

Three Generations of Research on Post Communist Politics—A Sketch

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This essay outlines theoretical visions or paradigms that have underpinned empirical and historical work on the great transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Such paradigms shaped “sociological imaginations” and analytical lenses through which scholars generated important questions and developed their research interests and projects. The study of post-communism was influenced by three such paradigms: the first focused on the immediate communist past as the main constraint on post-1989 transformations; the second attempted to transcend the specificities of post-communism and integrate the study of the region with the general comparative politics enterprise; and finally, the third signified the return to a disciplined exploration of historical and cultural contexts and their role in shaping the outcomes of transformations.

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Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, research on Central and Eastern Europe has become an integral part of mainstream comparative politics and political sociology. What was formerly the esoteric study of a unique regime type, relegated to specialized journals and separate panels at professional conferences, moved rapidly to the center of social science inquiry. Of course, this newfound interest in the region was the result of the collapse of communism and the profound political and economic transformations that occurred after 1989. As a result of the end of the Cold War, former communist countries became the latest additions to the democracy’s “third wave.”¹ Problems of democratic transition and economic adjustment, as well as the theoretical perspectives developed to study them, have become highly relevant to the region. In turn, the study of post-communist transformations, with its large number of cases and their attendant complexities, has begun to drive disciplinary research agendas and attract an expanding number of scholars.

Scholars interested in issues of regime change, state- and nation-building, constitutional design, transitional justice, democratic performance, parties and elections,

welfare reforms or political economy were eager and excited to explore developments in the region and test the relevance of an entire arsenal of theories and methodologies developed to study these issues in other contexts over the course of past decades. The interaction between the process of change in the region and existing knowledge about communism, democracy, market economy and regime change proved to be fruitful, testifying to the utility of problem driven inquiry in studying politics. The study of democratization and its constraints has become the most important research program in comparative politics during the previous two decades, largely as the result of transformations in the region. Similarly, transitions to a free market economy and their limits spawned new subfields and journals in political economy. Transformations of the European institutional architecture, the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), and the promotion of democracy became a growing field among Europeanists and students of international relations.

Today, regional transformations are 25 years old and seem much less exciting than they used to be, at least until Russia's recent military aggression and the challenge it poses to the post-1989 European geo-political order. While general political and analytical interests have gradually shifted away from the region, the aftermath of communism still presents a set of puzzles and challenges to the social sciences. In this essay, I will sketch three successive research paradigms that attempted to make sense of changes that unfolded quickly and often unexpectedly across the region. Given the limits set by the editors, this exercise must be preliminary in nature. I am not able to do justice to the theoretical and empirical richness of the field and acknowledge all of the many fine contributions individual scholars have made. First, I will focus on the central puzzles of the post-communist transformations. Second, I will briefly survey three generations of research on post-communism and, finally, I will address the problem of long-run historical continuities, which I see as the most interesting challenge facing the field today.

Puzzles of Post-Communist Transformations

More than two decades of unprecedented political, economic, and social transformation in Eastern and Central Europe have resulted in outcomes that were hardly expected when the region emerged from communist rule. Since all the countries were moving away from a highly institutionalized system that was outwardly similar across political, economic, and social dimensions and had lasted for decades, the initial expectation was that their transitions should be broadly similar as well. Yet, two decades of post-communism produced an extraordinary diversity of outcomes across all relevant political and social measures.

In general, post-communist countries have followed four distinct trajectories. The advanced democratic welfare states of East-Central Europe have converged

politically, economically, and socially with the continental EU states. In contrast, countries that emerged from within the Soviet Union proper, with the exception of the Baltic republics, tend to have authoritarian or hybrid regimes, markedly higher levels of poverty and inequality, and much less generous welfare provisions. Their economies are dominated by the state and based on natural resource extraction, and corruption is rampant. They tend to resemble parts of Latin America more than Europe. Meanwhile, the countries of Southeast Europe lie somewhere in between, showing visible progress on many dimensions but also significant stagnation in the implementation of meaningful reforms. Even the new Southeast European EU member states, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, tend to lag behind all the other EU countries in important respects. Finally, the countries of Central Asia, which never even experienced a democratic interlude, have been firmly locked in the grip of authoritarianism since their emergence as independent states. While capitalism reigns supreme across the former communist space, in too many places it has evolved into a state-dominated, corrupt and oligarchic system. As a result, the distance between East-Central Europe's new EU members and the others has been growing, and the economic, social, and political differences among the sub-regions of the former Soviet bloc have become increasingly entrenched.

These outcomes have been relatively stable since the end of the 1990s. The dividing line between democratic and authoritarian parts of the region was further reinforced by Vladimir Putin's re-election as Russian president in 2004 and the accession of eight East-Central European countries to the EU in that same year. Since then, there have only been small shifts in the quality of governance on the democratic side (with some backsliding particularly in Hungary and Romania) of this line and a further, albeit gradual, descent into autocracy on the other. With the further accession to the EU of Bulgaria, Romania (2007), and Croatia (2013), Southeastern Europe stands to improve its democratic performance, while all the post-Soviet countries (with the notable exception of the Baltic states) slide deeper into authoritarianism. Moreover, the few countries that still harbor European and democratic ambitions have been threatened by Russia, their territorial integrity and reformist governments undermined by economic, political, and—increasingly—military means.

What is striking about the divisions that emerged in the post-communist world since the mid-1990s is, on the one hand, the absence of significant shifts or reversals in the developmental trajectories of individual countries and, on the other hand, a lack of convergence among sub-regional groupings of countries. While there has been some convergence within these groupings (toward democratic outcomes in Central and South-East Europe and toward authoritarian outcomes in other groups), differences among sub-regions have become stable and entrenched. Thus, the puzzle of post-communism is threefold: the presence of a clear geographic distribution of democratic and autocratic governments, the stability of transitional paths to both democracy and autocracy among countries of the region, and a general absence of political and economic convergence across the sub-regions of the former Soviet bloc.

Despite numerous opportunities, political openings, and considerable foreign assistance in support of liberal outcomes, these developmental trajectories seem to be immune to any significant change.

These diverging outcomes are aptly illustrated by a variety of easily obtainable data. General rankings of democratic performance, such as those provided by the Freedom House Index of Civil Liberties and Political Rights scores, the Nations in Transit ratings or the Bertelsmann Transformation Index scores show both divergence and stability over time. The same differences are also reflected in more specialized indices focusing on specific domains or policies, such as the USAID NGO Sustainability Index. Likewise, the World Bank Governance Index, which ranks various dimensions of economic policy and performance, reveals a very similar distribution of outcomes. In short, there is strong empirical evidence for the trends outlined above.

The results of post-communist transformations raise a number of questions about the drivers of regime and economic transitions, about regional and sub-regional boundaries and their persistence, about the nature of path dependency and critical junctures, about the limits of political agency, and about the legacy of communist rule. These are the types of questions that have always animated the best research in comparative politics and political sociology. Over the last two decades, the scholarship on post-communism in East-Central Europe has struggled with these questions and puzzles in increasingly imaginative and empirically sophisticated ways.

Three Generations of Research on Post-Communist Politics

The concept of generations is a slightly overstretched way of looking at the literature on post-communism since the three paradigms have co-existed side by side to some degree since 1989. Nevertheless, the successive dominance of specific ways of thinking about the challenges of post-communism can easily be demonstrated. The initial approach to the region was heavily influenced by the emphasis on the immediate communist past and the idea that this legacy would be burdensome and difficult—if not impossible—to overcome.

This deterministic position, however, was quickly dispelled by successful political and economic reforms in several countries. The second paradigm exploring the puzzles of post-communism adopted a general comparative approach, assuming that while communist regimes were different from other forms of authoritarian rule, the challenges of post-communism might nevertheless be quite similar to those present in transitions in places such as Southern Europe or Latin America. Accordingly, much of the subsequent literature on the region minimized the role of historical factors and initial conditions and emphasized instead the role of agency. Political elites and their strategic choices in various phases of the political and economic transformations acquired paramount importance. Such an approach lent itself readily to policy design and efforts to identify a range of choices that could secure liberal political outcomes.

Policy failures in securing democratic governance and equitable market economies, however, became so numerous and geographically concentrated that the idea that democracy can flourish in all places as long as the proper reforms are implemented in the correct sequence was seriously undermined. Analytical lenses have, therefore, turned increasingly to the past, with recent work emphasizing the importance of inherited endowments and constraints as well as various historical legacies at the expense of policy and institutional choices stressed in the earlier literature. More unexpectedly, long-run historical legacies spanning decades and even centuries are now accorded more explanatory power than recent communist legacies. There is also growing evidence that structural factors, such as relative levels of social and economic development or geographic neighborhoods, and contingent events such as conflicts, wars, natural disasters, or the involvement of external actors may greatly influence the outcomes of regime change.

Communist Legacy/Liability Paradigm

The idea that the communist legacy would be enormously consequential was provocatively laid out by Ken Jowitt, who argued that “whatever the result of current turmoil in Eastern Europe, one thing is clear: the new institutional patterns will be shaped by the inheritance and legacy of forty years of Leninist rule.”²² In a nutshell, this position pointed analytically and politically to a low probability of overcoming the social engineering and collective trauma of communism. “It will be demagogues, priests, and colonels more than democrats and capitalists,” Jowitt claimed, “who will shape Eastern Europe’s general institutional identity. The future of most of Eastern Europe . . . is more likely to resemble Latin America than Western Europe.”²³

The communist legacy paradigm rested on a number of basic assumptions shared widely by scholars, especially those who were students of communism before 1989.

The first of these was the idea that communist regimes were fundamentally different from all other forms of despotic rule; consequently, post-communist political and economic transformations were going to be *sui generis*.

Second, it was commonly assumed that the communist legacy was shared equitably across the states of the region, powerful in its persistence, inimical to markets and democracy, and innately difficult to overcome. Similarities among communist and post-communist states were considered more important than the differences between them. As Katherine Verdery put it, “The family resemblances among socialist countries were more important than their variety.”²⁴ Similarly, Ken Jowitt explained, “I have obviously, if not explicitly argued that the historical differences between countries and their current modes of transition from Leninism are not as important as the similarities. Poland is one genuine exception.”²⁵

Third, scholars believed that the transition from communism to democracy would be much more difficult than transitions from other forms of authoritarianism. Valerie

Bunce argued that because of the absence of even a rudimentary democratic tradition “that Latin America and Southern Europe enjoyed, Eastern Europe has faced an especially formidable challenge.”⁶ Therefore, the breakdown of democracy, the fragmentation of states, the hybridization of institutions and the failure of economic reforms were seen as being more likely than successful reforms. As Béla Greskovits worried, “Even the more successful East European nations will continue to exhibit varied combinations of relatively low-performing, institutionally mixed market economies and incomplete, elitist, and exclusionary democracies with a weak citizenship component.”⁷ Thus, many scholars shared fatalistic and pessimistic expectations regarding the future of the region.

Fourth, the communist legacy paradigm was firmly grounded in an area studies mindset. Reference points informing analytical frameworks were historical in nature, emphasizing the communist experience but also invoking deeper histories of the region, specifically its underdevelopment and peripheral position in Europe. This strand of scholarship was generally interpretative and qualitative in its methodological approach. Only comparisons among formerly communist countries were considered legitimate, and frequently, findings about one country were generalized to all the countries in the region based on the assumed similarity between them. Finally, East European regional studies and mainstream comparative politics remained in a tense relationship. In the broader field of comparative politics, the democratization paradigm emerged as an analytical anchor linking all other regional experiences, and especially those of Latin American and Southern Europe. In contrast, in studies focused on Central and Eastern Europe, the concept of an overarching communist legacy emphasized the uniqueness of the communist experience and the unique challenges this posed for building markets and democracy. As Valerie Bunce argued in a famous debate with Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl, “the differences between post-communism and the transitions in the south are far more substantial than Schmitter and Karl’s discussion seems to imply.”⁸

Transition to Democracy Paradigm

However, it was only after a short delay that general comparativists embraced post-communist countries as *prima facie* transitions to democracy. This inclusion not only expanded the universe of cases available to scholars, but also allowed them to apply to post-communism the same interpretative and conceptual frameworks that were successful in understanding democratizations in other regions. As Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl⁹ claim “Communism may have been different from other forms of authoritarian rule, but post-communism may not be as different as some thought.” The full inclusion of East European cases in the general study of democratic transitions generated a burgeoning literature in comparative politics focusing on the various dimensions and problems of regime transformations, the relations

between economic and political reforms, and the international aspects of democratization. In this regard, the publication of Juan Linz's and Alfred Stepan's *The Problems of Democratic Transitions and Consolidations* may be regarded as the crowning example of this "normalization" of East European politics.

The application of the transition paradigm to the post-communist world was based on a number of assumptions.

First, what area specialists viewed as unique post-communist predicament, transitionologists considered as a set of conditions present to certain degree and in various combinations in other democratizing countries and regions. Thus, cross-regional comparisons were considered to be legitimate, appropriate, and even necessary, as the mechanisms and sequences of democratization were taken to be fundamentally similar. Moreover, this group believed that while communist or Leninist legacies are complex, they were not always obvious, differed substantially among countries, and declined in importance the further one got from the moment of transition.

Second, since differences among post-communist states across all the relevant dimensions are striking, and diverging trajectories of political and economic transformations are increasingly apparent, there is nothing specifically constraining and universal in the communist legacy. The burdens of the past can be overcome by elite commitments, resolute decisions, and imaginative strategic choices, especially when combined with generous external support.

Third, it was assumed that the diversity of post-communist experiences is primarily the result of proximate factors, including contrasting modes of power transfer, differing outcomes of founding elections, and the initial institutional choices made by elites. Simultaneous transformations, that combine political, economic and social reforms, were not seen as an insurmountable problem provided reform measures were well designed, swiftly and consistently introduced. Specific constitutional and institutional choices seemed to matter as well: parliamentary democracy with proportional representation was considered the best constitutional framework since it offered flexibility, was optimal for accommodating various interests and preferences, and encouraged cooperation and consensus among political actors.

Fourth, privileging agency implies what Hirschman called "possibilism,"¹⁰ placing the emphasis on the management of political and economic change. What really counts is how to achieve democracy and the strategies of getting there, not the starting point. In this paradigm, initial structural conditions and specific historical legacies are relegated to the background as causal factors relative to transitional outcomes. This assumption was often criticized for its teleological bias¹¹ and, borrowing Peter Hall's phrase, for promoting "images of the polity as a homogenous plane, without historical texture, in which ancillary institutional or ideological developments are relatively unimportant and the fundamental determinants of political action are broadly universal in form."¹²

Fifth, it was assumed that the gap between regional studies and mainstream comparative politics would increasingly blur. As Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan announced

in their great synthesis of the transition literature: “We hope to contribute to the task of incorporating post-communist politics into comparative politics, so we end the book by trying to put the great problems and diversity of post-Communist Europe into a full comparative and theoretical perspective.”¹³ Thus, the main divisions in the study of the region should not be derived from the geographic boundaries but rather should reflect general theoretical approaches in comparative politics. The classic historical/institutionalist, rationalist, and culturalist theoretical orientations were all considered relevant and were equally present in analyses of the region. Reference points informing analytical frameworks were cross-regional and contemporary, reflecting experiences of established and developing democracies.

Sixth, while the transition-paradigm literature represents a mix of interpretative and quantitative approaches, more importance is accorded to quantitative methods and large-N research designs. The entire universe of post-communist cases becomes a standard empirical set, or sub-set, of cases for statistical analysis.

Yet, at the end of the 1990s, the transition paradigm had increasing difficulties in explaining the emerging diversity of transitional outcomes. Similar institutional choices produced different outcomes. Factors identified as causes raised as many questions as the outcomes scholars were seeking to explain. Why were reformers and opposition activists able to win initial elections in some countries but not in others? Why did all Central European countries choose parliamentary democracy, while all countries further to the east preferred presidential systems? Modes of transition, the results of initial elections and elite choices alone could not convincingly explain the diverging paths of transformations across the region. Consequently, elite choices and bargains struck at the moment of transition gradually came to be considered not so much a cause, but rather a part, of the outcome that needed to be explained.

Over time, the elite-focused analytical optics, assumed possibilism, the high level of generalization, and the unit of comparative analysis (nation-states) preferred by the transition paradigm showed their limitations. In-depth case studies and cross-border research designs revealed much greater complexity than the transition paradigm was prepared to handle. The exhaustion of the transition paradigm was followed by a decisive historical turn in the study of the region

New Historicism as a Paradigm

It was Philippe Schmitter, one of the leading advocates of the transition paradigm, who admitted its limits: “Parliamentarism, decentralization (federalism), and checks and balances (horizontal accountability) were thought to be magic ingredients of successful consolidation, but many countries have opted for different institutions and have done just as well. If I have learned one thing about institutions during the last 25 years, it is that there is no magic formula—nothing works everywhere. ... allegedly democracy-unfriendly institutions are symptoms, not causes.”¹⁴ Similarly, Lucan

Way claimed: “The post-communist experience suggests that we should pay less attention to proximate factors such as the mode of transition. . . . With the passage of twenty years, it has become clear that democratization prevailed across Central and Eastern Europe thanks mainly to long-range structural factors. First, the level of economic development seems to have been important. . . . But the single most important factor facilitating democratization was the strength of ties to the West.”¹⁵

This emerging consensus on the importance of cultural contexts, cognitive frameworks, structural constraints, historical legacies, and cross-regional affinities is also based on a number of underlying assumptions.

First, it has become increasingly clear that “possibilism” has its limits. The outcomes of transformations seem to reflect less the quality of elites and their policy choices than long-standing geographic, cultural and regional boundaries dividing the region. Agency and structure seem locked in an uneasy equilibrium over the longer run and windows of opportunity are less open than they often seem. The range of choices appears to be significantly constrained even in moments that can be considered as fundamental critical junctions.

Second, the outcomes of transformations appear to have little to do with the common communist legacy. As Jacques Rupnik noted, “The word ‘post-communism’ has lost its relevance. The fact that Hungary and Albania, or the Czech Republic and Belarus, or Poland and Kazakhstan shared a communist past explains very little about the paths that they have taken since. Indeed, it is striking how vastly different the outcomes of the democratic transitions have been in Central and Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, certain patterns do emerge. A new tripartite political geography of formerly communist Europe is emerging.”¹⁶ Similarly, Grzegorz Ekiert and Stephan Hanson argue that “the key paradox presented by the experiences of . . . post-communism is that the ‘Leninist legacies’ matter both less and more than scholars originally expected.”¹⁷ While calls for more analytical and empirical rigor and precision in tracing the impact of communist legacies are well placed,¹⁸ the variety of communist experiences before 1989 suggests that there is a complex relationship between various temporalities, among which the communist period is only one.

Third, while the debate on the role of communist legacies continues, it is increasingly clear from the emerging body of literature¹⁹ that deeper structural factors, including cultural ones, are behind the diverging trajectories of East European transformations. They include long-run economic developments, cultural affinities, historical ties, institutional continuities, and political and social traditions. It is also increasingly obvious that while diffusion and direct and consistent international support, epitomized by EU enlargement strategies and the EU’s continued assistance to new member states, is a vital component of successful democratization in the region, international efforts also face significant limits and constraints replicating similar divisions.²⁰

Fourth, the demise of the transition paradigm facilitated the re-evaluation of research strategies, fostering a methodological shift that included a return to detailed case studies and small-N designs, the extensive use of mixed methodologies, and the application

of more rigorous qualitative approaches. Reassessments of communist and long-run historical legacies highlighted the importance of the diachronic perspective, emphasizing episodic events, critical junctures, and importance of time series data.

This new approach emphasizes the contextuality and adheres to the position that “in order to understand cross-national or regional variation in macro-outcomes, . . . there is a strong case for moving beyond explanations that turn on two or three dispositive variables toward analyses focused on the social ecologies of countries and how they are built.”²¹ The main claim of this literature is that post-communist political and economic transformations should be viewed as part of an ongoing and long-term historical process of democratization and modernization across the European continent, from which communist rule was but a temporary diversion. This seems especially true for the countries of East-Central Europe that have historically gravitated toward the Western core of the continent, as well as for Russia that is re-asserting its distinctiveness from Europe and aggressively challenging the post-1989 geopolitical status quo. Such attention to contexts and a long historical perspective suggest remarkable continuities with the past, which are evident in institutional choices, elite and public preferences, the contours of political competition and, more generally, in political cultures. In short, variations in the countries’ pre-communist inheritances seem to have set the outer bounds of what was possible in the region under communist rule and what is possible today.²²

As much as the return to history and the idea of multiple temporalities having combined impact on the outcomes of transition makes intuitive sense, there are serious analytical challenges associated with it. It is not exactly clear what factors explain the persistence and continuity, the role of legacies, and the causal effects of various temporalities. These questions pose a fundamental challenge to analyzing and understanding the diversity of outcomes in the region through a historical lens. So far, the application of this analytical optics seems to confirm Quentin Skinner’s observation that “the study of history has increasingly proved to be a fertile source of inspiration and evidence.”²³ But combining historical insights with the systematic causal analysis has proved to be elusive.

The Challenges of the Historical Turn

Andrew Janos, in his magisterial analysis of modern East-Central Europe, highlighted the puzzle of historical continuity and persistence by evoking the old French aphorism “the more things change the more they stay the same.”²⁴ Nevertheless, the region he studies is, at the same time, characterized by enormous discontinuities. They were set off by the collapse of empires, wars, revolutions, massive state- and nation-building processes, territorial changes, mass population transfers, genocides and repressions, considerable changes of economic systems and property rights, and immense social and political transformations. One would expect very little continuity in such

places. Yet, as Grzegorz Ekiert and Daniel Ziblatt suggest, long-run historical legacies may be even more important in situations of discontinuous institutional changes.²⁵

In order to explore the nature and role of continuity and persistence in the region, we need to resolve three more general issues: first, whether continuities really exist and can be systematically documented or are just constructed *ex post factum*; second, *what* exactly persists; and third, *how* things persist; that is, what are the specific mechanisms of continuity?

It is not at all obvious that continuities are immanent characteristics of social reality. After all, as Alexander Gerschenkron suggested a long time ago, “at all times and in all cases continuity must be regarded as a set of tools forged by the historian rather than as something inherently and invariantly contained in the historical matter.”²⁶ However, this radical constructivist position is difficult to sustain given the considerable empirical evidence concerning long- and short-run continuities operating in various geographical and cultural contexts.²⁷ This is the case even if we assume that their meaning and symbolic importance are themselves contested, reconstructed, and subject to competing narratives.²⁸

The realist approach to continuities and persistence raises five fundamental questions:

1. What persists—social structure, institutions, preferences, identities, social tastes, mentalities, cultural scripts, or something else?
2. How do they and other possible carriers of continuity persist or what are the mechanisms of their reproduction?
3. What is the nature of the historical periods or moments that generate persistence-prone structures, institutions, identities, and preferences?
4. What are the effects of institutional discontinuities on patterns of continuity and persistence?
5. What temporalities are important and how do they interact to produce contemporary outcomes?

Elizabeth Clemens is certainly right in arguing that contemporary social science theorizing has not paid sufficient attention to the issue of continuities, particularly as it was based on “a loose synthesis of Marxian and Weberian historical narratives [that] directed attention to specific types of historical discontinuities.”²⁹ However, it needs to be noted that the problem of institutional continuities has been systematically and extensively explored by historical institutionalists, who worked mostly on developed democratic countries of Europe. There has also been considerable reflection and research on issues of critical junctures and path-dependent developments.³⁰ At the same time, long run-historical legacies are much less understood and studied, especially in discontinuous institutional contexts like those in Central and Eastern Europe.

Social science literature offers a number of ideas about the possible mechanisms linking historical legacies or various temporalities to current outcomes. One set of mechanisms is suggested by the older literature on economic backwardness and

underdevelopment, which emphasizes a circular, cumulative causation as a mechanism of backwardness persistence (developed in works of Gunnar Myrdal). Another set of mechanisms is offered by the literature on social capital, where scholars such as Robert Putnam struggle with similar questions of long run continuities and causation.³¹ Still another set of mechanisms is suggested by the idea of cognitive and social caging going back to Max Weber's work on protestant ethics and its role in the development of capitalism.³² Fernand Braudel famously introduced the idea of history moving at different speeds and the notion of *longue durée* as a centuries-long process in which specific mentalities flow across time interacting with other temporalities.³³ Finally, the idea of informality provides another set of possible mechanisms. As Douglass North noted "...the deep-seated cultural inheritance ... underlies many informal constraints. Although a wholesale change in the formal rules may take place, at the same time there will be many informal constraints that have great survival tenacity because they still resolve basic exchange problems among the participants, be they social, political or economic."³⁴ Yet, sorting out and synthesizing all these ideas and questions requires considerable analytical efforts backed up by rigorous empirical work.

Conclusions

This essay was not designed to review the existing research on post-communist politics. My goal was to specify theoretical visions or paradigms that have underpinned empirical and historical work on the many subjects and issues raised by the great transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Such paradigms shape "sociological imaginations"³⁵ and constrain analytical lenses through which scholars generate important questions and develop their research projects. The study of post-communism was influenced by three such paradigms: the first focused on the immediate communist past as the main constraint on post-1989 transformations; the second attempted to transcend the specificities of post-communism and integrate the study of the region with the general comparative politics enterprise; and finally, the third signified the return to a disciplined exploration of historical and cultural contexts and their role in shaping the outcomes of transformations.

As important as this reorientation of the study of post-communism in the direction of systematic contextual analysis is, it also faces many fundamental theoretical and empirical challenges. Given the inherent difficulties of ascertaining historical causation, it should not be limited to an effort to empirically establish precise causal relations between well-specified elements of the past and present as Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin advocated in their recent book on communist legacies.³⁶ In light of the complexity of political, economic, and social developments in the region, this is perhaps a very limited, if not impossible, task. At the very least, it will be very difficult to accomplish. William Sewell captures the dilemmas of combining historical analysis with causal approaches of social sciences in a most perceptive way: "That

there are a diversity of temporalities operating in any present raises difficult analytical challenges. . . . Which social processes, with which temporalities, will emerge as dominant in an event that mixes them together? How, and when, do short-term processes override, deflect, or transform long-term processes? How do long-term trends reassert themselves in situations where they seem to have been eclipsed by more pressing political processes?"³⁷

At present, therefore, the new historicist approach should be considered a heuristic strategy or a specific type of analytical optic relative to society and politics and to the nature of their relations. Such a perspective, acknowledging the uneasy balance between agency and structure and the power of historical and cultural contexts, goes back to the birth of modern social science, to Marx, Tocqueville, Spencer, Weber and other foundational thinkers. It was consistently present through the twentieth century, most recently being reflected in the golden years of historical sociology during the 1970s and 1980s, and in the historical institutionalism of the last three decades. This analytical optic follows Charles Tilly's advice to remember that "not only do all political processes occur in history and therefore call for knowledge of their historical contexts, but also where and when political processes occur influence *how* they occur."³⁸

As I argued in this essay, such a perspective takes short- and long-run continuities seriously by accepting a specific ontological stance consisting of essentialism, holism, and methodological realism. It also moves away from the contemporary nation-state as the "natural" unit of analysis by focusing instead on sub-national units, cross-border regions, and wider "civilizational" identities on the macro level. Likewise, it strives to re-conceptualize long-run continuities as multiple, interacting threads of continuity of various duration, each interacting with one or more critical periods that produce fundamental transformations, clusters of innovations, and new institutional and cultural configurations. These, in turn, gave rise to path-dependent developments. Moreover, it aims at specifying mechanisms through which continuities shape current outcomes. In short, this is the most demanding and challenging way of doing social science.

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