BOOK REVIEWS

A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe. By Béla Tomka. London: Routledge, 2013. xix + 526 pp.

Béla Tomka, a professor at the University of Szeged, is a well-known specialist in modern Hungarian and European economic and social history. In the past decade he has published numerous important comparative studies in Hungarian, English, and German focused on the modern history of the family, the household, and social welfare policy. His latest book, in which he seeks to sum up twentieth-century European social history, is not only integrally linked to his previous work but also represents its virtual synthesis.

A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe unequivocally represents a major achievement—one that, following its publication in Hungarian three years ago, has now appeared in English with Routledge. Its author has seen to his task with admirable diligence, the final result being an imposing, nearly 550-page volume that is readily utilizable as both a monograph and a college text. Synthesizing the latest scholarship while casting a fresh light upon it, it marks a major new opportunity for those researching social changes in Europe to pursue comparative analysis in the field.

The writing of such a comprehensive overview demands no little bravura, intellectually and otherwise; and of course a firm, broad grasp of the literature in the field, not to mention the ability to synthesize it all. Judging from Tomka's book, we can declare that its author is up to the task. Likewise of fundamental importance in undertaking such a project is thinking through conceptual issues with sufficient care so as to choose wisely from among the various modes of analysis and discourse that present themselves. Clearly one option is to proceed country by country, region by region—focusing on case studies of nation states, summing up and comparing by theme or chapter. Another sensible starting point is a continental, comparative approach that, by analyzing the development of different societies, draws conclusions as to general trends. Then there's a third possibility well grounded in scholarship, one built on the combined, comparative analysis of national and supranational development. This is what Béla Tomka has opted for here, presenting the development and distinguishing characteristics of individual nations while methodically comparing and contrasting.

Methodological concerns are of no small import in a scholarly undertaking of such size and significance. It seems evident that only through macrohistorical analysis could Tomka get a handle on the diverse range of issues comprising his chosen subject. Likewise indispensable: a broad application of sources and analyses from the realm of social science statistics—even if, as we are well aware, numbers sometimes "twist the truth"; are usually suitable only to reveal general trends; and only rarely allow for a detailed examination of background factors, of cause and effect. To what degree are such particulars necessary to describe social processes? Well, it must be said that they are hard to avoid when undertaking a comprehensive, comparative synthesis such as this even if they do pose a slight challenge to smooth reading. To his credit, Tomka here presents a resource replete with valuable data whose interpretation is made that much easier by way of well-edited tables and other graphics. His analytical methods are rich, employing interdisciplinary approaches where possible to make sense of the various social processes at issue. Given the wide-ranging scope of his project, he had to simultaneously apply methodologies and perspectives prevalent in the fields of history, demography, sociology, political science, and economics.

Tomka's work may be thematic/chronological in structure, but in contrast with numerous similar works, he has placed not one, but multiple key themes from the realm of social history at the heart of his work. Likewise to his book's benefit is that its author has not insisted on a single, all-embracing theory by which to interpret the social processes of the age, but instead presents the phenomena and the relationships between them, assigning theoretical interpretations on this basis.

The core question Tomka addresses is this: Just what does the concept "European society" mean? Is it possible to speak in terms of some sort of uniform European society on the basis of common traits? Is doing so valid only in the case of Western Europe, or does "European society" also embrace Eastern Europe? Tomka clearly concurs with those contemporary scholars—among them, Hartmut Kaelble—who have argued that European society is still very much developing, but the societies of individual national states have come in close proximity to each other in numerous respects; the similarities, the points of integration, have become ever stronger. For Eastern Europe, the opportunity for this transition was made possible by the political transition that unfolded more than two decades ago, a transition that will obviously take much longer yet before coming to fruition.

In its ten chapters and forty-six subchapters, *A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe* analyses the social changes that unfolded in Europe over the

course of the twentieth century, seeking both their common traits and their singularities. Among the issues the author devotes special attention to are population, families and households, social stratification and mobility, the welfare state, labor, consumption, entertainment, politics and society, urbanization, culture, education, and religion. He closes with a theoretical recapping of European societies (and European society) and writings on social history. The very breadth of the examined subjects makes it impossible to address them all, and so below I shall focus on but a few of the book's key conclusions.

Summing up the shifts in Europe's population trends, Béla Tomka refers to the winding down of the demographic transition; the deterioration in the reproductive capacities of European societies following the end of the post–World War II baby boom, the falling mortality rate with improved living conditions, the rise in the average age, and the aging of West European societies. He likewise devotes special attention to the issue of migration, pointing out that while Europe's was primarily an emigrating population in the first decades of the twentieth century, from the early 1960s on the continent became an increasingly significant target of international migration. He also notes that the twentieth century saw a big increase in forced mass migrations precipitated by politics and wars, which redrew ethnic and denominational contours and social structures more broadly in certain countries and regions.

Of course, the shifting role and structure of the family also made its mark on demographic trends. The high age at marriage in the first half of the century fell notably by World War II, as marriage became more popular, as more value was placed on the family; whereas from the 1970s on an opposite trend gathered pace, with the average age at marriage quickly reaching the level it stood at the start of the century. Simplified family structures represented a general European trend from the mid-twentieth-century on, with multigenerational households virtually disappearing as the nuclear family took hold. Alongside the economic function of the family, its growing intimacy and "privatization" came to the fore along with the increasingly "symmetrical" relationship between couples that developed in the wake of women's emancipation. Naturally, these processes unfolded differently in various places, influenced fundamentally by the prevailing mindsets in particular countries and regions—not least, the degree of religious commitment versus secularization.

In terms of social inequalities, the countries on the western reaches of the continent underwent a modest degree of leveling in the first half of the century and a much stronger one after World War II through to the 1970s and 1980s. In

Eastern Europe, meanwhile, communist regimes imposed a rapid equalization of incomes, but the resumption of free market economy in the century's final decade saw an even faster rise in socioeconomic inequalities in post-communist states. And yet despite the presence of many more women in the labor force, the income gap between men and women narrowed only slightly.

In examining the division of occupational fields and economic activity, it is evident that in most of Europe, agriculture fell to the background, and that after initial growth, industry waned in the final third of the century while business and finance, the service industry, as well as information technology and telecommunication came to the fore as sources of income. All this also had a significant impact on the process of social stratification.

The dividing lines between social classes blurred increasingly after 1945 in nearly all countries. The presence of the historical aristocracy in the upper classes diminished while an ever more influential spectrum of managers arrived at a position almost akin to that of property owners, of capitalists. One particularly radical shift was that of the upper classes and the elite in the Soviet Bloc in the second half of the 1940s, and a similarly radical shift in the structure of the elite unfolded in the region at the end of the century.

The middle classes underwent major changes, too, as wage earners increased in number and proportion in contrast with the trends characterizing the property-holding classes. As for the lower middle classes, the social and income disparity between the petite bourgeoisie and high-skilled workers generally narrowed in the second half of the century. Ever more factors—including gender, ethnicity, education, professional qualifications, income, type of settlement, family status, and prestige—came to influence social positions and opportunities for mobility, with single-factor explanations of stratification losing all their validity by the close of the era. And it must not be forgotten that, while in a different form in each country, the welfare state emerged to play a decisive role in reducing social inequalities, especially in the second half of the century. With economic development there emerged a West European social model that may fairly be regarded as more uniform than not. In contrast, Eastern Europe in the wake of communist takeovers in the late 1940s saw full employment—ensured by the requirement to work—become the core of social welfare, complemented by state support to cover the cost of social welfare services and other core benefits.

The nature of employment transformed, too, with wage work becoming the norm as the proportion of those employed in family-based and individual

productive activities kept falling. This process was further reinforced by the shrinking numbers of agricultural workers. And from the 1970s on, the West European labor market underwent a major shift—with fewer opportunities for long-term employment and guaranteed careers as unemployment rose rapidly with changes in the structure of the economy. Shorter work times marked the most important change in working conditions, as the earlier twelve-hour norm gradually fell to eight hours and by the final third of the century the six-day work week slimmed to five days, and the number of years spent on the active labor force also lessened over the course of the era.

Consumption, however, came to be a decisive factor in social processes, one that indeed took on massive proportions over the century. The transformation in the structure of consumption demonstrates that the cost of living signified an ever smaller challenge for ever greater numbers of people. This was because the proportion of income devoted to maintaining the direct cost of living dwindled overall—depending, naturally, on one's social class/position—while the role of transportation, communications, entertainment, education, and culture kept growing.

The importance of leisure time changed fundamentally amid all this for Europeans. The electronic transmission of news and cultural information became decisive in mass culture. Increased leisure time, less energy devoted to meeting the cost of living, and enhanced material wealth together signified a notable improvement in the quality of life in twentieth-century Europe. This was also bound up with the spatial restructuring of populations, for right up through the 1970s and 1980s, the twentieth century represented the modern era of urbanization on the old continent. The expansion of cities and the rapid rise in their populations also suggested that Europe closed the century with a transformed civilization. In parallel with this, urban societies became ever more heterogeneous—both in view of economic and ethnic-cultural differences. Thanks to well-planned urban development policies, most European cities successfully managed to retain in large part their historic/architectural singularities. Likewise a general trend in European countries over the century was a leveling of cultural and educational disparities—thanks mainly to expanded educational opportunities, especially as regards post-World War II higher education. As for the transformation of value systems, most noteworthy was the plummeting number of actively religious persons; the partial devaluation of the role of nation states and, consequently, individuals' commitment to them; and the increasing emphasis on the individual. Naturally, the general transformations

in the European social order outlined briefly above had numerous variants, as Tomka discusses in detail in his book.

One key merit of this work lies in its being a "living" history; that is, in its analysis of numerous problems that have been of decisive importance in recent years right up to the present day in the life of European society and societies. To name one salient example: the fundamental impact of aging, migration, and immigration on population trends.

Béla Tomka wholly realizes the objectives articulated in his introduction. The result is a work of substantial benefit to a broad readership; one that, now that it is available in English, can be expected to be high on the radar screens of those engaged in the writing of (social) histories of contemporary Europe.

Translated by Paul Olchváry.

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