

COMMUNIST UTOPIA REVISITED

PAVEL KOLÁŘ, *DER POSTSTALINISMUS. IDEOLOGIE UND UTOPIE EINER EPOCHE*

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In recent public debates on the communist past in East-Central Europe, communism is more often than not taken for a uniform experience of terror and decay, doomed to failure from its outset. Throughout the region, dominant historical master narratives tend to play down the chances for progress and for reforming the system from within. Instead, they externalise communist rule by picturing national societies as collective victims of Soviet oppression. In effect, East-Central Europe's multiple experiences and entanglements with communism are frequently reduced to one single story of totalitarian rule, foreign domination, and all-embracing regress. Such narratives provide little more than a convenient contrast for the triumphalist resurrection myths flourishing since the capitalist transformation of the 1990s.

Against this background, Pavel Kolář's recent investigation into what he calls the ideology and utopia of post-Stalinism is all the more inspiring and thought-provoking. Moreover, it is a necessary corrective to the undifferentiated black-and-white verdicts on four decades of communist rule in East-Central Europe that are commonplace in public discourse and the politics of history. Reading this book offers a fresh encounter with the many facets of communist hope, belief, and disappointment that were so crucial to the twentieth-century history of East-Central Europe (and far beyond), but which have become deeply hidden under layers of rejection and oblivion. In this sense, Kolář's book can rightly be seen to have come just in time.

Kolář sets out to reconstruct the specific historicity of communism, and he does so in two regards. First, instead of reducing communism to a uniform, immutable system whose fate was doomed right from the beginning, he emphasises the distinctive historical changes the communist regimes and their followers underwent in the course of the post-war decades. More specifically, he is interested in the major changes and reconfigurations that occurred in communists' minds after the demise of Stalinism, and he considers these changes as main signifiers of a distinct epoch he calls post-Stalinism. Second, Kolář claims that the key to understanding the changes is to be found not in communist approaches to social structure or economic modernisation, but in the historical dimensions of the communist symbolic universe (*Sinnwelt*). Thus his book focuses on how communists perceived the past, present, and future in the 1950s and 1960s, after the Stalinist certainties were gone but before utopia and authentic historical meaning had been lost in the formalised discourse of sclerotic late socialism.

This approach does not aspire to extraordinary originality, as far as the caesura of de-Stalinisation is concerned. More conscious historians of post-war communism generally agree on the fundamental sea change triggered by Stalin's death in 1953 and furthered by Khrushchev's Secret Speech at the twentieth party congress in February 1956, the Hungarian Rising, and the October events that resulted in the return of Gomulka in Poland later that year. However, while historians of the Soviet Union usually refer to this systemic break as a "thaw" (*Tauwetter, odwilż*), Kolář consistently (though implicitly) avoids this metaphor (which was probably coined after the title of Ilya Ehrenburg's famous 1954 novel) because he is uneasy with the naturalist and cyclical connotations it carries. He argues convincingly that de-Stalinisation was as much an end to something old as the beginning of something new. It definitely closed an epoch in Soviet communism characterised by ubiquitous mobilisation and terror as means of realising linear beliefs in a communist future, but it was no simple return to an earlier state that had somehow been frozen before. Rather, it initiated a period of authentic reorientation and renegotiation of political and historical expectations – post-Stalinism.

Thus, Kolář explicitly opposes the bipolar paradigm brought forward by scholars like Andrzej Walicki or François Furet, who equate de-Stalinisation with the beginning of the end of communism as a whole. In a sense, their notion of inevitable downfall shares the static, commonplace view of communism as an immutable totalitarian system, with the only difference

being that, instead of denouncing it right away, they constrict the meaning of “communism” to “Stalinism” and decline to ascribe any features of “real” communism to late socialism.¹ Whereas Walicki, Furet, and others conceive of the thirty years following 1956 as a more or less monotonous period dominated by cynical opportunism and non-productive “false consciousness” (Walicki 2013: 12–13), Kolář’s main thrust is to show that the idea of a communist utopia did not suddenly disappear with the fall of its Stalinist version, but that utopian energies did indeed prevail in a specific post-Stalinist setting. In his view, the linear, clear-cut utopia typical of high Stalinism was transformed into a fragmented, processualised utopia, which nonetheless proved capable of creating authentic post-Stalinist models of subjectification steeped in hopeful beliefs in communist progress. Referring to an influential contemporary concept by Ernst Bloch, Kolář sees post-Stalinism as being characterised by “concrete utopia” rather than by abstract, static ideology in the Mannheimian sense that had been distinctive for Stalinism.

The very persistence of communist utopia, although in a specifically ambiguous, post-Stalinist style, is the rationale behind Kolář’s distinction of post-Stalinism as an epoch in its own right, delimiting it from the subsequent period of late socialism. Drawing on the seminal work of Alexei Yurchak, who has applied Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “authoritative discourse” to the late-socialist Soviet Union and pointed out the “hypernormalisation” of the public language of the time, Kolář identifies late socialism with a lack of any utopian ambition or authentic political discourse at all. In contrast to the state aptly captured by the title of Yurchak’s book, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2006), Kolář maintains that in the late 1950s and 1960s communists’ world-views were still far from late-socialist immobility. In post-Stalinism, he posits, authoritative discourse was constantly in the making and did form – in spite of obvious constraints – a field of true debate, where ambiguities and impulses from below were permanently negotiated and renegotiated.

Therefore, Kolář’s ambition is to provide a new explanatory approach to the middle period of post-war communism, which he considers relatively under-researched, and most notably, under-conceptualised. This appears

¹ Walicki pointedly described October 1956 as “początek procesu faktycznej dekomunizacji Polski” [the beginning of the process of actual decommunisation in Poland] and added that “Milcząco zdystansowanie się od zadań dalszego ‘budownictwa komunistycznego’ było więc faktycznie odłożeniem na półkę samego ‘komunizmu’” [Silent self-distancing from the further task of “building communism” was thus in actuality a matter of putting “communism” itself on the shelf] (Walicki 2013: XIV–XV)

fairly plausible, as most historians indeed have concentrated either on the early post-war years of “building communism” or on the (later) crises and challenges to communist rule, such as the popular protests and upheavals in Poland, the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, or the final demise of the system. The latter way of framing post-war history as a story “from conflict to conflict” is especially common in Poland, not least because here communism was unquestionably shaken by serious crises more often than in neighbouring countries. However, this narrative framing results in a certain conceptual vagueness in approaching the period “in between,” as is reflected quite tellingly by the vacuous notion of “*środkowy PRL*” which is sometimes used for the middle years of Polish communism. The term “*mała stabilizacja*” [small stabilisation], which has become another common label for the Gomulka years, is also somewhat misleading, even though it certainly conveys some sense of the time. As Marcin Zaremba and Błażej Brzostek pointed out a decade ago, the one-sided images of greyness and stagnancy evoked by this designation rather prevent a deeper understanding of the period, which was likewise characterised by considerable social dynamism and profound modernisation (Zaremba & Brzostek 2006).² After all, Kolář’s book can also be read as an answer to Zaremba’s and Brzostek’s call for a new paradigm in researching this period, which transcends patterns of contemporary reflection and offers a genuinely historical interpretation. Obviously, his emphasis on the sustained vigour of communist utopia and the comparatively optimistic outlook that goes with it come as bold irritations of common vernacular notions associated with the period.

/// In Search of a Post-Stalinist “Utopia from Below”

So where does Kolář search for a post-Stalinist utopia? Geographically speaking, the scope of his enquiry encompasses Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the GDR. Topically, he focuses on how the communist parties dealt with their past, and which traditions and models of identity and alterity they invoked after the fall of Stalinism’s ideological certainties. As Kolář underscores the bottom-up agency in the making and re-making of post-Stalinist “utopia from below” (2016: 14), his ambition is to go beyond the discourse of the party leaderships and elites, and to grasp how rank-and-file members of the communist party conceived of these questions. To this end, he bases his study on material from the party archives documenting

² In an earlier text on Polish social history of the 1960s, Zaremba has even opposed “*mała stabilizacja*” [small stabilisation] with “*mała destabilizacja*” [small destabilisation] (2004).

debates inside local or district party structures, or reflecting conflicts between the party's grass roots and central party institutions. Amongst the latter the respective institutes for the history of the party, and the apparatus responsible for ideological instruction inside the party, appear most frequently. Additionally, in a move to avoid the common tendency to confine scholarly attention to developments in the capitals, Kolář has paid special regard to the periphery and carried out research in regional archives in all three countries, namely at Halle/Merseburg, Ostrava, Liberec, and Katowice. While this research strategy convincingly widens the traditional focus of historical scholarship centred on the highest echelons of the party, it is quite evident that Kolář predominantly relies on sources conveying views from inside the parties. Moreover, he does not seem to worry too much about cross-checking these views from within by consulting empirical material from outside the parties, or at least by drawing on evidence less concerned with internal questions of party tradition and communist identity. I will return to this point later, after taking a closer look at what Kolář brings to light from these sources.

Kolář presents his findings in five chapters, each of which is devoted to one aspect of the evolution of the communist parties' historical self-images. While the regional focus shifts throughout the chapters, and some aspects get more or less attention with regard to respective cases, Kolář succeeds in integrating the developments in all three countries into one common story without overly blurring the differences between them. Furthermore, he devotes considerable space to contextualising the processes under scrutiny with the broader history of communism, especially with regard to the Soviet Union.

The first chapter opens with the "historical turn" initiated by Khrushchev, who restored the supremacy of historical facts over the voice of the ideological "master editor," which had previously been controlled by Stalin. Thus, Kolář adopts Yurchak's discursive approach to Soviet de-Stalinisation as a starting point for his analysis. Subsequently, he traces the emancipation of the "archive rats" (as positivist historians were decried by Stalin) and delves into the boom of party history in the late 1950s which had been set off by the revision of compromised Stalinist dogmatism. Although it proved fairly difficult to integrate the diversity of historical facts and experiences at the party grass roots into a coherent post-Stalinist master discourse (*poststalinistischer Herrschaftsdiskurs*), Kolář makes it seem plausible that the constant rewriting of history fostered the emergence of a hopeful belief in the necessity of an endless effort of perfecting (*systematycz-*

ne doskonalenie). The characteristic spirit of post-Stalinism was, therefore, encompassed by the notion of “not yet” (Kolář 2016: 90).

The ideological limitations of this new opening turned out, however, to be quite different in the three countries researched. As Kolář shows in the second chapter, the reassessment of the Stalinist “personality cult” led to an open and vigorous debate in Poland, but less so in the GDR and in Czechoslovakia. Still, the overall tendency of discursive change was pretty much the same everywhere: the historical agency previously ascribed to great, infallible leaders was now transferred to the party itself, which rose to the position of the collective agent of history responsible for carrying on and perfecting the communist project. Kolář comes up with the insightful ancient allegory of a demiurge to illustrate the creative but imperfect status of the agency ascribed to the party in post-Stalinist philosophy of history (2016: 112–114). In this light, one may be ready to condone, as a permissible concession to academic fashion, his supplemental thesis of a “biopolitical turn” in post-Stalinist semantics, which he observes in the replacement of the Stalinist semantics of destruction (*Zerschlagung*, liquidation) by terms such as “creative” (*schöpferisch*, *twórcze*). Although this semantic shift was certainly a telling phenomenon of the time, one cannot avoid the impression that the label proposed by Kolář slightly overstates this point (2016: 110).

While Kolář’s investigations into the semantic twists of post-Stalinist discourse offer brilliant insights into the processualisation of communist utopia, the actual social scope of that utopia remains more obscure. The endless laments of party officials over ideological deficits, misunderstandings, ambiguities, and complexities (*Unklarheiten*, *niejasności*) at the party grass roots, which are quoted throughout the book, as well as the general passivity on the part of rank-and-file party members, which is referred to sporadically (e.g., Kolář 2016: 60ff.), cast certain doubts on the overwhelming success of post-Stalinist utopia amongst the “masses.” True believers appear to be found rather among party intellectuals and officials professionally attached to the dissemination of ideology than among rank-and-file communists. This modification does not question the relevance of the approach, but slightly qualifies Kolář’s emphasis: while he stresses the integrative dimensions of the post-Stalinist ideological project (which was evidently remarkable among certain social groups), the reader may wonder at some points if he does not underrate what he himself calls (quoting Thomas Klein) the “politbureaucratic” nature of this integration project (Kolář 2016: 219). From this point of view, the recurring complaints over

“misunderstandings” in the party documents look rather like euphemistic paraphrases for dissenting opinions, and could as well be interpreted as the first symptoms of the formalisation of party discourse typical for late socialism.

/// The Challenge of Nationalism

In the third chapter, Kolář turns to discuss a matter of central importance to communist models of identity and legitimation: the complicated relation between nation and class as competing “imagined communities.” Kolář rightly accentuates the particular relevance of this conflict in Central and Eastern Europe, where nationalism had emerged as the principal “matrix of modernity” in the nineteenth century (2016: 145). Not surprisingly, he finds the most consistent embodiment of national communism in Gomulka’s “Polish way to socialism,” whereas the concepts of nation and homeland (*Heimat*) remained highly problematic and unclear in the GDR, especially after the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961. But even for Poland, Kolář stresses that nationalist narratives were far from replacing class-based ones. Rather, he observes continuous mutual permeations of elements of nationalist and Marxist discourse.

Although Kolář hardly provides substantial new sources or facts in this context, the light he sheds on the problem is illuminating. Contrary to Marcin Zaremba’s benchmark work (2001) on communist nationalism in Poland, he rejects the interpretation that nationalism was cynically instrumentalised by the Polish communists as an unauthentic substitute for true popular support (Kolář 2016: 146, 177). Instead, he agrees with Katherine Verdery (1991), who has assessed the interplay between nationalism and communism (with regard to Ceaușescu’s Romania) as a social process with a potentially open outcome. In Kolář’s view, the typical post-Stalinist discourse of ambivalence enabled a productive ideological convergence of nationalism and communism. Hence, he asserts that Polish communists “sincerely” and “untiringly” strove for the integration of national and Marxist narratives, and emphasises the consolidating effects of their “sustainable identity work” in the late 1950s and 1960s (Kolář 2016: 177) – even though the ideological reevaluation of nationalism turned out to be detrimental to communist rule in the long run.

This perspective certainly helps in investigating the authentic driving forces and productive effects of national-communist legitimation. Unfortunately, Kolář is quite reluctant to push these questions further. Al-

though he undoubtedly has a point in that genuinely communist traditions remained important to the historical discourse of the PZPR (particularly in the specialist discussions of party historians), the evidence he offers to sustain his view appears rather scarce and unbalanced. Most of it focuses on the party's own history in a narrow sense, namely on the debate over the rehabilitation of the pre-war KPP in 1958 (Kolář 2016: 165–172), while the much-discussed rise of nationalism in official discourse throughout the 1960s is taken into account only marginally. Significantly, the name of Mieczysław Moczar, the influential minister of the interior and leader of the nationalist wing inside the party, is completely absent from Kolář's book. The neglect of these currents makes him underestimate the considerable shift in the self-declared genealogy of communist Poland that came with the reassessment of non-communist traditions of resistance to German occupation – first and foremost of the *Armia Krajowa* (Home Army). Far from being a purely cultural or discursive phenomenon, the so-called “partisan” culture offered attractive chances of integration for many Poles, who until then had kept their distance from the communist party, and prepared the ground for the wave of nationalism dominating Polish public discourse in 1968 (compare Wawrzyniak 2009).

Here, Kolář's study could probably have been even more instructive if he had taken a closer look at the social contexts and functions of internal party discourse. Namely, it would have made sense to link the problem of nationalism more directly with the anti-Semitic campaign unleashed in Poland in March 1968, which he discusses only at the end of the following chapter (devoted to concepts of alterity). Sure enough, the so-called anti-Zionist campaign was closely interconnected with other concepts of enemies, most notably with the concept of revisionism, and therefore should not be reduced to a simple eruption of anti-Semitism. Still, Kolář's analysis of the session of the Wrocław voivodeship party committee dealing with the disciplinary procedure against the philosopher Waclaw Mejbaum in June 1968 (2016: 248–251 – inadvertently misdated to “spring 1956”), does not really reveal new insights into the complex mixture of antirevisionism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Semitism that dominated Polish party discourse in these crucial months.

As Piotr Oseka and Hans-Christian Dahlmann have shown, the dynamics of the 1968 events resulted from a complex interplay between a top-down campaign (with an anti-revisionist and anti-Zionist edge) and independent actions by rank-and-file party members as well as lower party functionaries, who made their own sense of the situation and used the

opportunity to get rid of disliked career rivals – often exploiting forthright anti-Semitic resentments like the notion of *żydokomuna* (compare Dahlmann 2013: 375–388; Osęka 2008: 250–266). Irrespective of whether this grass root agency was primarily guided by individual career ambitions fuelled by Secret Police dossiers (as Osęka maintains) or rather by deep-rooted ideological predispositions amongst Polish society (as Dahlmann would probably have it), these dynamics do not really seem to fit Kolář’s thesis accentuating the lasting impact of a truly communist “utopia from below.” What they unmistakably demonstrate, however, is the authentic rootedness of the Polish party discourse of the time in the attitudes and desires of the so-called “masses” – for better or for worse.

Apparently, the transnational design of the study fails to account fully for the contradictions and inconsistencies that characterised the Gomulka years, with the Polish party discourse evolving from the enthusiastic opening of October 1956 to the national-communist bigotry of the late 1960s. Since Kolář is more interested in reconstructing the general characteristics of post-Stalinism as an epoch than in tracing its inner dynamics, he has obvious difficulties in explaining why it resulted in the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia but in a nationalist cleansing in Poland. On the methodological level, here is where the boundaries of Kolář’s view from inside the party become visible. Most notably, Kolář seems to underrate the degree to which party discourse (at least in Poland) was influenced by authentic popular claims and expectations, and also by the powerful ideological competition of the Catholic Church, which was of crucial importance for the millennium campaign of 1966. Grzegorz Wołowicz and others have argued for further research in which these developments would be more broadly contextualised with the continuities and changes in Polish society, and not solely considered as part of the history of communism, detached from national history (compare Wołowicz 2014: 39–68). The long-standing significance of national patterns of identity and alterity is actually acknowledged by Kolář, too. In an interesting digression devoted to the difficulties of Czech-German and Polish-Czech relations in the border regions, he reports on the substantial difficulties of party authorities in overcoming traditional national animosities in the name of proletarian internationalism (Kolář 2016: 188–200).

/// Contours of an Epoch

Eventually, in the fifth chapter, Kolář returns to more general questions concerning post-Stalinist concepts of time and temporality. Resuming his earlier examination of the “historical turn” of the late 1950s, he reflects on how history and memory shaped contemporaries’ perception of their own age. Again, he seeks to bring out the peculiarities of post-Stalinism by delimiting it from Stalinism and late socialism. Referring to Stefan Plaggenborg’s work on communist concepts of time, Kolář perceives post-Stalinist concepts of time as an ambivalent mixture, reflecting the difficult passage from the Stalinist time of action (*Handlungszeit*) – which had equated future revolutionary aims with the party’s present actions – to the cyclical conception of time dominating late socialism (compare Plaggenborg 2006). While the renouncement of Stalinism inevitably undermined communists’ belief in the one and only straight way to the future, the proclaimed return to the “golden age” of true Leninism did not yet result in stagnant cyclicality. Instead, key words of the time like “renewal” (*odnowa*) retained optimistic visions of socialist progress. They indicated the fragmentation and pluralisation of linear notions of socialist progress rather than their renunciation.

In party historiography, the new awareness of complexity went along with an emerging interest in the history of the everyday. Kolář exemplifies this with an oral history project by GDR historian Wolfgang Jonas, who in the late 1950s recorded the experiences of miners in the Mansfeld region near Halle (Kolář 2016: 273–283). Furthermore, the abandonment of revolutionary dreams fostered the emergence of nostalgia (especially among party veterans), and visions of a better future came to be accompanied by memories of a better past. This makes Kolář – in a paraphrase of Johan Huizinga’s famous work on the Late Middle Ages – speak of post-Stalinism as the “autumn of communism” (2016: 314). Even so, he insists, the epoch continued to be dominated by the persistent belief in the reachability of communism, albeit relativised and processualised by a “post-revolutionary culture of planning” (Plaggenborg quoted by Kolář 2016: 305). This utopian belief constituted a lasting political resource, which could be actuated into true “fireworks of visions of the future,” as staged by Gomulka in 1956, by Khrushchev in 1961, by Ulbricht in 1966, and ultimately during the Prague Spring of 1968 (Kolář 2016: 314). It is in the precarious balance between the persistence of utopian thinking and the longing for stabilisation that Kolář sees the specific mobilising power of the post-Stalinist regime of historicity.

These considerations are truly insightful and inspiring, as Kolář impressively traces the meanders of communist utopia and convincingly highlights the openness of post-Stalinist world views. Thus, he succeeds in presenting post-Stalinism as an important period of transition that was neither dominated by ideological fanaticism nor by bare opportunism (Kolář 2016: 330). Yet a certain vagueness about the chronological contours of the epoch remains, which tends to blur the definitive characteristics of the age. Whereas Kolář accentuates the break between Stalinism and post-Stalinism in 1956 very clearly, he is less precise about the end of the period and does not explicitly name a closing point. Although he incidentally seems to accept 1968 as the closing date (Kolář 2016: 321), he hesitates to endorse interpretations that take the violent suppression of the Prague Spring or the nationalist fury of the Polish March for the definitive fall of the communist project (compare Śpiewak 2012: 236). In his final remarks, he even dates the final collapse of the post-Stalinist utopia to the 1989 revolutions (Kolář 2016: 330).

Essentially, Kolář is more interested in the emergence of post-Stalinism from the ruins of Stalinism than in the further developments that paved the way for late-socialist ossification. He therefore privileges hope, utopia, and mobility over tendencies of stabilisation, stagnancy, and even regress. Consequently, his account is less accurate in mapping the depressing features of the time, like the disillusionments linked with Poland's *mala stabilizacja* (Kolář 2016: 310ff.), or the resurgence of nationalism. Compared to the subsequent modernising promises of the early 1970s, the late Gomulka years certainly did not seem a realm of future-oriented optimism and liberality. But surely Gierek's consumerism-on-credit seriously undermined the core elements of communist belief, thus rendering meaningless all the debates over the right way of interpreting Marxism that had been at the centre of post-Stalinist revisionism. By blurring the distinction between post-Stalinism and late socialism, Kolář avoids further questions on the relationship between communist utopia, political power, and social reality.

So it cannot be overlooked that Kolář's portrait of post-Stalinism resembles rather a sketch than a panoramic landscape painting. It would be unfair to reproach him for disregarding fields like economic modernisation, cultural liberalisation, or social history, which all seem essential for a comprehensive picture of an epoch, because he explicitly restricts the scope of his book to matters of ideology. Still, his empirical focus on party historiography and the historical self-perceptions of communists, though highly instructive, turns out to be a quite narrow footing for broad gen-

eralisations about the “ideology and utopia of an epoch,” as promised in the subtitle. In his move to transcend more traditional approaches to the history of ideas, Kolář manages to include plenty of views from below, but he leaves major fields of contemporary experience and ideology production unnoticed.

This applies most notably to a field communists considered especially important for their ideological self-perception: the so-called “base” of economic, material, and social realities. After all, post-Stalinist “processualised utopia” was to a high degree an economic and technical one. Walter Ulbricht’s famous claim “to outperform [West Germany] without catching up” (*überholen ohne einzuholen*) was materialised throughout the 1960s in a whole array of economic reforms, which were not stopped until his successor Honecker gave top priority to the satisfaction of present-day social needs. In Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary as well, the post-Stalinist era was a heyday of economic reforms aimed at transforming the Stalinist command economy into more sophisticated and sustainable models of socialist planning (although the extent to which the reforms were actually realised varied considerably). Maybe the euphoric belief in “scientific” methods of planning and steering, including cybernetics and computerisation, should be seen as one of the most characteristic features of post-Stalinist utopian thinking. Kolář’s neglect of these aspects is all the more regrettable as the ambitious efforts to reform the planned economy in the late 1950s and 1960s markedly distinguish the period from the subsequent late socialism, which was more and more focused on administrating the status quo by means of “patriarchal consumerism” (compare Boyer 2007).

Taking into consideration technological and scientific notions of progress would also facilitate comparisons with countries beyond the Iron Curtain, as similar optimism about technological and societal modernisation was no less common in Western societies of the time. Such a comparative perspective might appear slightly odd at first sight, but Kolář provides even more points suggesting a glance at parallel developments in the West. For example, his observations on the increased attention to the history of the everyday in post-Stalinism virtually call for a comparison with the Western “history from below” movement. The later erosion of meaningful visions of a better future, which marked the transition from post-Stalinism to late socialism, was no peculiarity of the East either, but found parallels in the momentous breakdown of Western beliefs in modernisation and progress after the 1970s (compare Rodgers 2011). To elaborate further on such parallels could certainly deepen the rather essayistic allusions to Thatcherism

and Helmut Kohl that Kolář proposes in the epilogue (2016: 325–327), and would help in more clearly specifying the place of post-Stalinism in the global history of modernity.

/// “Why Isn’t There Clarity Yet?”

In summary, Kolář has written an inspiring book that effectively complicates and enhances our picture of post-war communism. Fortunately, he does not stop with questioning conventional schemes of periodisation and interpretation, but proposes a substantial new view on the period of transition from Stalinism to late socialism, which has so far been slightly neglected by historical scholarship. Thus, he exposes himself to constructive critique, but also opens up perspectives for further research. While he impresses the reader by the refinement of his semantic analysis, one might have wished for more extended contextualisation of discursive phenomena with social developments. Kolář’s book is a milestone with regard to its comparative focus on East-Central Europe, too. By composing findings from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR into one common story, it offers much more than some scattered case studies from the periphery of the Soviet Bloc. Instead, Kolář demonstrates convincingly that it is possible – and highly instructive – to sketch a portrait of an epoch in transnational communism without focussing as usual on the Soviet Union, or in fact on Moscow. This shifting of perspectives from the centre to the periphery reveals what can be seen as the central purpose of his book: to open our eyes to the fundamental openness and plurality of historical processes, be it in their regional or chronological dimensions.

“Why isn’t there clarity yet on some issues?” – this question by an anonymous participant of a SED party schooling in 1967, who apparently felt irritated by the unsettledness of post-Stalinist ideology (cited by Kolář on p. 317), ironically reflects the longing for simplicity and black-and-white judgements that is equally present in many present-day opinions on the communist past. As Kolář shows, in order to adequately assess this part of our history, it is worthwhile to leave our hindsight aside and to cease looking at state socialism solely through the prism of the distressing 1980s. We may find then that the legacy of East-Central European communism is considerably more multifaceted and complex than current narratives praising the national-capitalist resurrection of the 1990s suggest.

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