The ghosts of the past: 20 years after the fall of communism in Europe

Marta Rabikowska

School of Social Sciences, Media and Cultural Study, Media and Advertising University of East London, 4–6 University Way, London E16 2RD, UK
Available online 13 May 2009

Abstract

Twenty years after the fall of communism in Europe, the post-Soviet countries have not achieved a similar stage of democratic development. They have shown to be too diverse and historically too independent to follow one path of consolidation. This volume questions the premises of transitology, homogeneity, and path dependency theories and suggests an insight into the continuities and discontinuities within particular contexts of the given countries (Russia, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Ukraine, Poland and others). The latter quite often collide with each other and with the Western democratic values, thus putting a concept of a harmonious dialogue or a definite democratic solution for Europe into doubt. This volume challenges one-directional analyses of both communism and capitalism and offers an examination of their inner contrasts and contradictions that are a part of transitions to democracy. The irreconcilable differences between the two systems of ideologies determined by universalisms, such as utilitarianism, liberalism, harmony, and productivity, were derived from the post-Enlightenment heritage of the humanist ideals which today cannot be acknowledged without criticism. To grasp the dynamics of the post-Soviet countries that are developing their own democratic models requires looking into their political struggles, social fissures and complexities within their past and present, rather than observing them from the epistemological standpoint. Such a standpoint is criticised in this volume for seeing those countries as locked in one homogenous totalitarian paradigm. The abstractness of the universalist and utopian concept of transition imposed on concrete social relations is criticised, while the theoricisation of democratic ideals is related to the political legitimisation.

© 2009 Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of The Regents of the University of California.

doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2009.04.007
According to the transition theory, the communist countries came out of the Soviet system at the beginning of the 1990’s ‘delayed’ in relation to the democratic achievements of the West. A delayed relationship between Eastern and Western Europe can only be judged through a comparison which lies at the core of transitology: there is a goal at the end of the road which signifies a democratic capitalist state to which all European countries should aspire while all investments undertaken by those countries should be aimed at meeting that goal. However, as Guillermo O’Donnell notices, the distance from democratic consolidation can, in fact, be obstructive to the development of those countries since it traps them in a ‘dependent variable’ and takes their attention from an ‘unsatisfactory present’ towards a promise of still ‘unfulfilled possibilities’ (O’Donnell, 2007: 5). Twenty years after the fall of communism in Europe it is very clear that capitalist democracy has not been fully achieved in the post-Soviet region while the trajectory of changes across particular states has been more varied and more unpredictable than it was imagined by Western scholars. The ‘ghosts of communism’ are still playing their roles in political and economic processes in those countries, and they may be not as scary as transitologists depict them.

Transition scholarship favour homogenous paradigms according to which: “East and Central European societies are best regarded as places where virtually everyone, save a tiny political elite, belongs to the same sociologically faceless and non-descript assemblage” (Fuller, 2000: 587). In recourse to this view the authors in this volume argue that internal differences between post-Soviet countries, their contrasting political and cultural contexts, and the changing landscape of powers which those contexts provoke, create a complex historical system of relations impossible to be analysed on the same ontological level. Through seven analytical arguments, engaging different political and historical circumstances before and after the fall of communism, this volume shows that there is no one road to democracy for all post-communist countries, while generalising their diverse historical and social entanglements in one pot of homogenous experience results in a reductionist view of the past and the abstraction of the present.

The authors in this volume argue that the ‘gap’ between post-communist countries and the conditions of consolidation determined by the West is a negative concept which implies backwardness of the former and the advancement of the latter (see, for example, Rabikowska and Burrell 2009; Garapich et al., 2007). It immediately determines a trajectory of development from abandoning the Eastern local and converting it to the Western global patterns. However, in practice the gap between the current reality and illusory future, cannot be easily bridged (Pi, 1996). This is not because Eastern Europe is not capable of achieving democracy, but due
to a traditional understanding of democracy that imposes one type of development that is transplanted from the West. This volume recognises the impossibility of full in a positive sense as a theory which reveals the illusory assumptions of ‘one type of democracy for all’ derived from bipolar politics and post-Enlightenment philosophy.

The original idea of progressing to a better democratic future goes back to the 17th-century humanist ideals of economic efficiency, rationalism, development, civilising mission, and universal modernisation. The secular, anthropocentric legacy of the Enlightenment, which underpinned the success of colonisation in the following centuries, has been defined by Teodor Shanin as follows:

a powerful and supra-theory that ordered and interpreted everything within the life of humanity — past, present and future. The core of the concept, and its derivations and the images attached to it, have been overwhelmingly simple and straightforward. With a few temporary deviations, all societies are advancing naturally and consistently ‘up’. On a route from poverty, barbarism, despotism and ignorance to riches, civilisation, democracy and rationality, the highest expression of which is science. This is also irreversible from an endless diversity of particularities, wasteful of human energies and economic resources, to a world unified and simplified into the most rational arrangement (Shanin, 1997: 65).

From this perspective a vision of transition to be achieved by post-communist countries presupposes a move to the neo-liberal market and most of all to the consolidation of democracy (O’Donnell, 2007). In this volume, however, the authors agree that liberal democracy does not solve all problems of history and does not reconcile easily the ambition of the West towards pluralism, liberalism, equality, collectivism and individualism. Although the liberal democratic philosophy signifies freedom and independence, it cannot be equalised today with the Jacobean values which demanded an objective sight of history that is no longer available. As Jeremy Gilbert puts it: “it is a myth of liberal democracy that its two principles co-exist naturally: that liberalism and democracy somehow imply each other” (Gilbert, 2007: 45). Twenty years after the fall of communism in Europe the question of what kind of democracy should post-communist countries aspire to is still open. Social changes in the East and economic hardship experienced lately in the West have shown undoubtedly that the idea of a homogenous collective or a liberal society is a mythical project. The fall of the Iron Curtain has proven the provisionality and fragility of political systems. The effects which the world had to face after the fall of the Iron Curtain have spread across all countries regardless of their position on the ‘transitional ladder’, revealing “the hollowness of the whole corpus of the state” (Kothari, 2003: 146). As William Outhwaite and Larry Ray point out, the fall of communism also has special implications for social theory, or more specifically, for our looking into “the way homogeneity and particularity will play themselves out in a world of increasing integration and diversity” (Outhwaite and Ray, 2005: 19).

This volume represents different theoretical points of view, encompassing diverse areas of social and political analyses, yet as a whole all papers lean towards post-structuralism and anti-positivism. Socio-political analyses by Holmes, Ziolo,
Miazhevic and Gayoso that engage with the issues of crime, democratic elections, business management and international relations respectively, map out the crossroads between the local and the Western, the past and the present, where history and politics meet with the contingent effects. The two critical debates on the deterministic role of theory in post-communist studies offer a post-structuralist perspective of interpretation of history. By introducing the categories of political imaginary and subjectivity, Zherebkin in his argument rejects the teleological and elite-oriented perspective on democratisation and social change and instead focuses on explaining the practices of collective resistance to hierarchy and the dominant power. By employing Lacanian psychoanalysis1 to a study of public health policies in Russia, Fotaki unveils the utopian character of both capitalism and communism. And finally, in her textual analysis of Polish films, Mazierska deconstructs the totalising meaning of national myths to show that they do not carry an objective picture of history.

The authors move away from path dependency research but they all acknowledge the relationship between a communist past and capitalistic present, conceptualised in this volume in the same ontological dimension. The ‘ghosts of the past’ are not considered in terms of an obstacle to be overcome on the way to democracy, but rather in broader terms as part of the ontological experience of the people. The authors do not analyse the past or explain the causes of the fall of communism, which has been done before by others (Lane, 1996; Maier, 1997; Szélenyi and Szélényi, 1994; Møller, 2009). They concentrate on current examples from different spheres of life from political, economic, social to cultural in order to view ideologies that limit the operations of democratic values in those areas. Neither past nor present have a “mirror effect” each of which reflects the “other.” The authors challenge a polarised politics of the question, critically proposed by Jadwiga Staniszkis, whether it is correct to measure the crystallisation of democracy either by “the pace of moving toward the model of Western democracy and economy or the degree of moving away from the classical model of real socialism” (Staniszkis, 1991: 181). They argue that such measures do not facilitate the analysis of social changes. Whether it is a direction “toward” or a direction “away” it justifies transition as a historical necessity in the name of the ideal. Such approach, as Fotaki and Zherebkin indicate, implies an ethnocentric and technocratic understanding of social change, which reduces problems of living people to abstract analysis. “The ghosts of the past” play a part on a social and political stage of the real and thus have to be acknowledged and incorporated into the debate of the current direction of the social change. However, being most of the time mythologised as a threat to democracy, ‘ghosts of communism’ have been removed from the scene to give the way to the ideal to come.

---

1 Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), a psychoanalyst and a theorist of language and culture, derived from the Freudian School of psychoanalysis which he later reinterpreted and built his own theory of the subject. Lacan’s subject is continuously split between culture and its symbolic realm and it will never be satisfied or fulfilled. The most significant concept introduced by Lacan is the ‘Mirror Stage’ which was inspired by Freud but enriched by Lacan’s radical understanding of the impossibility of completion of identity. The main selection of his papers is published under the title *Écrits*, from which some are known in English as *Écrits: A Selection* (1977).
In response to the normalisation of the dominant forms of power in the transition discourse, Galina Miazhevich proposes a “holistic” research of business behaviour in post-communist countries (Estonia and Belarus), which is to reveal the reciprocal influence of the local business culture on the expatriated Western models of management in a constantly moving circle. In her temporal and spatial analysis of synchronism between the “importing” and “exporting” of values, she applies a model of intercultural dialogue developed by Lotman (1990), which recognises the dynamics of the breakthrough between continuity and discontinuity. Miazhevich’s argument provides a new insight into the meaning of the history of two post-Soviet countries, Estonia and Belarus, whose diverse cultural and political origins were suppressed for decades by the Soviet reign, but not to disappear completely to the level of homogeneity as many critics claim. Miazhevich questions the very typical reaction of post-communist businesses, which today we frame within path dependency research, of adapting uncritically everything that came from the West (in this case models of management) onto the local ground without considering their economic or social inadequacy. However, 20 years later, this process reveals a complex condition of hybridisation, which challenges the theory of both glocalisation and divergence. Through a detailed structuralist analysis of oral narratives from local entrepreneurs Miazhevich explains this paradoxical ‘clash’ of values and indicates that the absorption of cultural models can never be without reciprocal effect leading to the transformation of both sides. In that sense absorption or adaptation is not a peaceful process but a struggle of antagonisms which cannot be balanced.

The resistance of the male orientated industry in both Estonia and Belarus towards feminist culture imported from the West, already leaking into the professional structures of the local management, is one of many examples of antagonistic reciprocity at work. This oxymoronic reciprocity, identified by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) as the effect of the hegemonic struggle, is rarely emphasised in post-communist studies which tend to see post-Soviet cultures as a passive receiver of democratic models. However, as it has been observed within the EU region after the 2004 extension, hostile reactions of some post-Soviet countries towards European liberal models of democracy are more and more frequent and do not promise harmonious reconciliation in the foreseeable future (Murko et al., 2008). Interestingly, using Lotman’s four-staged method of a temporal and spatial observation of the exchanges between cultural codes, Miazhevich concludes that the last stage of the exchange between the East and the West, when the former impacts the latter, has not yet been crystallised in Estonia and even less in Belarus. From the transitiological perspective, this reinforces the concept of the ‘delay’ of those countries and confirms the lack of their own power to influence the receiving culture. Yet the Lotman’s model enables us to see this process as a constant loop with new effects at each historical turn. From that angle the lack of an East European mark on the Western business culture may be as illusory as the immediate influence of the West on local business. Only from a wider, holistic perspective we can observe and appreciate the dynamism of exchange which may never be completed.
If we accept that the process of completion or consolidation is an open one, we put the problem of political identity of post-communist countries in a different light. Hence, the impossibility of political and cultural identity to be fully constituted ceases to be a threat. In fact a failure of identity to be completed proves to be a necessary condition in the process of open-ended democratic articulation. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) believe that this failure must be recognised as an essential motivation for democratic development even in mature democracies where dual political identity of active strata in society is still constrained by the aspiration of harmony. Despite embracing the openness and dialogue, the perspective of ‘hybridisation of norms’ proposed by Miazhevich does not split from this aspiration, since it points at a future goal to be captured in the universal standards of capitalistic democracy where the “clash” of values is understood in the Habermasian sense as a challenge to be overcome. On the other hand, Zherebkin’s paper reveals that Georgia and Ukraine did not produce democratic ‘rules of the game’ and at the same time managed to give birth to hegemonic resistance denying the possibility of harmonious solution, of which liberal revolution would be a fruit.

In the papers by Fotaki and Zherebkin we can see the influence of the post-structuralist philosophy of Butler, Laclau and Žižek who define the failure of full consolidation in terms of positivity, although it emerges from negativity of non-completion. Therefore ‘failure’ or negativity, becomes an essential and positive requirement of any political struggle in which “the contestatory process determines forms of universality which are brought into a productive and ultimately irresolvable conflict with each other” (Butler et al., 2000: 3). Fotaki and Zherebkin put forward an interventionist proposition of rejecting the power of the Cartesian mind of the intellectual over social relations and moving towards the post-structuralist approach aligned with the critique of idealism. Both researchers agree that it is not possible to maintain the conception of identity as completed totality, required in consolidation or in dialogical projects. Consequently the fissures and clashes which post-Soviet countries experience should be studied in respect to those antagonisms and conflicts rather than unachievable ideals of harmony and fully realised democracy.

In contrast to the Habermasian understanding of the pre-established universality, such as peace or democracy, Zherebkin discovers universality in the unpredictable historically and illogically political resistance of people in Georgia and Ukraine, standing together against their governments during Colour Revolutions (Georgia’s Rose Revolution in 2003 and Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in 2004). In his analysis, Zherebkin looks into carnivalesque motivations for mass mobilisation and identifies new national identity formations in the outburst of the collective agency of the ‘colour revolutionaries’. He rejects the teleology of transition within those post-Soviet countries in favour of revealing the historical simultaneity of the structure-agency’s working towards the mobilisation of political subjectivities and in consequence towards social change. Zherebkin argues that the positivist approach, still dominating in research, has restricted the scope of the analysis of the ‘colour revolutions’ to the domain of the institutionalised paradigms of social change, while the question of formation of collective national identities in the region have been generally left aside. His problematising argument highlights the concern about the
original communist ideals, such as the resistance to hierarchy and the dominant power. From his discussion of the meaning of unity during the carnivalesque revolt in Ukraine, an unspoken question arises: is solidarity of the people in those sudden bloodless rebellions a symptom of the rebirth of collective communist ideas in their most humane sense? That nationally-orientated and patriotic collectivism, which did not contemplate differences of class, ethnicity, gender, or status, shows the detour from traditional liberal revolution. With its overwhelming articulation of national unity, that outburst of political awareness and hope reminds one of the Marxist socialist ideal of self-determination by individual choice, and as such it surprised not only the Western world but most of the countries in the post-communist region, which very rarely have shown resistance in a unified form after 1991.

Recognising the productive meaning of negativity underlying political contestation is also Fotaki’s aim. In her paper on public health policy development in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, she employs psychoanalysis to show that democratic projects should not be deluded by mythical desires of social harmony, rationalism, utilitarianism and integration. In her opposition to totalitarian theories, she follows the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, a philosopher and psychoanalyst, who developed a highly original conception of history as an imaginary creation originating in the crossroads of ‘psychical monad’ (individual psyche) and society (Castoriadis, 1987/2005), which he called social imaginary. By applying psychoanalysis Mariana Fotaki shows that neither of the “utopian” system – capitalism and communism – are capable to offer a fulfilment of expectations and desires which people seek in them. She argues that fantasy produces illusory motivations for political projects and thus should be considered as their constitutive element. Through her analysis of public policies she demonstrates that fantasy can take a perilous form when applied on a mass scale, like in social utilitarianism under communism or in the philosophy of a free market under capitalism. In the unfulfilled conflict of a struggling psyche, or, in Freud’s words, of a ruptured subject torn between reality and fantasy, Fotaki sees a metaphor of the social and political contradictions from which the utopian systems suffer.

The failure of the Russian health care system, after two historical transformations: from pre-industrialism to socialism and then from socialism to free market, reveals the “disowned subjectivity” of the contested government and public institutions which are expected to provide “sublimated” care, especially in the areas where disease and dying cause unresolved anxieties. However, in its attempts to apply regulations to safeguard some essential competitive conditions when market elements are implemented, the Russian government also tries to achieve distributional outcomes that may be desired by the society. In this way the state health care system under capitalism always contributes to inequalities and discrepancies between both groups, patients and investors, and renders its own position ambiguous. Fotaki attracts our attention to the fact that the Russian state regulates corruption within the health care system, which should be free of charge. Yet this is only a façade which provides the illusion of free care to everyone, but in reality it condones the unethical practice of paying for public services ‘under the table’, which Fotaki defines as “state sponsored violence”. Alongside the effect of the exclusion of those
people who cannot afford paying for “free” services, this system “turns out to be no less tyrannical and no less totalitarian in its intent than the legacy of the communist ideology it opposes” (Fotaki).

Through their interventionist analyses, Fotaki and Zherebkin invite the reader to suspend the linear positivist thinking about progress and consolidation and offer instead a study of the limits of historical applicability in which such concepts are expressed. Zherebkin proposes a critical review of the postulates of the ‘transition paradigm’ which he considers to be responsible for the separation between the ‘transitologists’ and post-communist studies. He sees, like Fotaki, the emancipatory potential in acknowledging the positive value of the impossibility of full consolidation. Their understanding of essentiality lies in the acceptance of antagonism (ergo negativity) as being a condition of any progress or action and, what follows, the acceptance of the irrecuperable fragmentation of state identities in the post-Soviet region.

The unpredictability of historical change and the contingency of political systems, which such critiques bring to light, may be in some ways threatening to notions of identity and historical continuity. The changing forms of Russia’s role in the post-Soviet region can be received as a threat to the clarity of the democratic project and to the dialectics of the relations between Eastern Europe and the West. Carmen A. Gayoso provides examples from Russia’s history and from its latest relations with other post-Soviet states, which show that there is no obvious prescription to Russia’s behaviour while some of its political strategies are more rhetorical than real. In her response to the crude dichotomy between anarchy and hierarchy, strongly rooted in political science, Gayoso argues that Russia’s current role in the region does not have sharp boundaries and varies in form and in intensity. Although there are enduring factors in Russian foreign policy, especially in the four research areas — stabilising borders, economic interest, unification of fellow Slavs and fluctuating alliances — it is possible to discern that they do not account for conjunctural determinants of the political profile Russia adapts in different situations. To enable a discussion of the intensities of hierarchy, Gayoso introduces a post-structuralist and post-dyadic interpretation of the international system hereby regarded as ‘fluid’ and changeable. In that sense Gayoso meets with Fotaki and Zherebkin in their criticism of the totality of identity and historical determinism. The dynamic and ‘fluid’ relations which Russia has with other countries in the region and with the West reveal grey areas in dialectically conceived political projects, such as independent states, hegemonies, and empires, and consequently undermine the concept of typologisation.

Gayoso rejects a utopian view of state relationships which guarantee the continuity of the state identity and systemic predictability. By critiquing tsarist imperialism, socialist legacy and the current conflicts between Russia and post-Soviet states, Gayoso repudiates the totality of Russia’s imperialist identity and reveals relational tensions between continuity and discontinuity at various levels within the past and the present. In recourse to the mobility of the post-Cold War anti-polar effect, the external politics aimed at Russia’s neighbours exposes the myth of a “natural” or historically-intrinsic friend or foe, which in fact changes every time
when security implications or systemic developments fluctuate in the region to stipulate certain reactions. Following “a fluid anarchy–hierarchy” spectrum of political identities created by Adam Watson (1990, 1992), Gayoso argues that empires, like pure independent states, cannot exist in their absolute form whilst political articulation can only take place in “grey areas” where entities are apprehended in an interactive process that dissolves boundaries.

As expressed by Gayoso, Zherebkin, Fotaki and Miazhevich, the unending process of identification puts into question the possibility of consolidation, yet it reveals the constant displacement of qualities that take over from one another in a series of relays. Karolina Ziolo contributes to this stand with her analysis of continuities and discontinuities within Polish politics in the first decade after the fall of communism in 1989 within which the leaders of the pro-communist party — the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) came to power in the second (1995) and third (2000) democratic election. Their victory is interpreted by Ziolo as the effect of unsettlement and reshuffling of powers at that time, but also in terms of the conscious strategy to reinstate the European heritage and access to the EU. The link with a prewar and pre-communist past, when Poland was a capitalist country strengthening its political and economic position in the heart of Europe, was evoked for political purposes by the leftist LSD, which launched and finalised fruitfully the accession plans in 2004, thus catapulting Poland directly onto a plane of equal partnership with other states in the EU. Having constituted the alliance of the leftist forces in the country, at the same time SLD has demonstrated a very strong association with the European communist legacy, such as the Second International and other pro-socialist contemporary movements in the West. This continuity with communist history was openly shown in the Party’s manifestoes and concretised in participation of the same individuals who played active roles on the political scene during the Soviet reign, namely, among others: Aleksander Kwasniowski, Leszek Miller, and Józef Oleksy.

In her paper Ziolo puts this interesting juxtaposition of continuity and discontinuity under critique to suggest that the success of the Left so soon after the fall of communism in Poland owed as much to the politicians’ conscious strategy of linking with a European past as to the contingent interjection of circumstances which helped them to win. Considering that their successful election followed the first democratic presidential election won by Lech Walesa and the original Solidarity movement, it was a surprisingly short period during which the political landscape was completely refurbished with a pro-communist party to dominate for the next 10 years. In fact it surprised even the main players themselves whose apprehensive statements Ziolo quotes in her paper.

Ziolo’s analysis of the original documents issued between 1990 and 2001 by the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdRP) and the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) highlights the ambiguity of the role of a founding election on the trajectory of the state to democracy. If after the fall of communism the initial reaction of the electorate in Poland was towards the trade unionists, the Church and rightist traditions of democracy, which merged in the process of building up the resistance movement, the second and third turnouts were evidently opposite, showing the inclination towards the “ghosts of the past” which seemed by then to have lost their political currency.
In her explication of that peculiar ideological gambit, Zioło refers to the social and cultural conditions of that time, which were changing at a different pace than the formal state-led strategies. Although both planes do overlap, it is difficult to define a degree of nostalgia, disappointment, or confusion among the population which blurred a vision of the democratic project heralded from two opposite poles by the competing parties. Like in many other post-communist countries it is also difficult to state which election was really a founding one, the first one or the two that followed, and what criteria should be applied in assessing their meaning in the further implementation of democracy. According to M. Stephen Fish (1998) it would be the three main relationships between the consequences of that election and the next steps to democracy measured by:

1. the development of autonomous societal organisations, analysed in terms of strength, density and differentiation of political parties and the structure of civil rights;
2. the extent to which constitution concentrates power (the greater the concentration, the weaker democracy); and
3. the scale of economic reform (the more advanced reform, the more advanced democracy) which determine the democratic path.

However, what Fish and other influential authors (Diamond and Plattner, 2002; Bunce, 2003; Ekiert and Hanson, 2003) take into account in their diagnosis of the transition from communist rule is mainly the post-1989 condition of the country while the pre-fall circumstances are largely omitted. The reasons behind the succession of the pro-communist alliance which became a vanguard of the progressive international pro-EU policy in Poland have to be analysed firstly in the retrospective to the fall and secondly in parallel to the changing situation in the country.

Throughout its political reign, the Democratic Left Alliance was drawing upon different historical traditions. In 1993, for example, its members defined themselves as the heirs of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), established in the 19th-century, but simultaneously Leszek Miller (the chairman of SLD from 1999 to 2004 and Prime Minister of Poland from 2001 to 2004) saw the Party’s roots in the “democratic and pluralistic Europe, which created some level of protection from the right wing autocracy, which existed in Polish politics from the beginning of a transformation period”. Zioło interprets this ideological flexibility in terms of a continuous search for the identity of the first post-1989 coalition, “which wanted to be regarded as a legitimate social democratic European party, not just a post-communist formation” (Zioło). However, it could not find a long-term prospect to its identification and eventually could not respond to the criteria of the democratic progress mentioned above. Zioło challenges progression theory by highlighting the inefficiency of the victorious Left once the EU accession was completed. The political impasse of the leftist coalition (SdRP and SLD) and a strategic void after 2004 left the party unattractive to their loyal audience who were then waiting for internal reforms which the coalition did not know how to tackle. Her paper also confirmed
the precariousness of the results of the initial elections that should be seen “within
the context of the developing situation” (Gill, 2002: 23). As Graeme Gill put it:
“[T]he elections did not independently restructure the political situation. Rather,
what they did was to embed in the political system the changing balance of political
forces that was already underway in each country” (Gill, 2002: 23).

Within post-communist studies it has been agreed that on the way to democracy
the initial stage is always most dramatic and involves living in chaos, uncertainty,
political upheaval and rapid changes, which need time to be appeased and structured.
In that sense by arguing that the characteristic feature of the new democracy is
its instability and unpredictability, Ziolo’s paper articulates this overarching view
recognised by all the authors in this volume as the main effect of the collapse of the
communist rule. However, Holmes’ detailed argument also shows that 20 years after
the departure point for development, the reverse logic of the falling amplitude is
difficult to sustain in the post-Soviet region. The internal cultural differences, new
political and economic solutions imposed from the outside, ethnic acrimony,
historical conflicts reopened in the present, and daily confrontations with the new
Western order do produce unpredictable conflicts and contribute to the increase of
crime, organised crime, and corruption. On the other hand, there is also some
evidence that those countries which have joined the EU have managed to combat
corruption ratios to a greater extent than those which have not. This fact can be
regarded as a proof of the positive influence of the EU’s control and an increasing
stabilisation of democratic policies in those countries, yet Holmes also acknowledges
that the statistical finding on which this evidence is based is very suspect and hardly
consistent from year to year. A pool of information the statistical offices can offer is
not highly reliable and final conclusions must be speculative. This is mainly due to
the discrepancies between the methods each country applies and the lack of
consistency in implementing common research across the post-communist region.
Holmes’ argument also shows how difficult is to achieve the co-operation between
the post-communist countries and how different their engagement with the European
common laws, launched to track crime across Europe from one country to another.
Despite certain similarity of attitude imbued by ‘the ghosts of the past’ and the
unwillingness of the post-Soviet population to report to the police, the interpretation
and the application of anti-crime strategies differs substantially even among
government structures. When depicting the figures of the falling crime rates among
CEE countries, Holmes expresses some dose of optimism which he associates with
the slow pace to consolidation. Yet a significant value of his argument lies in the
exhaustive analysis of fragmented data which demarcate the limits of the picture
drawn at the end. Holmes acknowledges the contradictions, inaccuracies and gaps in
the evidence he provides and does state at the end: “it is difficult to discern a general
pattern across the post-communist world.”

Holmes’ widely ranging methodology, deploying statistics, history, economy and
politics enables us to pose a question about the influence of theory on reality.
Following the Khunian logic of the impact of applied theory on research results, we
could assume that if the evidence provided speaks in favour of some CEE countries,
those countries in the future will be more apt to achieve democracy, while those that
are defined below the line of democratic consolidation will be more likely to stay there. Therefore, producing and securing reliable data would be of utmost importance if speculations are to be avoided. Yet it is still possible to imagine that certain attempts at determining conclusions about those countries play the role of the determinant and thus constrain those countries from breaking the schema of predictable (non)development. That is also what Fotaki and Zherebkin try to imply in their rejection of methodological objectivism. As we have learnt from the post-structuralist research paving its way in the field of post-communist studies, there are different angles to this assumption that attract with its awareness of the limits of theory on the one hand and discourages with its conceptual defencelessness on the other one. In this volume the stress is put on the former rather than the latter, which results in a self-reflective understanding of social change, as well as a contextual revision of historical narrative.

The problem of diverse interpretations of historical accounts, which all authors have to face, is critically analysed by Ewa Mazierska who questions the objectivity of the national myths of Polish martial law and the Solidarity movement. In her textual study of Polish films produced between the 1960's and 2007, Mazierska emphasises the importance of insight into the historical narratives before the collapse of communism to see “them as they were then, not as they are today” (Mazierska). Her take on continuity and discontinuity refers to (mis)interpretation of reality, in this case, comparable with a propagandist filtering of “truth” for ideological purposes. While adopting this cultural position, Mazierska deploys myths in a historical context. The films she discusses are the responses to the historical changes of those times and she is interested in how this historical frame determines the changes and why the results are so different. The fact that historical “truth” is interpreted or manipulated by different directors in a subjective way does not mean that their narratives can be interpreted beyond history. Although their accounts of the same historical events are inconsistent from one film to another and even contradictory, Mazierska sees in that collision a promising attempt at struggling with the grand myths of the Polish nation, such as patriotism, martyrology, Catholicism, and unity of workers, that dominated Polish film until martial law; and also a struggle with meta-narratives in a cinematic sense, mainly mastered by Andrzej Wajda and Kazimierz Kutz. Mazierska identifies these inner antagonisms within Polish cinema along the lines of the divide between the modernist and postmodernist style of cinematic representation.

Postmodernist perspective (in fact developing in parallel to the modernist one) favouring pastiche, comedy, and travesty, proves vulnerability of the history of Solidarity and martial law to manipulation and mythologisation. In films directed by Wionczek, Checinski, Tym and Munk history is conceived of many different and equally valid narratives which herald the multitude of memories and witnesses to emerge after 1989. Today, colliding interpretations of grand narratives of resistance, martial law, Solidarity and the Round Table participate in cultural circle and constitute political discourses on both the left and the right. To the disappointment of many, the grandiosity of the past in postmodernist film has undergone a cinematic disenchantment and unveiled the ordinariness and ugliness of the mythical times.
The low and pragmatic motivations of the resistance leaders, fortuitous actions and incidental decisions have been presented in those films as contingent contributors to social and political change, while the validity of testimonials from witnesses and participants has been diluted in the flow of fragmented and incoherent memories which question objectivity and disavow claims for truth. Mazierska argues that this postmodernist representation of history in Polish cinema is a bridge to the wider context of post-1989 reality within which irreconcilable narratives, or as she says, “a series of juxtaposing, clashing and synthesising” accounts have become the only source of knowledge about the past.

Interestingly, Mazierska admits that there is one interweaving type of continuity across both the modernist and postmodernist cinema, namely gender discrimination, surviving the fall of communism without significant revision. The roles of women represented in the discussed films have been enclosed within the prototype of the nurse, mother or lover who hardly ever actively participate in history, but instead sacrifice proudly for the sake of the fighting men (Rabikowska, 2003). This traditional patriarchal picture of gender roles has been perpetuated in Poland throughout its pre-Soviet and its contemporary history (Titkow and Domaniński, 1995; Janion, 2006). In this sense Polish culture shows a similarity and continuity with the anti-feminist culture of Estonia and Belarus, which Miazhevich critiqued in this volume in her analysis of Estonian and Belarusian businesses. As some historical and social studies indicate (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2002; Szymańczak, 1995; Watson, 1993), this prejudice is very characteristic of post-Soviet countries, but it has to be researched in a much broader context than communism or capitalism.

The authors in this volume have tried to show that the relationship between the communist past and the capitalist present is not as synergetic and straightforward as would appear in transitology. The multifaceted condition of the post-Soviet countries and the complex nature of democracy per se disrupt the linearity of transition. In the opinion of the Harvard economist, Bruce Scott, capitalism does not need to imply democracy, and in fact the free market can even damage it, whilst social antagonisms can inspire a completely different route which may disobey democracy in its known form (Scott, 2001). It is quite obvious today that the objective benefit of liberal democracy implies essentiality, which reduces diverse subjects to manifestations of a unified and universal value. However, the antagonistic interests in each country, along political and social creativity of citizens, and changing international relations do not allow universalism to win without the poignant effects of exclusion and fragmentation. The pressure coming from the ideal of universality of democracy has been experienced by the political and social environments, as analysed by Gayoso, Miazhevich, Ziolo, and Holmes. As Fotaki and Zherebkin indicated above, in the idealist theories drawing upon post-Enlightenment orthodoxies, such as Marx’s and Hegel’s, history, society and social agents come from the same essence “which operates as their principle of unification” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 21). Although it is quite illogical to argue that the dialectical premises of Western democracy — pluralism and collectivism can be harmonised in the same political system (Canovan, 2004), this is exactly what grants its supremacy exercised in the name of advanced civilisation, human nature, and progress — the ideals identified in
this volume as illusory in their totalising promise. When imposed onto post-communist and ‘underdeveloped’ countries, those values emphasise the ‘gap’ between the East and the West. As long as the meaning of history is understood “to be the realisation of civilisation, that is of the form of Western European man” (Vatimo, 1992: 3), the non-Western countries do not have a chance to satisfy the ideals of democracy on all expected levels.

The authors of this volume are aware of the historicity and the contingency of this presumption, as much as of the limits of their own theories. Therefore they rely on interpretation which does not require dismantling history into particular developmental stages and they see history through a continuous process of disruptions and disjunctions of which they are active agents themselves. This approach results in the critique of subjectivity and its practical efficacy, thus undermining a Marxian theory of praxis, moving political science onto a level of ontology. In summary, this volume reinterprets the neo-Kantian distinction between objectivity and ‘real life’ in favour of the synthesis of the ontological and the social. It also detours from the Kantian concept of a universal, pre-constituted subject, playing a discursive part in the transition theory, where it stands as the signifier of ‘the underdeveloped’ or ‘the delayed’, and points our attention to the fact that transition was not conceived as a cultural process, but rather as a system of universally applicable technical and pragmatic interventions.

References


