Part I

The pre-political context

The two chapters in this part of the book provide a sketch of the context from which politics would reappear in Russia. Our aim, therefore, is to set out those aspects of the context most relevant to that reappearance and to develop certain concepts for analysing them. Accordingly, the first chapter begins with a model of 'politics' that articulates the concept across three spheres (state, political society and civil society) and along two dimensions (organization and communication). The discussion then turns to a consideration of the Soviet state that highlights from a structural perspective its relatively ineffective capacity for domination – despite certain appearances to the contrary, such as its arsenal of repressive practices. Our attention turns next to the ways in which this weak (yet repressive) state articulated with society. Its actions along the dimension of communication produced systematic distortions that had disrupted the formation of social identities and restricted their circulation to the narrow confines of face-to-face encounters. Thus, that singular exception to the Soviet state's weakness – its capacity physically to penetrate society – rendered society weak as well. This discussion then yields a number of problematics that serve as the book's principal themes.

These themes are first explored concretely in the second chapter. In contrast to the synchronic approach employed up to this point, the narrative in this chapter is organized diachronically in order to tackle the issue of how the structures of domination conditioned those of action. The time frame involved here is roughly bounded at one end by Stalin's death and, at the other, by the regime's inauguration of 'perestroika'. The focus of this chapter falls mainly on the development of the dissident movement which antedated, anticipated and contributed to the re-emergence of politics in Russia. As is the case with the first chapter, the second one introduces a number of concepts that we use throughout the book.

1 Politics and communism: figure and ground

The rebirth of politics in Russia is historically coextensive with the collapse of Soviet communism. More than mere contingency informs this temporal relationship. The key terms in it – politics and communism – define one another, like figure and ground, thesis and antithesis. On one hand, communism had represented a double-excision of politics: suppression of political activity, plus compulsory participation in ubiquitous pseudo-political rituals sponsored by the party-state. Here, we have in mind not only the repressive functions performed by the secret police, informers, prisons and labour camps, but also the appropriation of political forms for the purpose of preventing political practice, such as the empanelling of millions of individuals on soviets by means of single-candidate 'elections' who would represent their constituents by unanimously endorsing whatever measures the authorities had placed before them. On the other, the return of political life in Russia would witness a double-relationship to communism. Politics would be reborn as a struggle against the communist system that had denied it. It would reappear as heroic action, challenging, resisting and defying the communist system in the name of human dignity, national restoration, freedom and democracy. Measured against standards such as these, the prosaic aspects of political activity – ambition, advantage, influence and so on – would seem so many miscreants subverting this struggle from within. But the institutional inheritance bequeathed by communism to the new Russian polity would complicate the matter of rebirth in far more profound and ramified ways. It is not merely the case that individuals who had matured under the anti-political conditions of a communist system had developed certain dispositions, habits of mind and modes of action that would not readily supply that measure of civic virtue required for sustaining political life. While that may be true, of greater import would be the ensemble of structures peculiar to state socialism, a specific social formation that had existed in Russia for over seventy years, that the new Russian polity would inherit.

In order to develop the relationships between the categories of

Table 1.1 *Ideal–typical forms of political communication and organization*

Levels of system	Types of communication	Forms of organization
State	Authoritative	Hierarchical government bodies
Political society	Strategic	Parties and parliament
Civil society	Normative	Voluntary associations

communism and politics, we have recourse to a simple model that will serve to orient much of the discussion throughout this book. We might introduce it by specifying that which we include in our concept of politics.[1] In our view, politics – at least in so far as this term concerns questions related ultimately to the affairs of state in late twentieth-century societies – can be understood along two dimensions: communication and organization.[2] Both of these forms of action appear under different aspects in the relations depicted in Table 1.1. Along the top row, the domain marked off by 'state' refers to communication that appears as authoritative injunctions (laws, decrees, rulings and so forth) that are backed by coercive force.[3] Coercive action, as well as the other functions that the state might perform (say, post and communications, education, social security or data collection), transpires through hierarchically organized government bodies. Along the bottom row, 'civil society' encompasses that sphere of life in which communication is characterized as a normative discourse aimed at reaching understanding among socially differentiated participants. Individuals organize into 'voluntary associations' around certain 'interests' which they represent to others through normative claims, thus linking themselves to one another within these associations, producing social identities, and engaging others who may be linked in similar associations in various forms of dialogue which span a horizon including, at one end, overtures to undertake cooperative endeavours and, at the other, threats intended to secure some change of behaviour on the part of others.[4] The middle row is taken up by 'political society' whose premier organizations are political parties and parliaments. The principal mode of communication in this sphere is strategic, aimed at translating (or preventing the translation of) specific projects originating in civil society into policies adopted by the state and, conversely, producing either support for, or opposition to, state policies within the sphere of civil society.

This model, of course, is an ideal-type construct. Although its elements would be most closely approximated in contemporary democratic–capitalist systems, our intention in using it is not to idealize those same systems but to develop a concept of politics both broad enough and

sufficiently discriminate to facilitate our investigation of the reappearance of political life in Russia. In this respect, the model's utility consists in the fact that, as a matrix, all of the elements in it are mutually related. State communication appears as 'authoritative', for instance, because state structures are connected to a normative discourse via the institutions of political society. The coercive force of the state therefore has the capacity to appear as a 'legitimate' use of power. Its exercise can be thematized in civil society, in principle producing a public consensus that would accept, reject or modify the course of state policy. Equally, the non-state sphere of civil society appears as something neither removed nor isolated from the state, as – to take an extreme example – laws or rulings on privacy and the inviolability of persons would remind us.[5] The model thus helps us to bear in mind the fact that politics is neither a thing nor a phenomenon reducible to an essentialist definition. Rather, it represents a mode of human interaction whose varied forms admit to specification along the lines of the types of communication and organization that the model includes. In sum, 'politics' would be that which occurs within the model's domain.

Besides framing that side of politics/communism that we take for our 'figure', the model can also be used to sketch in its 'ground', communism. In so doing, we avoid side-tracking our discussion toward an empirical description of the communist past by maintaining a focus on those analytic aspects of the communist system that are indispensable to an understanding of our principal topic, the politics that has been (re)born out of it. This discussion proceeds according to the model's categories of 'organization' and 'communication'. From the vantage of the former, our attention turns toward the objectified side of social action. We concern ourselves here with those forms and practices in the area of social organization that confront individuals as ready-made – as existing independently of their will – which condition, shape and direct the activity of individuals, even as they might in turn attempt to reshape and redirect these organizational forms and practices themselves. The mode of action corresponding to these objectified forms of social interaction would be instrumental, focused on securing or preventing some condition identified by the parties to it as either desirable or undesirable. The second perspective, that of communication, highlights the subjective side of the matter. Its corresponding mode of action involves the meaning that those in interaction derive from or impart to their activity. In this respect, our concern is with subjects, especially political subjects, and how they constitute themselves and their respective social worlds in the process of communication.

Structure and the Soviet form of organization

By the end of the 1930s, the 'construction of socialism' in the USSR was officially acknowledged to have been completed. From the standpoint of organization, a brief outline of this accomplishment would include three main features. First, the Soviet state had taken on a 'total' character. Through application of historically unprecedented levels of force and violence, the state had abolished all hitherto existing institutions and replaced them with its own creations. All social intercourse, then, was confined to its agency.[6] Second, this transformation was abetted by massive personnel turnover among holders of state offices as hundreds of thousands of incumbents were removed from their positions through purge and terror while the roster of offices was further expanded by industrialization, the founding of new towns and cities, and so on.[7] Rapid upward mobility generated loyalty and obedience toward those officials who had engineered the respective promotions. Terror or the fear of its return reminded these same officials of the loyalty and obedience expected from them by the central authorities. Third, state and state-sponsored organizations tended to be designed along military lines, with centralized command structures that issued orders (tasks) which travelled down chains-of-command extending from Moscow to the far-flung reaches of the USSR.[8]

These features of Soviet state socialism – state violence and terror, rapid upward mobility generating loyalty and obedience, centralized, command-style administration of all aspects of life – masked the fact that the structural basis of this system was a weak one.[9] Following Stalin's death, however, this mask began to peel off. His successors ended the terror and drastically reduced the incidence of purging, thus jettisoning the principal mechanisms (mobility and fear) contributing to the system's integration in the context of its top-down organizational architecture.[10] They also unmasked enough of his deeds and his 'cult of the personality' to undermine the particular ideational complex whose symbolic structures had served to integrate individuals into the social order, a topic that we take up below. Here, our purpose is to sketch in more of the 'ground' of Russia's political rebirth by examining the communist order from the perspective of its structural basis.

Characteristics of structural strength

In order to develop this point, we need to say a few words about the concept 'structure'. We take this term 'structure' to indicate neither a thing nor a collection of things nor a mere ordering of things and/or

people as suggested by the words 'hierarchy' or '(formal) organization' which often have functioned interchangeably with 'structure' in much that has been written on the Soviet order. Rather, we regard a given structure as that which determines the relations among the elements that comprise it and, in so doing, defines the content of the elements themselves. Following Jean Piaget, we understand the distinctive properties of structure to be 'wholeness' (or internal coherence), 'self-regulation' and 'transformation'.[11] The last of these connotes procedures internal to a given structure by which changes in its empirical state are effected.[12]

The concept of exchange is helpful in explicating the idea of structure as it pertains to social phenomena, particularly in so far as it enables us to overcome the nuance of 'static' which unfortunately often accompanies the notion of structure in everyday English usage.[13] Structures are the sites of movement, of interaction, of exchange. In those that we call economic, money might be exchanged for goods or services; in those labelled political, promises might be exchanged for votes; in those regarded as principally social, promises often exchange against promises, as do vows in a marriage contract. In each of these instances, the character of the exchange has been established by no one in particular. Whether we are concerned with buying and selling, the practices of candidates and voters in an election or the wedding ceremonies accompanying a marriage, we notice that individuals step into a particular institutional form independent of the particular parties participating in it. In this respect, the character of each can be taken as social as opposed to personal or individual. But in drawing attention to the institutional character that is stamped on each of these exchanges, we do not mean to imply that the individuals involved in them have somehow disappeared. Far from it. Our point is instead first, that the individuals have appeared as buyers, sellers, spouses and so forth within a structured relationship that has constituted them as such and, second, that the roles or positions that they occupy are more or less constrained, more or less determined, by the overall structure within which they find themselves. This second consideration concerns the relative strength of a structure, a characteristic conditioned by those exchange relations particular to it.

From this standpoint, we can define the strength or weakness of a structure according to two criteria: the degree to which the conditions of exchange are established independently of those participating in it (that is, the relative impersonality of the structure); and the degree to which the conditions of exchange produce rates that advantage one or some of the parties (that is, the structure's capacity to generate domination). To

illustrate, let us take the example of a strong structure, an economic system based on private property in which exchange transpires through the medium of the market. Were a theoretically pure system of this type to obtain, social relations would appear only in the act of exchange itself. The frequent and ongoing repetition of these exchanges would provide them with a fixed, impersonal character. Accordingly, buyers and sellers would confront one another under specific terms – captured in the monetized aspect of the exchange relations, price – that are beyond their control. These terms have been fixed by the impersonal agency of the market. Exchanges under these conditions can be regarded as 'general'.[14] What is of value would emerge out of generalized exchange relations in the same way that value would govern the relation of the parties engaged in a particular exchange, setting the rates at which their media exchange one with another. Individual or collective will would neither constitute nor shape social relations of this type in a theoretically meaningful way. Rather, the activities of individuals would be set, shaped, constrained and disciplined by the market.[15] Along the lines of our first criterion, then, the impersonal character of exchange in a market would contribute to the strength of this structure.

Regarding our second criterion, the degree of inequality in exchange relations and its capacity to engender domination, the example of a system based on private property and market exchange will again illustrate structural strength. Here, we might begin by underscoring the obvious; namely, that private property refers solely to a relationship among people, not to a relationship between people and things. Above all, this relationship is structured by the condition of exclusion, such that the right of property entitles its holder to exclude all others from access to whatever, in a given instance, is governed by this right. Access for others, then, takes the form of exchange in which the property right of one party passes to a second in return for a simultaneous transfer of some consideration – typically another property right – from the second party to the first.[16] When we consider those cases in which so-called 'productive' property belongs to one class (owners) and access to it is sought by another (workers), it is apparent that the condition of exclusion structures exchanges between them. Denied access to the means of production, workers exchange their labour against wages. The rate of this exchange is, again, set impersonally by the (labour) market. Owners, *ceteris paribus*, occupy the dominant position inasmuch as no one of them can be excluded from this act of exchange while the reverse is true for any individual in the class of workers. Since any worker can be excluded from exchanging his or her labour for wages, and since the cost of not engaging in this exchange is for the worker particularly high, each

worker finds himself or herself in an ongoing competition with other workers to participate in the exchange of labour for wages. The effect of this competition would then set a rate of exchange favourable to the class of owners. Private property, expressed in this instance as the exclusion of workers from the means of production, thus structures the exchange of labour for wages that results in the phenomenon of 'exploitation'. However, our concern here lies with another phenomenon, 'domination', so let us follow the parties involved in this type of exchange into an organizational structure in which domination occurs.

Max Weber has used the term 'domination' to characterize those relationships in which a command of the dominators is regarded by the dominated as if the latter 'had made the content of the command the maxim of their conduct for its own sake'.[17] In Weber's view, the ideal-type construct of domination displayed in this definition would be approximated in modern bureaucracy. Moreover, it is within modern bureaucracy that our criteria for assessing the strength of a structure – impersonality and domination – are fused. Two points might be made in this respect. The first concerns the fact that the surface characteristics of this form of organization – the location of authority in offices rather than in individuals, the organization and gradation of such authority according to written rules and so forth – are themselves rooted in the structural transformations that have accompanied the passing of traditional society. Foremost among these transformations has been the establishment of the 'commodity form', the impersonal exchanges between buyers and sellers in the market on which we have already commented in an abstract way.[18] It seems important to recall in this respect that the implanting of this form at the centre of the modern socio-economic order had involved an extended, thoroughgoing and often brutal uprooting of social relations[19] as well as a detailed refashioning of human subjects along the lines of the disciplines that restructure their inner worlds as described by Michel Foucault and others.[20] Modern bureaucracy would be one product of this transformation, representing a site of human interaction that is homologous to the commodity form of exchange relations in the market. Not only does bureaucratic interaction transpire through an impersonalized, rule-bound structure of authority, but the action of any individual within this mode of organization, just as any commodity in the market is measured by its price, always reduces to something outside the individuals themselves – the job description, the work schedule, the production target, the efficiency rating and so forth. It is precisely these thing-like relations among people that enable the higher layers of bureaucracy to think in characteristically bureaucratic fashion, calculating costs and

benefits for the organization (rather than for the individuals who comprise it) and improving its performance (but not necessarily the performance of the individuals *qua* individuals within it) by means of an ongoing rationalization of the extant set of relations and routines that collectively constitute its capacity to perform.[21]

Second, bureaucratic domination coincides with bureaucratic performance. This coincidence springs from the relationship between superiors and subordinates in which the latter exchange obedience in return for any number of staples stored in bureaucracy's larder: employment, promotions, the promise of pension benefits on retirement and recommendations in the case of transfer to another organization. These incentives thus align individual motivations with organizational objectives such that the command of the superior (dominator) is received by the subordinates (dominated) along the lines of Weber's 'maxim of their conduct for its own sake'. Domination is enhanced by the impersonal bureaucratic structure through which it is exercised because the content of commands does not appear as the product of some subjective judgement – which, as such, would be open to scrutiny, criticism and resistance on the basis of other subjective judgements – but as something objective, something which is indistinguishable from the objectified relations (such as job description) that characterize bureaucracy in the first instance.[22] It is precisely these features of bureaucracy that have led a myriad of observers to see in it the quintessence of efficiency and effectiveness in human affairs.[23] Its objectified forms enable calculation to occur and rationalization to proceed (efficiency); its incentive structures that bring individual motivations into consonance with the commands of superiors enable it to marshal human energies and deploy them on specific targets (effectiveness). In sum, modern bureaucracy qualifies *par excellence* as a strong structure.[24]

Structural weakness of the Soviet order

On the basis of the argument outlined thus far, we would be compelled to conclude that the Soviet system's widespread reputation for being 'bureaucratic' had been rather richly undeserved. To be sure, until its final years, the party-state had methodically endeavoured to organize all forms of social activity along the lines of hierarchical administration, as well as to extinguish all attempts at pursuing organized social activity outside the ambit of the institutions that it maintained. Moreover, the organizations that it erected had many of the surface features of bureaucracy. After all, the USSR did produce an abundance of hierarchies, written regulations and formal instructions. Yet, were we to

look through the outer shell of these organizations and beyond the mere appearance of these practices, we would notice that the internal structures and dynamics of Soviet organizations had little in common with the theoretical category 'bureaucracy'.

Comparisons with capitalist societies would again demonstrate the point here. In contrast to a system of private property anchored in the principle of exclusion, the system of state property that prevailed in the USSR was based on inclusion. Rather than denying workers access to the means of production, state property guaranteed it. As a consequence, there was no labour market in the proper sense of the term under Soviet state socialism. No 'industrial reserve army' existed either, and labour time could therefore not be measured by any objective standard that would facilitate calculation and rationalization.[25] Moreover, the exchange of labour for wages knew no denominator establishing standard rates of remuneration for performance.[26] The inclusive character of state property therefore provided no objective basis on which to quantify the media of exchange, whether labour, raw materials or finished goods.

What had been true of the *quantitative* side of exchange relations within the structure of Soviet state socialism also had characterized their *qualitative* side. Continuing our comparisons with capitalism, we remind ourselves that exchange in the market is governed by the 'impersonal' feature of commodity–money relations. What has been produced must be of value to someone else if exchange is to occur. Mindful of this, producers gear their actions to meet the standards of value established impersonally by the market. Particularly under conditions of mass production and mass consumption, the production of value takes on a general form. Articles that fail to meet the standard are not marketable, just as the labour that goes into the production of such articles ceases to find employment. However, within the command–administrative structures of state socialism, we notice an altogether different form of exchange that in many ways more resembles 'particular' than it does 'general'. That is, value is constituted not by the impersonal force of the market but by the individual parties to the exchange itself.

One of these parties would be superiors in the administrative hierarchy who would provide a plan instructing their corresponding units on what to do. And formally, at least, superiors could employ both positive and negative sanctions (promotions, bonuses, awards, reprimands and so on) to ensure compliance with their directives. But these mechanisms would represent no more than superficial analogues to the control–compliance apparatus built into modern bureaucracies, precisely because of the absence of objectified, quantifiable, calculable – in short,