

**Béla Tomka, A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe, Routledge, Abingdon 2013, 552 S., kart., 24,99 £.**

Above all, this is a quantitative handbook on social changes in Western and East-Central Europe during the twentieth century. It has a wide thematic range, with a substantial chapter devoted to each of eight broad themes, population, families and households, social stratification and social mobility, the welfare state, work, leisure and consumption, politics and society, urbanisation, and education, religion and culture. The final concluding chapter relates the author's work and findings to three other social histories of Europe, Hartmut Kaeble's "Sozialgeschichte Europas 1945 bis zur Gegenwart" (2007), Colin Crouch's "Social Change in Western Europe" (1999), and Göran Therborn's "European Modernity and Beyond" (1995, which also exists in an updated German Campus edition, as "Die Gesellschaften Europas 1945–2000").

The author, who is professor of modern social and economic history at the University Szeged, Hungary, has an impressive grasp of the vast empirical field, and he is also well read in the huge literature on his chosen big themes. The result is a handy and valuable *summa* of social and cultural developments in Western and East-Central Europe (Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary, Poland), with occasional forays into the Balkans. Tomka's extensive reading leads at times to interesting unusual insertions, like the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (pp. 260f.) or the relative size of the primate cities of Europe in the 1930s (p. 339). But mostly he follows and lays out the mainstream.

The book has two main limitations. The first is the author's narrow definition of "Europe". Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union are left out, and the Balkans are excluded from most, though not all, comparisons. The outcome, then, is yet another book on "Europe" as Western Europe, with the Visegrád countries (Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary and Poland) now included in the West.

The second is the structuration of the text. With disarming candour, the author points himself to the problem: "The lack of an all-encompassing, comprehensive theoretical framework and overarching narrative resulted in a fragmented line of argumentation". His justification of his choice is not without weight: "[it] enabled us to provide more substantial information about the particular area of study in a social history" (p. 451). His book is indeed densely packed with substantial information. But the argument jumps over a large intellectual area between "an all-encompassing [...] theoretical framework" and data scanning of ploughed fields.

Tomka's "Social History" is largely lacking research questions, analytical curiosity, and therefore analytical edge. It hardly ever asks, why did this happen, and not that? Is this author's argument really correct? If not, why and how is (s)he wrong?

Two examples: One refers to mortality and life expectancy, and the relations in this respect between Western and Communist East-Central Europe. According to Tomka's own tables (pp. 26-28), between 1930 and 1960 the gap of life expectancy (and of infant mortality) between Austria, on one hand, and Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, on the other, narrowed substantially, and in the case of Czechoslovakia was actually reversed, with Czechoslovaks in 1960 living longer than Austrians and having fewer babies die. Then the tide turned again, sometime in the second half of the 1960s, showing up in Tomka's tables in 1970. A similar Eastern postwar catch up followed by falling back in the last two decades of Communism holds for Eastern-Western Europe as a whole. Then in capitalist Russia (and the Ukraine) followed by a precipitous decline of life expectancy, taking the gap to Western Europe in 2000 back to the width of 1900 (15 and 16 years for men, respectively). These data raise some puzzles. How did Communist Europe catch up demographically after the war? What went wrong with Communist demography in the late 1960s? Why did the restoration of capitalism have much less traumatic effects in East-Central Europe than in the East? About all this, Tomka has

nothing to say, noticing only the post-1965 East-Central decline, due “to the social conditions and the lifestyle people led” (p. 32).

A second example concerns economic growth. In his conclusion, Tomka polemicizes against my argument that there was a common post-World War II boom in Europe, East and West (p. 448). However, Tomka does not take the opportunity to argue empirically with an author in the wrong in his view. His only base is a table from Angus Maddison (p. 218), which does show that Austria and Italy grew faster, in terms of GDP (gross domestic product) per capita, than East-Central Europe in the 1950s, but also that Hungary and Czechoslovakia then grew faster than all countries of Western Europe except Austria, Germany, and Italy.

According to another table by Angus Maddison,<sup>1</sup> before 1950 the fastest long growth period in Europe was in 1870–1913, when GDP per capita in Western Europe (except Iberia) grew by 1.33% annually, and by 1.39 in Eastern Europe, west of Russia. For 1950–1973 Western Europe scored 3.92% a year, Iberia 4.05, Eastern Europe 3.85, and USSR 3.45. During the same period, USA grew by 2.45%, Latin America by 2.60, Asia excluding Japan by 2.87, and Africa by 2.02%, according to Maddison’s daringly precise estimate calculations.

Tomka’s substitution of sweeping assertions for analytical and empirical argument may in these two cases be interpreted as an effect of ideological blinders. He may have good ideological and other reasons to believe that everything Communism did was bad and/or evil. However, regardless of that possibility being true or not, there may be another process at work. Professor Tomka is obviously interested in knowing about the world, of Europe. That is why he has read so much, and knows so much – for which his readers should be grateful. But his curiosity seems to have a characteristic flatness, primarily geared to extending “substantial information”, less interested in solving intriguing puzzles or in seriously engaging with colleagues of different perspectives.

However, at the end of the day, all of us have our weak heels, even Achilles had, and Professor Tomka has given us a solid handbook of a century’s social development in Western and East-Central Europe.

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Zitierempfehlung:

Göran Therborn: Rezension von: Béla Tomka, *A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe*. Routledge, Abingdon 2013, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (online) 54, 2014, URL: <<http://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/afs.cgi?id=81517>> [17.12.2013].

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<sup>1</sup> *Angus Maddison, Contours of the World Economy, 1–2030 AD. Essays in Macro-Economic History*, Oxford 2007, p. 383.