1 Communism and democracy – a problematisation

As startling as the sudden and total disintegration of the Soviet Union may have been, the complete oblivion to which communism has quickly been consigned has been no less surprising. Political analyses of democratisation in eastern Europe have all but forgotten the rise of communism in Russia after 1917 and its enormous influence on the politics of the twentieth century. This book brings communism back into the study of democracy. The reason for such a return is not nostalgia for a failed political experiment, but the conviction that the rash classification of communism as an object of study for historians overlooks its active role in shaping the post-communist order. The unexpected collapse of communism indicated that much social science research was prejudiced with ideas about the immutable and eternal nature of communist power. Its sudden disappearance not only prevented corrections of this cognitive failure but also privileged views on communism as a ‘legacy’ rather than a social organism in gestation. The momentous simultaneous transformations in all areas of politics and society reinforced the pervasive desire in eastern Europe to break with unachieved modernisation and anti-liberal traditions in the name of democratic development. Democratic transformations were configured as an aggregate body of rules and norms, which would replace communism’s non-democratic system of government with Western-type models of democracy.

Structural and system-oriented perspectives alike have conceived transformation as particularisation, specification, or differentiation in the institutional framework of a political society. This positivist conception of politics, which envisages power as an objective force used to control behaviour and attitudes of people by means of legally enforced systems of rules, conceals the complexity of the sociogenesis of political order.¹ Not surprisingly,

¹ For the distinction between the functional and the genetic inquiries into democracy, see Dankwart Rustow, ‘Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model’, Comparative Politics, 2, 3 (1970), 337–63.
much of the theorisation on post-communist political transformations has disconnected the study of a new order from the previous one. Many analysts saw communism not only as preventing democratic development but also as an illusion, which arguably left nothing to posterity.

In a monistic fashion, theories of democratic consolidation have assigned the totality of representation to ‘liberal’ democracy. They consider democracy not as a socially endogenous process of historical articulation but as based on abstract, logical foundations of democratic individualism, the autonomy of preferences, or the institutionalised rule of law. Such democratic essentialism judges historical evolution by outcomes. Democracy has become a developmental goal, where values such as freedom, equality, and representation are disconnected from historical experience and their contingent articulation. For some, the potentiality of and the obstacles to democratisation are determined not by different points of departure but by a common destination and the imperative of convergence. This presumed universality of liberal democratic arrangements as a developmental goal has obscured the fact that the evolution of democracy – both as a value and as a constitutional form of government – has not been a goal of history, but an ‘accident’.

If historical determinants are assumed, they tend to be framed in rather abstract blocs of ‘legacies’, ‘genetic codes’, or ‘timeless antagonisms’ that either obstruct or favour transitional societies’ political development into consolidated democracies. Conversely, social, psychological, and symbolic foundations supporting the rise of democracy under conditions of authoritarian dictatorship have received little attention. While politics was reinvented in an environment of uncertainty, political analysis approached ‘post-communist’ countries with a plethora of certainties and categorisations. Unlike the communist theory about the necessary eventual fall of capitalism, social science in the West had no established theory about the crisis and breakdown of state socialism before it actually occurred. The failure of communism was taken as proof of democracy’s superiority and success on a global scale. However, we have largely neglected to inquire into the nature of communist power in the Soviet Union, how it expanded into eastern Europe, and the crisis of communism before its collapse. Viewed from such culturally deterministic perspectives, countries with the ‘wrong experiences’ lack endogenous sources for democratic politics.

In a legitimate attempt to avoid further conceptual confusion and disarray about democracy, the study of democratisation processes has usually focused on the institutionalisation of political authority, separate from social, economic, or cultural features. Historically, however, the institutional conception of political democracy emerged as a by-product of its social foundations. Aristotle defined democracy as a regime based upon the poor freemen, pointing out that poverty, not numerical majority, is the decisive criterion for distinguishing democracy from oligarchy. Even if the majority support the rule of the rich, the system remains an oligarchy. Even if the rule of the poor is based only on a minority, it is still termed a democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s philosophical anthropology focused on psychological universals such as desires, beliefs, and attitudes to explain human action by subsuming apparently different events under the same heading. Democracy unites people with a psychological bond according to which everybody forms his own judgement under the spell of an invisible authority, public opinion. In such a view, social conditions of equality produce passions, desires, and beliefs, for which anything can be sacrificed including love of liberty. Here is where the individual is subordinated to anonymous powers such as the ‘state’, the ‘people’, or ‘society’. These anonymous powers, however, are a precondition rather than a result of a social equilibrium based on accepted rules and norms. While Tocqueville’s Democracy in America was concerned with relatively predictable outcomes in a political system of institutions in equilibrium, the central idea in his work on The Old Regime and the Revolution focuses on understanding how the passage from a state of equilibrium to another state occurs and what it entails.

The collapse of communism demonstrated the inconsistency of deterministic accounts. If totalitarianism was an oppressive force capable of changing human nature and invading the depths of the human mind, how could communism implode without any considerable resistance? If political democracy and autonomous civil society were non-existent before the collapse of communism, on what grounds can one claim that autonomous political elites will adhere to an ethics of responsibility in supporting democratic transitions and consolidations? If modernisation has been the underlying force of political development, why is the evolution of democratic development in cases such as post-communist Russia considered to be problematic at best? If there has been a providential tendency towards

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5 This conceptual confusion is reflected in more than 550 ‘subtypes’ of democracy: David Collier and Steven Levitsky, ‘Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research’, World Politics, 49, 3 (1997), 430–51.
7 Jon Elster, Political Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 140.
democracy, why has the literature on democratic transformations largely dismissed the experiences, beliefs, values, and psychology of social movements and dissidence before the victory of the principles of liberal political democracy?

A political anthropology of transformative experiences

Western analysts understood democratisation as the set of political processes in the external world of state institutions. They focus mainly on the emergence of democratic elections, voting procedures, party systems, parliaments, governments, economic agencies, and legal institutions that will entail the equilibrium of a constituted political order. Conversely, this book suggests that any inquiry into the emergence of democracy needs to consider the aspirations, expectations, and hopes formulated by people under conditions of oppression and the denial of democratic rights and opportunities. To understand the emergence of democracy, therefore, we need to engage with the experiential basis of communism by examining the potential for the emergence of something new, whose authority in the newly constituted order may be legitimate and durable. Historically, democratic actors challenged monolithic political authority not on the basis of claims that they were endowed with legal guarantees, but under conditions of existential uncertainty, exposed to threats to their own life, and fundamentally aware of the brokenness of political reality. Democracy as a constitutional form has at its root unconstitutional acts beyond the boundaries of existing law. Like all processes of state-formation or changes of regime in the modern world, communism and democracy have been, to an important extent, based on a rupture of elite consciousness from previous orders of representation and political authority. Democratisation has not always involved a meaningful pattern of growth of a new regime after the breakdown of an old one. Contingent upon the conquest of the empty space of power and its own attendant legitimisation, it has been a lengthy, ongoing process of narrative construction and symbolic articulation.

Rather than adapt political reality to institutions, values, and ideologies dominant in other geopolitical contexts, one should try to problematise their emergence. While political science is largely interested in specifying variables and attributes of democracy that distinguish it from non-democracy, the inquiry into foundations of democracy should take the analyst deeper into history than he has commonly been willing to go.8 Political analysis should delineate its object of study by taking into

8 Rustow, ‘Transitions to Democracy’.
account haphazard and contingent historical reality. While many assume a ‘causality’ of democracy, which would be justified by the ‘outcome’, or try to measure its adequacy with a predominant ‘model’, the historical evolution of democracy has not been a predetermined course towards an end goal of development. In Max Weber’s terms, if there is any meaningful usage of ‘object’ at all, it can only be a historical individual that is a complex set of correlations in historical reality that can be connected as culturally meaningful.9 Whereas the distant analyst can prescribe ‘what democracy is’, the manifold social foundations of a historically articulated process are not merely reified ‘legacies’, ‘conditions’, or variations in ‘outcomes’, but themselves define the object of study.

This book sets democracy into the dramatic and contingent context of highly disruptive events characteristic of the rise and fall of communism. A number of recent studies have shown how to integrate the communist experience and its practices in the production of new meanings and symbols.10 Similarly, recent work on democratisation has emphasised the importance of domestic cultural aspects against dominant value-based interpretations of Western-type democracy.11 The empirical focus of this book is an interpretive understanding of great events such as the October Revolution, the Second World War, the ‘small’ revolutions in eastern Europe, and the disarticulation of communism. While these events entailed momentous transformations in the political and social world, they were also existential crises entailing significant disruptions not only because political authority was deeply contested but also because acquired meanings dissolved, putting pasts and futures at stake. These crises were, to an important extent, processes of communion among those dependent on a common cause, aspiring to a collective identity, which would be determined against the outside.

If these events are included in the study of democratisation, it is not because any of these events is ‘democratic’ in terms of a constitutional form. Rather, these experiences have had a decisive influence on attitudes and practices of individuals, meanings of democracy, and the development of the concept. A political anthropology shifts attention away from positivist or a priori normative models that precede action and towards experiences of historical ruptures. The dual-faceted approach characteristic of the modern episteme either reduces experience to sense perception, as in the case of empiricism and positivism, or assumes experiences are chaotic and unstructured, and therefore conceivable only through the categories of the mind. This book, in contrast, understands transformative experiences in a double sense. Analytically, transformative experiences can be considered as a methodological tool by which to understand the ‘rationality’ of action in dramatic revolutionary situations characterised by uncertainty and the brokenness of political reality. Substantially, transformative experiences refer to the living through of exceptional circumstances at critical junctures by contemporaries and the emergence of new states of consciousness. A political anthropology of transformative experiences examines how breakdowns of different political orders and their attendant symbolic universes transform consciousness, meanings, and beliefs in individuals.

In other words, the breakdown and the consolidation of a regime need to be set in the context of an irruption in the perceived and symbolically sustained, ordered course of life. In the tradition established by Friedrich Nietzsche and Wilhelm Dilthey, the pioneering studies by Max Weber, Eric Voegelin, Michel Foucault, Norbert Elias, and Claude Lefort have suggested that the constitution of political subjects, collective and individual, occurs through experiences and ensuing fundamental changes in consciousness. The social foundations of politics are crucial because it is the meaning of our experience, and not the ontological structure of the objects such as institutions, states, or systems, that constitutes reality. Linking the study of political order to the historically specific symbolism of its institution suggests that history is not primarily a sequence of well-articulated and stable political orders. It is the brokenness of political

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12 This applies, for instance, to Max Weber’s study of the spirit of capitalism, Norbert Elias’s work on court society and the civilising process, Eric Voegelin’s hypothesis of the Gnostic revolt as a source of modernity, or Michel Foucault’s disciplinary society. For a recent conceptualisation of ‘reflexive historical sociology’ as understanding the origins of modernity, see Arpad Szakolczai, Reflexive Historical Sociology (London: Routledge, 2000).

reality and the dissolution of order that make up the essence of history. If there is continuity and repetition, it is the repetition of disarticulation, which should inform inquiries into the establishment of political order. This is not because rupture is the rule, but because the exceptional condition of disarticulation of order will influence the articulation of new political authority most profoundly. This is why understanding the emergence of a constitutional form requires recovering the primacy of the historical event (événementialiser). It goes along with the need to disentangle the social foundations of underdetermined moments of disorder, to take into account a rupture of evidence or of the taken-for-granted.

An understanding of the political as experience goes beyond a scientific approach in which knowledge finds its self-assurance by defining political reality in terms of a sovereign distance between the subject and the social. The institution of the social order cannot be limited to the comparison of structures and systems as objective forces. Rather, it is simultaneously confronted with the question of its own institution. The historical process of human relations creates meaning and produces markers for distinguishing between true and false, just and unjust, and imaginary and real. It also establishes the horizons of human beings’ relations with one another and with the world. In Michel Foucault’s terms, ‘history becomes “effective” to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being – as it divides our emotions, dramatises our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself’.

A political anthropology of transformative experiences adopts three different but interrelated perspectives on discontinuity in the historical evolution of communism. Initially, the emergence of communism and democracy require understanding the formation of consciousness and dispositions of actors in the authority vacuum of the empty space of power. Revolutionary situations and critical junctures of history are not only chaotic and anarchical but also have their own rationality that produces new states of consciousness. Furthermore, revolutionary events can be approached through the acts of symbolisation that re-establish the equilibrium lost by the dissolution of order, structures, and markers of certainty. Eventually, one needs to acknowledge that such events have had enormous effects on identities as well as on interpretations of pasts and futures. This is why interpretations of meaning need to address the power of memory and the deconstruction of ‘second reality’ as

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two crucial methods of denouncing the logic of violence characteristic of communism.

**Approaching the empty space of power**

An important tradition in democratic theory has reduced power to the capacity of an institutionalised set of rules and norms to control the actions, behaviour, and responses of citizens.\(^{17}\) This way of defining political authority as a complex set of procedures that compel the compliance of the citizenry has focused on the limiting effects of power through accountability and rule of law. Similarly, constitutionalism includes determinants of governmental decisions and prescribed rules that control the behaviour of citizens and influence the legitimate distribution of power among government officials. Historically and logically, however, the constitution of power in a revolution means not the limitation but the foundation and correct distribution of power. In the struggle over the American Constitution, for instance, the main question was not about ‘limited’ government but about how to establish power.\(^{18}\) Montesquieu’s suggestion that ‘power arrests power’ is not synonymous with a claim that the power of laws checks the power of man. Laws do not pre-exist their formalisation in the sense of imposed standards, commands, or positivist legality.

In this spirit, a political anthropology of transformative experiences transcends the classificatory category of politics as constituted power. Following Claude Lefort’s distinction between *la politique* (politics) and *le politique* (the political), one must differentiate between two realities: on the one hand, a preconstituted domain of politics as delimited within the social order against the non-political fields of society or the economy; on the other, the conditions under which a political order is instituted in social and historical reality with the aim at constituting order on the basis of constitutive principles. The essence of politics is not in the constituted order of norms and rules but is found in the exception, where the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid through repetition.\(^{19}\) The essence of sovereignty is not in the monopoly of sanction or power but in the monopoly of decision.


The conditions of institutionalised government conceal that constituent power is logically prior to constitutional arrangements. Historically, the structure of sovereignty is likely to be articulated in exceptional situations of an authority vacuum. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that no political act ever conforms to the standard of being legitimate in terms of a generally accepted sovereign authority. As political acts always lack full legitimacy when enacted, sovereignty occurs with a temporal gap between act and the consent that approves and enables it. The French Revolution not only targeted the absolute power of the monarch, but had to legitimate a newly erected constitutional order whose founders were themselves unconstitutional. Their authority to set down the fundamental law relied on the need to define identities and interests of the people not by means of constitutionally granted political authority but in a legal void. Sieyès’s distinction between constituent power and constituted power suggested that the authority of the constituted power could not be guaranteed by the constituent power, as the latter was prior to the constitution itself. The exercise of real power by government had its roots in the nation as the constituent power, which was supposed to be formed solely by natural law and not to be subject to legal prescriptions formulated in positive constitutions. The national will as the origin of all legality, therefore, would always be seen as relying not on a differentiated social order regulated by law, but on a national spirit articulated under exceptional circumstances.

For Rousseau, the founding of a general will as the precondition for sovereignty and democratic participation would be paradoxical. In his view, for an emerging people to follow the fundamental rules of statecraft embodied in the general will, the effect (social spirit) would have to become the cause, and the cause (good laws) would have to become the effect. The problem was how to establish either condition without the previous attainment of the other on which it depends. Seeking practical solutions to this paradox, the French revolutionaries answered with replacing the divine right of kings by what Edgar Quinet called a people-God (peuple-Dieu). They had followed Rousseau’s observation that, to establish the validity of manmade laws, one actually would need gods. The task of finding a sound principle of sovereignty for the French nation

in a revolutionary situation required putting the law above man. On the one hand, the people were to become citizens, i.e. subjects who would govern themselves. On the other hand, to substitute a secular principle for the belief in divine right, they would need to inspire an awesome, almost mystical, authority. The radical reorientation of political purpose drew not on pre-existing theoretical principles, but required the mobilisation in people’s minds and hearts of a belief, if not of a cult, of the impossible. Yet, the practical business of reconstructing a social order on the basis of powerful, hypothetical futures could not be achieved without destruction, bloodshed, and annihilation of human life, which peaked in the revolutionary terror. Thus, the idealisation of the People-God as the principle of sovereignty came at the expense of sacrificing lives of human beings that made up the ‘people’.

Historically, therefore, the exception is not only a theoretical principle. Modern revolutions with their intense collective violence and their lofty, idealised visions of hypothetical futures have deeply ambivalent effects of destructive and formative power. The Janus-like character of revolutions combines the elegant, abstract, humanitarian face that is creative of constitutional norms with the crude, violent, rather nightmarish side where the revolutionary dynamics not only overcomes theoretical principles or concepts, but also destroys human life. As Claude Lefort has suggested, modern democracy is riddled with this ambivalence as it emanates from the dramatic context of the downfall of absolutist monarchy, the revolutionary conflict between antagonistic forces struggling to attain political domination, and the attendant emptiness of the space of power. Democracy’s crucial characteristic consists in the dissolution of ‘markers of certainty’. Whereas before the nineteenth century political society relied on largely determined relations between corporate parts of society, the ‘democratic moment’ introduced radical indeterminacy by disentangling the legitimate basis of political power, the sources of moral and legal norms, and the production of knowledge. The modern democratic revolution was about the transformation from power incorporated in two kinds of bodies, the body of the king and the corporate social body. In monarchies, power was incorporated in the body of the king, as the body of the king gave the body to society. Democratic rule, on the other hand, is not entitled to incorporate or appropriate power, as the