Wedel's "Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe" - Book Review

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The author is an anthropologist who teaches in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. She has previously published two books on Poland. With this study she widens her horizons to consider the other states in the northern tier of Eastern Europe, as well—the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, and Russia. (None of the Balkan nations are treated.)

In this volume she examines how the nations of the West dispensed monetary aid and economic advice in Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Communist Bloc. Her research included hundreds of interviews with leading figures in various bureaucracies of the Eastern European states and Western nations alike. As well, she has explored in painstaking detail reports and other materials about Western aid initiatives and endeavors. This all provides a solid basis for her assessments.

As the author notes, Western nations were eager to assist the nations of Eastern Europe in a quick transition from a Communist system into a privatized, free-market economy serving a democratic polity. As the Communist Bloc imploded, supposed experts from the West found their way to the various Eastern European nations, offering insights and suggestions. This “Marriott Brigade” (to use the designation developed for them by some Eastern European leaders) flew from one country to another, strewing presentations and promises generously. In their wake came numerous organizations (whether from western governments or with their endorsement) which advised on privatization and on restructuring economies. Multiplied millions of dollars in aid were funnelled through these organizations and the Eastern European channels they decided to support. That some of it was misused should come as no surprise, given the magnitude of the aid endeavors; that so much of it managed to enrich the few while impoverishing the many should be recognized as a scandal.

The author demonstrates that much of this aid, while well-intended, was dispensed with scant awareness of the peoples, societies, cultures, and histories of the nations of Eastern Europe. Western advisers seem often to have come with the notion
that the representatives they met from the fledgling democratic states of Eastern Europe were naïfs unsophisticated in economics and politics; actually, as the author repeatedly shows, the naïveté belonged to these advisers from the West. For example, under Communism, people had honed the fine art of dissimulation as a way of securing what they wanted from leaders without committing to substantive change. As the author points out, several of these Eastern European representatives quickly learned to use the expected terminology (“free market,” “business,” “privatization,” etc.) that would open the doors of the Western treasuries; subsequent use of the money showed a considerable difference in the meaning of the terms, however.

As well, the author shows that many of the Western organizations sought to circumvent the slow-moving structures of government in some of the Eastern European nations, preferring to operate more efficiently with select individuals and their private organizations. However efficient this might appear, it nonetheless invited abuse: without local governmental control, the moneys earmarked for public service ended up enriching these individuals and their cronies, rather than serving the public good. To complicate matters further, Western advisers encountered a significant difference in economic culture: much of Eastern Europe has none of the “conflict of interest” legislation which we in the West take for granted. Professor Wedel offers numerous instances of an official from an Eastern European country offering a second business card to Western advisers—with the second card a private business which dovetailed with the official’s government ministerial responsibilities. Another problem pattern identified by the author was that some of the Western advisers struck up exceptionally close relationships with their Eastern European counterparts—relationships which ended up feathering the nests of both, to the detriment of the supposed aid projects. (At the time of publication, several advisors from the USA [whom the author names and regarding whose cases she gives some detail] were under federal indictment for alleged misappropriation of such funds.)

For readers of this journal, this volume is valuable for its demonstration that Western foibles in reaching out to post-Communist Eastern Europe were not confined to proselytizing religious organizations. In both regards, the West manifested woeful
ignorance of the histories, societies, and cultures of the Eastern European nations. Professor Wedel’s study offers much to consider and lament.

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