

Philipp Ther. 2016. *Europe since 1989: A History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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We all too often tend to think of 1989 as the year of Eastern European revolutions, without consideration of the changes the historic transformation brought to Western Europe. Perhaps the greatest merit of Philipp Ther's book, *Europe since 1989: A History*, is to break the long-standing tradition and ask a new question: what does 1989 mean for the historical evolution of Europe as a whole? That is, how did the revolutions in Eastern Europe 'co-transform' Western European advanced democracies? In his 400-page long analysis Ther develops a clear thesis: by the rise of the neoliberal order.

To explain the regime change and the direction post-communist societies took after 1989, Ther goes back to the socio-economic developments in the 1980s. While the Soviet Block was crumbling under the influence of nationalism and economic decline, in the West, a new ideology – neoliberalism – was gaining traction under the leadership of Reagan and Thatcher (chapter 2). After the Eastern European revolutions (chapter 3), the intellectual proponents of neoliberalism, headed by Milton Friedman, saw the perfect opportunity to experiment with these ideas. They allied with key domestic actors to implement neoliberal 'reforms' in the form of privatization, economic deregulation, and market liberalization (chapter 4). These reforms put Eastern European countries on a path where neoliberal transformations were considered key to succeed and defined politics in the decades to come (chapter 5). However, the success of neoliberalism undermined the societal basis of these reforms by creating structural inequalities, large-scale unemployment, and poverty. Ther's assessment of the gap between the boom economy of capital cities and other regions' underdevelopment serves as an example (chapter 6).

If *Europe since 1989* had been a history of the post-communist transitions, the reader might expect the book to conclude here. But, Ther goes on to discuss the effect of the Eastern European neoliberal development path on the politics of advanced democracies. Particularly, after the era of the Great Recession (chapter 7), European policy makers looked at the 1990s transition reforms as models to manage the consequences of the economic crisis. But while in the nineties the price of these reforms was supported by older generations, during the Great Recession, in Southern Europe the Troika-endorsed policies pushed the costs on the younger generations (chapter 8). In the long run, integrating the Eastern European countries in the common market affected Western European economies by incentivizing wage cuts to make them more competitive, which, in turn, led to growing economic and social inequalities. Ther exemplifies the co-transformation process by devoting a chapter to the post-unification German history (chapter 9), from the solidarity tax to the Hartz IV reforms.

*Europe since 1989* reviews and provides a valuable contribution to some of the decade long debates of the literature on the transition. The most important of these debates concern the speed of the reforms and their relationship to latter success. An analysis of the cross-national patterns shows two paths countries followed: ‘shock therapy’ or gradual transformation. Countries which implemented rapid reforms with high societal costs later became the most successful Eastern European economies. Ther acknowledges the correlation, but he argues that a third aspect confounds the relationship: human capital. The reason for the success of countries like Poland or Hungary lies in the resilience of their population endowed with entrepreneurial skills. Ther distinguishes between top-down and bottom-up transformations, and argues that the latter had a great impact on the different countries’ chance to succeed (chapter 6). He discusses the Polish market in Vienna and the extensive cross-border trade practices as examples of human capital which made the success of these countries possible.

Writing the history of recent events is not an easy task, and perhaps the most innovative aspect of Ther’s book is his ambition to analyze the post-1989 evolution of Europe as a distinct historical epoch (p. 32). In this regard, his contribution is path-breaking and requires broadening the traditional methodological toolkit. Therefore, apart from archival research, Ther reviews extensive social science secondary literature, uses descriptive statistics and relies on his personal memories to build a rich narrative of the era. As an excellent writer, he manages to bring together and use a variety of methods to convincingly argue for his thesis.

One of the over-arching methodological suggestion formulated in the book is to take Eastern Europe's heterogeneity serious. The sub-regions followed different paths, and one should not conflate the dynamic across the Baltics, the Southeast, the Visegrad countries and the former Yugoslavia. Although Ther reviews events from all the different regions, the Visegrad countries stand out as the source of most of his examples. Similar to other comparative works on Eastern Europe, the description of the Baltics and of Southeastern Europe are rather schematic and often reads as a footnote to a 'Visegrad perspective'.

Despite Ther's insistence on using 'neoliberalism' as a neutral, analytical term, the concept is not clearly delimited. His definition of 'a blind belief in the market as an adjudicator in almost all human affairs' (p. X.) is neither neutral, nor precise. Perhaps, this lack of conceptual precision is the reason why, for a social scientist used to hypothesis tests, some of his causal arguments could be more convincing. Arguably, it is not a historian's job to develop counterfactual scenarios, but Ther's argument that the supposedly unavoidable neoliberal reforms were in fact unnecessary for the success of a given country's transition and only resulted in considerable social costs lacks a tangible contrast. Without any counterfactuals or solid conceptual cues, the reader is left to his/her imagination of a post-communist transition 'with a human face'.

Overall, *Europe since 1989* seems like an instant classic of the field. Just as any classic, it asks the important questions and provides thought-provoking answers, which may not always be the final verdicts. Ther's in-depth analysis makes the book an interesting read for a wide audience coming from different disciplines or even outside of academia. I recommend the book for anyone interested in contemporary European affairs, narrated "from an Eastern angle" (p.8).