

The Transit of Transitology

Review essay on the book by Philipp Ther:

Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent – eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa

Philipp Ther

Suhrkamp, Berlin 2014, S. 432, EUR 27,70 English edition likely to be published in 2016

Thomas Nowotny

Ex-Diplomat, Wien, Austria

E-Mail: thomas.nowotny@tmo.at

“Transitology”, as we might call it, is a sub – species of political science that deals with the transformation of authoritarian/despotic/sultanistic/totalitarian systems into democracies. History had shown that this process of democratization would run in “waves”, and that reversals in the process were possible. One nonetheless assumed that democratization would ultimately touch nearly all nations of the earth. In the end, their political systems would thus have become quite similar.

Transition theory highlighted “path dependence” in suggesting that conditions at the outset, and the mode of the downfall on the non-democratic system would determine the future course to full and consolidated democracy. Much would depend on whether the end of the old regime had come about abruptly, even triggered by violence; or whether transition had been smooth and negotiated across a “round-table” between the old and the upcoming new elites. In all cases, this split in a ruling elite would have been the crucial factor opening the way to regime change. Social and economic developments leading up to that change were seen as less decisive.

Political science is beware of “over-theorizing”. In light of actual developments in the formerly Communist countries, the theoretical musings of “Transitology” have proven mostly irrelevant. The present situation in Poland and the Czech Republic is quite similar, though regime change was abrupt in the Czech Republic and “negotiated” in Poland. Conditions at the outset were not very favorable in the Baltic Republics, but quite favorable in Hungary. Nonetheless, the former had progressed much more rapidly than Hungary beset with recurring crises. By now and with “Transition” having come to an end, the countries that were Communist once have not become more similar to another. Quite on the contrary:

they differ more widely than they ever had done under Communism, even if we compare just those to the West of the Urals. This holds true even if these countries are relatively close to another ones like Poland and Belarus; and even if they had once been part of the very same state such as Slovenia on one hand, and Bosnia on the other.

Phillip Ther is a historian. Unlike political scientists he does not attempt to verify or falsify pre- conceived theories. He uses a “bottom-up approach” of close observation, facilitated by extensive travel and knowledge of several Slavic languages. Two salient conclusions might be drawn from these observations. Not the elite’s split at the time of regime change was the driving force behind transition. It had a deeper and earlier cause in the eroding legitimacy of “real existing socialism”. Success in the following phase of building a new political and economic base was not dependent of the mode of regime change – whether it had been negotiated or abrupt. The existence or absence of an entrepreneurial spirit and of an emerging entrepreneurial class made for much in success or failure. Such an entrepreneurial class existed in Poland, but much less so in the West Balkans.

Local political traditions and philosophies, such as Slavic communitarianism, the Czech concept of “lid-skost”= humaneness, or the attempt to find a “Third Way” between the Communist past and a neo – liberal concept of the state and the economy were quickly discarded. The latter philosophy came to prevail. It did so first in the Ex-Communist East of Europe and then, to a large extent also in its Western parts; creating (according to the title of the book) the “New Order on the Old Continent”.

As a result, the former “transition countries” have moved closer to the European average. By and large, their economies have evolved more dynamically than the economies in the “West” of the continent. Per capita GDP in some of the “Eastern” capitals like Warsaw, Bratislava or Prague is now higher than in most of the “Western” capitals. But income disparities have widened, and very much so between rural regions and urban agglomerations. In the Ukraine and Romania, living standard in remote villages is close to the one in poor developing countries.

The Southern European countries are the ones that have become the problem cases and that are now forced to neo-liberal policy prescriptions. The “South” would have become the “New East”. The success of the cure is not evident. Not just the South, but Europe as a whole stagnates and that stagnation and the accompanying problems are not relieved but aggravated by these neo-liberal policy-prescriptions. Philipp Ther therefore argues that the tide would have turned and that neo – liberalism’s impact were about to fade. One should wonder. For even if this were to be the case, it is not likely that the European Democratic Left would supplant the neo-liberal order on the old continent. The more likely contender is a nationalist Right with authoritarian tendencies. Unfortunately, not or Hollande seem pointers to the future, but Orbán, Le Pen and Putin.