

Saxonberg, Steven; The Czech Republic Before the New Millenium: Politics, Parties and Gender. East European Monographs, distributed by Columbia University Press, New York, 2003, xii + 259 pp. Notes. Tables. Index. £33.00 (hardback)

THE Czech Republic Before the New Millenium brings together a number of the author's papers and articles on Czech politics during 1990s. The first part of book deals with Czech party politics between 1989 and 2001, specifically addressing the nature of the Czech party system and of Václav Klaus as a charismatic leader. Here, Saxonberg's analysis is a slightly hit and miss affair. The unusual character of Czech party competition, which centres on socio-economic issues, rather than the cultural and moral cleavages dominant elsewhere in the region, has been convincingly explained by Kitschelt and his collaborators without reference to the rather stereotypical notion of Czechs being more 'Western'. As a 'historic', rather than communist successor party, the Czech Social Democrats are undoubtedly distinct among centre-left parties in the region, but are not unusual in mixing technocracy, etatism and populism. Social conservatism may indeed be largely absent on the Czech Right, but the hardline Czech Communists are 'conservative' mainly in their opposition to post-1989 economic reform. Despite their traditional anti-German nationalism and socially conservative elderly electorate, Communist deputies have, for example, happily co-sponsored bills in the Czech parliament to legalize same sex partnerships, indicating the essentially non-partisan character of moral issues in Czech politics. On the right, the failure of the Klaus governments to implement full-blooded free market reform when in office has already been widely written about as have the 'left-wing' beliefs of many right-wing Czech voters. Equally, the claim that Czech politics is riven with personal animosities is undoubtedly true, but tells us little, as the same could be said of, say, the Polish or Slovak party systems.

Given the stress in the literature on East Central Europe on institutional and programmatic politics, perhaps the most original aspect of the book's analysis is its treatment of Václav Klaus as a charismatic leader. Here, Saxonberg notes the 'situational' character of charisma that made Klaus a potent, if temporary, symbol of transformation, convincingly arguing that the Czech Right was partly bound together by Klaus's charismatic appeal. However, the exact nature of the relationship between individual leadership, party politics and social change is left frustratingly vague. This lack of focus leaves the wider social or political causes of 'Czech Thatcherism' largely unexplored, reinforcing the myth of the Czech Right as the product of Klaus's political wizardry.

The second half of the book, which brings a comparative perspective and empirical thoroughness lacking in earlier chapters, deals with Czech social policy and the position of women in Czech politics and society. Saxonberg argues that the social policy models in East Central Europe in the mid-1990s owed less to ideology and political culture, than to the the state of the communist economy in 1989. In the Czech case, despite the strength of neo-liberal parties in government, patterns of kindergarten provision, parental leave and social benefits, reflected a 'state socialist' model, strong on universalism, but weak on gender equality. Saxonberg also considers the underrepresentation of women in the Czech parliament, which is typical of the region. Given the PR electoral system, which tends to favour female representation, and limited evidence of anti-female bias among votes, it is political parties' candidate nomination procedures, he concludes, that are the key obstacle. Finally, Saxonberg considers the prospects for a Czech women's movement, given the rejection by Czechs – including many Czech feminists – of Western feminism, which seemingly echoed the rhetoric of the (in fact, highly patriarchal) communist regime. Here, Saxonberg suggests that a re-framing of existing discourses (for example, Czechs as leaders in Europe or Czech society as historically lacking gender divisions) represents the best prospect for the Czech Republic's small feminist NGOs and

communist-era women's organizations to become themselves into an influential social movement.

At bottom, in both parts of the book, Saxonberg asks why the trends towards a post-materialist gender and identity politics seen in post-war Western Europe have not made themselves felt more forcefully on the centre-left in East Central Europe's most secular and historically modern society. Although the author's tone of self-appointed consultant to the Czech left will grate with some readers, this is an intriguing and worthwhile question. Disappointingly, however, the book's analysis often becomes bogged down in cataloguing differences between East and West, neglecting the more interesting questions concerning the interaction of post-communist realities and post-modern trends to which the Czech Republic was fully opened up after 1989. Overall, however, the book combines an accessibly written, up-to-date account of Czech politics with more grounded research on gender issues, which will interest both general and specialist readers.

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