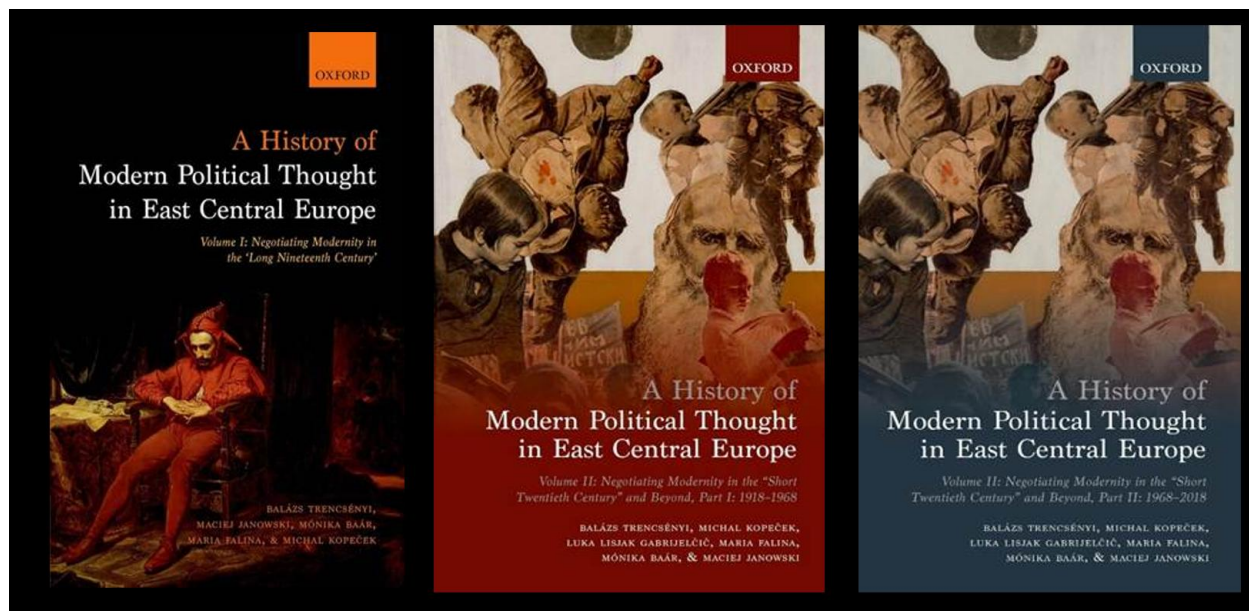


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The Intellectual Labyrinths of East Central Europe

A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe I-II/1-II/2.



It is no exaggeration to say that we encounter an unrepeatable intellectual achievement when we pick up the volumes that synthesize the history of modern political thought in the East-Central European region. Unrepeatable, because they place nearly two and a half centuries, from 1770 to 2018, as well

as all the cultures of the East Central European region, within a comprehensive narrative framework that reaches beyond the national level. In other words, they do not survey history by breaking it down into national units; rather, they integrate national contexts by thematic fields.

The project is also unrepeatable because the retreat of the humanities over recent decades would no longer make it possible for a group of historians to spend a decade traveling through the region consulting with local researchers in order to “negotiate” the contents of the volumes, in the spirit of the subtitle – Negotiating Modernity.

Yet it seems that the results of this undertaking have remained within the confines of international scholarship and have not reached broader layers of Hungarian public thought. It is easy to see, however, that knowledge of the wider region’s intellectual traditions would improve Hungary’s capacity for international action and provide a tool for a deeper understanding of regional politics. For example, no one in Hungary would be surprised that Poland, across successive governments, supports Ukrainian and Belarusian aspirations for freedom, or that any Slovak government treats the Beneš Decrees as a cornerstone of state integrity. To draw attention to the usefulness of the volumes under discussion, we present three lessons drawn from them.

The long shadow of the past looms over current politics

The study of East Central European intellectual history sheds light on the historical and intellectual traditions that shape present-day political processes—traditions that political science often

overlooks. The project interprets the long historical process of modernity through the prism of the current political situation, since it presents the region's intellectual history all the way up to 2018.

In doing so, it brings into view intellectual traditions that political science often ignores, reserving for historians the right to deal with processes before 1989. One example is that the intellectual antecedents of most of today's dominant ideologies originate in the intellectual ferment of the turn of the century and the period between the two World Wars.

One characteristic example is the current that appeared east of the Elbe: the "third-way" populist/narodnik movements, which can be explained by the large proportion of the exploited agrarian population. The authors call these movements agrarian-populist, thereby emphasizing their connection to the present. It is enough to mention three names among the Hungarian populists who remain influential today: the liberal István Bibó, the communist Ferenc Erdei, and László Németh, who is usually placed on the right.

Another current, rooted in the Central European milieu between the two World Wars and above all in the protectionist economic system that followed the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, is neoliberalism, which became especially embedded in Romanian and Polish thought. It is important to

stress that the authors apply a strictly contextualist methodology: they examine which debates of their own time the thinkers in question entered, and with what political purpose. They interpret the survival of historical legacies within this framework as well, meaning that they do not indiscriminately project the present back onto the past.

The experience of modernity is concentrated in the question of the relationship to the West

To understand East Central European modernity, the authors emphasize the many-sided nature of the region's continuous "negotiation" with the symbolic West. It is no accident that they use the term East Central Europe, which conveys that the region is structurally part of the Western system, but possesses characteristics different from those of the core areas.

Their interpretation makes it clear that, in most cases, the intellectual history of modernity in the region indeed consists of the varied reception and further development of ideas originating in the West. An illustrative example is the spread of modern nationalism: a phenomenon imported from the West, which, by the nature of the ideology itself, began to take on local features and present itself as indigenous.

The authors also point out that mechanisms of influence sometimes worked in the opposite direction, with ideas from the

East invigorating the West, for example through emigré groups. The emphasis is on the diversity of receptions, characterized not simply by the binary of rejection or acceptance, but by countless other factors. What matters is:

- who mediates the ideas, for instance Western ideas often reached the Balkans through Eastern mediation;
- who interprets them and how, for instance the principle of national self-determination was interpreted differently by a national minority within a state and by the majority;
- what local context a given current enters, for instance while in the West the ideas of the Enlightenment helped unfold the principle of popular sovereignty, in East Central Europe they became tools for legitimizing absolutist power;
- what the relationship is between core areas and peripheries, for instance Prague became a center of reform-socialist discourse in 1968 until the Soviet intervention;
- what the temporality of reception is, for instance the various modernist artistic currents that arose in the West in opposition to one another appeared in East Central Europe in compressed form, simultaneously.

Hungarian intellectual history can be interpreted in its fullness only in the mirror of regional debates

To gain a complete picture of domestic intellectual debates, it is not enough simply to show how individual national contexts received Western currents; they must be interpreted in light of the debates of the broadly understood East Central European region. Each national context followed events in the surrounding territories at least as closely as it looked toward the West.

In empires and multiethnic states, dialogue among nations was naturally present, for example in Polish-Ukrainian, Serbian-Croatian, and Romanian-Hungarian relations. Significant reception across borders also took place among East Central European territories. This could happen along ideological lines, for example through the transnational institutions of socialism; because of geographical proximity, since border regions always looked in several directions; or because of historical connections, as when the Hungarian nobility closely followed the partitions of Poland. The list could, of course, be continued.

Another important consideration is that it is not always necessary for there to be a connection between two regions for similar ideas to appear. It is enough for there to be structural similarity that produces similar reactions, a prime example being the Hungarian populist movement. A further important advantage

of the regional perspective is that comparison provides a basis for understanding a national context. After all, a phenomenon can only truly be evaluated by looking at how countries in similar situations responded to it. A striking example is that liberalism receded most strongly in the countries defeated in the First World War, or that in states with national minorities, communism assumed a national character.

The regional perspective that transcends national frameworks is the project's greatest contribution for its readership. On the one hand, it presents all those linguistic contexts, from Albanian to Estonian, that would otherwise be inaccessible to us because of language barriers and, often, because of the sparseness of intellectual-historical scholarship even in the given national languages. On the other hand, it brings these national contexts into dialogue with one another by examining them within a common analytical framework organized by themes rather than by countries. The ultimate lesson of the volumes may therefore be this: the history of East-Central Europe is not a series of separate national histories, but an ongoing dialogue in a shared intellectual space, one that continues to this day.