

Ideas, Culture, and History in Transition Studies

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Abstract: In recent years it has been possible to observe a historical and cultural turn in the studies of transition in Central and Eastern Europe. Whereas until the late 1990s the field was dominated by 'transitology', which endorsed the convergence of the post-communist countries with Western Europe (both in a normative and an analytical sense), more recently there have been an increasing number of studies dedicated to obtaining an understanding of political and cultural diversity in the region. The two publications reviewed in this essay significantly contribute to the latter and are reviewed here with a view to their contribution to the understanding of the cultural, ideational and historical aspects of transition (such as collective identity formation, nation building and state formation, and discursive legacies). It is noted in conclusion, however, that although there is increasing sensitivity towards the diversity of post-communist societies, major steps are still required in order to overcome modernisationist, Western-centric and economic-determinist thinking.

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The new strand of theories – known somewhat pejoratively as 'transitology' or more neutrally as transition or transformation theory – which emerged with the collapse of 'really existing socialism' in the early 1990s, and which aimed at assessing the comprehensive changes in the former communist bloc, has been marked from the outset by two major trends. On the one hand, the field has been dominated for a number of years by neo-liberal and (neo-)modernisationist approaches to transition, both of which assume a universalistic solution to the problems of the transition from authoritarian and centrally planned systems to democratic market economies, emphasise the possibility of societal design, and largely understand the transition as the construction of new democratic market societies *ex nihilo*. On the other hand, despite remaining for a long time on the margins of the transition debate, there are a variety of critical approaches that have contested such a relatively simplistic, policy-steered, normatively charged, and a-historical approach to change in the region by instead focusing on (the positive outcomes of) historical legacies, diversity, and the distinctness of the emerging post-communist societies.

The initial intellectual hegemony of the neo-liberal and (neo-)modernisationist approaches, while steadily declining since the mid-1990s, seems now to have effec-

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tively been surpassed by a multiplicity of approaches that question the main, one-sided assumptions of the earlier paradigm and offer inter-disciplinarity in its stead. The neo-liberal paradigm is not only questioned on the basis of its rather rigid theoretical tenets, but also its empirical accuracy and its implications for governance are queried. With regard to the theoretical premises of the paradigm, the main thrust of criticism points to this paradigm's exclusive focus on the market and private property rights as a *telos* for transition, its designation of historical legacies as purely negative (and by the same token the Western model, if there ever was one, as the only alternative), and its vision of the role of the state as purely contextual, and of societal and cultural factors as being secondary in importance. In empirical and policy-making terms, the neo-liberal model has clearly failed to provide a convincing account of the emergence of undeniable pluralism in the paths of transformation in the region or to offer an unequivocal model for political and economic reform (simplicity was, after all, the most convincing element of the neo-liberal blueprint).

Two comprehensive collections of essays have recently contributed to the current openness in the field and offer an overview of the wide variety of studies and analyses of the former communist countries that are now available – *Postcommunist Transformation and the Social Sciences*, edited by F. Bönker, K. Müller, and A. Pickel (published by Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford 2002), and *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule*, edited by G. Ekiert and S.E. Hanson (published by Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003). Both volumes offer a significant and varied contribution to the development of transition theory, while simultaneously presenting a selection of substantial empirical studies. In this review essay, rather than trying to condense the two volumes into a few short lines, I will focus on those contributions to theory that deal with culture, ideas, and historical legacies. This means that, owing to the lack of space and the subject delineation, I will discuss only a number of essays in relative depth, while the others will not be considered.

In the introductory chapter to their volume, Bönker, Müller and Pickel present a comprehensive genealogy of the emergence of the field of transition studies out of earlier area studies, democratisation studies, studies of totalitarianism, economic sociology and development studies. Here, the authors importantly and correctly relate the early moments of transition theory to the global discursive hegemony of the neo-liberal paradigm and the intimate entanglement and consensus of theory, politics, and practice. They also put forth the useful distinction between *first generation theories*, which were dominant during the early 1990s and are still under the spell of a rather naive sense of voluntarism, and *second generation theories*, which argued against simplistic and sweeping recipes for an often ill-understood region. Critical approaches gained sufficient weight only in the later years of the 1990s, so that only recently has it become possible to speak of a veritable paradigm shift in the study of post-communist societies. As pointed out by the authors, the new paradigm, if one has indeed emerged, is based mainly on the consensus that it is necessary to

apply interdisciplinary approaches to any comprehensive study of the processes of political, social, economic, and cultural change at hand.

Alternative approaches emphasise the important role of public policy and the executive in the transformation, or they underline the historical and cultural legacies that significantly shaped post-communist institution-building, in terms of political systems, culture, economic institutions, and informal norms and values. The emergence of a new paradigm is surely not founded on theoretical critique and innovation alone, but stems equally from the empirical shortcomings of the neo-liberal model. A number of crises in the 1990s not only called into question the validity of orthodox shock therapies, but also pointed to the unmistakable variety in transformation pathways, at odds with the notion of any universal blueprint or explanation.

In sum, a variety of cross-disciplinary approaches, stressing a comparative perspective that focuses on the specific post-communist pre-histories and in particular their social, non-economic, cultural, ideational manifestations in the present as decisive explanatory factors in the transformation, are substituted for the universalistic understanding of transition as a relatively unproblematic evolution towards 'normal society'. In this perspective, conflict, social polarisation, ethnic division, and social inequality and exclusion are the primary factors for understanding change and diversity.

A number of essays in the collection by Bönker, Müller and Pickel focus on the economic transition, while also touching upon cultural/ideational, institutional and global factors of divergence, instead of merely assessing actors' reform strategies and progress in societal convergence. In his analysis of post-communist transitions, Raiser underlines the crucial role that the factor of trust (as an informal institution in both bilateral exchanges and on a general social level) plays in the successful creation of a market economy. His argument is that only a form of 'generalised trust' (on a society-wide level rather than just the levels of family or networks) can in the end lead to a successful transition to a stable modern market system. "[T]he lack of extended trust, including distrust in the state itself, is one key factor behind the disappointing economic performance observed in many countries across the region" (p. 78). The legacy of communism in relation to formal and informal institutions is evaluated in different ways. Some see socialism as having left behind mainly distrust (in state institutions, interpersonal relations), whereas for others socialism anticipated market behaviour and shaped the networks which form an important asset in transition. Raiser supports the first argument by evaluating communism as having left behind a structural legacy of distrust, and he offers four main avenues for overcoming this legacy: moral leadership; political competition, and accountability; justice in the distribution of resources; and direct interventions in the formation of business support and information services. All these elements clearly point to the highly important role of the state in not only providing the necessary 'third-party contract enforcement' but also in radiating moral and ideological leadership throughout the whole of society. Even though the value of Raiser's argument

regarding the central role of the state in creating a successful market economy cannot be denied, he seems to involve a rather circular form of reasoning in that he sees increased impersonal exchange as generating extended trust, while in fact trust constitutes the necessary precondition for these exchange relations to come about in the first place (p. 81). Similarly, the state is regarded as the necessary third party in generating society-wide trust, but in order to successfully do so, it needs societal legitimacy as well as a national, universalistic frame of mind to start with. What seems to be missing from the argument is structural attention to the historical pathways of nation building and state formation (despite some indications) and a more nuanced assessment of the communist legacy, which would lead to a more profound grasp of societal differences in the development of stable collective identities, feelings of sameness, and social solidarity.

Wade Jacoby's contribution problematises the universalism of neo-liberal approaches through a focus on the tension between 'institutional transfer' on the one hand, and the reception and embedment of institutional models in local contexts on the other. Jacoby acknowledges that institutional transfer is much more complex than the "simple 'imitation' of best practices" and he identifies three major difficulties: "the *perception* (and possible misperception) of foreign models, political disagreements of their *desirability*, and difficulty in *implementing* foreign-inspired practices and designs" (p. 130). The impact of external factors on policy-making and policy implementation is notoriously difficult to research. Jacoby seeks to confront this analytical complexity by singling out institutional transfer as one instance of the relationship between the external environment and the domestic political sphere. He rightfully regards the process of transfer as one characterised by fragmentation and as relatively open-ended in nature, and, importantly, he underlines the reciprocal nature of its constitution in the sense of both external and domestic actors playing their parts. Here he emphasises the often neglected fact that local actors dispose of room to manoeuvre (which is downplayed in theories of international political economy that overemphasise the power of external actors in shaping local affairs) and that local affinity with external models is a *conditio sine qua non* for successful transfer. On the one hand, the author concludes by arguing that the most important instance of institutional transfer in the case of the Central and East European countries (CEECs) – that of the EU 'institutional tutoring and monitoring' – only partially constitutes a form of imperialism or direct external influence, as the EU has only recently become a major promoter of internal institutional change, and only reluctantly so. On the other hand, the EU is the most important external actor meddling in local affairs. However, it always acts in cooperation with local political elites. Although Jacoby rightfully depicts the external dimension as one which is ultimately complementary to domestic politics, one would like to know more about the conjunction (or disjunction) between the local ideas and policy alternatives and the external models and paradigms.

The chapter by Pickel and True also focuses on the influence of global forces on national transformation processes, an aspect much neglected in comparative

studies. The impact of global and trans-national forces on national pathways has been subject to insufficient analysis and theorising, first of all, owing to the domination of neo-liberalism as a paradigm of transition, and second, owing to the 'great divide' that exists between comparative politics and theories of international relations, which results in mutual blinders. Therefore, Pickel and True call for an approach that transcends the disciplinary boundaries of either approach alone (strangely, they claim to endorse a 'neutral' approach or framework rather than a theory, as if built-in biases or *a prioristic* assumptions can be banished by simply denouncing them) and propose a multi-level focus on three mechanisms or dimensions of post-communist change: global mechanisms (comprising structural elements on the global level), trans-national mechanisms (focusing on interactions between trans-national actors and organisations), and intra-national mechanisms (local actors and sub-systems). In the ensuing case-studies, they attempt to show that cultural globalisation is capable of enforcing local agency and identity rather than just constituting a form of cultural imperialism (the Czech Republic), that historical legacies of trans-national cultural embedment are being reproduced in the present (East and West Germany), and that resistance to external domination can be a primary factor in explaining regime stability (Cuba). The authors note the importance of devoting attention to the seriously neglected issue of the interaction between global factors and domestic contexts in forms other than neo-liberal domination and the inevitable integration into the world economy.

Central to the contribution by Melanie Tatur is the diversity of the experience of political capitalism. Her criticism of current transition studies is that, although by now the significance of formal and informal institutions is acknowledged, and cultural and symbolic factors such as interpretative frameworks and values have been given their due in recent contributions to the discussion, many conceptualisations of economic transition still set out from a rather voluntaristic approach to reform and social change. Instead, Tatur proposes a comparative approach that identifies various manifestations of the phenomenon of political capitalism (that is, the transformation of political networks into economic capital) and relates these to different processes of state (trans-)formation and patterns of social integration. In this sense, she seeks to add a cultural dimension to the study of the diversity of transformation pathways. Tatur makes a strong case for the analysis of the legal-institutional and political-cultural sides of transformation. First, she underlines the importance of the institutionalisation of property rights and the legal demarcation between the public and private spheres, rather than focusing on strategies of private property formation and marketisation *per se*. Second, she introduces the concept of 'moral familism' (based on the studies of Banfield and Putnam) to overcome the bipolar distinctions between amoral familism and civil community, which in transition studies are often equated with the clientelism of old communist networks and the reform efforts of democratic elites, respectively. As in Raiser's contribution, Tatur points here to the importance of society-wide forms of integration, in contradistinction to integration on the level of social groups/families. Despite the obvious merits of Tatur's approach, in terms of explicitly incorporating societal integration and the character of

the state, one cannot escape the impression that her equation of political capitalism with 'moral familism' resembles a version of the rather outdated understanding of societal change as evolutionary (and therefore as an in-between stage of an overall process of convergence towards a Western type of society) more than it does an analytical tool for understanding diversity in transformation.

The most comprehensive approach – historical-sociological and comparative – in the collection is provided by Wilfried Spohn. Unlike the bulk of the other contributions, which focus on economic transformation and the extra-economic, societal, and informal components of the formation of market economies, Spohn offers a broad analysis of political, social, and cultural transformation, and in this underlines the necessity of analysing the processes of nation building, state formation, and collective identities as a precondition for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of (economic and political) modernisation in the former communist societies. In addition, the revival of both nationalism and religion are taken as a starting point for criticising overly modernisationist approaches (which assume rationalisation and secularisation). Nationalism and religion are taken as constitutive factors of transformation and modern society, rather than as merely reactionary forces against the unstoppable march of modernisation. Spohn's comparative historical-sociological approach is substantiated in a brief historical analysis of nation building, state formation, and the role of religion in East Germany, Poland, and Russia. What one gains from such a long-term, comparative approach is the realisation that socio-economic and political-institutional approaches cannot suffice for the study of post-communist transformation, but that rather "the cultural dimension of societal transformation has to be analyzed on its own terms, before statements on the causal relationships between the different societal dimensions are possible" (p. 205). Here, Spohn rightfully criticises the existence of strong disciplinary boundaries and the (ontological) negligence of cultural and societal components of the transformations. Moreover, he makes a strong case for the use of a historical dimension that incorporates (and not secondarily) pre-communist projects of modernisation as well as the communist ones in order to understand the present. In this way, Spohn sketches the contours of an approach to varieties of transition that goes beyond the identification of a divergence from or approximation to the ideal-typical Western democracy and is able to deal with alternative constellations instead.

The volume edited by Grzegorz Ekiert and Stephen Hanson takes as its main subject the role of the legacies of the past in post-communist transformations. As the editors rightfully observe, the post-communist experience consists of a "mosaic of rapidly diverging societies" (p. 2), rather than an unquestionable convergence and singular evolution from 'really existing socialism' to a democratic market society, as was rather naively expected by many at the beginning of the post-communist voyage. The theoretical challenge is thus to confront the construction of democracy and capitalism in its diversity. Within the field this challenge is widely acknowledged, but systematic and comprehensive attempts to theorise on how this diversity has come about and what its main underlying factors are have so far failed to materi-

alise. The editors dismiss observations claiming that 'post-communism' as a region-wide designator has lost its relevance. For a moment, though, by suggesting that 'Leninist legacies' are much more tenacious in the former USSR, while in Central Europe these legacies have been more successfully overcome, they come dangerously close to equating legacies with the negative impact of the communist past, while foregoing deeper insight into the variety of ways in which these legacies work in the present, and they risk conflating Western democracy with the modern present and communism with the obscure past, thereby reproducing the archaic tenets of classical modernisation theory vis-à-vis the non-Western Other. Notwithstanding this *lapsus calami*, in the summary of the book the editors prove more inclined towards diverse explanations and qualifications of the past and its variegated impact on the present.

Indeed, in the comprehensive theoretical chapter written by the editors, they underline the difficulty of finding the right balance between particularism and universalism. Studies exemplifying the former (regional studies) acknowledge the uniqueness of particular cases and provide rich narrative accounts, while universalistic, nomothetic approaches (comparative politics) seek to generalise from a large number of cases, but tend to slip into a-historical and de-contextualised modes. Here, the debate over transition in the post-communist region meets the time-honoured debate over contextualisation versus generalisation, and, were it theorised systematically, this could contribute significantly to transcending the lasting controversy that exists in the social sciences. The authors propose the outcome of such a contribution in the 'dual contextuality' approach, which focuses on both temporal and spatial factors. The importance of the suggested approach lies not so much in its originality – the distinction between three levels of analysis as structural, institutional, and interactional can hardly be considered a novelty – but rather its merits lie in the comprehensiveness of the analytical framework it offers. It allows the authors to emphasise the significance of the often neglected processes of state formation and nation building for present-day transformations (although they tend to slip back into a modernisationist mode when discussing nation building; too rigid a distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism has by now been thoroughly discredited in most literature on nationalism; *resentiment* nationalism developed most prominently in the heart of Europe, rather than merely on its fringes). It also allows for the identification of diversity as the complex outcome of the uneven impact of historical and institutional legacies of Leninism and state socialism in the post-communist region and their interaction with more distant legacies as well as contemporary political strategies. Here, the authors point to the necessity of employing structural approaches to historical legacies (in particular, regarding traditions of statehood and the formation of national identities), but at the same time acknowledge the need for 'grounding' such approaches in actual constraints, interpretative frameworks, and political events in the present. As the authors note, it is the comparative sociological tradition in particular that has proved capable of providing the deepest insights into the nature of the communist regimes, and it therefore seems also to offer the most useful tools for the analysis of the impact of the communist

past on the present. Such insights – such as the ‘myth of the vanguard’, ‘planned heroism’, or that Leninism consisted of a complex of institutionalised ideological components – significantly help in both assessing different trajectories during communist and understanding post-communist pathways. The impact of communist ideology and its demise (though the authors seem to assume too hastily that the Marxist-Leninist ideology disappeared altogether, as though some post-communists have not reproduced significant components of communist ideology, as, for instance, in the case of the Romanian National Salvation Front; see also the contribution of Kubik in this volume) have profoundly shaped post-communist trajectories, as have networks based on party affiliations and perseverant socio-economic institutions. The second component of the ‘dual contextuality’ approach – the spatial context – is, in my opinion, less convincing, in that its most significant contribution to explaining diversity (the demarcation of space by means of the construction of boundaries) has often to do with constructed representations of space (through political constructions and affinities) and could therefore quite reasonably be included in the levels of temporal analysis introduced earlier. Moreover, while the authors claim that the impact of geography has been “too often associated with a morally suspect geographic dimension and traditional cultural diffusion models that assumed the cultural superiority of the West and a unidirectional evolutionary path of social development” (p. 31), by emphasising the importance of geographical proximity in the diffusion of democratic models and market institutions they themselves come close to a rather static conflation of political and economic success with geographical location.

A substantial theoretical chapter is offered by Herbert Kitschelt. His point of departure is to understand the diversity of political regimes and economic reform efforts in the context of a shared communist legacy and similar levels of economic development. In this regard, Kitschelt observes that the widespread assumption that democracy emerges and consolidates best in rich countries does not hold in the Eastern European context. Kitschelt endeavours to make sense out of a range of competing explanations of diversity in the post-communist period and to offer a reasonable causal account of this diversity. It is impossible of course to establish a single superior causal account, and instead the force of different conceptions of causality need to be acknowledged. Furthermore, according to Kitschelt, causal analysis and its predictive potential are compromised by three main difficulties: the complexity of phenomena, the reflexivity of analysts, and the uncertainty of actors. In a manner roughly similar to that used in the introductory chapter, Kitschelt points to the tension between “excessively deep explanations” of post-communist diversity – historical-sociological, narrative accounts with presumably little potential for generalisation – and “excessively shallow explanations”, which “provide mechanisms and high statistical explanatory yields but little insight into the causal genealogy of a phenomenon” (p. 68). Deep explanations do not point out the causal relations between the past and the present too well, whereas shallow explanations prioritise immediate factors in explaining diversity, while dismissing or ignoring long-term legacies and patterns. The latter, the causally shallow explanations, dominate the field,

not only owing to the 'methodological fashion' of multivariate analysis, but also as a result of the discredit that has been thrown on historical, structuralist explanations in the wake of the apparent 'sudden sweep of democracy' in the so-called Third Wave of democratisation. This tendency has led to excessive explanatory focus on the 'event' of the breakdown of the communist regimes. Kitschelt pleads, conversely, for an approach that "takes into account the temporal ordering of forces that may impinge on the final outcome" (p. 73). Thus, he argues that in certain instances long-term factors can be more significant than short-term triggers in explaining an event. Moreover, short-term factors can prove to be complementary to long-term factors in "some kind of funnel of explanation" (p. 74). And, finally, short-term factors can even be the decisive causes of particular outcomes, or in some cases the explanandum can be the result of pure contingency. Kitschelt makes a strong case for a variegated, interdisciplinary, and historically informed approach, in which structure as well as human action/creativity and their mutual constitution play primary roles. He reminds us, however, of the inevitable limitations of any explanatory approach in the social sciences: "[t]o tell the story of how communism collapsed in 1989–90 and of the trial-and-error processes that led to the emergence of new political and economic systems to replace them therefore remains a task of historical event analysis no social scientist could ever exhaustively replace with causal models of regime decay, breakdown, and replacement" (p. 82).

Kubik's essay represents a welcome contribution to the analysis of cultural legacies in the understanding of post-communist systems. In his theoretical elaboration of the nature of cultural legacies and their significance for the post-communist present, Kubik points to significant innovations in recent cultural theory. There are three tasks that ought to be central to any analysis of the impact of cultural legacies on the present: the identification and description of past cultural patterns, the transmission of such patterns by cultural entrepreneurs into the present, and an outline of the mechanisms whereby past patterns are (selectively) turned into significant present-day patterns (p. 319). In this, Kubik criticises approaches that depict legacies as the 'dead weight' of the past, which lives on in the present through sheer inertia. Furthermore, rather than understanding culture merely in psychosocial or psychological terms, and thereby reducing its significance to a syndrome of enduring attitudes or internalised norms and values, a cultural legacy should also be interpreted as a semiotic system, functioning as a 'tool kit' (Swidler), or representing a 'usable past' that actors are able to draw on creatively in their daily actions. Importantly, Kubik sees political culture as comprising both implicit legacies (syndromes of attitudes) and explicit legacies (discourses). As the implicit legacies are mostly studied by means of surveys, the object of study tends to fluctuate, and therefore the outcome of such studies seems relatively open-ended, incapable of providing any indisputable conclusions. In the case of explicitly articulated discourses, the archetypal empirical approach is the content analysis of texts, and its results seem relatively less ambiguous, as mapping the ideological positions of prominent actors seems to be a more precise exercise (though hermeneutic approaches would point out the multi-interpretability of the texts themselves). Kubik

subsequently uses these insights in a convincing comparative account of the influence of Russian and Polish discursive legacies on post-1989 politics. He underlines the importance in both cases of a hybrid of nationalism and communism, but shows at the same time the highly different outcomes of this legacy. In Russia the alliance of post-communists and nationalists has developed into a powerful, exclusivist and anti-liberal force. In Poland, however, post-communism went the other way, and, in an alliance with post-Solidarity forces, it turned left-liberal, by relying on Western European social-democratic ideas (a similar tendency can be seen in the Romanian Party of Social-Democracy of the late 1990s), while its nationalist components continued along a pro-European and open-minded course. This meant that nationalist, conservative trends remained relatively marginalised in the Polish political scene. Kubik's approach is convincing in that he shows that past cultural scenarios are relevant as 'usable pasts', rather than as structures that overwhelmingly predetermine the present. Actors are thus constrained by the past, but while they transmit particular elements of the past they also dispose of instruments such as selection, amnesia, and creativity. It is by means of (creative) action that cultural traditions live on in the present. Cultural traditions help to shape, but do not predetermine, present-day political institutions and policy-making.

The two volumes indubitably show that after a relatively dogmatic period of dominance by neo-liberalism and neo-modernisationist attitudes towards transition, the advance of interdisciplinary, and historically and culturally informed approaches are rendering the field of transition studies a breeding ground for innovation and critical perspectives on sociology in general. As the reviewed essays attest, there is increasing sensitivity towards the possibility of understanding the emerging post-communist societies as possible alternative forms of democratic and capitalist societies, rather than as either faithful or failed copies of the West. The fact that one can speak of a current paradigm shift, however, does not mean that we can do away with critically scrutinising the concepts and frameworks we use, as it would seem that quite a few steps must yet be taken before modernisationist, Western-centric and economic-determinist thinking will effectively become a thing of the past.

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