

## REVIEWS

**Hana Horáková and Stephanie Rudwick, eds. 2014. *Global Challenges and Local Reactions: Czech Republic and South Africa*. Berlin: Lit Verlag. 243 pages. ISBN 978-3-643-90591-8.**

The book under review presents an interdisciplinary evaluation of the political transitions in the Czech Republic and South Africa. The comparative perspective is founded on the effects that globalisation and the hegemony of neo-liberalism had on the move towards liberal democracy in both countries. Because of the timeframe when the two case studies occurred the book is able to point out that a number of common features and parallels in the two transitions can be identified, as well as the post-transition environment and how this has played out in South Africa and the Czech Republic.

In both countries elements within the “democratisation” movements represented a nascent congregation of individuals who saw themselves as the heir-apparents to the new dispensation. The cause of an aspirant elite, a discomfort with socialism and the undue influence of external actors advocating liberalism were the hallmarks of this tendency. The constraints of globalisation and the collapse of communism in the Eastern bloc meant that in both countries the global uncertainties that affected all socialists at the time seemed to suggest that there were no apparent alternatives to capitalist democracy. This then served the interests of those fractions advocating neo-liberalism. It must be remembered that the two transitions took place at a time when the principal ideological resource available to actors’ advocating a neo-liberal economic programme was the rise to hegemony of market ideology. The collapse of communism ensured that there was no alternative economic discourse to that of the market and the market was celebrated as the only rational mechanism for the efficient production and allocation of goods within and among societies. The legitimisation of market discourse was clearly evident in both Czechoslovakia and in South Africa. Though this discourse rightly critiqued the tendency to bureaucratism and the lack of tangible democracy in

the Soviet-style centrally planned economies, the practical effects were to undermine confidence in socialism per se and promote a rightward shift in both countries. Closely following the Gramscian understanding of how common sense is promoted, media interventions simply rubbished alternatives to the orthodoxy.

The involvement in the transitions by two of the most powerful international financial institutions was remarkable. Throughout the transition period, leaderships within both countries came under relentless pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in favour of more “realistic” economic strategies. Throughout the transition period, a plethora of research projects funded by the IMF and World Bank corresponded with and refined the same project. Equally, passion for the norms of neo-liberalism pervaded the press, with analysts openly recommending the implementation of IMF-style structural adjustment programmes. This factor considerably strengthened the hand of pro-capitalist organic intellectuals, who relatively easily embarked on a concentrated political and ideological struggle to promote the hegemonic norms which they subscribed to. By doing so, the policies that should not be pursued were comprehensively rejected, very often at nominally technical levels. In doing so, such actors were quite effective in their ideological propaganda about economic policies that should not be implemented on the grounds that they may damage vested economic interests. Henceforth, those fractions that opposed the neo-liberal agenda were cast from the terrain of the debate as lacking any serious and rigorous contribution to be made.

The results, as the book shows, means that it has been very hard to locate equity as an explicit policy goal in either Pretoria or Prague post-transition. Instead, the pathologies associated with trickle-down economics are clearly evident. For example, the Gini coefficient in the Czech Republic has risen quite considerably since 1990 whilst the gap between rich and poor regions of the Czech Republic has grown exponentially. Whereas Prague was only 29 percent richer than the average region in 1990 it is now well over 100 percent higher. Equally, among OECD countries, the Czech Republic has the lowest minimum wage based on the median national wage. The economic problems that South Africa faces are well-known and hardly need any comment.

The book has a number of chapters that are set out to compare the two countries, with contributions on them as emerging donors, nationalist discourse, language policies, and regional strategies drawing together evidence from both case studies. There are then stand-alone chapters on the role of women in the respective countries as well as a commentary on the HIV/AIDS situation in South Africa. A chapter on transitional justice and reconciliation efforts in both countries is particularly interesting, examining how both states have dealt with the traumas of the past.

Overall, the book is an interesting treatment of two countries that though are in very different parts of the world exhibit some similarities as a result of the timing of their transitions to liberalism. As a project that brings together Czech and South African academics it is a success and further evidence of the healthy state of affairs regarding academic engagement with Africa in the Czech Republic. In this sense, the book may also be seen as part of the wider renaissance in Central and Eastern Europe of African Studies as a discipline.

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**Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová. 2013. *The Production of History and Culture in Africa Revisited: Problems, Methods, Sources*. Studia Orientalia Monographica, Volume 4. Bratislava: Slovenská akadémia vied, Ústav orientalistiky. 119 pages. ISBN 978-80-8095-085-9.**

It is a highly ambitious if not impossible task to make a thorough revision of the hitherto world historiography concerning Africa, primary and secondary sources, to evaluate approaches, production and results achieved within that vast area of academic research and amateur endeavour. The success in outlining and digesting the theme is based on the wide experience and extraordinary skills of the author who has been dealing with African topics for decades.

An ample bibliography (pp. VII-XXXII) commences a little unusual, but adds to the fully adequate composition of the study. The Introduction (pp. 1-4) mentions the essential changes in the conception of African history, which occurred after the WWII. The author also mentions her