
Ther, Philipp:

**DIE NEUE ORDNUNG
AUF DEM ALTEN KONTINENT.
EINE GESCHICHTE DES
NEOLIBERALEN EUROPA.**

Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag. 2014.
431 pages.

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Generally, the role of a historian dealing with contemporary history is a rather unrewarding one. To deal with the matter of connecting the past with the present means walking on thin ice and risking that your work will sooner or later be criticised by subsequent authors, not to mention the potential critique you may receive from eye-witnesses and contemporaries. Some authors of books and papers on contemporary political history try to solve this puzzle by over-subjective interpretation, others bypass it by becoming mere chroniclers who put one date after another without bringing any substantial explanation or context of interpretation.

I am glad to state at the beginning of the review that Viennese historian of German origin Philipp Ther does not belong to either of these camps. His book, published in German in 2014 and currently being translated into English (and into Czech, as well), is an example of how contemporary history can be treated without falling into one of the two above mentioned traps. Not only is Ther's book a rigorous application of the historical methods and principles of historical writing, but it also benefits a lot from the author's ability and willingness to communicate with the world of social sciences and to use concepts developed beyond the borders of historical research and writing.

Ther, a respected expert on modern and contemporary history of Europe who places a strong emphasis Central European issues, fosters his historical writings with the use of the concept of neo-liberalism and neo-liberal order which has taken the lead in Western Europe (and subsequently in Southern Europe) since the 1980s, and which has spread throughout post-communist Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. Ther elaborates on the concept of neo-liberalism in a critical, yet rational and scholarly way. He far from praises the ideology of neo-liberalism nor expresses the uncontrolled hate so typical for a majority of the fashionable leftist academic intellectuals of the present era. Taking into account the development of Europe since 1989 to the present and combining political issues with a strong focus on economic and social history, Ther has been able to analyse both the ups and downs of the neo-liberal paradigm applied to real life European societies. In this respect, Ther's treatment of the concept could serve as a positive example for experts in the social sciences that even the concepts so heavily burdened with ideological and political connotation can be treated in a purely analytical way.

Some of his views are, of course, related to his status as a Western observer. I would, for example, not see such a big gap between the ideals of 1989 Revolutions and neo-liberal economic thinking, since the experience of economic collapse and the will to achieve Western economic standards of life were crucial vehicles in sparking the massification of anti-communist protests at the end of the 1980s (see Ther's argument at page 85). For that matter, Ther himself offers a genuine explanation of this, challenging his own remarks on the pages 113 and 116, when he talks about '*der mittelständische Kapitalismus*' (Middle-Class Capitalism) and stresses the role of this idea in the process of democratic consolidation

after the break-up of communism in Central and Eastern Europe.

The near future might also challenge his assumption that Russian aggression in 2014 is a landmark to end the neo-liberal era in Europe (p. 89). Perhaps he underestimated the role of economic paradigms and does not place enough emphasis on the role of geopolitics and the dynamics of internal politics while dealing with an explanation of the process of German unification. Still, his treatment of the concept of neo-liberalism is very interesting and accurate.

Another important positive aspect of Ther's book on neo-liberal Europe is his effort to bridge, at least partially, the gap caused by analysing Western and Central(-Eastern) Europe separately. Ther follows the footsteps of the still few authors (historian Ivan Bérend and political scientist José Magone, to list two of the perhaps most important examples) who are willing and able to put recent European development on one interpretation level. Ther's book clearly shows that the concept of post-communism no longer suffices and that in order to anchor debate on recent European politics and economics in a broader historical context, broader concepts (such as neo-liberalism) can be used with much greater benefit. Especially, the focus on the comparative study of post-communist economic transformation and its challenges and the economic crisis of Southern European Eurozone countries shed new and stronger light on the benefits and flaws of the neo-liberal political and economic order (for example, a reader can see a comparison of the 1990/1991 economic crisis in Poland and Czechoslovakia and the 2008/2009 events in Southern Europe on page 254). Reading the parts devoted to the recent economic crisis, a reader might even wish that Ther would write another book analysing the contribution of the neo-liberal paradigm to European integration.

The structure of the book is clear and it corresponds well with the author's aims to discuss the history of neo-liberalism in Europe. On the other hand, the title of the book is perhaps too general, since Western European neo-liberalism is tackled merely, more or less, as one of the sources of the general global neo-liberal turn. The cases elaborated on in the book are related to the transforming countries of Central, Southern and Eastern Europe only. This helps to keep the matter concise and to explain the relation between the process of transformation and its ideological anchorage in neo-liberalism; but the same fact can slightly disappoint any reader who hopes to encounter the complex economic and social history of Europe since the end of the 1980s.

Looking at the book from a political science perspective, it can be of substantial use for those students and scholars who do not see politics as a phenomenon isolated from the broader context of societal and economic changes. Ther is familiar with many relevant concepts of political transition to democracy (logically and primarily building on the works of German language authors such as Wolfgang Merkel or Dieter Segert). This helps a reader with training in political science only to put Ther's work into his or her own scientific context. Such a reader can expand his understanding of political processes with a deep view into economic and societal development, with the refreshing addition of information concerning the history of everyday life in Central and Eastern Europe of the 1990s.

The sources consulted by Ther are vast and, given the natural language limits, more or less comprehensive. The information and data presented in the book are accurate. A reader finds few factual or other mistakes such as the misspelling of Czech Prime Minister Petr Pithart ('Pithard', page 317), or a slightly imprecise interpretation of Gorbachev's role in (and especially knowledge of) the brutal assault by

Soviet troops on the TV tower in Vilnius in January 1991.

Far more important are some fresh interpretations, such as his fair remarks on some positive impacts of bank 'tunnelling' in Central Europe in the 1990s (p. 201), an accurate interpretation of post-communist societal order in Central Europe as being rather egalitarian despite all of the neo-liberal rhetoric (p. 162–163), an authoritative explanation of the benefits of close German economic cooperation with the Central European region (p. 262), and an interesting remark on the proximity between the ideas of *Annus Mirabilis* and the communitarian philosophy of Charles Taylor that deserves deeper expert elaboration (p. 321).

Seen through the eyes of a political science scholar, Ther's book is perhaps the strongest in the closing parts devoted to an analysis of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Ther offers not only a precise analysis of the affair in general, but he gets down to business when criticizing the approach taken by the European Union. To conclude, Ther's book perfectly shows the strength and contribution of contemporary history research on our understanding of current politics. As such, it is must for any reader who is seriously concerned with recent Central and Southern European politics or with the influence of the economic environment on recent political changes in Europe.

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Neuman, Marek:

TOO SMALL TO MAKE AN IMPACT? THE CZECH REPUBLIC'S INFLUENCE ON THE EUROPEAN UNION'S FOREIGN POLICY.

Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften. 2015. 308 pages.

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How can medium-sized EU members influence EU foreign policy? That is, in short, the question Marek Neuman has raised in his latest publication. He presents an example of Czech foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia and post-Soviet space and examines whether the Czech Republic has been successful in uploading its national preferences to the European level.

Neuman explains that the Czech Republic has been selected for material/geographic and cognitive reasons. The former seems to be clear: the Czech Republic is a medium-sized EU country which joined the Union in 2004 and is located, more or less, in its geographic centre. However, some latter conditions for selection are questionable. Neuman points out that the first special cognitive feature is the role of public figures. He singles out Jiří Dienstbier, Šimon Pánek and Václav Havel. However, this explanation is poorly justified only by the fact that these personalities advocated foreign policy grounded in ethical values. Such an assumption is not specific to Czech foreign policy discourse. The same voices might have been heard in Slovakia, Hungary or Sweden, which would also fit into the first material/geographic selection cluster. Moreover, the reason why only these three gentlemen are mentioned is not clear. Dienstbier has had little influence on foreign policy since 1992 when he left the post of the minis-