In a famous essay, ‘The Writing Lesson’ from *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss records the first contact of the Nambikwara Indians with writing. They are illiterate but imitate the anthropologist’s own writing by making horizontal lines with pencils on the paper he has given them. The chief of the group quickly learns the relationship between writing and authority, by pretending to be able to ‘read’ his arbitrary lines. As it is usually interpreted, this is a story about writing and power, but the fact that the marks on the paper are visual, irrespective of any meaning that may be conveyed by them, is also clearly important.

Anne-Marie Cristin does not invoke this story though she may with justice have done so, because this collection of essays is very much about the importance and the power of the visual nature of writing. She sees as significant a moment in the 1820s when it was discovered, by Jean-François Champollion, that the Egyptian hieroglyphic system could also represent a phonetic system. She sees this as ‘a brutal, unanticipated refutation of one of the West’s most tenacious beliefs, that only an alphabetic system was able to transcribe the sounds of a given language’ (p. 9). This showed that the same system could communicate ideogrammatically and phonetically, and it is this binary nature of writing which is the primary concern of this book. As the editor puts it: ‘Writing is born of a hybrid process, and it is this hybrid aspect that *The History of Writing* aims to emphasize. The main center of interest is, nevertheless, the role played by images in the birth and development of this crossbred system’ (pp. 10–11). This is a book that explores the graphic nature of written language.

It represents a massive collaborative effort: there are 58 chapters of varying lengths written by 53 contributors. The book is divided into three sections: one deals with the origins of writing; a second with alphabets and derived scripts; and a third looks at the image in writing.

In the first section, much attention is predictably given to cuneiform script – a script consisting of wedge-shaped forms made with a calamus or reed-pen, usually on wet clay tablets. Originating in Sumeria, it developed and spread throughout the near East. Originally it was mainly ideogrammatic but, as Jean-Marie Durand’s informative essay makes plain, from the first it incorporated
syllabograms, pronunciation markers and grammatical markers. This essay raises many of the questions about writing and explores many of the tensions between essentially pictorial and essentially phonetic systems, which run through the whole book. This section also contains studies of the origins of Egyptian, Chinese, Japanese and a number of systems from the Indian sub-continent. A characteristic of many of these scripts is that they are annotational in that they do not deliver meaning with particular completeness. As Jean-Marie Durand writes of cuneiform: ‘The encoding system is so defective that in the case of literature, it can only be assumed that the work was already known orally, which made it easier to decipher’ (pp. 27–28).

The section on alphabets begins with Aegean scripts of the second century BC-Cretan hieroglyphics and Linear A – but mostly it is concerned with Semitic and Arabic alphabets and scripts and with the Graeco-Latin alphabet and its descendants. It is one of the features of this collection of essays that the scripts studied are applied quasi-decoratively, in that the writing appears on objects as well as on the usual matrices for the communication of the written word – parchment or paper. In this section there is a brief treatment of inscriptions on Greek coinage, and informative, although very brief, sections on runic and ogamic script, as used in Scandinavia and Ireland, mainly on stone, wood and bones. In the case of runes, the treatment could have been more extensive, for there is nothing on the rich tradition of English runic writing. But one of the interesting things to emerge from both essays is the connection of runic and ogamic script with magic, curses, warding off evil spirits and the like. Communication of information is but one function of this type of alphabet.

The third section concentrates on western writing, and particularly on the image in western writing. It is a looser and more various section than those which precede it. In this section appear essays of a socio-linguistic sort. One, by Nina Catach, succinctly outlines the importance of spelling in France from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries and, again briefly, looks at some of the proposals for its reform and regulation. Another deals with letter writing in France. Yet another stresses the importance of French and English primers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And a more general one studies the increase of literacy in Western societies. Writing, which had been the privilege of the few, was becoming the accomplishment of the many, and the democratization of literacy is one of the themes that emerges most powerfully in this section. It is implicit in Henri-Jean Martin’s fine, condensed account of the rise of printing in the west, understated but stunning in its implications. Of incunabula he writes: ‘Several hundred thousand early volumes survive, corresponding to 27000 to 30000 known editions, which means that a total of fifteen to twenty million books were put on the market in the forty or so years between 1460 and 1500’ (p. 357). The impact which this increase in the number of books available must have had on what was still
basically a manuscript culture catering for the few is hard to imagine. But the politics of the print revolution are not really adequately explored: a chapter on print and propaganda would have made the book more complete – both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation were largely fuelled by this medium. But the main theme of the book, the visual aspect of writing, is not forgotten. There are chapters in this section on the presentation of literary texts in relation to illustrations from Jennifer O’Reilly’s account of some pages of the Book of Kells to the editor’s essay on ‘visual poetry’, which has some fine observations on the lay-out of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century verse texts from Mallarmé onwards, where the visual again assumes a rich importance. Of these early modernist experiments she writes: ‘In the maiden whiteness of books, renewing the ancient traditions of ideogrammatic cultures, image and text have finally come together once more’ (p. 382).

When considering a book of this sort, so ambitious in its scope and lavish in its illustrations, so rich in its variety and suggestiveness, it is easy for a reviewer to become greedy, to want more of what contributes to his or her particular set of interests or particular areas of expertise. It is also easy, because the book seeks to cover so much, to find fault with what may be inadequate coverage of a particular subject. And in certain areas the book does promise more than it delivers: the third section, for example, is heavily biased towards France, and does not really account for ‘western writing’ in any very complete way. But it is not proper to dwell on such shortcomings too much, for this is a fine, informative, intellectually stimulating and handsomely-produced book.

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Max Kaase and Vera Sparschuh (editors), Agnieszka Wenninger (co-editor)
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In the social sciences, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was dominated until 1989 by one rather old-fashioned school of thought. Marxism-Leninism, by subordinating descriptive objectivity and analytical stringency to the Party line, accelerated the downfall of the Soviet Empire. The liberated countries sorely
needed more realistic social sciences. After 1989, they sought to renew their pre-communist traditions, to follow Western models or to improvise home-grown theories, and frequently all these together. The book under review attempts a stocktaking of these endeavours.

However, it does not consider all of CEE, but merely the ‘accession countries’ Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, and therefore focuses on the three disciplines specified in the title. Economics, Political Science and Sociology are more evenly institutionalized and lend themselves more easily to quantitative documentation than other disciplines; there can be discerned a certain bureaucratic bias in this approach. This handbook is based on a documentation project undertaken by the Berlin branch of the Social Science Information Centre (GESIS) and is, like an iceberg, merely the visible part of that documentation. A CD-ROM is attached to the book, giving access to its ‘living database’ and to the homepages of all the institutions mentioned.

This is a work one would rather consult than read, nonetheless it contains readable papers and immensely valuable materials. Its bulk is made up of standardized reports on the period 1989–2001 for each of the three disciplines in each of the ten ‘accession countries’. They have been prepared by knowledgeable specialists, presented and reviewed at the Collegium Budapest and further reviewed and corrected by outside ‘discussants’. The organization of all this, and the thorough edition of the texts, in such a short time is a remarkable feat. For each discipline there is an introduction and a résumé (except for Political Science, where the latter is lacking for unspecified reasons) by a scholar well-known in the field. There are, moreover, two rather chatty ‘keynote pieces’ and essays on four other social science disciplines, anthropology, demography, geography and law.

The ten countries can be subdivided into two groups: one where discussion and guarded application of Western theories had been tolerated by relatively ‘enlightened’ regimes before 1989, and the others. The former consisted of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, countries that had mastered the turn of events more or less successfully. Whether this was mainly the effect of replacing worse by better social science is an interesting question. In order to answer it, the ‘non-accession-countries’ of the CEE as well as the special case of the GDR would have to be considered. This would ask for less documentation and more comparison. The successful group is geographically closest to Germany and Austria, has relatively strong educated middle classes and relatively few ethnic minorities. For highlighting such differences, other more qualitative disciplines would have been relevant.

The switch from Marxism to Monetarism has, however, nowhere been easy: ‘a change of creed does not preclude a continuity of dogmatism’ (Hans-Jürgen
Wagener, p. 197). The well-known oblique party language, combining the avoidance of concreteness with namedropping, is still very much in evidence. Yet it easily combines with the imported language of efficiency, evaluation and political correctness. This German-inspired handbook exhibits all these qualities. No future study on the social sciences in CEE will be able to ignore it. But how much really has changed beneath the surface levels of language and institutions still remains to be seen.

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