

Summary: Tucker's volume theorizes the enduring salience of totalitarian legacies in post-communist Europe.

The Legacies of Totalitarianism: A Theoretical Framework. By Aviezer Tucker. New York: Cambridge UP, 2015. Pp. 272. USD \$99.00 hardcover.

Aviezer Tucker's book, which masterfully chronicles the tenacity of totalitarian legacies across post-communist Europe, arrives at an opportune time. In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, many observers enthusiastically proclaimed the ideological victory of neoliberal economics and democratic governance over centralized planning and coercive political authority. This initial optimism, however, proved misplaced. Expectations that the whole of the post-communist space would eventually converge institutionally (and attitudinally) with Western Europe have been receding for well over a decade now, the teleological conceit embodied in viewing the events of 1989/1991 as a "catching-up revolution" (Habermas 1990) or a metaphorical "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992) withering away in the face of mounting evidence that the liberalizing reforms uniformly prescribed for the region were not as societally penetrative or durable as once anticipated.

Noting that democratic practices and liberal norms did not take substantive hold in a number of these states is not a new observation, of course. Already in 2002 Thomas Carothers warned that the transition paradigm had exceeded its expiration date, post-communist polities by this time having sorted themselves into three distinct outcome categories: those possessed of relatively liberal regimes that appeared to be effectively integrating into the wider European community; those requiring adjectival modifiers to denote their persistent democratic deficits; and those, such as Belarus or Turkmenistan, that had rapidly lapsed into new flavors of dictatorial rule (the latter are not considered by Tucker). Moreover, in recent years even the liberal democratic credentials of countries like Poland—not long ago regarded as an undeniable success story of the post-Soviet transition—have been increasingly called into question. Consequently, both former communist states that never became full-fledged democracies, as well as those that did but that currently face growing populist and anti-liberal challenges, figure prominently in this volume.

At its core, Tucker's argument is straightforward: instead of representing a radical break with the past, post-communist realities often bear a striking resemblance to what came before, totalitarian legacies revealing themselves in new guises but bringing about familiar results. This is a different tale than Westerners are used to hearing, but it rings depressingly true, implying that the real question in need of answering is not why some attempted transitions to liberal democracy failed, but why we believed they would succeed in the first place.

A refreshingly original work of political theory that defies easy categorization, this ambitious book is a self-described foray into "middle-duration processes." As such, Tucker states upfront that he is neither interested in analyzing deeper structural factors nor country-specific experiences with communism and its aftereffects. The same holds for exogenous influences, such as global economic trends and the eastward expansion of the European Union. Instead, he focuses his gaze on

elucidating “the lasting legacies that totalitarianism imprinted on different societies that shared a totalitarian type of regime”(6), the regional ripples of which remain discernible to the present day.

Positing that a central trait of totalitarianism is a lack of respect for the rule of law or even its effective absence (irrespective of what declarative constitutional arrangements may purport), he considers the various theoretical lenses through which the transitional period has been interpreted before launching into a discussion of the shift from “late-totalitarianism” to “post-totalitarianism” in chapter one. Tucker regards the transmutation of the late-totalitarian elites’ political power into its economic equivalent to be a defining (and profoundly non-egalitarian) characteristic of this period, leading him to claim “democracy in post-totalitarian Central and Eastern Europe was the unintended consequence of the adjustment of the rights of the late-totalitarian elite to its interests” (22). What he means by this counterintuitive statement is that the process of democratization was largely an epiphenomenal outgrowth of elites’ economic adaptation: the price the well-connected had to pay in order to assert legal ownership over the massive collection of state assets that they informally expropriated during communism’s death throes.

Chapter two continues along similar lines, focusing on the application (or lack thereof) of post-totalitarian justice, which Tucker views as consisting of three facets, namely depth, scope and level of “roughness,” or accuracy. In particular, he holds that a decidedly rough version of justice—which arose from a paucity of judicial mandate as well as human resources for its enforcement, and is therefore consequentialist as opposed to deontic—has prevailed in the region. The next two chapters, respectively, examine the extent to which members of the old regime have been held accountable for their actions and the question of compensating those harmed by the totalitarian system. Rounding out this thematic thread, chapter five looks at how the application of a justice that stressed outcomes over procedures affected the relationship between politics and newly created property rights. Unsurprisingly, Tucker leaves the topic on a pessimistic note; real justice is hard to conceive of after totalitarianism, which destroyed so many individuals outright and made even more complicit through their silence.

The final section of the book is more eclectic and less-well-integrated conceptually, with chapter six looking at the manifestation of totalitarian ideas in contemporary higher education and chapter seven examining how certain European intellectuals, among them Derrida, Habermas and Žižek, embrace a totalitarian rhetorical style. Undergirding both these chapters is the contention that totalitarian impulses may come from “unexpected directions,” including Western Europe (205). Tucker concludes by bemoaning the regional return of these tendencies, suggesting that avoiding a relapse into old habits requires eternal vigilance and the rekindling of the dissident tradition.

“Totalitarianism has not died; it just broke apart” (190) is an apt summary of the main themes of this work, which presumes such a system may still be reassembled. Significantly, while he dispenses with the idea that institutions are readily importable and easily imprintable, Tucker nuances his argument by noting that the persistence of totalitarian mores should not be regarded as a failure of democracy per se, “the original sin of the transition” being “the failure to construct liberal institutions”(232). In this sense, “real existing” post-communism may be seen as resulting from prior elites’ self-interested

pursuits and the path-dependent privileging of informal late-totalitarian institutions and social networks over their formal post-totalitarian counterparts.

Notwithstanding the considerable merits of this iconoclastic and highly insightful volume, it is not without idiosyncrasies. For example, Tucker's claims regarding higher education seem uncharacteristically forced, and not everyone (including this author) will agree with his premise that Western-style managerial practices—however great their flaws—reflect neo-totalitarian proclivities. More broadly, while he connects the resurgence of illiberalism and strongman rule across the former communist space to its totalitarian past in an intuitively persuasive way, the causal linkage is underspecified and requires more thorough evaluation before it can be accepted uncritically. This is especially so given that the wave of anti-liberal populism that has washed across the globe in recent years has not been confined to post-totalitarian contexts. Consequently, although Tucker refers to the rise of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and the “Putin Restoration” in Russia to bolster his argument concerning the endurance of totalitarian modes of thinking and acting, the actual extent to which these phenomena are attributable to the former as opposed to other factors, including more temporally proximate ones such as the 2008 financial crisis, remains unclear. More than likely they resulted from a confluence of influences, as Tucker himself suggests but never fully explores. Granted, disentangling these issues was never his objective, but addressing them could have allayed potential concerns over a lopsided interpretation of the evidence.

In the end, however, the above critique does less to highlight faults in this work than to suggest that the questions it raises are timely, complicated, and both normatively and empirically compelling. Blending a sophisticated theoretical framework with a profound understanding of the region, this volume explains better than any other that I know of why this part of Europe continues to suffer from a post-totalitarian malaise. All students of the region should read it, and it is highly recommended to those interested in regime transitions more generally as well.

GEORGE SOROKA

Harvard University

References:

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