

CENTRAL AND SOUTH EAST EUROPE

DEMOCRATISATION AND GROWTH: POST-COMMUNISM AS A MODERN OR POSTMODERN PHENOMENON?

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The phenomenon of post-communist development in Europe to this day eludes a clearly-defined conceptualisation due to its multi-dimensionality. The study of post-communist political economy must commence with a discussion of common property resources; this is achieved through explaining and examining the relationship and interplay between common property and collectivism, and the monumental impact that both liberal and neoliberal thought have had on the social economies of Eastern Europe following the fall of communism (Pickles, 2006). This paper aims to provide a multi-layered critique of the diverse perspectives towards post-communist growth in Europe has been variously understood and assessed, with a focus on Romania. The overarching theme of this paper is framed within the wider debate surrounding modernity and post-modernity, employing the work of Jacques Derrida, Jurgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman and Pierre Bourdieu. The main argument proposed in this paper is that post-communism ought to be seen as neither a modern nor postmodern phenomenon, but rather as part of a development along an alternative trajectory of Western modernity; one which is characterised by a struggle for identity reaffirmation.

Contemporary understandings of both communist and post-communist common property resources have been shaped and molded by the neoliberal crusade. As a result, a new definition of the commons arose in Europe; one that is unable to harmonize legal and political aspirations for a peaceful, inclusive and tolerant European Union with a common economic project and space of harmony between markets and trade policy (Meurs, 2001). This project of a 'common economic union', as well as what a public, a commons and a universal value entail, are becoming increasingly amalgamated with postcolonial ideas and with deeply-entrenched historical and racialized views of common identity (Stark and Bruzst, 1998).

For many political commentators representing both sides of the Iron Curtain, the revolutions of 1989 underscored what Vladimir Tismaneanu (1999: 69) labeled "the triumph of civic dignity and political morality over ideological monism, bureaucratic cynicism, and police dictatorship." Strongly founded upon individualistic notions of freedom, said revolutions appeared, at least on the surface, to be liberal. On the contrary, other scholars have shown far less optimism about the transition process that followed thereafter, that is, the immediate consequences of the emerging liberalism across the region (Dauphinée, 2003). Rather, for others, the alignment of economic and political institutions under the umbrella of a monolithic anti-communism highlighted the dawn of a new hegemony for the capitalist project, and with it a refined market ideology following those of Margaret Thatcher's Britain and Ronald Reagan's America; as Derrida (1994: 51-52) asserted: "No one, it seems to me, can *contest* the fact that a dogmatics is attempting to install its worldwide hegemony in paradoxical and suspect conditions... This dominating discourse often has the manic, jubilatory, and incantatory form that Freud assigned to the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work. The incantation repeats and ritualizes itself, it holds forth and holds to formulas, like any animistic magic. The rhythm of a cadenced march, it proclaims: Marx is dead, communism is dead, very dead, and along with it its hopes, its discourse, its theories, and its



practices. It says: long live capitalism, long live the market, here's to the survival of economic and political liberalism!"

In essence, Derrida's pessimism reinforces the view that the project of 'Westernising' the formerly communist countries after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991 was a hegemonic one, one of the subversion of socialist identity, and the forging of a new, neoliberal union of states with the exercise of power inevitably skewed towards those wishing to enforce the aforementioned ideology. This crusade was waged with a fearsome and obdurate force by the Bretton Woods agreement and its associated transformative institutions, most notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and with their agenda to privatise collective property and to 'liberalise' markets (ibid.). Consequently, this post-communist process of transition could only refer to the advent of private property, market logics, political individualism, and a profound devotion to the universalism of a common neo-liberal European project (Gowan, 1996).

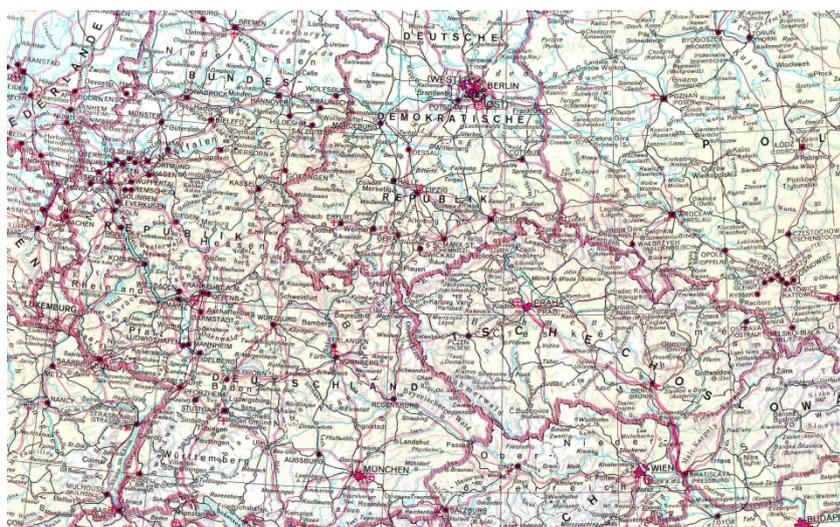
Furthermore, on a latent level, there appeared to be a much broader positivist and objectivist belief in what was understood throughout the 19th Century as the *stationary state*, that is, a state of generalized social balance stemming from the manners in which rational market decisions are made by individual social actors. For example, for Balibar (2004: 106): "The result of this is not, of course, to render any further transformation impossible; cultural and technological changes can, in fact, go on and even accelerate. But transformation would henceforth occur without essential conflictuality between classes, social groups, powers, and counterpowers, 'systemic' and 'antisystemic' forces." This very much framed a "return to Europe," the restitution of an unrestricted path to democracy and capitalism in which history had come to "an end." (Fukuyama, 1992).

In Eastern Europe, this new liberalism triumphed, often with the support of groups and individuals as varied as right-wing communists, left-wing liberals and internationalist-free-marketeers (Verdery, 1996). The radical individualism and its associated anti-collectivism that quickly and vigorously spread through the region denounced collectivism and common property regimes, some which had long pre-dated communism, as barriers to economic development and 'efficiency' (Pickles, 2005). Throughout this transition process, social complexity and diversity were thought of purely through the lens of a new universalism. Economic governance was thereafter to be structured by price signals among so-called autonomous and equal economic actors, and the then-existing diverse economies of socialism and capitalism were considered to be a sign of 'backwardness' (ibid.). The above points of discussion relating to the nature of post-communism and the direction that it took after the fall of communism in 1991, broadly speaking, form part of overarching debates about the nature of modernity and its relationship with politics, which the following section of this paper seeks to address.

The majority of responses to the issue of the collapse of communism in Europe, Central and Western Asia have accounted for communist and post-communist experience through Western sociological frames of reference (Ray, 1997). This very much reflects the way in which sociological theory has largely been founded upon the experience of modernity in North America and Western Europe, and it has subsequently tended to conceive of state-socialist systems as variants, albeit deviant ones, of familiar social forms, such as 'industrial society.' (Ray, 1997). Consequently, with regard to post-communism, the debate over modernity and postmodernity revolves around the question of whether the "civilizational distance within Europe is at stake," (Zybertowicz, 1994), that is, whether the former eastern and western sectors now share a common culture and trajectory (ibid.). The crisis of communism has often regularly been understood by scholars as highlighting a crisis endemic to the modernist project in general. This

warrants an examination of two popular claims: first, that communism was the epitome of modernity, and secondly that the crisis of communism thereby foreshadows a crisis of modernity per se.

The first claim stems in part from Weberian notions of bureaucratization. In a Weberian vein, communism has been viewed as a nightmarish form of modernity; for example, Zygmunt Bauman (1992) adopts a Promethean outlook on modernity, which starkly contrasts with the fluid, differentiated and anesthetized cultural forms of postmodernity. For Bauman (1992: 166-167), “communism was modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture... purified of the last shred of the chaotic, irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable.” Soviet modernism, therefore, was associated with gigantism, Fordist mass production and unrelenting consumption; in other words, an extensive, corporatist and rationalized state holding a secular, etatist ideology (Murray, 1992).



Now, if communism was the epitome of modernity, then the crisis of communism could serve as the trigger to a generalized crisis of modernity or, at least as Kumar (1995: 151) points out, the end of communism and the end of modernity perhaps possess an “elective affinity” for one another. Crook et. al (1994: 42) develop this point even further by arguing that Soviet-type societies were essentially variants of an industrial society which is currently converging with the West in a ‘crisis of corporatism,’ marked by decentralization, new social movements, privatization and a ‘shrinking state’, deregulation and globalization. Furthermore, Bauman (1992) argues that as a result of the allure of the postmodern consumer society in the West, the ‘obsolete head-per-steel’ philosophy was no match for the narcissistic culture of self-enhancement, self-enjoyment and instant gratification.

Consequently, postmodernism has the advantage of releasing new energies and subversive forces. However, to say that there is an ‘elective affinity’ between post-communism and postmodernism are somewhat misguided. For instance, Bauman’s (1992) nightmarish vision of modernity as being characterised by carceral power stresses ‘discipline’ at the expense of the contrary tendency towards ‘liberty’ (Wagner, 1994). Not only is the implementation of disciplinary systems generally more slapdash, partial and fragmented than Bauman suggests, but they are also dulled by the countervailing power with which those who are subject to them are able to develop

Rather, a more persuasive argument than that of postmodernization is that the fall of communism opened up new spaces of struggle for modernity (Ray, 1997). As Eisenstadt (1992) indicates, the anti-communist revolutions occurred within already modernized societies, and the rebellions did not topple traditionalistic *ancient regimes*. Instead, regime changes took place within the confines of existing political institutions and were ratified by legal frameworks of the outgoing states (ibid.). In a similar view,

Habermas (1994: 62) conceives of the Eastern-European Revolutions of 1989 as ‘revolutions of recuperation’, ‘overcoming distance’ with Western Europe. Contrary to the classical revolutions of modernity, such as the American, French and Russian revolutions, which were oriented towards the future, the anti-communist revolutions espoused a desire for a linkage to the inheritance of bourgeois revolutions, taking inspiration from the repertoire of the modern age (ibid.). Therefore, ‘being modern’ is an extremely complex process that transcends mere polarities. For example, while the modernist revolutionary tradition since 1789 has been associated with notions of heroism, self-sacrifice and certainty, modernity is typically associated with Weber’s ideas of disenchantment, rationalization, professional impersonality and formal legality (Cohen and Arato, 1992). Having discussed at length where post-communism temporally fits on the spectrum between modernity and postmodernity, the final section of this paper proceeds to put such discussions into perspective, namely through a consideration of economic development in Romania during the 1990s.

During the 1990s, the Romanian governments were considered to be consistently failing to establish credibility in what regarded democratic consolidation and market reform (Pop, 2007). The supposed ideological rupture with the nation’s communist past was very much called into question as ‘neo-communist’ political parties were in power until the end of 1996. Equally, the ‘shock therapy’ attempted in the period of 1997-1998 by the ‘democratic’ parties resulted in a three-year economic recession, the second during that decade (ibid.). That said, by the early 2000s, Romania had become a fully functional market economy and was reaching a standard of competitiveness that allowed for significant progress in the process of EU accession (ibid.). More importantly, Romania is very unique among the Central and East European countries in what regards the intensity of its relationship with the IMF during the 1990s, which thus accentuates a complexity in Romania’s post-communist economic development during the 1990s.

The theoretical toolkit employed here in order to understand this phenomenon heavily builds on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, which is extremely sensitive to the ways in which macrostructures delineate and delimit what is possible and impossible in micro-interactions (Leander, 2006). Bourdieu’s understanding of the different spheres and fields of social life and the way in which actors are embedded within these were developed through anthropological and sociological research in national contexts, particularly France and Algeria (ibid.). The national context remains very much relevant here, for some of the determining factors in the relationship between Romania and the IMF originate in domestic economic and political circumstances. Most importantly, the post-communist transformations that took place can be defined as processes of gradual differentiation of the economic and political spheres or fields that had been tightly integrated under the communist regime (Adler, 1997). This therefore means that all of the elements that are characteristic of fields in general, namely, identifiable actors, the distribution of their assets, the structural relationship between the numerous positions of the actors in the field, the stakes of field-specific struggles and the boundaries that separate the insiders from the outsiders all are in a process of evolving (ibid.). Nevertheless, the actions of the Romanian economic and political actors can only be sensible and have significant consequences when considered beyond domestic field-creation and with respect to the need to use economic foreign policy to place the country within the international political economy (Pop, 2007). Henceforth, to conceive of the international state-system as a *field* is to acknowledge that said field is constituted as a *distinct sphere* which only particular actors may have access to, where there are clearly-agreed-upon rules of engagement and where the distribution of resources is relatively stable and therefore has a structural quality.

In order to fully understand the dynamic relationship between states and the international field, in this case Romania and the IMF, it is worth recalling another major element of Bourdieudian sociology: the concept of *habitus*, which consists of “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 58). In other words,

structures manifest themselves in the actors' internalized *sense* of their own place in a particular social context, or within a particular *field*, and the *rationalizations* that they employ in order to understand their position (ibid.). By acting in this sense, often unconsciously, both individual and collective actors *structure* distributions of material power.

For Bourdieu, certain practices arise out of the interwoven and dynamic interaction between *habitus* and *field*. However, the practices that are most relevant for the study of the international sphere are those associated with what Bourdieu (1991) identifies as the *logic of honour* and which brings along with it the issue of contestation. This pressure to shield declared norms from open contestation is visible in interactions in the international field; because states and intergovernmental organizations embody the highest forms of political authority in relation to their domestic constituencies and in relation to each other, there is a heightened sense of danger about their interactions (ibid.). As a result, high-level interactions between actors in the international sphere occur in accordance with elaborate rules of protocol that are supposed to shield and satisfy the sense of identity, and the *sense of honour*, of all the legitimate participants (ibid.). Consequently, this Bourdieusian analysis of the relationship between the state and the international political stage can serve as a reinforcement of the Derridean critique of the hegemonic neoliberal project and its subversion of socialist identity; that is, neoliberal 'honour' must be kept safe from the prospect of challenge at all costs.

As such, on one level, the relationship between the successive Romanian governments of the 1990s and the IMF can be seen as an example of attempts to maintain the existing social fabric and to reproduce existing hierarchies. For example, the Romanian governments, throughout repeated applications for international financial assistance, accepted all conditions as supplicants who have to function according to established practices and conventions; they did not give into the temptation to issue a challenge to the IMF's authority (Pop, 2007). A case in point is the 1997-1998 Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR) government led by Victor Ciorbea. In its eagerness to demonstrate to the international community that Romania was a true neoliberal reformer, the government implemented a shock therapy program that by and large ignored previous experience with price liberalisation and the difficulties inherent in implementing structural reform (Pasti, 1998). Eventually, the government was forced to acknowledge the fact that ensuring social peace was rewarding in and of itself, even in the eyes of foreign actors; by giving in to protesters and delaying either the restructuring or closure of some of the greatest loss-makers in the economy, Ciorbea strengthened Romania's case as a factor of political stability in the region (Pavel and Huiu, 2003). In general, thus, the CDR enjoyed far greater trust and recognition on the part of their foreign counterparts and this was perhaps the result of their unwavering pro-Western rhetoric (Pop, 2007). Consequently, this Bourdieudian discussion of economic development in Romania during the 1990s and following the fall of communism lends credence to the argument that post-communism has opened up a new space for understanding modernity; one of constant struggle to redefine an identity and to find a place in the new world created by drastic structural and political shifts.

In conclusion, this paper has provided an extensive and elaborate examination of the phenomenon of post-communism by paying close and careful attention to the modernity-postmodernity juxtaposition. The neoliberal project, or struggle, is one that highlights the hegemony of so-called campaigns to create 'free-market economy', which in reality serves as a pretext to impose a certain politico-economic agenda, or to defend a sense of 'honour', as per Bourdieu's understanding of honour. The consideration of Romania's relationship with the IMF is a case in point; governments' desires to emancipate the country and modernize it, as it were, were inevitably going to be constrained by international influence, and national development was equaled to an alignment with Western post-communist economic projects.

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