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**Transition Economies: Transformation, Development and Society in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union**

**Aleksandr V. Gevorkyan. Oxford: Routledge, 2018. 292 pages. Cloth \$150.00 [Paper \$46.95]. ISBN: 9781317567950**

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For researchers who work on post-Soviet and transition economies, this book comes as a fresh breeze. The debate on the heritage of the Soviet Union and state socialism has been for too long discharged as an unfortunate political experiment and archived as a “failure” of history. However, we can’t explain the current tensions of contemporary nation states and their socioeconomic crises away from their past. This book is much needed on the bookshelves of those who want to understand how historical experiences can inform state-market relationships and dynamics of capital accumulation at the start, during, and end of the former Soviet Union (FSU). By offering a complex interdisciplinary analysis of an underinvestigated region of the world, the book invites reflection on prescriptions formulated to implement the transition to market of centrally planned economies, and to revive the debate around the causes and mechanisms of that transition. In addition, it informs the debate on comparative economic systems across time and space.

The historically informed and politically aware approach of the book leads to a further contribution, which is the lucid ex-post evaluation of the reforms implemented after the collapse of the FSU across Eurasia in the early 1990s. The book underlines that “big-bang” reforms, in their varieties, symbolize the consecration of mainstream economic theories through the so-called “Washington Consensus.” Those reforms focused on the privatization of state-owned enterprises, price liberalization, and macroeconomic stabilization. Disregarding historical, institutional, and economic specificities, the reform package imposed what was essentially a one-size-fits-all solution for the entire FSU region. These reforms wanted to ensure that *value* and property rights could be individualized and freely exchanged, and thus efficiently allocated in the market and society through the price mechanism. The ideology of free market and individual freedom was blindly embraced as the alternative to the alleged inefficiency, repression, and corruption of the top-down approach of state socialism. The book unpacks the mechanisms of this transition by factoring in the benefits and costs involved in it.

However, the Washington Consensus also advocated for a distinctive model of value creation, based on following (as opposed to challenging) natural comparative advantage and liberalization of foreign trade (Lo 2012). Few authors have explored in depth the growth dynamics and outcomes of those last decades (e.g., Bennett, Estrin, and Urga 2007; Kornai, Maskin, and Roland 2003). *Transition Economies* fills this gap. Gevorkyan picks up the few but rigorous research works that argued that the challenges of the former Soviet transition were way too complex for the solutions proposed, and that those challenges could not be addressed simply by turning these economies into market-oriented economies overnight. Thus this book coherently illuminates the limitations of those market reforms through comprehensive empirical evidence.

The book develops three main analytical contributions: the first advances a simple but not obvious argument, namely that to understand the complexities of transition and transformation in the FSU and Eastern Europe it is important to acknowledge that events are part of a continuum and are embedded in their historical and geographical specificities. In order to set up these premises, the book analyzes country-specific challenges and varieties of transformation over the past decades. The analysis shows that these regions in reality contain very heterogeneous historical, geographical, cultural, and religious realities, which contributed to shaping twenty-nine different economic policies. For instance, an important distinction is made about countries that are, as the result of path-dependent policies, still relying on primary commodity exports. Indeed, understanding the origin of certain economic structures is a crucial step to understanding the challenges of social and economic transformation today.

Another very good discussion developed in this section of the book is about the concept of *transition* versus *transformation*, and the inadequacy of the former in describing complex patterns of change. The book rightly points out the fact that *transformation* entails a much more complex and multidimensional process of institutional change within both market and society (Tool 1994). In this respect, it also denounces the inadequacy of neoclassical theories based on market equilibrium and production possibility frontiers, first in explaining the challenges of change of transition economies, and second in assessing institutional change, and third in formulating sensible policy recommendations.

The second contribution of the book is to thoroughly analyze mechanisms of production, exchange, and distribution during the Soviet era and after the Soviet collapse. It traces back the history from the Russian revolution to the fall of the Berlin wall. It goes back and traces the history of the push for collectivization and industrialization happening in the 1928–1932 period, and it rightly emphasizes that those economic policies affected the socio-economic institutions of today.

Through a meticulous historical analysis—which collects and systematizes a huge amount of secondary social, economic, and historical data on capital, migration, employment, industrial development, and foreign direct investment—the book illustrates the missed opportunities and the undesired transaction and economic costs that shock therapies, through voucher privatization, liberalization, and rapid marketization, had on those countries. For example, it meticulously describes how and why market reforms led to a collapse of aggregate output of more than 40 percent from the “pre-reforms” era. It discusses how, while inequality increased, income per-capita decreased and still has not recovered. However, it also methodically describes the deterioration of living standards and the social crisis that emerged as result of the sudden closure of public services provision in health, education, housing, and work. It offers a balanced analysis of why big-bang privatization policies failed to meet the promises of efficiency and effective economic redistribution. It discusses the rationale of why it is wrong to treat the vested interests of those economies as homogenous economic agents that only suffer “soft budget constraints.” The book emphasizes that those economic agents were embedded in a complex institutional, cultural, and economic system that could not be dismantled and replaced overnight. Last but not least, Gevorkyan argues that power relationships should be made explicit when analyzing economic transition.

The book touches upon the concept of *competitiveness*, a crucial driver of the capitalistic mode of production, in various ways. It shows that the lack of market competition in the FSU was criticized and conceptualized in a vacuum, yet it provided the leitmotif for drastic ahistorical reforms. This is a crucial point which could be discussed further especially in relation to the social and political crisis that neoliberal market capitalism faces nowadays. On the one hand, there is the idea that market competition supremacy has legitimized the dichotomy of state versus private accumulation with drastic consequences for wealth redistribution and society well-being. On the other hand, the illusion that through private competition efficiency will prevail has been not only refuted by reality, but it has been pursued at the cost of societal equity and justice.

Having said that, through those chapters it is clear that a classless society was just a mirage during the FSU. The book pursues a very honest intellectual exercise by discussing the role of the *nomenklatura* in following unfair practices and rent-seeking behaviors both during and after the Soviet era. It explains that elites kept control of economic assets through disruptions and false reconversions, with no clear or consistent direction of institutional change.


The third analytical contribution of the book focuses on market transition, and continues to assess the varieties of solutions and the contemporary challenges in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. It also well describes the geopolitical tensions that led to a reshuffling of the various state positions at the end of the Soviet Union, in particular by looking at the new influences of Western players, including the European Union.

The level of analysis of the book is clearly centered at the macro level. This choice has both benefits and costs. It allows for a wide overview of trends across the Eurasia region. However, sometimes it misses precious insights at the meso and micro level. For instance, when discussing the rural-urban divide in Central Asia, a regional specialist might notice that the low level of urbanization is in some countries not only due to “traditional ties” as logically assumed in the book, but rather to a top-down system of government regulation on internal migration which still forbids free movements to the cities.

Second, because of the breadth of the data, sometimes the analysis remains descriptive and fails to untangle the deeper structural power relations in their contextual specificity. For instance, how the mechanisms of socio-economic stratification affected relations of production at the sectoral level remain unexplored. Obviously this would require a country-level analysis looking at the class structure and pattern of social differentiation specific to a certain context, so the book sets the basis for further research on this important chapter of history.

Third, the book shows a clear effort in gathering empirical evidence to feed the much-needed discussion on post-Soviet transition. However, it is recognized that, especially in Central Asia, secondary data and databases are very scattered and often constructed based on estimation. The lack of exhaustive secondary data for the large part of Caucasus and Central Asia is the reason why some sections tend to remain Russia-centric and include interesting but fragmented details about peripheral Central Asia or Central Europe on, for instance, productivity or sectoral changes.

In conclusion, the author succeeds in arguing his case for a reopening of the debate on so-called “transition” economies, which for too long has been monopolized by one version of the story, namely the Washington Consensus. This book is a rare and precious attempt to contextualize those reforms within the political and ideological framework of the early 1990s. It shifts the balance of the debate to a more empirically informed analysis and less neoliberal-driven narrative on transition economies in Europe and Asia. By doing that, it sets the basis for potential new theorizations, which could better grasp the specificity of these post-socialist economies during contemporary capitalistic development.

Lorena Lombardozzi   
Economics, The Open University,  
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA UK  
Email: [lorena.lombardozzi@open.ac.uk](mailto:lorena.lombardozzi@open.ac.uk)

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## ORCID iD

Lorena Lombardozi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9233-5558>.

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## The Routledge Handbook of Heterodox Economics.

**Tae-Hee Jo, Lynne Chester, and Carlo D'Ippoliti, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. 550 pages. Cloth \$220. ISBN: 978-1-138-89994-0.**

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The editors of this handbook set themselves the ambitious task of providing coherent heterodox frameworks to understand the capitalist economy while drawing out the differences and commonality between these approaches. In six parts divided into thirty-seven chapters, the reader is taken through heterodox theory, the anatomy of capitalism and its dynamics, and, finally, proposals for transforming the capitalist “social provisioning process.”

Thankfully, the book does not develop its themes primarily in opposition to orthodoxy but as insightful perspectives in their own right. By and large, the heterodox traditions set out in the book can be characterized as those that perceive of the economy as a reproductive/circular, monetary, capitalist market system. The strongest chapters expose the reader to the history of thought and succeed in situating clearly its theoretical perspective in relation to others, while giving a critical assessment of the limits of the approach at hand. There is a certain ambivalence in the editors’ views on the desirability of synthesizing heterodox traditions, and those contributions that attempt such a synthesis yield mixed results.

The variety of topics covered is wide, and in some instances the selection appears a little haphazard. For example, there are chapters on *banks in developing countries* and *shadow banking* but not on banking or the financial system more generally. The logic of the separation of the handbook into its different parts is not entirely convincing. The division among “theoretical cores of heterodox economics” (part II), the “anatomy of capitalism” (part III), and the “dynamics of capitalist socio-economic structure” (part IV) is not always evident in the contributions. The “theoretical cores” cover the social provisioning process, social surplus, accumulation regimes, monetary theories of production, effective demand, value, price, distribution, and the micro-macro link. The “anatomy” deals with institutions, interactive agency, households, business enterprise, competition and governance, legal form of business, money and monetary regimes, banks, informal economy, and poverty and inequality. “Dynamics” comprises accumulation,