The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe

More than a decade has passed since the collapse of communism, yet citizens of post-communist countries are still far less likely to join voluntary organizations than people from other countries and regions of the world.

Why do post-communist citizens mistrust and avoid public organizations? What explains this distinctive pattern of weak civil society? And what does it mean for the future of democracy in post-communist Europe? In this engaging study, Marc Morjé Howard addresses these questions by developing a provocative argument about the powerful and enduring impact of the communist experience on its countries and citizens.

Howard argues that the legacy of the communist experience of mandatory participation in state-controlled organizations, the development and persistence of vibrant private networks, and the tremendous disappointment with developments since the collapse of communism have left most post-communist citizens with a lasting aversion to public activities.

In addition to analyzing data from more than 30 democratic and democratizing countries in the World Values Survey, Howard presents extensive and original evidence from his own research in Eastern Germany and Russia, including in-depth interviews with ordinary citizens and an original representative survey.

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Preface

In April 1998, five months before parliamentary elections, a new political force seemed to be emerging in Germany. As the main political parties competed for the public's attention by placing posters all across the major cities, a series of prominently positioned banners appeared on behalf of a “political party” known simply by its acronym BKD. The banners included such “slogans” as “Out with Diets!”, “Freedom, Equality, and Mealtime!”, and “It’s Time for Change – BKD: The Genuine Alternative!”, and they directed viewers to the website of the party’s campaign headquarters.

Those industrious enough to check the site found out that the party’s full name was “Burger King für Deutschland” and that the campaign banners were actually a cleverly designed nationwide advertising initiative by the international fast-food giant Burger King in an attempt to gain ground on its perpetual rival McDonald's. The ensuing media coverage provided Burger King with a great deal of free publicity, and the humorous ad campaign was widely viewed as a great success. Over the following weeks and months, “the Whopper” emerged as the BKD’s leading candidate, and Burger King continued to play the BKD theme until the elections took place in late September.

Of Burger King’s many clever posters and banners, one in particular was most striking, both in its location and its (perhaps unintentional) revealing insight about East German society today. It was an enormous banner, affixed to the aboveground S-Bahn commuter train line, stretching across the main street leading to Alexanderplatz in East Berlin – the site of the imposing television tower built by the East German state as a symbol of its alleged superiority to the West, and the place where more than one million East Germans gathered for a demonstration on November 4, 1989, leading to the opening of the Berlin Wall several days later. The Burger King banner proclaimed “eine neue Burgerbewegung,” an obvious play on the German word “Bürgerbewegung,” or citizens’ movement. All it took was one missing umlaut, and the entire meaning of the phrase was transformed, from a citizens’ movement into a hamburger movement.
Although I was not resourceful enough to take a picture of the striking banner – which I would later regret when trying to come up with this book’s cover – its image and message have remained with me throughout this project. Aside from being part of an effective marketing campaign, the Alexanderplatz banner captured the condition of civil society in contemporary Eastern Germany, and in post-communist Europe in general, surprisingly well. However noble, well intentioned, and briefly powerful the citizens’ movements of 1989–91 were throughout the Soviet bloc, they were nonetheless ephemeral and fleeting. Indeed, the story I tell in this book shows that post-communist societies have been far more successful in developing a private “hamburger society” than they have been in creating an actively engaged “civil society” in the public sphere.

This book was a long time in the making. It started as a vaguely conceived dissertation proposal, took on substance after a year of intensive fieldwork and multiple follow-up trips to Russia and Germany, and eventually developed into its current form after many drafts were written and revised, in both Northern California and Washington, D.C.

The research and writing of the book would not have been possible without the help of many institutions, colleagues, friends, and family. The MacArthur/Mellon Foundations provided funding at both the predissertation and dissertation stages of this project; the Social Science Research Council allowed me to conduct my fieldwork Germany through its Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies; the National Security Education Program and the Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies supported my fieldwork in Russia; and the National Science Foundation provided the funding to commission my representative survey in Germany and Russia. Georgetown University’s Center for German and European Studies, where I was a post-doctoral Research Associate in 1999–2000, generously offered a warm and supportive intellectual home from which to begin revising my dissertation for publication. I am very grateful to these institutions for having deemed this project worthy of their financial and institutional support.

Since this project began as a doctoral dissertation, I would like to thank my former advisers for their helpful suggestions and supportive feedback. Ken Jowitt, George Breslauer, Jack Citrin, Gerald Feldman, and M. Steven Fish were a constant source of inspiration, encouragement, and friendship over the five years I spent at Berkeley. Juan Linz, my former undergraduate adviser at Yale, graciously accepted to join my dissertation committee from afar; his ideas, conscientiousness, and unfailing work ethic have greatly influenced me over the past decade. Even though these six scholars do not always agree with one another, their diverse approaches and points of view have enriched this project tremendously.

I also owe many thanks to those who helped me in Russia and Germany while I was conducting my fieldwork. In Russia, I would especially like
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to thank Oleg Kharkhordin and his colleagues at the European University of St. Petersburg; Viktor Voronkov, Elena Nikiforova, Oksana Karpenko, and other researchers at the Center for Independent Social Research in St. Petersburg; and Oksana Bocharova, Leonid Ionin, Alla Tcherny, and Natalia Zorkaya in Moscow. In Germany, I am particularly grateful to Carola Hammer, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Sigrid Meuschel, Eckhard Priller, Torsten Schneider-Haase, and Jan Wielgohs for their help with various aspects of this project.

The core of my field research would not have been possible without the openness and generosity of my in-depth interview respondents. Even though I was a total stranger to them – and I spoke German and Russian with a peculiar Franco-American accent – they let me into their homes and into their lives. They told me fascinating and inspiring stories, filled with struggle, hope, and great emotion. I can only hope that some of their passion remains in the pages of this book, and that readers will appreciate and learn from them, as I have.

While writing the book, many friends and colleagues were kind enough to read chapters, and to provide me with helpful suggestions and feedback. While apologizing to those I may inadvertently be omitting, I would especially like to thank Harley Balzer, Sam Barnes, Michael Bernhard, Valerie Bunce, Keith Darden, Larry Diamond, Tomek Grabowski, Ken Greene, Steve Hanson, David Isao Hoffman, Wade Jacoby, Jeff Kopstein, Mark Lichbach, Jim McAdams, Laurence McFalls, Brian Pollins, John Sides, Jennifer Steen, Jeremy Straughn, Vladimir Tismaneanu, Mike Urban, Ned Walker, and Lucan Way. Evan Lieberman read every chapter of the book – often more than one draft of each – and provided detailed and insightful comments from its earliest stages to the final revisions and editing.

I would also like to thank Lewis Bateman, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for his steadfast support and good humor throughout the publication process, as well as production editor Camilla Knapp for her timely and helpful replies to my frequent queries, and copy editor Susan Greenberg for her thoughtful editing suggestions.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their help and support. My parents, Brigitte and Dick Howard, have shown me how to combine my love of books with human contact and interaction. And by raising me in a bilingual French-American household, they have inspired me to seek out, understand, and appreciate new languages and cultures. My wife, Lise Morjé Howard, has been my companion throughout the entire journey of this project. Our common love of travel and adventure and our constant exchange of ideas have enriched this book and my life. No language can express my sense of gratitude and appreciation for our partnership. Finally, I would like to thank our daughter Zoe, who only recently entered this world and does not yet speak in any comprehensible language, but who already gives me more joy and inspiration than I had ever imagined was possible.