

John Pickles (ed.), *State and Society in Post-Socialist Economies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 281 pp.

Much like its subject matter, transitology has been subject to regular alterations, disruptions, and crises of confidence in the past twenty five years. While some may have been relieved that the democratic boosterism of previous popular works inevitably ceded ground to more open-ended analyses of the transformation of the former Soviet states in central and eastern Europe, for many transitologists there was also a loss of confidence in methodology and hence also in the focus of their studies. If political and economic developments in the former Soviet states had not turned out to be transitions from socialism to democracy, what were they? And how could sense be made of it all? Scholars of transitology are now developing and applying new techniques in an attempt to study these transformations, and *State and Society in Post-Socialist Economies* is one such attempt.

According to Pickles, the collection is part of the ‘fourth wave’ of transitology and thus seeks to identify the ‘general and unique drivers’ of political, economic and social transformation. Forging a new path of intellectual study is always difficult, and must inevitably derive some analytical tools and theoretical standards from previous schools of thought. In transitology this has produced a tension between the desire to make sense of political and economic developments but also to avoid a close-ended framework or generalizable ideal types. At first, *State and Society in Post-Socialist Economies* seems to confuse avoiding close-ended frameworks with eschewing discussion of political models, and the strong focus on corporate governance and market deregulation in the first section of the book lends a feeling that the dependent variable of past transitology – democracy – has simply been replaced with a new dependent variable – capitalism. There is a strong sense that Hayekian neoliberalism is the normative (if not unproblematic) economic system, and this feeling is only strengthened by use of the term ‘post-socialist’, when as Pickles himself acknowledges, the fourth wave arose in part because Central Europe witnessed a ‘resurgence of reformed socialist and social democratic parties’. That said, the contributors frequently acknowledge and discuss the different varieties of capitalism, which does suggest that in this collection, capitalism (as democracy was for Adam Przeworski) is a ‘contingent outcome of struggle’.

The attempts in this collection to develop coherent but open-ended analyses can convey a sense of methodological confusion and weak scholarly theory. In his introduction Pickles states that ‘at the heart of this “fourth wave” is a questioning of the logics and theories of “transition studies” themselves...’ – but little explicit questioning ever takes place, and so there is no real clarity or consensus about adequate mechanisms for analysing transformation. Where methodology is discussed, it often seems a haphazard collection of different theories blended together into overly complex schemas.

For example, Greskovits’ analysis of the varieties and implications of the new capitalisms arising in Central and Eastern Europe suffers slightly from methodological over-reach. In addition to his own analytical model on physical and human capital distribution in production processes, Greskovits calls on dependency theory, product cycle theory, and comparisons of ‘institutional similarity’ and foreign direct investment to form a coherent narrative of capitalist development. The rationale for this methodology is not always clear. Why is Greskovits’ own analytical model better than alternatives? What conclusions do dependency theory and product cycle theory provide that could not otherwise have been reached? What exactly does ‘transnational integration’ mean, and why should foreign direct investment be the key indicator? Similarly, in his analysis of capitalism in the Visegrad Group, Drahekoupil gets bogged down in lengthy expositions of his method of constructing his own conceptual models of ‘Klausian welfare national states’ and ‘Porterian workfare national regimes’.

The second section of the book broadens the field of investigation beyond the economy. At times this can expose methodological uncertainty, particularly weakness in handling evidence. Congiu’s analysis of trade union membership uses static unemployment data from an undisclosed time period, unsubstantiated commentary from trade union officials, and observations on conditions for Polish workers without referral to the industrial legislation which mandates those conditions – but not a single specific example of workers having ‘little or no alternative but to accept any conditions of employment’. Similarly, Ghodsee’s otherwise excellent exposition of women employed in the Bulgarian tourist industry frustratingly fails to quantify its interview data and occasionally relies on dubious sources. Surely detailed explanation of a ‘legal disagreement with Czechoslovakia that first pushed Bulgaria into the international tourism market’

requires a more credible source than an interview with a ‘proto-Balkantourist employee and author’?

Fortunately, when taken as a whole the breadth of the collective subject matter presents a much more colourful and humanised description of change. The best chapters are focused, well-researched, and insightful. In the first section, Vliegenthart makes a compelling case against the often-overlooked influence – now painfully obvious – of transnational actors such as banks on the development of Czech political and economic institutions, while Dolgopyatova provides a snapshot of corporate control within Russian companies during Putin’s first term. Beyond the economic sphere, Maciulyte traces the differing course of Lithuanian policy responses to environmental degradation in towns and countryside, and Grodeland uses qualitative and quantitative data analysis to compare informal practices and corruption in the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania.

While the breadth of subject matter is a great strength, the geographic narrowness is frustrating. There is a clear but unexplained Eurocentrism, and the decision to exclude the ‘post-socialist’ countries of Central Asia is not even acknowledged, let alone justified. And if the collection must be Eurocentric, why not include a chapter explicitly analysing how the unprecedented convergence of capitalist and former Eastern Bloc countries into a federation of European states envisages and enables a polity such as the EU? An item on the harmonisation of political and economic strategies in post-1989 Germany would have seemed both symbolically and academically appropriate. Finally, given the broad range of studies on quite specific aspects of transformation, an item on one of the more significant indicators of state divergence – the military – would also have been useful.

Overall, this collection is a valuable contribution to the development of transitology, with some compelling depictions of changing economic and social systems. It is not easy to develop a new methodology, and Pickles has assembled a wide cast of accomplished and burgeoning scholars from around the world to assist and inspire in this task. The methodological uncertainty and occasional clumsiness in handling evidence can be discouraging, but as a whole the collection shows how transitology might reinvigorate itself as an academic discipline.

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