlicki (ed.), *Dzieje inteligencji polskiej do roku 1918*, i: Maciej Janowski, *Narodziny inteligencji 1750–1831* (Warszawa, 2009); English version: Jerzy Jedlicki (ed.), *A History of the Polish Intelligentsia*, Pt. 1: Maciej Janowski, *Birth of the Intelligentsia*, trans. Tristan Korecki (Geschichte – Erinnerung – Politik. Studies in History, Memory and Politics; Frankfurt am Main et al., 2014).

He thus had to find a way to fill the gap and in a way serve as a Romantic and a positivist historian at the same time” (p. 565). Although the comparative concept allows to point out to certain potential options Hruševsky and the other characters actually faced, the causality is undeterminable with its use. Hruševsky did not have to do a thing. On the other hand, to nit-pick on those scarce moments where the charm of comparative approach seems to have overly taken charge of the authors would not be a fair thing to do. Owing to the assumed interpretative pattern, they quite often succeed to spotlight a number of interesting and original thinkers who have been somewhat forgotten in their respective national contexts – one of them being Stanisław Herbert-Heybowicz, the outstanding Polish theorist of the national question. Thus, the assumed method passes, in most cases, its practical test.

This is mostly owed to the authors’ liberal approach towards the methodological issues. The book opens with a declaration identifying the *Begriffsgeschichte*, in Reinhart Koselleck’s concept, coupled with a contextual history (J.G.A. Pocock), as its inspiration. Yet, its influence on the reader is not too manifest; it is certainly not burdensome, in any case. Attention is potentially drawn, at most, by a few reappearing borrowed phrases, ‘horizon of expectations’ being one of them. The author’s interest in the functioning of language, as declared in the introductory remarks, impresses no clear stamp on the narrative style applied. Consequently, this book will not revolutionise the methodology of research into the history of ideas. Its actual importance consists in filling the gaps in the history of European political thought, and in providing a counterpoint to the individual national historiographic schools. The rather classical way in which the story in question is told does facilitate its reception. Such a conservative approach helps the reader deal with the enormous material gathered in the volume.

While the narrative style is not quite innovative, the organisation of work on this ambitious project serves as a rare example of successful collective work, with the resulting book that is probably of a much higher quality than a hypothetical work that would have potentially been written on the subject by any of the five authors on his/her own. Whoever has come across one of those ‘collective monographs’ offered by the historiographies of Central Eastern and Southeast Europe, will observe with appreciation that even in a careful reading the seams linking the sections written by various authors are not conspicuous at all. It must have called for enormous effort to achieve such a result. As I have mentioned, the narrative never stops, even for a while, at one place. The combination of individual fragments has not been carried out mechanically by a ‘super-editor’ but must have resulted from multilateral negotiation. As we can learn from the introduction, the authors moreover took advantage of a dozen expert scholars who enabled them to follow not only the larger and better known traditions of political thought but to include those peripheral ones, Estonian among them (Kaarel Piirimäe’s remarks provided

the indispensable material). Given such an excellent insight in the subject-matter as well as in the historian milieu of East Central and Southeast Europe, it seems even more astonishing that the authors have not managed to include Greece. As they remark, this gap ought to be approached as a rather essential testimony to the region's 'mental maps', which sometimes have not much to do with the country's geographic location or actual neighbourhood.

It would take more space than is appropriate for a review to summarise a work so immense, whose character is that of a handbook. It is worth, however, to pose a question that accompanies the reader (almost) throughout the book: What is it that is peculiar to this particular region of Europe? Does East Central Europe really form an entity, or, is the proposed list of the countries under analysis merely a matter of geographical coincidence? Apart from a general answer, the book provides a series of detailed indications. The former consists of the references to modernisation, underdevelopment, and transfer of ideas, scattered across the study. East Central and Southeast Europe accepted and absorbed, as a rule, the ideas produced in the West: there is no dissenting opinion among the authors on this point. They moreover remind us that among these imports was the idea to finally quit the imitative attitude and oppose it with the region's own, purportedly organic, tradition. As repeatedly emphasised by Jerzy Jedlicki, one of the intellectual patrons of the study under review, the borrowings from the West were drawn by both sides: the *Zapadniks* and the Slavophiles. The comparative perspective allows the authors to more deeply (re)consider the mechanisms of the transfers in question, their non-simultaneity and non-evidence, which is due to the difference in the contexts in which the ideas were meant to function. Even if the regional political thought fed on imported goods, the use it tended to make of them remained its own business. Such an understanding of the ideological transfers has enabled to identify original aspects where the more traditional concepts could not spot them: namely, in the ways in which the borrowed ideas were adopted to the local determinants, unrestrainedly blended and processed.

The book moreover points to certain trends in political thought which developed most successfully in this particular part of Europe. There are four such currents coming to the fore, which marked their presence the most strongly at the end of the nineteenth century. One of them was agrarian populism. In the region that struggled with chronic deficiency of capital and thus with weak cities, this political orientation gathered steam due to the objective reasons (as it represented peasantry, the largest social class) and to the dogmatic attitude of the local social democrats. While the socialists, loyal to the theses of Marx, expected the working class to become dominant, politically and number-wise, the populists took over the field and offered their voters eclectic agenda blends that adopted anticlericalism and criticism of liberalism, nationalism and, not infrequently, anti-Semitism combined

with elements of socialism. Several outstanding political leaders emerged out of such a formation – to name Stjepan Radić or Aleksandar Stambolijski. Analogous local conditions fostered the development of federative ideas. These were contributed by liberals and socialists (especially, Balkan ones), by Jewish folkists and even by conservatives, such as Aurel Popovici. Another current in the political thought which in East Central Europe played a generally larger role than in the western part of the continent, was civic radicalism. A cohort of courageous intellectuals at the turn of the century, driven by a personal sense of morality and dissent against their contemporary standards of functioning of political parties, formulated several versions of a programme for ‘non-political politics’. The most influential among those figures was definitely Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of independent Czechoslovakia. Oszkár Jászi also pursued a (short-lived) political career. The other civic radicals were mostly influential in the sphere of ideas rather than in political pragmatics – the notorious examples being Edward Abramowski, Stanisław Brzozowski, or Jan Baudouin de Courtenay. Finally, anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism was, in the authors’ opinion, probably the most astonishing trend in the political thought that ripened faster and more abundantly in the east rather than west of Europe. Although always marginal compared to the other ideologies, the trend did enjoy a long duration. The ideas of civil disobedience and left-liberal resistance to authoritarian regimes were subsequently repeatedly revived across the region: in the 1930s and in the Stalinist period; in the dissident movement from the 1970s onwards. Presently, they are perhaps followed up in countries like Hungary and Poland.

In order to learn how original in the general European context these particular traditions of political thought are, a comparative exercise had to be employed. Another benefit of such a depiction of the topic is that all the manifestations of the transfer of ideas between the nations of East Central Europe have been highlighted, excluding the West European ‘centre’. The local traditions of the history of ideas and, more generally, the history of culture, tend to place an emphasis on the direct relations between the local thinkers, authors or artists with their Western counterpart ‘originators’. The study under discussion blatantly shows that some personal and intellectual connections and interrelations between the peripheries of European thought proved to be more important than the apparent analogies. Myxailo Drahomanov’s influence on the Bulgarian Left is explained in these terms: not only his sympathy for the oppressed common people but also family ties were fundamental to his association with the option (pp. 524–5). Another, much more important example of ideologies emerging under the influence of local thinkers and local conditions, is certain trends in the Jewish political thought, which is covered at considerable length in the study.

A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe is worth of utmost appraisal owing to the skilful depiction of an extensive richness

of political thought developing over more than a hundred years in the region, as a coherent and logical whole. Is the proposed argument free of flaws or controversial theses? Most probably, not; experts in the specified segments of political thought will expectedly find there fragments to object or causing a feeling of insufficiency. The undersigned would, for instance, put more emphasis on the practical political and charity activities of the women's organisations in the years 1914–18 as the founding argument for the postulates of political emancipation of women put forth in the late years of the Great War and the beginnings of the interwar period. To give another example: Juozas Gabrys-Paršaitis described as a leading Lithuanian politician in the early twentieth century, with the 'business' nature of his activities and his connections with the French and, subsequently, German intelligence service being neglected, attests to a rather random knowledge of the recent literature on this otherwise extremely interesting figure.³ None of these remarks, however, relates to a gross omission or error and they nowise inform the general appraisal of the book being reviewed. Any self-respecting scholar specialising in the history of East Central or Southeast Europe should get acquainted with this study, or at least have it accessible as a reference source.

trans. Tristan Korecki

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³ See Juozas Gabrys, *Auf Wache für die Nation. Erinnerungen. Der Weltkriegsagent Juozas Gabrys berichtet (1911–1918)*, ed. by Eberhard Demm, Christina Nikolajew, and Nathalie Chamba (Frankfurt am Main, 2013).