

Sovietology, Post-Sovietology, and the Study of Postcommunist Democratization

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What have social scientists learned about postcommunist democratization since the collapse of the USSR in 1991? In our recent book *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy*, Richard Anderson Jr., M. Steven Fish, Philip Roeder, and I argue that many widely accepted theories of democracy fall short when confronted with the evidence of postcommunist cases. On one hand, classic political science studies claiming to identify the “prerequisites” of democracy, whether they emphasize the importance of industrialization, wealth, pre-existing democratic traditions, or vibrant civic culture, simply don’t explain the pattern of distribution of democracies, semidemocracies, and autocracies now found in the postcommunist region. On the other hand, early predictions of a smooth democratic “transition,” resulting from elite pacts and a careful “crafting” of formal democratic institutions, which tended to downplay the importance of Leninism’s institutional and social legacies, have proven equally unhelpful in making sense of broad outcomes thus far.

In short, the progress of democracy in the postcommunist region over the first decade since the Soviet collapse presents a more mixed picture than originally anticipated by either pessimistic sociological or optimistic institutional analysts. The most successful postcommunist democracies, such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland, now seem fully consolidated and stable; countries that few scholars would have expected to be democratic in the twenty-first century, such as Moldova and Mongolia, continue to defy predictions of collapse or reversal; and formerly autocratic regimes in Serbia and Croatia have taken decisive steps toward democratization. Yet at the same time, countries that once looked like democratic success stories, such as the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia, continue to struggle with fragile electoral institutions, weak civil societies, and often unconstrained executive branch power; formerly democratic Azerbaijan and Belarus have become fully autocratic; and outright dictatorships

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in Central Asia show few if any signs of meaningful reform. We apparently still lack an overarching theory of democratization that can make sense of the ways in which the collapse of the once seemingly monolithic Soviet bloc generated such complex patterns of democracy, quasi democracy, and autocracy.

To be sure, we have made strides in identifying some of the key factors that tend to correlate with democratic success or failure in the postcommunist region. Thus we know from multicountry studies by Fish and others that countries in which market reforms were pursued more vigorously tend to be more democratic than those with less reformed economies; we know from the work of Jeffrey Kopstein and David Reilly that countries bordering existing liberal democracies tend to do better than countries far from the European democratic core; and we know from recent essays by Michael McFaul that postcommunist democracy is more likely to succeed where ideologically committed democrats have attained decisive power than in places where power has remained divided between opposed ideological forces. None of these factors, however, fits very easily into existing social science theories of democracy, which tend to de-emphasize the importance of ideology and geographic diffusion, and which often posit rapid marketization as a threat to democratic consolidation. For those who anticipated that simply reinserting post-Soviet studies into the mainstream of comparative politics would suffice to resolve theoretical debates about postcommunist change, such an outcome should be sobering.

In this short essay, I will argue that further progress toward a comprehensive theory of postcommunist democratization requires us to return to a more detailed analysis of institutional and social developments during the communist period itself. Unfortunately, due to the discrediting of the subfield of "Sovietology," the study of Leninist political and Stalinist socioeconomic institutions has been almost completely neglected in the political science profession since the early 1990s. In what follows, I first review the reasons for the marginalization of Soviet (and post-Soviet) studies within mainstream political science. I then argue that the recent resurgence of interest in the "comparative-historical approach" within the comparative politics field may allow us to return, from a new theoretical perspective, to earlier debates about the functioning of communist institutions. In gaining a more nuanced understanding of the nature of communism, we may simultaneously shed analytical light on the surprising results of postcommunist democratization outlined above.

The End of Sovietology

Being a political scientist specializing in Soviet and post-Soviet politics during the 1990s was a challenging and often disorienting experience. I entered graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley in 1985, in the heyday of Sovietology, at a time when conservative concern about the dearth of young specialists focusing on the USSR combined with liberal excitement about the new reformist general secretary to generate unprecedented levels of interest in, and funding for, our subfield. I soon learned that my colleagues tended to regard Soviet studies with a mixture of envy and disdain. On one hand, those of us studying

the USSR, with its closed society, seemingly bizarre institutional structure, and lack of accessible and reliable statistics, were implicitly exempted from many of the usual methodological requirements of political science graduate training; we nonetheless seemed to get more than our fair share of conference invitations, fellowships, and travel support. On the other hand, many of my colleagues clearly suspected that “Kremlinology” was a pseudo-science based on analysis of “data” such as the number of jazz records in Andropov’s collection and the percentage of Politburo members wearing Italian designer suits.

When the USSR came crashing down in 1991, the stage was set for a marked decline in the fortunes and status of Soviet—and post-Soviet—studies within the political science profession. The disintegration of European communism represented something of a double-whammy for Soviet specialists: at the same time as our near-total failure to predict the collapse appeared to confirm the worst fears of mainstream political scientists concerning the intellectual status of Sovietological theories and methods, the postcommunist “transition” seemed to open the subfield to the application of conventional social science tools such as public opinion polling, large *n* statistical analysis, and formal modeling to capture the effects of new institutional realities—methodological skills possessed by few scholars in Soviet studies. Those of us lucky enough to be “on the market” in fall 1990 had literally dozens of good tenure-track openings to apply for; a year later, after the August coup, almost nobody wanted to hire a former Sovietologist. Dissertation topics that had been painstakingly developed over the years of Gorbachev’s perestroika had to be radically revamped; many promising academic careers, inevitably, were cut short. Even those fortunate enough to have attained academic positions before 1991 were faced with the unenviable prospect of spending the early tenure-track years redesigning syllabi, rethinking research plans, and—in many respects—relearning comparative politics.

For another few years, however, the subfield remained in the academic spotlight as scholars debated just what, if anything, had gone wrong with Sovietology. This debate, in fact, was genuinely wide-ranging and stimulating, touching on many of the central ontological and epistemological problems at the very core of the social science enterprise: Is scientific prediction of macrosociological outcomes possible in principle? Does social science analysis progress more rapidly through deductive theory applied to specific cases, or through inductive, in-depth fact gathering? Did political pressures, whether from the American left wing or right wing, undermine the intellectual integrity of the Sovietological enterprise? Most importantly, what were the lessons of the collapse of the Soviet Union for the wider political science field?

Unfortunately, this important debate soon ran out of steam, with little if any resolution of the key issues it raised. The failure of Soviet studies was blamed by some prominent scholars on the subfield’s lack of attention to mainstream comparative politics theory and methods—and by other equally prominent scholars on the unwarranted application of conventional social science to a “*sui generis*” regime. Sovietologists were chastised for knowing too little about the languages, history, and day-to-day life of the various Soviet peoples—and, simultaneously,

for focusing too much on the specifics of the Soviet case at the expense of comparative generalization. Left-wing Soviet specialists decried what they saw as the anti-Soviet bias of inveterate cold warriors in the subfield; right-wing critics lambasted what they saw as the pro-Soviet bias of “revisionist” analysts. Many prominent figures argued that prediction of the collapse of the USSR in advance was impossible; others insisted that they had indeed correctly predicted the collapse in their earlier publications. By the middle of the 1990s, all of these contradictions were left hanging, as scholars outside the Soviet studies subfield lost interest. Post-Soviet studies became, for all intents and purposes, an ordinary part of comparative politics.

The reintegration of post-Sovietology into the mainstream of political science has been in most ways a healthy process, allowing scholars to apply the entire toolkit of social science methods and theoretical approaches to the study of Eastern Europe and Eurasia and spurring genuinely comparative investigations of the similarities and differences between the dynamics of postcommunist democratization and marketization and those in other parts of the world. However, the end of Soviet studies as a distinct subfield also had the less welcome, and less noticed, effect of breaking a long tradition of dialogue among historians and social scientists specializing in the study of communist regimes. Just as political scientists interested in Soviet institutions were separated from their colleagues in comparative politics by the specific political and methodological difficulties of studying closed societies, historians studying the Soviet Union were isolated from the rest of their profession both by their inability to utilize archival sources and by their choice of a seemingly “contemporary” subject. Thus, as a result of the separation of nearly all Soviet specialists from the intellectual mainstream of their fields, Soviet studies as a whole became remarkably interdisciplinary.

Indeed, looking back on the standard graduate school curriculum for Soviet studies in the 1980s, one is struck by the nearly equal standing of works written by members of history and political science departments. Nor were the two disciplines on opposite sides of the main paradigmatic debates among Sovietologists. On the contrary, the totalitarian model of Leninist politics was defended both by prominent historians such as Merle Fainsod and Leonard Schapiro and by political scientists such as Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, while the “revisionist” approach to Soviet studies originated simultaneously in the works of historians such as Stephen Cohen and Sheila Fitzpatrick and of political scientists such as Jerry Hough. Even the works of literary scholars such as Katerina Clark and Vera Dunham were frequently assigned in Soviet politics graduate seminars, further broadening the intellectual horizons of young scholars in the subfield.

The result—at its best—was a form of scholarly training and academic discourse that placed a high value on exploring diverse aspects of the interaction of state and society in communist regimes from a multiplicity of paradigmatic points of view. By the Gorbachev era, most scholars studying Leninist regimes had gained a rather nuanced, empirically rich, and in retrospect quite accurate understanding of the dynamics of everyday life under communist autocracy.

because of the heavy dose of historical training in graduate seminars in the sub-field, the majority of Soviet specialists also had a relatively strong understanding of the process by which Leninist political and Stalinist economic institutions originally developed and diffused to (or were imposed upon) diverse societies throughout Europe and Asia. Indeed, some of the most important works in the field of postcommunist studies over the past decade relied on their authors' unprecedented combination of historical understanding of the development of communist regimes and their exposure to contemporary social science theory—including seminal books by Steven Solnick on the disintegration of the Soviet state, Jeffrey Kopstein on worker protest and the collapse of East

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German communism, David Woodruff on the origins of post-Soviet barter, Juliet Johnson on Soviet and post-Soviet banking, and Valerie Bunce on the diverging trajectories of Leninist federations, to name just a few outstanding examples.

In the rush to discard everything associated with the Sovietological tradition, unfortunately, mainstream political scientists dismissed much of this hard-won specialist knowledge as irrelevant. As a result, since the mid-1990s, typical graduate student reading lists for students interested in Russian studies in history and political science departments have rapidly diverged. Given the high priority placed on mastering quantitative methods and formal modeling to prepare for the political science job market, as well as the notorious difficulty of mastering Russian and other Eurasian languages, little time remains for in-depth exposure to historiographic debates about events in the early decades of the Soviet era. Meanwhile, the abstract theorizing and stylized facts now typical of mainstream political science discourse hold little appeal for aspiring historians.

How to Bring History Back In

Ironically, just as post-Soviet studies has moved away from a historical approach to explaining patterns of political and social change, the rest of the field of comparative politics has seen a resurgence of interest in what is now termed the “comparative historical approach.” Increasingly, leading political scientists have begun to realize that an approach to politics that abstracts entirely from the realities of temporal and spatial contexts in a search for “universal” laws is likely to have little relevance in explaining the specific patterns of evolution of empirical political institutions. Instead, they argue, the content of actual political life is driven by the concrete environmental, institutional, and cultural circumstances facing individuals in particular historical contexts and in particular geographic locations. Institutional formulae that may help to promote democracy, political parties, or

civil society in one social environment may thus be quite ineffective, or even counterproductive, in another. The study of democracy, then, must focus not only on the impact of formal institutional rules and incentives, but also on the social milieus in which such formal rules are imposed and enforced. From this perspective, the historicism typical of Soviet studies during its heyday may be worth resurrecting after all.

But it would be a mistake to resurrect the central theoretical paradigms of Sovietology uncritically. The fact remains that Soviet specialists really did fail to predict the collapse of the USSR—in most cases, even after the East European communist regimes had disintegrated and powerful secessionist movements had spread to many of the Soviet republics. Even if no one could have foreseen the precise timing or exact circumstances of the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, surely scholars could have done a better job of assessing in advance the conditions under which such an outcome might occur. Thus, while the embrace of historical forms of explanation by the Soviet specialists was laudable, this did not by itself guarantee successful analysis of the revolutions of 1989–91.

The failure of Sovietology to predict the collapse of European communism, I would argue, can be traced to the explicit or implicit reliance of both major schools of thought within Soviet studies—the totalitarian model and the revisionist approach—on the particular conception of historical change set out in the modernization theory that dominated U.S. academia in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Modernization theory was built around the central argument that industrialization, urbanization, and education would inevitably and everywhere transform “traditional” agrarian societies and cultures to produce “modern” societies built on individualism, impersonal proceduralism, and market efficiency—with the United States seen as the prime example of successful modernity. Using this rubric to analyze Soviet and East European politics, analysts were forced to choose between two possible interpretations. Advocates of the “totalitarian” approach to communism argued that the natural progression of Soviet/Russian society toward modernity had been artificially hijacked and diverted after the Bolshevik revolution by an unprecedented form of political tyranny based on mass terror, ideological hegemony, and leader worship. Most “revisionists,” by contrast, argued that notwithstanding the regime’s revolutionary origins, political dynamics in an industrialized, urbanized, and educated Soviet society were becoming increasingly similar to those of other modern regimes. On a deeper level, however, neither camp really disputed the assumption that an urban, educated, and industrialized Russia should—*ceteris paribus*—gradually find its own path to democratic capitalist “modernity”; the debate between totalitarian and revisionist analysts instead centered on the question of whether continuing communist party dictatorship was or was not blocking this supposedly natural process.

Neither the totalitarian approach nor its revisionist counterpart, however, fully grasped the possibility that Leninist political and Stalinist socioeconomic institutions, and the unique social milieu they created, might represent a completely different *type* of modernity—a separate, and ultimately self-destructive, “civilization” (as Stephen Kotkin has provocatively put it) built around the passion-

ately held conviction of communist believers that “heroic” socialist industrialization would eventually transcend the “alienating” capitalist mode of production. Despite post-1991 protestations to the contrary, the fact is that very few Sovietologists really took communist ideological principles at all seriously in explaining the course of development of Soviet and East European communism. Totalitarian theorists tended to see ideology as little more than a tool manipulated by cynical party elites to control the masses, while revisionists attacked the very idea that any coherent ideological doctrine underlay the design of Soviet-type regimes. Given the terms of this debate, any argument that “Marxism-Leninism” still mattered in the Soviet bloc was equated with the argument that the Stalinist system had still not been meaningfully reformed. Thus the field was quite unprepared for the emergence of a self-proclaimed “Leninist” reformer, calling for a radical reconstruction of Soviet society not to reject the regime’s original revolutionary mission, but to fulfill it. The totalitarian camp mistook Gorbachev’s protestations of ideological faith as indications of his innate Stalinism, while revisionists mistook Gorbachev’s passionate calls for reform as an open embrace of Western liberal democracy. Thus the true pathos of Gorbachev’s naïve ideological self-confidence about the prospects for a revitalized, less coercive Soviet socialism—and an understanding of the disastrous institutional results it would surely engender—eluded the field.

The task that confronts us today in postcommunist studies, then, is not to resurrect Sovietology in its old form, but rather to think through the implications of the distinctive history of the rise and fall of European communism for more general theories of comparative politics. Those of us who were trained in the historically grounded methods of Sovietology, but who have since joined the mainstream of comparative politics in the decade after the Soviet collapse, have a unique intellectual opportunity to chart the details of the formation, consolidation, diffusion, corruption, disintegration, and aftermath of a distinct “regime type.” This is not to say that we should somehow ignore the remarkable diversity of institutional and social contexts found in different formerly Leninist countries, of course. On the contrary, the key advantage of the comparative-historical approach to communism and postcommunism is that it allows us better to understand how formally similar ideological, political, and socioeconomic institutions can generate quite distinctive patterns of state-society interaction in different social settings. Shorn of the teleological assumptions of modernization theory, our rich historical knowledge about communism in comparative perspective can now be deployed in a systematic effort to tease out the precise causal factors and developmental pathways that generate economic success or failure, ethnic peace or conflict, state strength or weakness, and not least, democratic consolidation or authoritarian backsliding.

Returning to the main findings about postcommunist democratization with which this essay began—in particular, the importance of ideologically committed elites and geographical diffusion—it is striking how well they fit within the general conception of the evolution of “regime-types” sketched above. In East-Central Europe, where Leninist political and Stalinist socioeconomic institutions

were imposed for a shorter period of time, and where diffusion of ideas, resources, institutions, and practices from the liberal capitalist West was hardest to contain, the spread of liberal democracy has been most successful. In the less-advantaged countries of Southeastern Europe and the European Newly Independent States, which inherited less reformed and more pervasive Leninist institutional legacies and which are bordered by few if any liberal capitalist countries, the fate of democracy has depended greatly on the success or failure of ideologically committed democratic politicians and social movements in generating sustained collective action—which is one reason why both democratic and autocratic regimes in that part of the postcommunist world remain so fragile.

Finally, in Central Asia, where prodemocratic political forces have been rapidly marginalized and the geopolitical environment has been most disadvantageous, authoritarian outcomes have been universal. In short, over a decade since the collapse of European communism, the struggle to establish, defend, and consolidate democratic institutions in Eurasia remains an ongoing process. Comparative-historical analysis can give us a better sense for the institutional and social obstacles convinced democrats will continue to face in the region. An understanding of the importance of ideological conviction in global politics, however, reminds us that genuinely committed democrats may yet overcome even the seemingly most hostile structural circumstances to found new, more tolerant regimes.