

Book Review:

**Post-Communist Transformations in Baltic Countries:
A Restorations Approach in Comparative Historical Sociology**

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Post-Communist Transformations in Baltic Countries: A Restorations Approach in Comparative Historical Sociology by Zenonas Norkus, 2023, Springer.

Professor Zenonas Norkus is widely recognised within the international sociological community as a leading scholar in comparative historical sociology. His research focuses particularly on the diverse trajectories of post-communist transformation, with a special emphasis on the historical similarities and differences among Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – three countries often grouped together as the ‘Baltic states’ by external observers, who tend to perceive them as a single entity without clearly distinguishing their individual paths.

In his comparative studies, Professor Norkus employs a broad range of methodological approaches, spanning philosophical conceptualisations of historical processes and sociological ‘grand theories’ to meticulous data mining aimed at establishing a robust statistical foundation for his analyses. His work also involves the development of sophisticated empirical models that capture the diverse patterns of post-communist transformation. At the same time, Norkus’ research goes beyond statistical representation, embedding these quantitative insights within rich historical narratives that provide a deeper contextual understanding of transformational societies.

These characteristics also define his recent research on restorations, which has resulted in several notable journal articles and two closely related books: *The Great Restoration: Post-Communist Transformations from the Viewpoint of Comparative Historical Sociology of Restorations* (2023, Brill) and its sibling, the subject of this review. While the first of the two books offers a systematic framework for the sociology of social restorations, drawing on an extensive comparison of the course of events after two major modern revolutions – the French and the Russian – the second monograph applies this restorationist perspective specifically to post-communist transformations in the Baltic countries.

The first part of the reviewed book lays the theoretical foundation for the concept of modern social restorations. The author examines various forms of social rehabilitations and restorations and defines the criteria for assessing their success. Building on, yet partly diverging from, the work of Austro-American historical comparativist Robert A. Kann (1906–1981), Norkus develops his own theory of post-revolutionary restorations, distinguishing between ‘token’ and ‘type’ restorations. The key factor in this distinction is the extent of demographic continuity between the pre-revolutionary and restored state. If the post-revolutionary period extends for too long, the generations socialised under the *ancien régime* – as carriers of its cultural legacies, values, and loyalties – would eventually die out, disrupting the direct transmission of pre-revolutionary knowledge and institutional practices, and thereby undermining the potential for restoration.

Norkus uses the Baltic states – particularly Latvia, given its most consistent and resolute implementation of restorationist policies – to propose critical threshold values of demographic continuity that enable token restoration. He argues that ‘at least 7% of survivors from the original system who were aged 15 or older at the time of its revolutionary breakdown, at least 10% of survivors who were at least 10 years old, and at least 20% of survivors born before the breakdown’ serve as the threshold values distinguishing social systems where token restoration is demographically feasible from those where only type restoration can occur (p. 7).

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Applying this threshold, the author explains why token restoration was successful in Baltic and Central European countries, where, at the time of the collapse of the Soviet regime, a sizeable portion of the population had direct experience of the pre-communist political and economic system. This demographic continuity provided a solid foundation for the restoration of capitalism, particularly in ownership reforms that reinstated property rights to former owners – the core feature of what Norkus terms ‘token’ restoration. By contrast, in countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia, where the proportion of survivors from the pre-communist era was insufficient, only type restoration was possible, making the legitimization of radical market reforms more difficult.

By examining the restoration of capitalism in the former socialist bloc as a form of counter-revolution triggered by the failed implementation of communist ideas, Norkus develops and applies an innovative methodology for assessing the success of restoration, grounded in the philosophy of humanism. Specifically, he considers changes in human well-being as ‘the ultimate guideline for the assessment of the quality of social systems’ (p. 45).

In the final chapter of Part I, the author defines three main criteria for evaluating restoration performance: economic progress, measured by GDP per capita as an indicator of socioeconomic well-being; health progress, measured by life expectancy at birth as a proxy for human well-being throughout the lifespan; and, as his original contribution, somatic progress, measured by average human body height as an indicator of human well-being during specific historical periods; that is, those in which the individuals in question were children and adolescents, undergoing their most intensive growth.

The second part of the book offers a comprehensive historical and political context by analysing the Baltic states as ‘paradigmatic’ cases of successful modern restoration. This section consists of three chapters, each addressing a key aspect of the restoration process: demographic continuity and constitutional politics, the ‘Baltic Question’ in international affairs, and the mechanisms of property restitution and privatisation.

In the following three parts of the book, Norkus examines changes in well-being through what he metaphorically describes as the ‘three Phoenixes from the ashes’ – a concept that captures the dramatic phases of interrupted development in the Baltic countries across different historical periods.

The author’s methodological approach is firmly rooted in *hard* evidence, drawing extensively on demographic and economic statistics. In this book, as in his previous studies, Norkus showcases the full potential of historical sociology as a *hard science* – treating societal transformations as unique natural historical experiments. Revolutions followed by counterrevolutions or restorations, occurring simultaneously in multiple countries, serve as prime examples of such historical experiments.

One must acknowledge the author’s ability to collect and systematically rework vast amounts of statistical data from different periods and regions for his historical analysis. A particularly remarkable contribution of Norkus’ project is the provision of comparable data and the construction of statistical timelines that trace the dynamics of well-being across all three Baltic countries (as well as reference countries) over the long *durée* – from the late 19th century through the first period of independence, the Soviet occupation, and the restoration of capitalism, up to the present day.

Moreover, Zenonas Norkus’ deep knowledge of historical contexts, including the complex political relationships that shaped decisions on the alternative restoration policies in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, adds depth and nuance to his interpretations, complementing the statistical analysis with rich contextual insight.

The three parts of the book that zoom in on the details of the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian reforms make for an engaging and thought-provoking read. In analysing differences in well-being among post-Soviet and Central European countries, Norkus demonstrates that all three Baltic states have outperformed all former Soviet republics and nearly all Central European nations.

He examines the extent to which the Baltic and other post-communist countries have been able, following the restoration of capitalism, to reach levels of economic well-being comparable to those of the *old* West.

To explain this Baltic miracle, Norkus delves deeply into historical legacies, demographic patterns, and political developments in each country. His book reflects an impressive command of European history and provides a nuanced understanding of distinct experiences and policy choices of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia on the path to restored independence and subsequent economic and political reforms.

A key point of criticism is that some chapters are overly dense with technical details and make extensive use of various abbreviations that may be difficult to retain. The book, furthermore, contains some repetition of its main ideas and arguments. Despite these minor drawbacks, this book remains essential reading for anyone interested in the socioeconomic and political history of the Baltic states or the social transformations of former socialist countries. Beyond that, the monograph may appeal to scholars and students fascinated by classical sociological theorising in the true spirit of Max Weber. Above all, this groundbreaking work by Zenonas Norkus reaffirms the analytical value and broader intellectual significance of historical sociological research in understanding ongoing social transformations.

Norkus' work also carries policy implications. Perhaps most significantly, his sociological conceptualisation of modern restorations – framing the Baltic states as paradigmatic or ideal-typical cases of token restoration – suggests that a 'de facto extinct state should preserve the right to restoration until its former citizens die out' (p. 268). This argument has broader legal and political implications concerning state restoration, potentially informing discussions in international law.

Like all ambitious and far-reaching academic works, this book raises issues for discussion and opens new avenues for future research. In his concluding remarks, the author himself identifies emerging questions and directions for the sociology of revolutions and restorations. He also highlights one of his theoretical constructs – the Criterion of Restoration Resilience (CRR) – as a conceptual tool for assessing the potential impact of a NATO-Russian war on the restored Baltic states. Norkus concernedly asks: 'What can be done to increase the prospects of their survival as well as to increase the speed of return to normalcy, provided that war does not end with transition to an alternative equilibrium?' (p. 277). These and other pressing and complex questions underscore the need for multidisciplinary and international research efforts.

This extensive and groundbreaking work convincingly demonstrates how comparative historical sociological research not only enriches our understanding of the Baltic past but also provides valuable insights for shaping public policy in these restored, and persistently vulnerable, states.

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