

Austerities and Aspirations. A Comparative History of Growth, Consumption, and Quality of Life in East Central Europe since 1945. By Béla Tomka.

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Austerities and Aspirations suggests a new methodological approach for a more nuanced understanding of convergence and divergence between East Central and Western European countries. Specialized in social policy and economic history, with a particular focus on international comparisons, Professor Béla Tomka, who is best known for his outstanding *A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe*,¹ is an expert on twentieth-century Hungarian society.² His results in comparative historical research are remarkable in Hungarian historiography. The current volume is a revisited version of his book published in 2011, which mainly concentrated on twentieth-century Hungary.³

The well-constructed book consists of five main chapters, with several sub-chapters leaving space for the elaboration of details. The introduction conceptualizes *the triple approach to well-being*: the concepts of economic growth, consumption, and quality of life. Tomka explains his approach by saying that it is meant to overcome the deficiencies of economic analysis focusing merely on GDP and economic output, while the available data on consumption practices and quality of life might facilitate a more complex understanding of economic and social history. Following the introduction of the aims and scope of his research and the possible methods, sources, and their deficiencies, the author argues in favor of long-term and comparative methods. Tomka is clearly aware of the methodological difficulties and shortcomings and reflects upon them throughout the book. In the introduction, we also get a brief description of the volume's content and structure. While

1 Tomka, *A Social History*.

2 Tomka, *Welfare in East and West*.

3 Tomka, *Gazdasági növekedés*.

an overall analysis is given of thirteen Western and Northern countries considered to be “Western Europe”,⁴ the focus is on East Central Europe, which in this case is restricted to the V4 countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary).

The three longest chapters describing the main analytical categories follow the triple approach. Thus, the second chapter focuses on *economic growth* first in the West, then in the East. After listing the possible methods for measuring economic output, the characteristics of Eastern European data are determined, which raises a question about the comparability of market economies and command economies. It needs to be highlighted that while the title promises the investigation of the post-1945 era, Tomka offers a broader perspective, reaching back to the end of the nineteenth century. The periodization of growth patterns somewhat differs from the traditional historical periods: considering Western trends of economic growth, the structural changes connected to the oil crisis in the 1970s are seen as a dividing line. This subchapter also examines the factors determining how national economies have converged or diverged, concluding that the latter half of the twentieth century saw convergence in the West. Subsequently, East Central European growth patterns starting from the post-war recovery up to the 1989 regime changes are contextualized. This subchapter traces the unbalanced nature of centrally planned or command economies in the early 1950s, the reforms of the 1960s, and the subsequent crises of the 1970s. The section ends with a comparative examination of Eastern and Western economies.

In the third part, the structure, practices, and policies of *consumption* are evaluated first in the West, then in the East. The chapter explores the consumption patterns of Western societies, along with the categories of household expenditures like food, clothing, housing, and consumer durables. Differentiation is made by income inequalities (class structure), gender, generations, and the urban/rural divide. Factors of mass production and commercialization are identified, as well as structural changes in people's working time and social benefits, affecting their leisure time activities. The author examines the concept of the consumer society and its homogenizing effects (i.e., Americanization and Europeanization), including the post-materialistic value-orientation perceived among the youth. Consumption in East Central Europe is analyzed by the same categories (i.e., household expenditures, social structure, balance of work, and leisure time); in addition, practices of black-marketing and informal economic trends connected to the shortage of goods and services are discussed. Tomka questions the existence of a “socialist consumer culture”. He argues that we cannot speak of consumer culture within the Socialist Bloc, as there was a lack of consumer choices and a constant shortage of goods in

4 The EU-15 states with the exception of Luxembourg, Greece, Spain, and Portugal, but including Norway and Switzerland.

command economies. However, it should be noted that the availability of goods and choices cannot be considered equivalent to the purchasing power necessary to become a consumer. The chapter ends with the comparative examination of Western and Eastern trends of consumption, along with the concepts of convergence versus divergence.

The concept of the *quality of life* is investigated based on the same categories. Life expectancy and mortality rates are made out to be the most accurate determinants of life quality, as Tomka uses the Human Development Index (HDI) to conceptualize people's well-being. While the author is aware that quality of life is hardly quantifiable, especially in historical analyses, it is questionable whether it is mortality rates that best describe the quality of people's lives. Rather, longer life expectancy seems to indicate that we might contribute to the growth of the national economy for longer. Based on Tomka's approach, gendered differences in average life expectancy would mean that women generally live better than men, which is hard to assert in the light of the gendered inequalities of everyday life, discrimination, and violence against women.

Chapter five deals with what determines change in the three areas discussed, by tracing the factors that shaped convergence and divergence. Finally, the advancements after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc are tracked: changes in Western societies and the recently developing regimes in the East. The main conclusion of the triple approach is that convergence and divergence are constantly altering phenomena, and that in the second half of the twentieth century, divergence between the East and the West created a development gap. In this period, among the former Bloc countries, Poland and Hungary followed similar patterns, while Czechoslovakia slightly differed from them. The other main finding is that in the interwar period and before 1945, there were more similarities among East Central European countries than supposed earlier.

The book is essentially descriptive, reviewing immense amounts of data from secondary literature, combined in several valuable charts. Nevertheless, conclusions are scarcely drawn, though antecedents and consequences would be essential for historical analysis. For example, in the case of a gendered inquiry of leisure time, the text does not make it obvious where the differences originate from. Therefore, the idea of women's reproductive work, possibly the main reason for why they have less free time, is completely missing. Also, considering the conclusions about the quality of life, the author does not clarify the causes of the phenomenon. The significant decrease in middle-aged men's life expectancy in East Central Europe in the 1960s could be explained by poor working conditions and an unbalanced division of labor between the sexes. Similarly, displaying women's outstanding life expectancy in the same period, when family allowance programs withdrew them from the labor

market, would also require contextualization. Besides the deficiencies concerning the gendered aspects of the analysis—which are mostly related to the methodology used—the same problem appears regarding the presentation of the situation of different social layers.

Another challenging issue that needs to be highlighted is the economic convergence in the wake of World War II. The assumption that it was in 1939 that Hungary's economic performance has ever been closest to that of Western countries raises numerous questions, as the author does not give any historical context to this surprising finding. However, it should be remembered that at that time Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany, and the preparations for war account for most of the country's growing output that served German military interests. Therefore, questions like what this outstanding economic performance indicates should be raised, since in the Horthy era millions lived under devastating conditions, especially in rural Hungary. Without proper contextualization, some of Tomka's conclusions might be easily misinterpreted. Since the book targets non-Hungarian academic audiences, it would have been even more important to include basic historical facts about Hungarian society. In this case, contextualization seems essential, because the paradigm we use for talking about the past of the economy might determine its future as well. In addition, studies by East Central European scholars intended for international readerships could contribute to a more favorable understanding and reassessment of the region's history.

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