FEATURED REVIEWS


In recent decades, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the changes of regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, interest has grown in the histories and ultimate falls of the empires that once ruled the region. It is thanks, in part, to this new interest in the pre-World War I history of the region that numerous new, engaging works of scholarship on the Habsburg Monarchy have been published. In contrast with earlier assessments, which were rather one-sided and negative, a new “revisionist” trend has emerged, which is particularly prominent in the United States. The earlier scholarship tended to present the Habsburg Monarchy as an anachronistic state or a so-called “prison of nations,” the fate of which was allegedly sealed from the outset, and the decades immediately preceding its fall were characterized as a time of chronic crises and death throes (the mere titles of the monographs and articles that were published on the subject in the 1960s, 1970s, and even 1980s exemplify this tendency). The newer literature, in contrast, reassesses these schematic views. The roots of this earlier “master narrative” are found in the scholarship that was published in the period leading up to the Great War and the period immediately after the war. The arguments that were made by R. W. Seaton-Watson and Oszkár Jászi (to mention only two of the more emblematic names), which rested on the notion of tensions between centripetal and centrifugal forces, exerted a decisive influence on the scholarship on the Monarchy and its fall for a long time. Works of history that approached the region from the perspective of the nation state did not really know how to deal with the many peculiarities of the Habsburg Monarchy, though to paraphrase an article by Gary B. Cohen in 1998, with regards to the monarchy of the Dualist Era, one can speak neither of absolutism nor of anarchy (“Neither Absolutism nor Anarchy: New Narratives on Society and Government in Late Imperial Austria” [1998]). As Cohen suggests, when historians concentrate too narrowly on the collapse of the monarchy and study its internal conflicts according to an approach that is too narrow in its perspective (first and foremost the national conflicts and, in connection with them, the failure of the state to democratize), then a number of other important processes are pushed to the margins. One of
the great merits of the reviewed book is that it does not repeat the notion—at this point a wearisome cliché—that the empire was “doomed to collapse from the outset.”

The other side of the coin (the factors that contributed to the Monarchy’s relative stability and functionality) were neglected for a long time. Beginning in the 1970s, one could see signs of a shift. In Hungary one might think of the work of Péter Hanák as perhaps the most illustrative example.

In the emergence of the aforementioned trans-national tendency in the United States, along with Cohen, John W. Boyer, the Hungarian-born American professor István Deák, and their students, Pieter M. Judson, the author of the book under review, played a significant role. In his earlier works, Judson, who is now a professor at the European University Institute in Florence, studied the transformation of liberal politics and political culture (Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848–1914 [1996]). In other works, he examined the process of nationalization which came in the wake of the work of the “national activists” on the language border, and the phenomenon of the national indifference. Alongside the books by Cohen, Jeremy King, and Tara Zahra, Judson’s Guardians of the Nation (2006) constitutes one of the fundamental works in the new assessments of national identity. It offers a lively analysis of complex and highly malleable identities, the very complexity and malleability of which seemed to have escaped entirely the notice of the earlier approach, which tended towards simplification.

Judson’s new monograph on the last two centuries of the Habsburg Monarchy fits into this narrative well. It places emphasis not on nation building, but rather on state building. The book begins with a story from 1911: in a multiethnic small town in Galicia, passions and tempers flare in connection with the election. The soldiers sent to quell the disturbance shoot into the crowd and 26 people were killed. The story, however, is not about electoral corruption, national antagonisms, or the brutal measures taken by the authorities. Rather, it is about the odd unity among the linguistically, ethnically, and denominationally diverse people of the crowd, for whom the election (i.e. the future of the monarchy) was at stake. Judson offers the following explanation of the purpose of the book: “This book is about how countless local societies across central Europe engaged with the Habsburg dynasty’s efforts to build a unified and unifying imperial state from the eighteenth century until the First World War. It investigates how imperial institutions, administrative practices, and cultural programs helped to shape local society
in every region of the empire, from the late eighteenth century until the first
decades of the twentieth century. It also examines how citizens in every
corner of the empire engaged with these various practices and institutions,
often appropriating them from their own purposes or reinterpreting them
to fit their interests. Taken as a whole, these complex processes of empire
building gave citizens in every corner of the empire collective experiences that
crossed linguistic, confessional, and regional divides” (p.4.). Judson considers
it important to show that, alongside the ruler, the bureaucracy, and the military,
the imperial Habsburg state “was also an ongoing project that engaged the
minds, hearts, and energies of many of its citizens at every level of society”
(p.5.).

The book is captivating from the outset. The writing is elegant and precise,
and the manner of presentation is enthralling. Judson shows a remarkable gift
for balance as he mixes a presentation of the events (knowledge of which is
indispensable to understanding) with a discussion of processes and innovative
approaches. The antecedents and the annals history are painted with broad brush
strokes, with all of the advantages and disadvantages that this involves. With
regards to the annals history, Judson is very judicious in his selection (though
in some cases readers ought to have already some knowledge of the topics).
He strives to use individual stories to shed light on and bring the reader closer
to a given era and the theme at hand, but his goal is not to provide yet another
account of the events, but rather to build his own quite innovative interpretation
of these events. Rather, building on the ideas and interpretations presented in
the first paragraph of this review, he focuses on the ways in which the empire functioned, and he examines how the empire was part of the everyday lives of
its citizens and how its citizens identified (or did not) with it.

Judson presents the history of this unusual Central European state formation
(which, as the book itself demonstrates, was actually not so unusual) from the
second half of the eighteenth century to its fall (though in the epilogue he even
goes a bit further). He contends that the Habsburg Monarchy was a perfectly
viable formation in which, from the middle of the eighteenth century until the
outbreak of World War I, numerous attempts were made to modernize the
structure of the state, attempts which were always aimed at improving the quality
of life and the circumstances of the subjects or citizens of the state. Thus, the
most emphasis is placed on presenting this process of development, while aspects
which are not tied (or not directly tied) to this concept are given significantly
less consideration. Judson examines the monarchy from a “Gesamtmonarchie”
point of view, but he gives each of the individual countries and crownlands considerable attention, being moderate and balanced. Interestingly, one has the impression that, in this delicate balance, the peripheral regions, first and foremost Galicia, are given greater emphasis than, for instance, the Austrian hereditary provinces.

The point of departure for the narrative is the period of the reign of Maria Theresa and Joseph II. It was under their rule that the desire for a unified, centralized monarchy first began to exert sway. New institutions were created in pursuit of this goal, and numerous reforms were introduced. While these reforms and institutions undoubtedly yielded results in many spheres of public life, they were not sufficient to allow the monarch to achieve the goal of creating a united empire. There were many reasons for this failure: the traditions of autonomy in the provinces and the opposition of the traditional elites to Joseph II’s reforms, not to mention the national movements that were emerging in the colorful linguistic and ethnic mix of the monarchy. Even Joseph II’s personality contributed in part to the failure of these efforts. In the wake of the work of the reformers, however, a bureaucracy and system of rules took form that constituted the principal uniting force of the monarchy. In Judson’s estimate, the Allgemeines bürgerliches Gesetzbuch (issued in 1811) played a role of particular importance in this process as a tool of state integration, which established the preconditions for civic equality, linking citizens of the state directly to the monarchy, and not to the feudal estates or provincial bodies. In principle, this and the creation in 1804 of the Austrian Empire established a unified state and the unifying institution of state citizenship (even if the Hungarians saw this very differently, both at the time and later).

After the death of Leopold II and in the wake of the French revolution, the empire in Central Europe became a bastion of ossified conservatism for a few decades, but the tradition of the Rechtsstaat endured, and beneath the surface a new economic and social order was beginning to take form. Liberalism and nationalism—the two most influential ideologies of the nineteenth century—were spreading to ever wider circles. The revolutions of 1848 brought about the decisive turn. In the chapters on the revolution, Judson offers a vivid picture of the complex and often mutually contradictory efforts, but he emphasizes that, with the exception of the Italians and, later, the Hungarians, the other ethnic and national groups of the empire and their elites remained loyal to the dynasty. They did not seek to bring down the empire, only to transform it better to suit their needs and interests. Given the overall interpretation presented in the
book, it is perhaps not surprising that there are only a few references to the civil war in this chapter. The revolution, however, also cast light on the fundamental problems faced by the empire.

The subsequent period attempted to find various solutions to these problems, and it was in this period that the united empire was actually made a reality, even if only for a short time. In the previous section of the books, Judson adheres for the most part to the traditional periodization. For the period between 1849 and 1914, however, he diverges from the norm. To be more precise, he regards the decades between 1849 and the 1880s as a single, unified period, since, in his assessment, as of 1849, the government was essentially liberal. A process of reform had begun, according to Judson, the result of which would be the emergence of a liberal empire (as the title of the fifth chapter, “Mid-Century Modern: Emergence of a Liberal Empire,” suggests). However, his argument is not entirely convincing when he tries to characterize the Silvesterpatent (with which Franz Joseph, still a young man and relatively unseasoned ruler, withdrew the Imposed March Constitution), as the beginning of what was “an ambitious and in many ways forward-thinking program of economic, social, and cultural renewal.” Although both recent Austrian and Hungarian historiography have offered nuanced portraits of the neo-absolutist era, with regards to the intentions of the monarch and his most influential advisors one can hardly harbor any illusions. (See for instance Stickler, “Die Herrschaftsauffassung Kaiser Franz Josephs in den frühen Jahren seiner Regierung: Überlegungen zu Selbstverständnis und struktureller Bedeutung der Dynastie für die Habsburgermonarchie” [2014]). Furthermore, some of the reforms, for instance the decision to abolish what remained of the feudal system, had been a consequence (and arguably victory) of the 1848 Revolution, which the regime would not have been able to undo in the wake of the conflict. Judson acknowledges that the price of reforms was the introduction of a police state (since the empire was compelled to use force to compensate for its lack of legitimacy, primarily in the Italian provinces and Hungary), but in his assessment, the attempt to forge a unified, centralized empire had far greater and more general significance. Although various attempts were made to make the system and the dynasty itself more popular (Franz Joseph’s wife Elisabeth or “Sissi” was given an important role in this), the period beginning in 1849 was clouded by foreign policy failures (the threat of Italian and German national unification), financial difficulties, and internal discontent (in particular, the openly oppositional conduct of the Italians and the Hungarians). The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 was a consequence
of the Italian fiasco and the gradual marginalization of the Austrian Empire in the wake of German unification, but this disrupted the unity of the state and thus, at least in Judson’s assessment (though he does not emphasize this) it was a step backwards. Hungary never really fits neatly into Judson’s interpretation of events up until 1867, and it fits even less into his assessment of the empire after the Compromise. He does not really find a persuasive solution to this, but he raises many questions and dilemmas that merit further thought in connection with Hungary and many other matters.

The most exciting part of the book is chapter six ("Culture Wars and Wars for Culture") and seven ("Everyday Empire, Our Empire"). The ever increasing authority and jurisdiction of the state and the ever increasing number of tasks it had to address in the spheres of infrastructure and social politics, combined with the transformation of politics itself (the involvement of ever wider circles of the masses instead, merely, of the narrow elites in politics as part of the process of democratization), gave rise to challenges that were confounding not only for the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, but for all of the old monarchies of Europe. One of the virtues of this book is that it demonstrates how, in many cases, the problems facing the Monarchy were merely local variations of the great problems of the era. Judson offers convincing examples of how the state attempted to address the cultural differences among its peoples, first and foremost in Cisleithania. While the central bureaucracy made noble efforts to modernize the Monarchy and make the state apparatus effective and efficient (as persuasively argued recently by John Deak: *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* [2015]), a partly contrary process was also underway. The local elites and, first and foremost, the political activists were “attempt[ing] to both manage and take advantage of the entrance of larger numbers of people into political life” (p.271).

According to Judson, in whose earlier work the notion of national indifference already played a significant role, in the local societies in which they lived, people who spoke various languages did not necessarily perceive cultural differences as such. The significance of these differences grew in the wake of political mobilization. The efforts of the political activists to attain institutional protected rights for the people who spoke a given language contributed to the tendency among people in local communities to see themselves and one another “in terms of language based-categories” (p.272). Thus, political conflicts were given a linguistic, cultural, and ultimately national tinge, but the nationalizing elites (political activists, representatives, journalists) played a significant role
in this. As the electoral base in Cisleithania broadened as a consequence of parliamentary reforms, the popularity of cultural principles and arguments grew in politics: “Activists naturalized their particular political agendas by expressing demands in the more inclusive language of ethnic nationhood. This language made cultural commonalities the basis for group identification” (p.272). Nation building was a difficult and tiring process, and for precisely this reason Judson feels that, in order to understand this process, we need a concept of “event-driven” or “situational” nationalism. In a manner familiar from his earlier works, Judson contends that “nationalist conflicts” (he deliberately uses this term instead of “nationalities conflicts”) were a product of institutions. Institutions and administrative practices made significant contributions to the deepening of a sense of cultural difference. The story begins, according to Judson, with the bitter fight between the conservative federalists and the liberal Vienna government (the so-called Bürgerministerium) in power after the Compromise, and Judson considers the symbolic implications of this fight. Nationalists later continued to add to the tools used in the “culture wars” of the 1870s. The press and the societies that began to appear in ever larger numbers in the 1860s played a significant role in this. Given the focus of his earlier research, Judson concentrates primarily on Cisleithania, and the vast majority of his examples are drawn from these territories of the empire.

The presentation of the paradoxical process of the elevation of language and language use to the critical and decisive factor in identity (i.e. the principal criterion of membership in the “nation”) is extremely interesting, in particular the presentation of how the state’s efforts to guarantee equal linguistic rights for all of its citizens led to the rise of separate, closed national groups that defined themselves on the basis of language. In connection with this, the emphasis shifted from individual rights to group rights, and in administrative and legal practice nations became legitimate legal actors. Indeed, the political activists who stood up in the name of the nation sought increasingly to use the law in order to compel people to make the “correct” decision, for instance when it came to the question of children’s schooling, as studied by Tara Zahra. In other words, in the end, there was a battle underway over national upbringing, and it displaced the national indifference (Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900−1948 [2008]). The last stage of this came with the Moravian (1905) and then later the Bukovinian (1910) and Galician (1914) compromises, which put new tools for the cultivation of national identity in the hands of political activists. Thus, the language rights of the individual were
transformed into the right of the national community over its members: “the liberal constitutional guarantee of language rights to the individual gradually became transformed into the right of the national community over its members. This steady legal transformation was the culmination of cultural arguments that had long maintained first, that an individual has a fundamental and authentic national identity, and second, that the cultural gulf between national communities was unbridgeable” (p.316).

It is unfortunate that Hungary, the other half of the monarchy, is presented less elaborately. Either it is not mentioned in these analyses or Judson merely adds a shade of nuance to the traditional image. (Though this is in part a consequence of the lack of similar research and the paucity of scholarship on the subject in English, it is primarily due to the fact that Hungary simply does not fit well into the larger interpretation.) Yet careful consideration of the consequences of the two diverging political practices would have been interesting from this perspective.

Parallel to this, Judson presents the efforts of the liberals to emphasize the new civilizing mission of the empire and their attempts to achieve this mission in Galicia and Bosnia. The conclusion he reaches following a presentation of an instance of corruption in Galicia, however, is an exaggeration at best, particularly if one takes into consideration the antecedents: “The liberals had also made the East a site of corruption, of arrogant chicanery, and worst of all, of downright failure”, and liberalism, furthermore, “had been revealed as simply one more sectarian political party or set of ideologies that benefited only a part of Austro-Hungarian society at the expense of other parts of society” (p.327).

Judson then presents the developments that took place in the monarchy over the course of its last three decades, including increasingly rapid urbanization, the development of infrastructure, the spread of literacy, and, parallel to all this, the growth of the state bureaucracy. Social questions, the workers’ movement, the appearance of social democratic parties, and expansion of the right to vote in Cisleithania and, in contrast, the freeze of suffrage in Hungary created new problems. However, the monarchy produced fascinating phenomena, such as the use of many languages in the military. The activities of veteran organizations, which were used in an attempt to strengthen a sense of patriotic attachment to the empire, offer a clear example (as Laurence Cole has shown in his research) of the complex role that patriotism played in everyday life, and they shed light on the interesting intertwining of imperial patriotism and regional and ethnic identity. The political storms of the turn of the century were partly
national conflicts, but the “nationalist movements shaped their demands around the institutions and expectations created by empire,” and the actors thought within these frameworks (pp.381–82). Following the crisis of the turn of the century, the decade before the outbreak of World War I was again a period of consolidation. People who were engaged in fierce debates in parliament were eager to reach compromises in the wings. “Habsburg bureaucrats and party politicians had long demonstrated a flexible creativity in negotiating structural modifications intended to make the empire function more effectively and to give it greater longterm political stability” (p.376). World War I interrupted this complex but fundamentally positive process. In Judson’s view, the processes of modernization and integration essentially had been successful. The national movements and conflicts had not significantly weakened the state, and they certainly did not contribute to its fall. The monarchy fell because of the war and the consequences of the war.

At the time of World War I, destructive tendencies and processes were set in motion which led to the collapse of the monarchy. First and foremost, the military leadership (the Armeeoberkommando, or AOK) bore responsibility for pushing the bodies of civil administration to the side and harassing, for the most part, citizens of the empire who were Serbian, Ruthenian, or members of other nationalities that had been branded “suspicious.” By doing so, they alienated these people from the monarchy. The military dictatorship (the term is borrowed from Josef Redlich) caused a rupture in the traditions of the constitutional state. In addition, the state was no longer able to perform the tasks it was expected to perform, and members of the civilian population who were indigent received assistance primarily from the nationalist organizations. This further undermined the legitimacy of the monarchy and contributed to its disintegration. The last chapter offers a short overview of the afterlife of the monarchy and the ways in which the multinational successor states, which presented themselves as nation states, in many ways passed on the repudiated legacy of the monarchy. The maps and the attentively chosen illustrations offer an excellent complement to the book.

Many comprehensive works have been written on the history of the Habsburg Monarchy, and they have all had to address the fundamental difficulty of writing on what was a composite state formation. The authors not only had to plough their way through the swollen body of secondary literature, they also had to be able to incorporate the histories (written in seven or eight different languages) of the individual lands and provinces into their work. And any author
writing on the Habsburg Monarchy had to have a true gift for synthesis in order to grasp the history of the empire in all its complexity. From this perspective, Judson is the ideal scholar, for he knows the most recent secondary literature in English and also uses the secondary literature in German, Czech, and other Slavic languages. He also merits recognition for his efforts to devote adequate attention, alongside Cisleithania, to Hungary. The fact that the most recent works of Hungarian historians are the least frequently mentioned in his inquiry is less his fault and more due to the shortcomings of Hungarian historiography. This also explains the unevenness of the sections of the book that deal with Hungary. Since the writings of Hungarian historians have not been adequately spread in international scholarly forums (first and foremost in English), they have not become part of the larger circulation of ideas among historians outside of Hungary, although recently, there have been numerous efforts to change this, for instance the very journal in which this review is being published. I would mention only a few of the mistakes or misunderstandings in connection with Hungarian history as examples: allegedly the national assemblies of the Reform Era did not deal with the peasantry or the cities (p.152); in 1848, Hungarian citizenship was tied to the use of the Hungarian language, and this was one of the reasons behind the Serbian uprising (p.200); Judson repeats a mistake often found in the works of history of the successor states according to which after the so-called Lex Apponyi, (a law passed in 1907 on the legal state of non-state schools), all instruction in the schools of the non-Hungarian nationalities had to take place in Hungarian (pp.304–05); and until 1896 the Jews were not eligible for election to public office (p.518, note 31). Judson’s treatment of the various layers of the nobility is often vague, and it is often unclear what the terms “noble” or “gentry” actually are intended to mean, precisely. However, these kinds of small imprecisions are insignificant given the many merits of the book.

Judson’s efforts to remain balanced and impartial are clear in his use of settlement names and proper names. In the case of settlement names, he uses several variants, depending on the ethnic makeup of the given community. This merits praise in part because it is hardly common practice at Anglo-Saxon publishing houses. Judson also avoids normative terms when dealing with the nationalities. Instead, he prefers phrases like “German speaking” or “Czech speaking,” and he also uses the word Hungarian instead of “Magyar”. Proper names are given on the basis of the professed ethnicity of the given person, though there are a few exceptions to this rule (for instance Julius Andrássy instead of Gyula Andrássy).
Judson is clearly biased in favor of the Habsburg state which forms the subject of his book, but he is not frustratingly apologetic. Thus, a great work has been written on the eve of the centennial of the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy which rethinks the existing scholarship on the subject and challenges the old paradigm. It paints a new, balanced picture from an interesting perspective of this multifaceted Central European state.

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If there is one methodological point upon which classical historians of intellectual history such as Quentin Skinner, post-structuralist theoreticians such as Judith Butler, or social historians of the political field such as Gareth Stedman Jones would undeniably agree (in spite of their conspicuous differences), it is that the primary purpose of intellectual history or the history of ideas is not essentially to retrieve or recuperate the (real or accurate) meanings (of texts). Rather, it is about activity. In other words, intellectual history is above all about linguistic action; it is in the first place an analysis of the situational employment, or, more aptly phrased, the strategic deployment of language in order to generate meaning in, or in dialogue with, specific or variable contexts (these may consist of other texts, particular historical constellations, configurations, or traditions, counter positions, etc.). Precisely this act presupposes an audience and attests to the social and public character of the utterance as activity, particularly in the realm of political philosophy.

The edited volume assembled by Michal Kopeček, Head of Department of Late- and Post-Socialism at the Institute for Contemporary History and Assistant Professor at Charles University, Prague, and Piotr Wciślik, PhD candidate at the Central European University, represents not only a successful example of good practice in consideration of the above; more importantly, it offers a novel and refreshing take on the history of the political transformations of East Central Europe (ECE) in the post-communist era, a field that has been long and eminently dominated by the normative and often ahistorical prescripts of “transitology” scholarship (and business). The volume is the result of an exploratory workshop convened in 2011 by a group of East Central European intellectual historians under the auspices of the Institute for Contemporary History (Prague) and the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, in cooperation with the ERC-funded research project “Negotiating Modernity: History of Modern Political Thought in East-Central Europe,” the innovative and bold aim of which is to provide a synthetic and comparative history of political thought in the region. (The first volume, which covers the nineteenth century, has already been published, see Trenesényi, Janowski, Baar, Falina, and Kopeček, A History of Modern Political Thought in East
Thinking through Transition brings together 18 essays by scholars from the region and beyond, combining the strengths of history, political science, sociology, and anthropology. It focuses on the political and ideological metamorphoses of actors and institutions in ECE with a greater and more systematic emphasis on the cases of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, but it also includes contributions on ex-Yugoslavia and Romania (one essay on each). A series of essays tackles the transitions from a comparative perspective, and this enhances the analytical strength of the book.

The specific contribution of intellectual history in general and this volume in particular to a subtler understanding of Zeitgeschichte lies in its analyses of the transfer and circulation of ideas from a bottom-up perspective. In other words, it endeavors to contextualize the circulation of ideas in the specificities of local cultural discourses, historical trajectories, and political configurations, without, however, neglecting their interregional, European, and/or global entanglements. Intellectual history is operationalized through a variety of paradigms, testifying to the methodological pluralism in the field, from classical Begriffsgeschichte, which examines mutations of concepts like “totalitarianism” or “civil society,” to the worldview of specific intellectuals and their cohorts, from the legal history of rights and constitutionalism to the history of transfer, from the sociology of knowledge to history and memory politics. The political field appears as a rapidly shifting and dynamic arena involving a constant and (in contrast to transition theories) unpredictable restructuring of positions. Going against the grain and challenging the frequently encountered picture of a glorious passage from immobile dictatorship to liberal democracy, the volume discusses 1989 as a reconfiguration of the political field rather than as a sudden break with the past. Though 1989 functions as the springboard of narration, several essays trace and connect discourses back to earlier intellectual genealogies; they demonstrate how both past intellectual standpoints and present concerns provided the particular ideological admixture and the choice of positionality in the present, drawing upon an arsenal of actual or fictitious continuities, discontinuities, and/or reconfigurations of political discourse, a circumstance perhaps best exemplified in the transformations of “1989” itself: from an initial symbol of consensual politics to a floating signifier and, eventually, a convenient moment of contestation in order to redraw the lines of the political. Moreover, this volume exemplifies the fact that intellectual history is not only about the lifecycle of ideas but also about the performativity of the political, in other words, the capacity of actors to occupy timely key political/ideological spaces in relation
to their political opponents and therefore not only to define the political agenda but also to capture public space and social imagination. Here, the interplay between ideological choices, socioeconomic factors, and power becomes most apparent. Organized around five comprehensive thematic blocks—liberalism, conservativism, populism, the left, and the politics of history—the volume charts the political and ideological landscape of the post-1989 era as it was framed through the tension between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectations.”

The first thematic section addresses the transformation of dissident liberal discourses and the unspectacular career of liberalism in post-communism. Ferenc Laczó analyses post-dissident liberal discourses in Hungary based on a sample of five leading liberal intellectuals involved in the publication *Beszélő*. In spite of their varying and ambiguous content, most post-dissident concepts of liberal democracy in Hungary showed paradoxically stronger affinities with the left than with the right. Often articulated in a polemical and abstract style, they most probably contributed to the marginalization of political liberalism after its heyday in the early 1990s. The remarkable afterlife of the concept of “totalitarianism” in post-communist Poland is the focus of Piotr Weiślik’s essay. He demonstrates how the boundaries of the political were redrawn via the contestation of the post-totalitarian divide. This involved the transitional reconfiguration of political languages in the merger between formerly competing concepts of totalitarianism of the ex-dissident elite and the liberal “new realists” of the late 1980s. In the rapidly-polarizing political field, radical anti-communism emerged as the strongest language of political contestation. The mutation, which constituted an almost outright setback of Václav Havel’s idea of civil society as conditioned by Havel’s contestations with his neoconservative political rivals of the ODS, is the focus of Milan Znoj’s essay. Though initially conceived as a concept based on the dissident experience but also drawing upon the local intellectual tradition of the first republic, Havel’s concept ebbed in a moral populism that eventually contributed to the rise of anti-communism. Paul Blokker offers a comparative analysis of the rise of legal constitutionalism after 1989, understood initially as an antidote to the ideological instrumentalization of law in the previous period. Though representing the dominant paradigm, legal constitutionalism also saw the parallel rise of alternative models, such as democratic and communitarian constitutionalism. Finally, Blokker expounds on the reasons why a radical form of communitarian (nationalistic/conservative) constitution could be established in countries like Romania and Hungary.
The three case studies in the second thematic block are devoted to examining the impact of conservative ideas. Petr Roubal looks at a small yet influential group of Czech post-dissident neoconservatives and their alliance with neoliberal economists around the Civil Democratic Alliance (ODA). They shaped the belief in neoliberal shock therapy and advocated a radical break with the past, playing a leading role in pressing for the denunciation of the communist regime and the adoption of an uncompromising stance towards Slovak demands for greater autonomy, which they interpreted as left-wing nationalism. How conservatism, though lacking strong continuity and even an independent political organization, nevertheless imposed itself as the language of the right in Poland is the focus of Rafał Matyja’s essay. He examines the ideational convergence of intellectual groups around the publication Res Publica, the Young Poland Movement (RMP), and right-wing liberals of the 1980s. Conservativism was a school that arose out of a religious outlook on reality, but it gladly borrowed from the language of Anglo-Saxon neoconservatives. Zoltán Gábor Szűcs analyzes the aborted constitution-making project of the socialist-liberal government in Hungary between 1994 and 1998. Though initially indifferent to constitutional amendment, Fidesz was able to base its own conservative and highly contested constitutional revolution (the so-called Basic Law of 2011) on the systematic promotion of a conflicting vision of politics, thus turning the tables on the consensualist politics and the predominantly technocratic policy approach followed by the socialist-liberal coalition after 1989.

Is populism the antithesis of or a constituent part of democracy? In other words, is populism a syndrome of the region or a symptom of the age? The third section of the volume focuses on these questions. Camil Alexandru Pârvu pleads for a wide characterization, and he contends that populism is a symptom not merely of fringe parties in contemporary Romania, but also of mainstream ones. The roots of populism lie in a succession of blockages of political representation and the endemic constitutional crisis that accompanies them. As a result, most political parties relatively easily shifted their political identities towards a strong populist mode. The Janus face of populism is at the center of András Bozóki’s contribution regarding the populist phenomenon in Hungary. He examines populism’s inherent paradox, namely the promise of broad inclusion of the people in the political process while in essence populism serves the opposite goal. In the case of Hungary, not only has populism been applied flexibly to different and contradictory political platforms, it has also been used for exclusionary political purposes. Viktor Orbán’s policies of
pampering the middle classes at the expense of the lower classes offer perhaps the most illustrative case. Finally, Juraj Buzalka deals with “political necrophilia” in Slovakia, that is, the popular practice of ritual reburials of political leaders in post-communist states as a political symbol for legitimizing actual political power. He explains why the reburial of interwar prime minister Milan Hodža seemed best to fulfill the qualifications for Slovakia’s return to Europe, even though in popular memory Hodža would never match the popularity of the authoritarian leader of the Slovak People’s Party, Andrej Hlinka.

The fourth thematic block of the volume addresses the left’s soul-searching between communist legacy, neoliberal challenge, and global protest movements. Ágnes Gagyi examines attempts to formulate the agenda of the political left in post-1989 Hungary beyond the official successors of the Hungarian Communist Party. These attempts were made by various groups and activists (“Politics Can Be Different,” Anarchism, the United Hungarian Left, Left Alternative, Erzsébet Szalai, András Lányi, “Protect the Future,” 4K!, etc.) operating within and outside of the Marxist tradition, their common ground being a diagnosis of the social effects of post-socialist neoliberal politics and concomitantly the incubation of a new extreme right. Though liberalism and the right have had a firm grip on politics in Poland since the 1990s, the left’s vitality of ideas after 2002 is disproportionate to its political weakness, argues Maciej Gdula. By tackling issues related to memory, gender, populism, neoliberalism, and the knowledge society, the Polish left has managed to distance itself from the previously common use of naturalized concepts of liberal democracy and the market, which had effectively functioned as imaginary standards with which to “discipline” and frame the political body. Stanislav Holubec focuses on the Czech case by analyzing seven figures of the post-communist intellectual left and their endeavors as public intellectuals. They allow a certain typologization along the lines of five different traditions and generations: reform communism, the anti-Stalinist radical left, new party members after 1970, sympathizers of environmental politics in the 1980s and 1990s, and, finally, a group of outright converts to the left. In the last contribution to this section, Zsófia Lóránd takes a closer look at feminist discourses in Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s and the ways in which feminists resolved to redefine democratic politics in order to counter dominant political discourses that equated democracy with the free (allegedly liberal) expression of nationalism. The feminists’ agenda targeted essentially three topics: 1. civil
society and active citizenship, 2. the inclusion of women in politics and 3. critiques of patriarchy.

The last section in the volume deals with the politics of history and memory. The article “1989 After 1989” by James Mark et al. scrutinizes the memory of 1989 in the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia from a comparative perspective. It demonstrates how the wrangling for the canonization and interpretation of 1989 related either to questions concerning the reconfiguration of the nation and its history or served as a point of distinction between left and right. The authors analyze the specific constellations, which resulted either in positive identifications with 1989 postulating a national identity based on democracy and freedom or negative identifications, which stage 1989 as a betrayal of expectations and a moment of great lost opportunities. Gábor Egry deals with concepts of history and the nation in 1989–2010 and shows how and why the community of destiny (nation) came to predominate over the community of will (republic) in contemporary Hungarian politics. 1989 offered an opportunity to redefine community and brought up several neglected or taboo topics (such as 1956, the Treaty of Trianon, and the end of World War II), which eventually led to mutually exclusive interpretations of the past by political actors and signaled the loss of a common history. In this stalemate, the concept of suffering emerged as the nation’s strongest identity marker. Stevo Đurašković shows how the nationalist Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) was able to gain power in the 1990s by appropriating the national identity-building discourse developed by Slovak communist intellectuals in the post-1968 normalization period. Relying largely on the historical concoction devised by Vladimír Mináč, the HZDS was able to promote the self-image of a state-founding, all-embracing people’s movement. Finally, Zoltán Dujisin discusses the transregional cooperation of post-communist memory entrepreneurs, who via a state-driven institutional apparatus pursue the establishment of a mnemonic regime based on the equalization of communist and Nazi crimes and the externalization of the communist experience from the region. This “usable totalitarianism,” which is based on a crime-centered narrative, is crafted through the cooperation of portions of the political and academic elite, who are also backed with appropriate financial and institutional resources. Their interpretation of history, stylized as the “politics of truth,” is presented as an allegedly “specific” Eastern European contribution to the European memory regime; it contrasts and clashes, however, with the prevailing West European memory consensus, built upon the “politics of regret.”
Thinking through Transition is not a book for beginners; it does not offer a comprehensive history of the East European transition. Rather, it provides compact, thoughtful, and dense analyses of transitional politics through the lenses and methodological instruments of intellectual history. It brings together essays with varying strengths and emphases, and with its focus on local contextualization, it certainly keeps its promise to engage with the origins, genealogies, adaptations, and dynamics of ideas, not as simple transplants, but as energetic and resourceful local processes with their own historical trajectories. The volume is truly informative and thoroughly analytical, and it offers a persuasive example of the capacity of intellectual history to offer a different historicization of the East Central European transition. Narrating the history of this transition is a daunting task, perhaps first and foremost because it means charting and framing an as yet non-existent scholarly field and doing so without the comfort and reassurance of hindsight. Furthermore, historians find themselves faced with open-ended, dynamic, and mutating processes, which in the twenty-first-century information society develop unprecedented forms of acceleration. In addition, in view of the abundance of normative paradigms (transition studies, modernization theory, democratization studies, path dependency etc.) that have been used to explain the transition, developing a new structure of narration where ECE is not the object but becomes the subject requires imagination and creativity. Finally, it is challenging because of the project’s ambitious aim of simultaneously accommodating a comprehensive narrative and a comparative perspective.

The time frames used in the individual essays are rather variable (from a couple of years or decades to genealogies traced back to the nineteenth century), so it is quite hard to assemble them into a bigger and consistent picture in spite of their thematic ordering into ideological currents and the volume’s insightful introduction, which binds them together very intelligibly. The comparative perspective is applied occasionally but not consistently throughout the whole volume. Missing is a systematic and coherent thematic and chronological framework of comparison for East Central and Southeastern Europe capable of accommodating synchronic and a-synchronic developments in each case and explaining them adequately as parallel or contrasting developments (though this is provided to a certain extent by the introduction). In what respect and to what degree do they react to similar or different challenges, in what respect are they or were they reacting to similar or different influences, and in what respect and to what degree have they had similar or diverging historical trajectories?
Second, there is little emphasis on inter-regional intellectual cross-influences between the countries of East Central and Southeastern Europe. In my view, this represents a desideratum not only for the post-1989 period, but also for the era of the Cold War. It is common knowledge that the Cold War imposed its own geography upon the globe, a specific way of seeing and understanding the world but also a particular way of structuring networks of information. An interesting question here is to what degree and in what way is the post-1989 period a reshuffling of this geography and its networks. Can we discern or fashion interesting patterns here for intellectual history? And furthermore, to what degree and in what form did foreign interventions in the form of think tanks, foundations, capacity building, etc. help structure or delineate the lines of the political internally (locally)?

Third, the issue of sample representativity might need to be considered more closely and thoroughly, since it frames and structures the comparative endeavor. Nolens volens, a certain selection, prioritization, typologization, and structuring of topics will have to be made. At times, I had the impression that the concept of intellectual history was perhaps stretched a bit too far (burial rituals, memory politics, etc.); not that I feel compelled to defend some kind of imaginary or purist borders of intellectual history, which do not exist anyway, and one of the volume’s definite assets is its inclination towards experimentation; however, given the abundance of themes and areas that might potentially be covered and integrated (for example, the intellectual history of economic or religious thought, both of which are absent from the volume), such an overstretching might prove tricky in the long run.

Fourth, in spite of the indisputable merits of local contextualization, it is important not to lose sight of the bigger picture with respect to European and global developments. Some of the essays reflect individually on this, but this is insufficient for an analysis which makes the explicit claim to narrate a regional history. Also, it is crucial to provide an approximate or stringent time frame in order to further an understanding of the directionality of transfers and their interdependence. Neoliberalism and the way in which it bounced back and forth between Eastern Europe and the Western world during the Cold War as exemplified by Johanna Bockman’s innovative study on the left-wing origins of neoliberalism” (Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* [2011]) is a good example. Another good example is populism and its spectacular resurrection in the West. Greater attention will therefore need to be paid to global temporalities and the ways in which they affect the contents of
discourses. Where the East European left took the stage in the 1990s (for instance in Hungary), it did so not only after the fall of communism, but simultaneously with the rise of “New Labour,” which was itself a capitulation to capitalism. The sensitive question here is the extent to which local timing shaped the events and the extent to which global timing was decisive or at least significant, and also how the local and global trajectories paralleled each other and how they diverged.

Fifth, in contrast to the nineteenth century, when Europe represented predominantly an idea, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it also represents concrete structures and policies and communicating public spheres. How does this affect the ways in which we narrate European intellectual history?

Sixth, although the individual essays are assembled under traditional and established ideological currents (liberalism, conservativism, etc., which in fact is quite comforting and reassuring for an intellectual historian), it would seem to me that the major challenge for contemporary intellectual historians is how to provide intelligible categories for the present blurring of ideological borders (for example, the appropriation of the defense of social rights by the extreme right wing, the patriotic turn of both the left and the right, the anti-EU positions of both the radical left and the radical right) so typical of post-industrial society. Do we group them according to well-known and established political categories? According to their self-ascription? According to their institutional affiliations to transnational party unions and associations? When I discuss the intellectual development of Viktor Orbán with my Hungarian liberal-democratic (and anti-communist) friends, they all tend to push him into the communist corner, the official justification being that this is the milieu out of which he initially emerged. However, Fidesz belongs formally to the European conservative party block, and Orbán’s politics are explicitly populist. Which political category can digest all this?

Thinking through Transition provides unique insights into the complex constellations described above. Nevertheless, local contextualization cannot deliver better answers unless it maintains the dialogue with bigger contextual frameworks by demonstrating their affinities, cross-fertilization, cleavage, or distance. The volume is particularly successful in avoiding a portrayal of Eastern Europe either as an aberration from European and global developments or as a mere passive recipient of ideas. This paradigm would need to be elaborated and developed further in its full complexity—admittedly not a simple task. Thinking through Transition is certainly a brave and important step in the right direction.

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