

Theory after the Fall

Since the postcommunist transition meant pulling up an established social system by its roots, we propose to go back to first principles in asking what social theoretical resources might be most relevant in understanding these societies. A possible starting point is Marxism. A humorous guide to the Soviet Union is subtitled “From an original idea by Karl Marx” (Polonsky and Taylor 1986), and most studies of the USSR and the rest of the bloc began with some reference to Marxist theory and the aims of the Bolshevik leadership and their successors. There was never, of course, a single Marxist account of the nature of the Russian Revolution or the Soviet state; theories varied from the official state doctrine of scientific communism, still taught in the 1980s in Soviet and East German universities as part of the core curriculum, to a variety of anarchist, Maoist, and Trotskyist critiques. The Mensheviks were in many ways better Marxists than the Bolsheviks when they argued that conditions in Russia were not ripe for a communist revolution; the Revolution could be seen either as a vindication of Lenin’s break with orthodoxy or as a “revolution against Marxism” which called into question its deterministic emphasis.

Similarly, the suggestion that the end of communism demonstrates the theoretical as well as the practical failure of Marxism is only one of many possible conclusions. Gandhi, when asked what he thought of Western civilization, replied that it sounded like a good idea, and it remains possible to make the same reply on behalf of communism, that it was never tried properly, under properly favorable conditions. And even if the Marxist prognosis of capitalism was wrong, and the cure, as standardly applied, worse than the disease, the diagnosis might still be valid. On the other hand, even if Marxism can offer a good theory of capitalism, it seems less confident in explaining the original communist revolutions or takeovers, the operation of communist systems, or their overthrow and the process of postcommunist transition. Economic reductionism seems unhelpful in explaining what look more like essentially political and military processes at the beginning and end of the communist era, and in systems in which, to use Giddens’s

terminology, authoritative resources seem more important than allocative ones (Giddens 1985).

If Marxism is poorly equipped to address the details of these processes, it can offer an admittedly crude, but by no means ridiculous, account in which the (low) level of development of the productive forces, if it did not explain the original communist revolution in Russia and its military/geopolitical extension to Eastern Europe and elsewhere, can reasonably explain the failure of communism, its eventual collapse, and the somewhat bleak prospects of postcommunist states in the 1990s and beyond. Such an account of postcommunism will tend to play down any institutional or political differences from other variants of capitalism, stressing instead the peripheral or handicapped position of the postcommunist countries or regions in modern global capitalism. Seen in this way, Marxism can turn its political defeat into a theoretical advantage, as it reverts to the terrain on which it is most comfortable, the analysis of capitalism.

But if we are going to give Marxism, at least provisionally, so much of the benefit of the doubt, we should be at least as generous toward other traditions of social theory. The axis between Marxism and critics such as Max Weber, who attack its determinism and economic reductionism, is perhaps the most obvious one, but we should bear in mind also a rather different axis between Hobbes and Tocqueville. It is, of course, no accident that Hobbes, writing in the revolutionary turmoil of the mid-seventeenth century, looked to the establishment of a strong sovereign power, and many postcommunist thinkers, particularly in Russia, have been similarly attracted by a Hobbesian alternative to a situation of radical economic and political disorder. Even those, the majority, who would not feel comfortable arguing for a(nother) dictatorship, can hardly deny that almost a defining feature of postcommunist states is their pathological weakness (cf. Staniszkis 1999: ch. 4). Theories of postcommunism *before* 1989 tended to stress Latin American models as pointing to a possible future for the USSR and the rest of the bloc, and although, of course, the original prognosis of a gradual “Mexicanization”¹ of the ruling parties and their regimes was abruptly refuted in 1989, something of the underlying analysis remains useful.

At the other extreme from this approach is one which stresses the need for democratization and the development of intermediate institutions, built on the ruins of the all-powerful Stalinist and neo-Stalinist state and nurturing the civil society which that state had so badly fragmented and distorted. Tocqueville’s model of civic activity in American democracy has been a significant reference point here (Wellmer 1993). More broadly, there have been a number of studies concerned to trace and evaluate the democratization process in cross-cultural contexts, encouraged by the substantial short-term evidence for a global democratizing shift in the last two decades of the twentieth century (see, for example, Wolton 1993; Pridham et al. 1994; Held 1995; Fischer 1996; Nagle and Mahr 1999; also the earlier and some-

what prophetic texts in Lefort 1981). Finally, as we will see in more detail in the chapters on convergence and civil society, the EU's insistence on democratization as a precondition for membership has exercised an important effect in East Central Europe, both as an overall parameter and in the details of the expansion and democratization of civil society in individual postcommunist countries.

A third axis might be that between Spencer and Durkheim or, in their more modern form, the neoliberal economic and political theorist Friedrich von Hayek and the communitarians. Communist societies had, because of their ruling charters, to interpret themselves, officially, in primarily Marxist terms, but in practice their official self-image was much more a Durkheimian one: a harmoniously integrated national community, motivated by shared beliefs and values and in which the division of labor had lost its antagonistic, anomic, or forced character. The US sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1971) rightly pointed to the parallels between American functionalism, which took up much of this underlying model while on the whole avoiding the dangerously leftist term "solidarity," and Soviet Marxism-Leninism and scientific communism. One can, of course, debate what solidarity meant in practice in state socialist societies, but a first approximation might be to say that the official rhetoric of solidarity coincided both with a substantial degree of mutual indifference, encouraged by the feeling that any systematic social disadvantage was the responsibility of the state, but also with the cultivation of self-help networks in the face of general material shortages.²

The indifference seems to have survived postcommunist transition better than the informal practices of mutual assistance, and the collapse of the latter has been a well-documented source of anxiety throughout the region. The perceived responsibility of the state has in many ways simply been transferred to a reified and personified market, seen as giving everyone their just deserts. More worrying still, much of the basis of social solidarity has been eroded by the collapse of many institutions and the criminalization of much of ordinary life. Durkheim's concern for social solidarity in the previous *fin de siècle*, and his sense that market relations alone were unable to sustain it, is reiterated, with good reason, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. (The attention paid in East Central Europe to Putnam's analyses of Italy and the US is a striking example of this concern.)

Max Weber's critique of Marxism's one-dimensional reductionism and his early responses to the Russian Revolution and the beginnings of bureaucratic socialism now seem quite prophetic. His stress on autonomous, i.e. not class-determined, power, including the military power of the nation state, also acts as a corrective to Marxism. More broadly, Weber's sensitive analysis of modernity and patterns of individual motivation in his sociology of religion and elsewhere has been an important source of analyses of communism and postcommunism, which make modernity rather than industrialism or capitalism their primary organizing category (Arnason 1993). Here, Weber rides

together with Simmel and Elias's later work in the same vein. Simmel is also relevant as a precursor of what we have come to call a postmodernist stress on the fragmentation of the contemporary world. Whatever the weaknesses of postmodernism as a theoretical model or a historical thesis, we should not be surprised that it has found considerable resonance in a region where it often seems that almost everything has become shifting and uncertain and where oppositions such as legitimate/illegitimate, profitable/unprofitable, or economic/political often seem inapplicable.

Postmodern theory, as originally developed by Jean-François Lyotard (1979) defined the postmodern as "incredulity" towards "metanarratives" (tr.: xxiv) or "grands récits." "I will use the term 'modern' to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (tr.: xxiii). In this long list a special place is occupied, at least in Lyotard's own biography, by the Marxist narrative of the emancipation of the working subject, since he was for a long time a rather unorthodox Marxist involved in the production of the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which was particularly concerned with the critical analysis of state socialism. From Lyotard's later post-Marxist position, as developed by subsequent postmodernists, both capitalism and, even more so, state socialism can be seen as modernist as well as, rather more plausibly, Fordist. The ruling communist parties were certainly also modernist in terms of Zygmunt Bauman's influential distinction between conceptions of intellectuals as legislators and interpreters (Bauman 1987). They laid down the law on the basis of their self-certified insight into the logic of historical development – something foreshadowed in Engels's conception of "the development of socialism from utopia to science." Although one can question this conception of modernism, Bauman's distinction is all too relevant to state socialism (see also the influential analysis by Konrád and Szelényi 1979).

We shall return to these issues in chapter 5, but two points may usefully be made here. First, "critical theory" in the narrow, Frankfurt School sense of the term offered elements of a powerful account of Stalinism, displaying a greater sensitivity to its authoritarian power dynamics than more orthodox Marxist analyses focusing on the productive systems (see, for example, Marcuse 1958). Although Habermas and Wellmer, the leading theorists of second-generation critical theory, did not address these issues directly until the fall of communism (Habermas 1990; Wellmer 1993), their approach inspired a good deal of work in West Germany and elsewhere (see, for example, Arato 1982; Guldemann 1984; Meuschel 1992). These thinkers mostly worked in the 1970s and 1980s in quite close contact with opposition social theorists in East Central Europe itself, many of whom should be included in a somewhat broader definition of critical theory. Konrád and

Szelényi (1979) and Fehér et al. (1983) in Hungary, Staniszkis (1985, 1992) in Poland, and the “Praxis group” in Yugoslavia are particularly worthy of note. Regular meetings at the Inter-University Center in Dubrovnik and the Yugoslav journal *Praxis* (after 1981, *Praxis International*) formed a focus for much of this collaborative work. More recently, Claus Offe and Ulrich Preuss have concentrated their work on the critical analysis of postcommunism (see, in particular, Offe 1994, 2000, Elster et al. 1998).

Secondly, it is worth noting the contribution of three French thinkers who have not worked substantially on communist or postcommunist societies, and in one case did not have the opportunity to comment on postcommunism, but whose work is highly pertinent: the French theorists Michel Foucault, Alain Touraine, and Pierre Bourdieu. Foucault (1975) introduced to social theory the theme of panoptical surveillance; this was, of course, all too relevant to the study of heavily policed communist societies, as was, more broadly, the notion that welfare policy regimes, of the kind most fully developed in state socialism, should also be seen in these terms. Foucault dramatically extended reflection on power from what he rightly saw as an unduly limited concern with state power and sovereignty; the notion of power being located in an intricate web of explicitly political and other social institutions was again of exceptional relevance in a communist context. When French thinkers in the late 1970s and 1980s addressed the issue of communist totalitarianism, their thinking was shaped by Foucault’s contribution. Elsewhere, thinkers such as Anthony Giddens (1985) made surveillance central to their analyses of the state, and Giddens (1990) went so far as to describe it as one of the core elements of modernity, along with industrialism, capitalism, and military power. The discovery after 1989 that the surveillance apparatuses of the communist states had been even more pervasive than previously believed, especially in Germany and Romania, lent a new twist to this line of analysis.

Touraine conducted one of his major interactive social movement studies with *Solidarność* (Touraine 1982), and his more recent work on social solidarity and his critiques of neoliberalism (Touraine 1997, 1999) are highly relevant to the postcommunist world. In a more general way, Bourdieu’s model of social stratification, which lays especial importance on “cultural” or “symbolic” capital, can be shown to illuminate the postcommunist world, in which foreign contacts, languages, and so on may be more important for individual life-chances than economic resources or formal qualifications derived from the communist period. A concern with the intersection of culture and social stratification is also central to feminist analyses of postcommunism. Western critical theory of the late twentieth century developed in close connection with feminism, though in an often tense relationship (Hartmann 1981). The encounter between Western feminism and Eastern European reality was similarly tense and problematic, though the best of this work takes one to the heart of social dilemmas in postcommunist societies (see, for example, *Feminist Review* 1991; Einhorn 1993; Einhorn et al. 1996).

So far we have been concentrating on theoretical models mostly developed or cultivated in Western Europe, and this is not just for accidental reasons of geography and linguistic competence. One of the disappointments of the 1990s was the realization that the removal of restrictions on publishing, and the social transformations themselves, in Central and Eastern Europe had not led to an explosion of new home-grown analyses of communist and postcommunist reality. Systematic retrospective or prospective analyses such as that by Jadwiga Staniszkis (1999) were the exception rather than the rule. Yet Western social and political theorists, as opposed to economic technicians, had learned two crucially important lessons from the process. Firstly, as is noted below, the permanent possibility of being taken by surprise. Secondly, that legal, constitutional, and more broadly institutional processes are not part of an epiphenomenal superstructure and are too important to be left to the attention of specialists. Offe has rightly stressed the centrality of “institutional design,” not as a substitute, but as a complement, to other processes of social transformation.

This forms part of a broader process in Western social and political theory, which had seen from the late 1970s a new emphasis on the importance of state power – what Theda Skocpol, a leading exponent of this approach, called “bringing the state back in.” Skocpol and others argued that both Marxist and pluralist sociologists and political scientists had tended to see the state as a mere epiphenomenon of class forces or other social pressures. Looking back to Max Weber and to the German historian Otto Hintze, Skocpol argued that social scientists should pay more attention to the internal dynamics and organization of the state – whether in the initiation of policy or in increasing the susceptibility of societies to revolutionary challenge. Although there was little systematic work on the state in state socialism to match the vast outpouring of work on “the” capitalist state, it was clear that states were even more central to Soviet-type societies than to those of the West; Giddens, whose work had always had a strongly comparative emphasis, and others reflected this. However simplistic the contrast between “state-centered” and “society-centered” approaches, it helped to sharpen up thinking in this area.

At the normative pole of social and political thinking, too, issues of state power, human rights, and the rule of law had taken on a new importance. Thinkers on the political left who tended to marginalize the legal-political “superstructure” and to treat human rights discourse as a liberal indulgence were pushed into a response to the much greater prominence of human rights-based activity in the wake of the Helsinki European Conference on Security and Cooperation (ECSC) of 1972–5 and the citizens’ assemblies to which it gave rise. Western peace movements, too, began to cultivate contact with dissident groups in the East as well as with the official peace committees largely animated by the security services. In the UK, where constitutionalism was, and remains, bizarrely underdeveloped in both theory

and practice, the Thatcher government's attacks on established rights and practices led to the creation of a pressure group, Charter 88, borrowing its name from the Czechoslovak Charter 77. In the realm of theory, Habermas in the late 1980s brought his theoretical model of communicative action to bear on the interrelations between law, morality, and the democratic state, culminating in his major treatise of 1992.

The Communist System

Before proceeding with discussion of theoretical approaches to postcommunism we should briefly characterize what we understand by communism. This view will be elaborated later, especially in chapter 5 on modernity and modernization. There are many detailed sociological discussions of communism, which this section will not repeat (e.g. Ray 1996; Lane 1985; Staniszki 1992). However, there were relatively few attempts to theorize the system in a creative way. Among these were Fehér et al. (1983) who drew on Weber's concept of goal-directed action to define the system in terms of the goal function of *Zweck der Produktion*, production as an end in itself. Abolition of the market, they argued, left no room for contingencies and the articulation of needs, no objective basis for calculation of human cost, no welfare system, and no concept of rights-based individualism.³ Rather, there was a "dictatorship over needs" in which people were bound to the state as atomized subjects of a sovereign power through complex systems of dependency. The only constraints on production were those of extent and technological capacity that were mobilized without reference to articulated needs, producing a system of unparalleled waste and scarcity (1983: 236). Dictatorship over needs is a historical "dead end," and once the system begins to reform, they suggested, it would abolish itself. The following depiction draws loosely on their analysis (and on Ray 1996).

The Soviet system was a project of *dirigiste*, state-directed modernization on a "heroic" scale attempting to fashion a Promethean modernity based on rapidly increasing productivity through forces of industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. Throughout the life of the Soviet Union, and despite efforts to correct this imbalance, the production of consumption goods was subordinated to the heavy industrial and military sectors. Published economic growth rates (always highly unreliable) indicated high increases in the mid-twentieth century, declining rapidly thereafter.⁴ This developmental model was driven by an extensive bureaucratic state for which Marxism-Leninism was a scientific and technological vision of progress towards a communist society that represented the future for humanity as a whole. Following Lenin's concept of a professional, theoretically guided, revolutionary elite, the Communist Party claimed to be the vanguard of the proletariat in whose name it ruled and whose true

consciousness it embodied. Soviet Marxism further promoted a particular form of hegemonic masculinity that idealized the roles of warrior/revolutionary and proletarian Promethean strength. At the same time a particular cult of femininity was developed in which women often featured in propaganda alongside men (or alone) enacting “masculine” roles – such as manual workers or soldiers – encapsulating an ideal of equality through common participation in the revolutionary struggle. Although women were more highly represented in public life in state socialist than in most Western countries (though rarely in leading political positions) they were also subject to the “double burden” of paid employment and domestic work (e.g. Corin 1992). This was especially the case following World War II, when women faced the conflicting responsibilities of rebuilding the economy and repopulating the Soviet Union, and the press bombarded them with images of women who successfully fulfilled all the demands placed upon them (Bucher 2000).

Having superseded the market as a means of resource allocation (although some limited market exchanges would continue during the transition to communism), allocation was managed by a massive system of state planning, usually based on five-year targets. Planners attempted to replace the impersonal, indeterminate outcomes of markets by administratively set production quotas and prices. However, the unpredictability of demand and needs in what were becoming increasingly complex industrial societies meant that it was impossible for central authorities to flexibly control millions of prices and production decisions (Nove 1991: 80ff). Despite periodic campaigns against “bureaucratism,” this system required multiple bureaucracies that exercised mutual surveillance on one another. In particular, there were dual lines of authority via the state enterprises on the one hand and the Party on the other, both of which came under the constant vigilance of security services. This is not to say that power rested with the bureaucracy, since during the 1930s each functional layer, including that of state security (NKVD), itself was subject to purges. The bureaucratic mode of execution of power was a consequence of a mode of political domination exercised by the Party (Fehér et al. 1983: 175). Within the bureaucracy career paths and admission to the new ruling stratum, the *nomenklatura*, were based on high degrees of clientelism, patronage, and personal loyalties – a system that Stalin attempted to break through periodic purges. In the Great Purge of 1937–8 virtually the entire top stratum of managers and government personnel (the old Bolshevik “Red Directors”) was removed in favor of the *vydvizhentsy*, new technical graduates who were too young to have developed loyalties in the immediate post-Revolutionary period, whose loyalty to Stalin could be forged. Terror created a collective and visceral fear of the constant possibility of denunciation and arrest as a “saboteur,” “Trotskyite,” or other form of anti-Soviet deviant.

During the Stalinist period (1928–53) forced industrialization and collectivization were pursued at the cost of a death toll of genocidal proportions.

Supposedly justified by the necessity to increase agricultural productivity to meet the needs of a growing industrial and urban population, collectivization was also waged as “class war” against the *kulaks* (“better-off peasants,” literally “fist”). In the process some 3 million died in the famine in the Ukraine and the mass deportations that accompanied collectivization. At the same time the population of the gulag system of labor camps during the 1930s, crucial sources of labor for industrialization, amounted to somewhere around 15 million by 1938. The total numbers of deaths that resulted from the camp system, purges, executions, and famine are matters of dispute but many estimates put them at 15–20 million during the Stalin period (Hosking 1992: 203). Although terror and mass death diminished after Stalin’s death, partly because of a mutual security pact entered into by the surviving political elite, the memory of terror remained within the system, was never really expiated (despite de-Stalinization under Khrushchev), and always threatened to undermine the tenuous legitimacy of the ruling party. This was especially the case among the Soviet “satellite” states of Eastern Europe that were brought into the socialist bloc at the end of World War II, where communism was often regarded as a foreign system. Furthermore, as the complexity and extent of the system increased, its underlying systemic limitations became increasingly apparent.

Officially, communism as a state of substantive equality and rational resource allocation based on need represented the developmental goal of the system, to which the Soviet Union was in the process of transition. In this it took a leading role over the East European People’s Democracies, which (with the exception of Yugoslavia) were integrated into a military alliance (the Warsaw Pact) and economic association (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, CMEA). The Soviet Union was dominant in both, and attempts to break free from this comradely alliance of socialist peoples, such as Hungary’s in 1956, would be met with military suppression. Even so, by the 1950s the political thresholds of terror had become apparent in that mass arrests and deportations were failing to address underlying systemic crisis tendencies and were actually reducing the Party’s capacity to address them. Several of these arose from problems inherent in the planning process. First, the absence of constraints on deployment of resources created chronic overinvestment and imbalances – overproduction in some areas (especially capital goods), combined with shortages in others (especially consumption goods). This in turn resulted in periodic manifestations of unrest associated with rising prices and shortages (notably in Poland in 1956, 1971, and 1980–1). Secondly, the exhaustion of the Stalinist growth model and the emergence of informal decentralization, such as local deals and exchanges between enterprises, meant that the “plan” became increasingly fictional and unrelated to actual social and economic life. The planning system was in practice replaced by negotiation between enterprises and planners in which the former would understate their productive potential to obtain

manageable targets. At the same time planners knew that enterprises hoarded labor and materials and allowed for this in plan targets. In turn, managers would further underreport inventories in order to anticipate planners' adjustments, all of which encouraged falsification of data and concealment of worsening conditions. This, thirdly, created conditions for cynicism and withdrawal from the system in the forms of apathy, illness, ritualism, and a drain of labor from the state sector that in turn reduced productivity. Fourthly, the more these problems were articulated (at least within higher echelons of the Party) the less even the Party intelligentsia were committed to the symbolism and political culture associated with the vanguard role. They began to seek models elsewhere, including Western liberalism and social democracy (examples of this are given in Ray 1996: 4–6).

Nonetheless, there were serious attempts in the post-Stalin period to shift from the extensive growth model towards more intensive growth, based on increasing labor productivity. These required the reduction of supply shortages; improvements in quality of capital and consumer goods; less variability in production; and the availability of consumption goods as a reward for labor. But the central planning mechanism found it impossible to deliver this and alternative models were experimented with in the Soviet Union (e.g. the Lieberman Reforms, 1965–8) and across the socialist bloc, giving rise to a wide range of variation within the system. This included, in particular, varieties of “market socialism” in which the scope for market-based systems of allocation was increased (these harked back to Lenin’s New Economic Policy in the 1920s) (see Nove 1991). One example of this was the Yugoslavian model of self-management and state coordination with extensive market and competition. Another was the Hungarian New Economic Mechanism in the 1970s in which the plan was limited to capital goods and energy production, and an extensive legal “second economy” (along with a less legal informal economy) emerged. In the Gorbachev period, after 1985, such models were actively promoted in the Soviet Union too, although it was still publicly acknowledged that inherent problems in the system (of efficiency and innovation) were not being tackled (e.g. Aganbegyan 1988). By the late 1980s reform communism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere (e.g. Hungary) expanded democracy, civic freedoms, and markets while trying to retain the “socialist” character of the system. Questions of “what if” are inherently speculative but there does remain, we feel, such a question over the eventual fate of the system and whether its demise was inevitable (thus confirming Fehér et al.’s thesis) or whether an alternative route might have been possible.

Challenges of Postcommunism

What then is postcommunism? Leslie Holmes (1997: 16–21) outlines a model of the key issues within postcommunism that provides a starting point

for our discussion (though not in the order he presents them). The fall of communism was a comprehensive revolution entailing the unprecedented simultaneous transition from a centralized state economy and polity to a privatized economy and at the same time political democratization. This not surprisingly created widespread insecurity, especially following the reduction of welfare systems and an end to full employment. Political instability, legitimation problems, frequent elections and changes of government, and in some cases civil war followed, although in many parts of central and eastern Europe this was relatively short-lived. There was general rejection of “grand theories” of social reconstruction, and an insistence on “return to normality” rather than more social experiments (although given the uniqueness of the transformation it is difficult to see how it could be other than another experiment). The collapse of Soviet ideology created an ideological vacuum into which nationalism and religious ideas entered, often accompanied by unrealistic expectations about the amount of national independence that was possible within a complex global system. There was an absence of a culture of compromise in a situation in which democratic culture and civil society were undeveloped, combined with high expectations placed on “charismatic” leaders. At the same time there was cynicism towards political institutions often linked to a legacy of corruption and a moral vacuum in which social solidarity was weak and crime rates were soaring. Yet postcommunism is a temporally specific phenomenon (all transitions must end) and dynamic – it passes through a trajectory of changes.

To what extent does living in the postcommunist condition affect our core concepts and theories of the social? These questions will be examined with reference to some central themes in current sociology, including postindustrialism, modernization, globalization, postmodernism, social differentiation, and the problem of agency in social change. This will involve considering both the relevance of dominant Western concerns for understanding the crisis and transition of state socialism and the actual and potential impact of the transformation on sociology. We argue that, whatever one regards as the underlying tendencies of contemporary social organization, the continuing diversity of possible institutional responses to the global environment should be acknowledged.

The first challenge posed by the anticommunist revolutions is that they took us by surprise. This widely held view has a degree of validity. Dahrendorf (1990) commented that while (Western) sociologists were eager to “explain things that had not taken place,” such as the imminent downfall of capitalism, they were struck speechless by the revolutions of 1989. Offe (1991) lamented the “a-theoretical character” of the changes, which followed no historical model and were not informed by a revolutionary theory.⁵ Again, the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS) Symposium (Hechter 1995) debated the reproach that sociologists failed to predict the revolutions.⁶ Here, Randall Collins, who *did* predict the fall of the USSR (Collins

1986), claims to offer a geopolitical theory of the disintegration of large empires. However, others (e.g. Charles Tilly) argue that revolutions are non-linear events and cannot ever be predicted, even if they have recurrent causes. There has been an extensive and at times acrimonious debate among former Soviet area specialists as to whether the end was foretold, and if not, why not? (e.g. King 2000; Lipset and Bence 1994).

Actually, although no sociologists predicted specifically when communism would disintegrate (would one expect them to?), there were numerous general predictions of its imminent demise (e.g. Fehér et al. 1983: 21–2; Bugajski and Pollack 1989: 1). Many Eastern European scholars juggled the views that, on the one hand, Soviet systems were incapable of reform (so would last indefinitely) and on the other, that reform such as *glasnost* would serve only to render their latent irrationality manifest. This paradox was epitomized by Fehér et al. (1983) who argued that the communist systems were dominated by a “will to production” – a new form of domination that established an irrational dictatorship over genuine needs. Reforms that attempted to reduce the irrationality and oppressive nature of the system would signal its imminent demise since this form of domination was incompatible with the rational and democratic articulation of needs. To some extent, it seems, both views were right – the systems were unreformable and the reforms made manifest their unviability. One should not overlook, though, the extent to which institutional and cultural aspects of the former systems survived the transformation and continue to shape present-day social practices.

However, the charge of failing to predict the anticommunist revolutions is surprising, because the problem of prediction has latterly received little attention in sociological theory (see Kemp and Holmwood 2003). Most sociologists appeared convinced by arguments from diverse positions – systems theorists, Popperians, realists – that it was not the task of sociologists to predict the future. We may attempt to identify trends – in demography, consumption patterns, technological development, and so forth – on the basis of which we project what life may be like in the next half century or so. But we do so in the knowledge that present-day trends can be misleading in many ways and that, like weather fronts, they can change direction and take us by surprise. The idea, central to the sociology of August Comte in the nineteenth century, that sociologists can make scientific predictions on the basis of law-like propositions about the course of social development, has proved to be mistaken. Complex dynamic systems defy the prediction of specific outcomes and the problem arises only for those who believe in the scientific, predictive power of social science (Sójka 1994). All in all, prediction is probably better left to sorcerers and astrologers who, while they may not be much good at it, do it with flair.

The real challenges for us are to explain what happened and how the postcommunist transformations affect our understanding of the social. This

book focuses on the latter. But why might we expect the fall of communism to have *any* particular implications for social theory? It is possible, after all, that the whole experience can be incorporated comfortably into existing modes of analysis. We argue against this view, not least because the configuration of the post-Cold War world as a world in which all alternatives to capitalism have been exhausted, poses questions that could not have been addressed in mid-twentieth-century social theory. These include the possibility of the most remote corners of the world being incorporated in an all-encompassing process of globalization; the way homogeneity and particularity will play themselves out in a world of increasing integration *and* diversity; the implications of postcommunism for debates about modernity and postmodernity; and the ability of or necessity for social theorists to engage in critical analysis at all.

The end of the Cold War brought new optimism, risk, and uncertainties. The various “Civic Forum” movements, which had begun in Leipzig (and Czechoslovakia) and spread rapidly throughout the communist states, suggested new models of politics and citizenship that would surpass the old representational politics of the Western democracies. Some like Habermas argued, albeit briefly, that 1989 offered Europe a “second chance” to realize the idea of a communicative civil society in both East and West, but this time free from “Eurocentric narcissistic self-absorption” (1994: 72). Optimism about a world in which major conflicts had been resolved and as Anthony Giddens claimed, “no one has any enemies” was widespread (this is discussed further in chapter 6). Writing after September 11, Stephen Holmes (2001) talks about the end of “the long postcommunist ‘decade’” which had been the “heyday of happy globalization.” The long postcommunist decade ran from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001, during which time there was widespread optimism that as capitalism gained access to the whole planet it opened a decade of “frictionless competition” bringing prosperity to the poor, peaceful dialogue and progress toward democracy and the rule of law. After September 11 globalization took on more sinister and threatening connotations. But the two events were connected in that the collapse of the Soviet bloc left in its wake significant areas of the world free from governmental control or where the government humored autonomous armed groups like al-Qaeda. In the process, the lines between military and civilian, state and society, civil and political became unstable (see Kaldor 1998).

However, the region of the world now described as postcommunist has not generally been at the forefront of Western sociological concerns. The anxieties that have arisen in the postcommunist world have less to do with poor prediction, and more with the unease that momentous social changes arose from a part of the world that had received little direct attention from mainstream sociology. Sociological theory, as we noted earlier, has been largely grounded in the experience of modernity in North America and

Western Europe and its frames of analysis have tended to reflect this. It has, moreover, tended to assume that the West represents the normal developmental model, prefiguring the future of other societies.⁷ While social differentiation has been an important theme in recent sociological theory, this has tended to refer to differentiation of function (polity, economy, civil society, family, etc.) which is compatible with the view that the structural and cultural patterns of modern societies are becoming homogeneous. It will be suggested here that this idea has several manifestations in contemporary sociology, in addition to its classical formulation in Parsonian theories. For the latter, homogeneity arises from the evolution of optimal systems of coordination combined with cultural diffusion. Richard Münch (1990: 463), for example, argues that “social differentiation is the only possible answer to the problem of social order under modern conditions” (see also Schwinn 2001). The view that societies are increasingly conforming to core organizational forms has been reinforced by the collapse of communism, previously the only “actually existing” competitor to capitalism. Recently, theories of modernization have been dusted down in response to problems of socio-economic adjustment in Eastern Europe (e.g. Alexander 1995; Inkeles 1991; Lipset and Bence 1994; Tiryakian 1991, 2001). One of the best-known exponents of this view is Fukuyama, who claims that “modernization theory looks much more persuasive . . . than it did 15–20 years earlier. . . . There are few versions of modernity other than the capitalist liberal-democratic one that look like they are going concerns” (1992: 133). Modernization and neomodernization theories have entered many debates about postcommunism, such as:

- investigating the importance of the urban–rural balance in successful democratization (Kurtz and Barnes 2002);
- the emergence of cultural difference as opposed to increasing homogenization and conformity (Blaney and Inayatullah 2002; Hörschelmann 2002);
- the development of ecological policies in postcommunist countries (Andersen 2002);
- Europeanization vs. Latinization as models for understanding the emergence of postcommunist political forms (Goetz 2001);
- developing models of the postsocialist urban area (Ott 2001).

As well as these classical and neoclassical formulations, there are more recent theories of convergence between Eastern and Western social systems. The classical versions envisaged a convergence around principles of social welfare and state-managed industrialism, which Wagner (1994) calls “organized modernity.” Recent theories, if they do not speak explicitly about “convergence,” nevertheless imply that there is a tendency for all developed societies to share features of post-(or “late”) modernity. These diverse trends

are often associated with globalization, postmodernization, and reflexive modernization. Crook et al. (1994) see a common tendency within contemporary societies towards:

- cultural fragmentation, semiotic promiscuity, and pastiche;
- decentralization of the state and decoupling from economics – the “remoralization of politics”;
- post-welfare societies in which the politics of redistribution has less importance than that of identity, lifestyle, and consumption;
- the erosion of the public/private boundary and transformation of class and gender relations;
- the emergence of ephemeral and informal social movements;
- flexible specialization in work organization;
- the erosion of scientific authority.

In this vein, Soviet societies are viewed as having been a variant of industrial or modern society, now undergoing a similar process of crisis and restructuring as Western capitalism. Such arguments refer to things like the “crisis of corporatism,” state decentralization, new social movements, economic privatization and a “shrinking state,” deregulation, and globalization (e.g. Crook et al. 1994: 42n; Wagner 1994: 100–1).

However, it may be premature to expect former communist societies to converge around (what some perceive to be) the main features of privatized, post-welfare neoliberalism. It can be argued (as did Latour 1991: 8ff) that the “year of miracles, 1989” exposed modernity’s failure, permitting a “return of the repressed” – of passions previously excluded by the modernist paradigm. History, he claims, has run in reverse. The Bolsheviks announced the end of exploitation; but now, with popular approval, the repressed returns as “voracious elites take up the old work of exploitation in banks, businesses, and factories.” Kumar (1995) makes a similar point, arguing that the resurgence of revolution, nationalism, and religion as bases of social mobilization indicate the need for a reassessment of the modernist project. Not so much a convergence, then, as a rethinking of the core assumptions of contemporary social organization.

We will suggest that the changes pose several challenges to sociological theory. Communism, as Steve Smith (1994) has said, now has a narrative structure, a “beginning, middle, and end.” This enables us to review, in the light of hindsight, questions about the underlying tendencies of industrial systems that have exercised sociologists for decades, appearing in “convergence theories,” but in many other forms too. Then there are the questions of social organization thrown up by the anticommunist revolutions themselves, which have put ideas of civil society, democracy, the foundations and regulation of market relations back into the foreground of sociological debates.

There are also important implications for theories of globalization. The events of 1989–91 were “global” in several respects:

- the fall of communism signaled the end of a world-historical idea;
- the successive collapses of the regimes were world media spectacles;
- the rapidity of televisual transmission partly accounted for the speed with which the regimes fell;
- the availability of alternative social models to state socialism had been demonstrated by satellite TV;
- their impact was global, in that the postcommunist world confronts new questions of security, volatility, migration, and so forth.

Yet globalization in turn bears on the questions posed above. To speak about social differentiation, diffusion, transition, and so on, we need to specify where these occur. However, contemporary theories of fragmentation, globalization, and new virtual forms of sociality call into question precisely the traditional object of sociological theory: a “society” situated within the borders of the nation state. This in turn relates to current debates about the nature of modernity, “neo” and “post,” as Alexander puts it. The transformations of postcommunist societies in the context of an increasingly globalized but unstable world are crucial for our understanding of these very processes. Clearly, postcommunist societies are undergoing a process of transformation, but from and towards what? Here there is less agreement. Are the problems of the transformation largely peculiar to the postcommunist societies, or do they address more general concerns about the values, action, choices, and indeed, the “fate” of modernity itself?

Beyond Postcommunism?

Before proceeding further, though, a few words of justification of the very idea of postcommunism are needed. Although the term has entered into widespread use since 1989 (e.g. Sakwa 1999), the diversity of postcommunist societies leads some to argue like King (2000) that “the idea of ‘post-communism’ is genuinely useless.” “The label,” he says, “ten years into the transition, now seems bizarre as a moniker for governments, societies and economies as vastly different as those of Poland and Tajikistan.” Have we already arrived in the period beyond postcommunism? In some ways, perhaps. It is true that there is considerable social, cultural, political, and economic diversity among the countries that were once communist. But when we speak of “postcommunism” we use the term (as does Sakwa 1999) to denote not only the geographic European and Asian region of former communist states, but also the wider postcommunist global condition. By the latter we mean the complex political, social, and intellectual transformation brought

about by the collapse of the “socialist” alternative to capitalism. So postcommunism is not rendered redundant as a concept simply because the former communist nations have followed diverse paths of social development since 1989. The end of the bipolar world has been accompanied by a new but also fragile US hegemony along with the emergence of civilizational conflict and global terrors that, in contrast to the territorially based divisions of the Cold War, are partially “de-territorialized.”

This constitutes a radical departure from the emergent social processes of the previous two centuries. For most of the nineteenth century socialism developed as a diverse body of ideas and political movements that presented an alternative to capitalism and colonialism. During the first half of the twentieth century it was possible to imagine or indeed expect that capitalism would be superseded by socialism in some form or another – a possibility that Weber and, following him, Joseph Schumpeter noted with some dismay. Socialist parties were attracting mass working-class followings and extensive support among intellectuals. As well as growing support in the industrialized countries socialism became increasingly influential among anticolonial liberation movements such as Indian Congress and the African National Congress. The bitter split between socialism and communism after 1917 damaged the movement, perhaps fatally, and the inability of Communists to form an alliance with Social Democrats in Germany eased the way for the Nazi victory in 1933. Nonetheless, the socialist and communist movements remained powerful forces in much of the noncommunist as well as the Soviet world during the twentieth century. Indeed, ironically, the Communist Party of Great Britain, that had never been a significant force in British politics, gained hitherto unprecedented influence on the intellectual Left through the journal *Marxism Today*, which during the 1980s was able to establish broad engagement between radical movements and issues. By the end of 1991 all this had gone along with the Soviet Union – communist and, increasingly, socialist ideologies, Eurocommunism, and the project of a post-capitalist order based on social justice and equality all consigned to history. With this passed an epoch in social and political thought and practice.

It is tempting to define postcommunist transition out of existence, suggesting that it is either essentially over, as many in East Central Europe would argue is the case in the parts of their states which interest them, or not yet seriously begun, as jaundiced observers of points further east often say. Either way, for this reductive view, the implications for the rest of Europe are seen as relatively limited and can be handled under the category of transitional arrangements, where “transition,” like “convergence,” now refers to European Union accession rather than the shift from totalitarian socialism to liberal capitalism. It is certainly true that the world-historical significance of the transition, rightly stressed by analysts like Andrew Arato, hardly seems to be reflected in the observable phenomena. Everything, so to speak, was tossed up into the air, but it fell down again into relatively

familiar structures and patterns. As against this view, we start from the premise that “we are all postcommunist now,” not in the sense of ideological demobilization or what Habermas, as early as 1985, called “the exhaustion of utopian energies,” but in the sense that Europe, as well as the EU, are radically transformed by what has happened. It now makes sense once again, as in the period immediately after World War II, to think of a political Europe which in principle includes the whole subcontinent, but where East and West have experienced radically different trajectories over half a century.

There remains the crucial question of whether the social forces and structures that gave rise to socialist and communist ideas could yet be articulated in new visions of social justice in the twenty-first century, or alternatively whether these have disappeared? We cannot answer this here (not being in possession of a crystal ball), though we will address the implications of the fall of communism for thinking about global social movements and politics. The idea of postcommunism is neither bizarre nor redundant; we are still only beginning to see its manifestations working themselves through contemporary societies.