

The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague

Ash, Timothy Garton (2019): *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*. Atlantic Books. London. [first published 1990 as *We The People. The Revolution of '89*]

Ash, Timothy Garton (2019): *Ein Jahrhundert wird abgewählt. Europa im Umbruch 1980-1990. Erw. Neuauflage*. Carl Hanser Verlag. München. [The German version; includes *The Uses of Adversity* and *We The People. The Revolution of '89*]

The book I would like to discuss here is not a book on management. Rather, it is a treatise by a historian and political writer on the fall of socialism in Central Europe, not a recent development. As if that weren't enough, this book is a "re-cycled" version of an edition that was already published in the 1990s, with the addition of just one chapter. And yet, from my point of view, this book has to say a lot to scholars who deal with management and organizational issues in Central and Eastern European countries.

Timothy Garton Ash is Professor of European Studies at Oxford University. His interest in authoritarian regimes in Central Europe dates back to the late 1970s, when his research on resistance during the Hitler regime led him to East Berlin and then to the Central European countries behind the Iron Curtain. Personal experiences and encounters before and after the political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe have fuelled several of his books on the topic.

The first edition of *The Magic Lantern* was published in 1990 by Random House, New York (*We The People. The Revolution of '89 as Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* was the title of the UK Edition by Granta Books, Cambridge; the German translation was titled *Ein Jahrhundert wird abgewählt* by Hanser Verlag, both were published in 1990). Two decades later, the book has been re-published. The beautiful metaphor of a magic lantern (lat. *laterna magica*)—a technical device that stems from the prehistory of technological and cinematic innovations and stands for imaginative journeys to forgotten worlds and worlds of shadows—has unfortunately been discarded for the first German edition. Instead, the German title uses less flowery language and focuses on voting (against a century of authoritarian socialist regime) as the core of democracy and the main idea of the book. Nevertheless, the book remains a magic lantern, illuminating shadows of the socialist and transformative past in Central and Eastern Europe.

The first edition of the German version of the book is considerably more voluminous than *The Magic Lantern* since it includes 14 essays from *The Uses of*

Adversity. Essays on the Fate of Central Europe, published by Random House, New York, in 1989. The recent editions in English as well as in German contain the new chapter “Thirty Years On: Time for a New Liberation?”, which reflects the current situation in Central and Eastern European countries 30 years after the great societal transformation.

For those readers who are too young to know the original version of *The Magic Lantern* from 1990, the re-edition of the work is highly welcome. I myself am part of these “younger audiences”: in 1990, at the time of the first publication, I was a 13-year-old Lithuanian-Russian girl in politically turbulent Lithuania without the vaguest notion of academic publications in political sciences or history. I probably would never have noticed let alone read this work without the new edition. But even the more experienced researchers from CEE-fields, especially management scholars, might not be familiar with the work of Ash and will be surprised by its re-edition.

In the following, I refer to the German edition, since it was the only version I was able to get from the university libraries close to Lippstadt. I was lucky to have been able to borrow this book just before Germany was put on lockdown because of the Coronavirus. Hardly any other book is better suited to fill the lacuna created by the quarantine; it encourages one to look back and to reconnect with personal memories of the years between 1987 and 1990, to reflect on current tensions and ambivalences in the CEE region as well as to look forward to the future of democracies in CEE countries.

An outstanding characteristic of the book is the author’s splendid interweaving of personal accounts with precise and solid historical and political analyses. In an almost anti-scholarly manner, Ash uses his own personal experiences in the field as a point of departure for analytical insights. The book is a brilliant example of how seemingly trivial encounters, such as the meetings of Solidarność members in Poland or discussions with Czech dissidents, can be acknowledged as expressions of the ‘grand’ issues and topics. Expressing major issues in minor details is the main—methodological—strength of the book. The sociological imagination as proposed by Mills (1959) finds its practice in political analyses by Ash. Additionally, in these essays, the profound knowledge of the region is tied to the humanistic and emphatic position of the author. It’s deeply gratifying for me as a reader with origins in Eastern Europe to not be confronted with the usual prejudices against socialist societies as deficient and faulty. Quite the contrary, Ash’s approach is anti-dogmatic, open-minded, and genuinely concerned about people and their personal and collective struggles. In this way, Ash is able to open up new analytical perspectives, such as the essay “Reform or Revolution?” (originally in *The Uses of Adversity*), where he tackles the question of how it was possible that socialism gained passionate supporters at the beginning

and lost them later because of economic and financial problems the socialist regimes were facing.

The regional focus on this magic lantern is directed solely at Central Europe. The essays mainly deal with East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Romania, the Yugoslavian countries, or the Baltic States, including Lithuania, my home country, are only mentioned in passing. The analyses of the countries that are considered in more depth are astonishing due to Ash's intimate knowledge of the countries' history, culture, and main institutional elements that have framed peaceful revolutions throughout Central Europe, powered by the people praying, singing, and writing provocative texts. The author finds the foundation of democratic movements in every country considered, like Catholic religion and nationalism in Poland or the intellectual movement in the Czech Republic. The reader regrets that the remaining formerly socialist countries are not discussed more closely. Nevertheless, just to share another personal observation, I was delighted when I saw that the original book ends with a verse from the poem *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz, a Polish-Lithuanian poet: "O Lithuania, my homeland! thou art like health/ Only he can truly appreciate thy worth/ Who has lost thee". A quote that expresses exactly what many thousands of emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe living in Western Europe, especially those from Lithuania, may feel.

Incidentally, the book abounds with personal, detailed accounts of different encounters on different occasions in Central European countries. It is truly a treasure chest for scholars who deal with political and social movements as well as leadership processes. Group dynamics, power issues, the role of individual actors, the struggle between authoritarian and democratic leadership tendencies, as detailed accounts on Václav Havel, Lech Wałęsa or Viktor Orbán at the beginning of their careers as liberal reformers exemplify, are issues that are more or less deeply touched upon in essays and represent fruitful material for further analyses.

The most relevant issue for JEEMS readers and the reason I'm presenting this book here, is the fact that particularly the new chapter included turns out to be a highly informative and though-provoking analysis of the current situation in the CEE countries. With his elegant manner of intertwining personal experiences with analytical considerations, Ash delineates several important peculiarities that are still distinctive for the CEE region in this chapter. These specifics, according to the author, include, for example, strong oligarchic tendencies in the economy, tight interlinks between politics and private firms, and high emigration rates. As JEEMS editors, we expect that authors submitting their work to our journal seriously consider these regional specifics and provide context-sensitive analyses. This is not always the case since potential authors often tend to neglect regional specifics and consider empirical material from CEE countries as akin to

Western European or the US contexts. The increasing publish-or-perish pressures and the requirement to publish in highly-ranked, mainly US and UK based academic journals, foster this tendency considerably. Thus, Ash provides management scholars with relevant arguments to take country-specific contexts into account more seriously, not only for publishing in JEEMS, but in other management journals as well. In the end, context-sensitive management research is one of the sources of the new management and organizational theories we are all striving to determine. In sum, *The Magic Lantern* is a must-read for social scholars dealing with Central and Eastern Europe, in order to remain sensitive towards this specific European region in general as well as towards post-socialist specifics in every separate country in particular.

References

Mills, W.C. (1959): *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Irma Rybnikova

(Hamm-Lippstadt University of Applied Sciences, Germany)