However voluminous the literature on the transitionary period of the late 1980s and early 1990s may be, growing distance allows for newer and newer interpretations. The studies edited by Joachim von Puttkamer, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Stanislav Holubec, who set as their goal to „reconsider how liberal democracy in Eastern Europe came about in the first place“, may be treated as part of this wave. According to the authors, the year 1990 was not only the crucial moment in the history of the Central Eastern European transition from communism to capitalism and from autocracy to democracy. Being, as James Krapfl put it, the „year of decision“, it also played a fundamental role in the contemporary history of Europe in general.

The 15 studies published in this volume give insights into a variety of topics, combining analyses of national cases with attempts at wider generalizations. In such a situation it is virtually impossible to expect one unified theoretical frame to be employed by all the authors. Some articles are based mostly on archival materials, whereas others, inspired by political sciences or sociology, build on empirical data. What is more, since the basis for consideration contains such cases as the GDR, Yugoslavia, or Poland – not to mention Western actors, including the European Community – one may expect significant difficulties in drawing a cohesive picture. Nevertheless, From Revolution to Uncertainty offers a surprisingly balanced view derived from a polyphony of theoretical backgrounds and thorough research.

Not surprisingly though, the rise of populism noticed in Europe three decades after the turn of 1989 serves as an important backdrop against which old questions await new answers, constituting new challenges for research. Here, the study by Éva Kovács serves as a perfect example. Her analysis of the Hungarian case explains the roots of the idealization of state socialism, which is often seen as a basis for the rise of populist sentiment today. She argues that the stimulatory effect the transition had on Hungarians proved ephemeral, especially in the provinces, where the long-run economic costs of the transition drastically exceeded its benefits. This accounted for the fact that, from the point of view of social memory, the year 1989 in Hungary is seen as both a miraculous and miserable start at the same time (p. 115).

Making use of such a sociological inquiry seems to be among the strongest points of this book, as the chapter by Joanna Wawrzyniak confirms. The author rightfully points out that the majority of Polish society was ready for far-reaching, revolutionary economic reforms already before the political caesura of 1989. Using the concept of moral economy, Wawrzyniak shows, however, that the values of liberal democracy turned out to be at odds with the prevailing values of the working class after the radical reforms designed by Leszek Balcerowicz had been implemented in 1990. This, finally, leads her to the conclusion that „the origins of the post-socialist moral economy are embedded in a global neoliberal divide rather than in socialism itself“ (p. 201). Wawrzyniak’s findings, based on social research conducted among Polish workers, are supported by the analysis of Czechoslovak institutional politics presented by James Krapfl. He clearly separates the democratic revolution of autumn 1989 from the neoliberal turn in 1990, embodied by the reforms put through by Václav Klaus. The conviction that „full freedom can only be reached if there is economic freedom“ was shared not only by Balcerowicz and Klaus but appeared as a part of the zeitgeist. What seems to be of critical importance from today’s perspective is not the politicians‘ devotion to the reforms, but the refusal of significant portions of Eastern European societies to yield to this way of thinking.

This does not mean, however, that better paths than those chosen in 1990 could be easily drawn. Although Bogdan C. Iacob emphasizes, with respect to Romania and Bulgaria, that „the gradualist agenda of change resonated with large sections of the population“ (p. 140), the adoption of such strate-
gies during the first part of the 1990s did not guarantee success either. Consequently, both countries joined the competition for economic development as relative latecomers. At the same time, the studies in this volume hint that some of the policies not employed in 1990 turned out to be no less important than those employed. The chapter by Joachim von Puttkamer precisely argues that in this historical moment, „the mindset of today’s Polish political right began to take shape“ (p. 78). Indeed, the concept of an unfinished revolution was already developed by Jarosław Kaczyński, and, in spite of the passage of time, this is still a surprisingly catchy and powerful argument.

As this observation by Puttkamer confirms, the historical turn of 1989/1990 has been accompanied by influential political myths. Whereas the notion of unfinished revolution is utilized for questioning the legitimacy of almost the whole history of post-communist Poland up to 2015, the Slovene and German cases provide us with positive, yet no less misleading, mythmaking. Marko Zajc critically assesses the myth of Slovene national unity in the moment of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the vision of Slovenian „good nationalism“, which is typically contrasted with the Serbian nationalists’ responsibility for the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Similarly, Tim Schanetzky scrutinizes the mythological interpretations of German unification as a „patriotic moment in Germany’s history“ (p. 209), which in fact had little to do with reality.

From Revolution to Uncertainty may also be read as a contribution pointing to the deep interconnections of the post-communist world and the one from before 1989. Again, Zajc points out the importance of the self-management discourse which, to a certain extent, paved the way to the solutions employed in post-Yugoslav countries after 1990. Philipp Ther, analyzing the flamboyant pace in which the Polish economic reform was put into practice, brilliantly notices that „with its promises about the future and its orientation on modernization, it resembled communist modernization“ (p. 12). Considering the elements that link socialist and post-socialist spheres, it is also worth taking into account the political careers of some communist functionaries under the new, democratic conditions. Slovene Milan Kučan’s dream of becoming the president of the democratic republic came true, unlike Imre Pozsgay in Hungary, in spite of the latter’s skyrocketing popularity in 1989. While Hans Modrow, the GDR’s last communist Prime Minister, managed to create the public image of a devoted reformer, which later even opened him the door to the European Parliament, Mieczysław Rakowski, the last first secretary of the communist party in Poland, was not so lucky, although he had been preaching reform socialism for years.

On the one hand, the year 1990 indisputably marked a new opening. The re-unification of Germany reoriented the whole geopolitics of the continent, as is presented concisely in the closing chapters by Włodzimierz Borodziej on Polish-German relations, and Wilfried Loth on the perspective of the unifying Europe, just moments before the creation of the European Union. On the other hand, as much as 1990 was a year of the firm success of democracy, its meaning proved to be problematic, especially when Yugoslavia soon plunged into a bloody civil war.

The legacy of 1990 certainly proves to be ambiguous, as the very title of the book emphasizes. Yet the arguments presented by the authors makes it an excellent read, which is a serious achievement in the field of comparative studies on the transition period and its long-lasting meaning.