Bönker, Müller, & Pickel's "Towards a New Paradigm in Transitology Postcommunist Transformation and the Social Sciences: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWS


The democratic transformation of the former communist states in Central and Eastern Europe constitutes a widely researched area in the social sciences. Academic and public policy interest in the field is motivated by the specifics of the political development of the region since 1989, otherwise broadly defined as a transition to democracy. Eastern Europe comprises a distinct subset of democratic transitions, a newcomer and a major consecutive instance of the third wave of democratization commenced in 1974. The region represents also a significant challenge to democratic theory, comparative politics research, and international politics. Political discontinuity, system transformation and political change, as well as social justice and conflict management in the unique geopolitical setting of Central and Eastern Europe became a critical test of the capacity of theoretical and analytical constructs to explain, guide, and predict the progressive accomplishment of democratic transition. Against the background of structural change in the international system, the accelerated pace of transformation in Eastern Europe produced a unique momentous feedback and critical reevaluation of the approaches followed. In conceptual and methodological terms, it questioned the entire transition paradigm. The problems posed by the practical implementation of political and economic approaches to democratic transformation and the lessons learned from this experience in turn reshaped the existing conceptual frameworks applied by both theoreticians and practitioners of reform.

Among conceptual approaches to democratization in Eastern Europe neoliberalism established itself as the paradigm of transition, and, arguably, subsequently failed to maintain a fundamental explanatory matrix of political development and social change. Postcommunist Transformation and the Social Sciences: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches, a collection of papers presented at a conference in Berlin, constitutes a major reevaluation of the dominant paradigm and of the puzzles and anomalies with which it is confronted. The volume consists of thirteen individual chapters presenting distinct theoretical and methodological perspectives from public economics, social theory, comparative politics, international relations, institutionalism, and synthetic frameworks.

The overarching question which all essays ultimately address, is: how does theory and its conceptual boxes deal with novelty and with social dynamics which remain unpredicted or unexplained by existing theories? Most of the authors concur with contributor Béla Greskovits that normal-science transitology of the postcommunist period has made a very limited contribution to understanding social change. It has engaged in puzzle-solving but failed to resolve the anomalies of political development presented by the crises of transition: recession, state failure, and undermined social structures. “At the end of the twentieth century history luckily surprised social scientists with a complex laboratory that allows the undertaking of new intellectual experiments,” contends Greskovits. “So far, however, social scientists have been capable of little more than repeating their predecessors’ visions, and teaching contradictory results.” (p. 242). This verdict closely resonates with Thomas Carothers’ argument, advanced elsewhere, that the transition paradigm should be discarded due to the reality “crash” of its core assumptions. In line with such reasoning, this book aspires not only to conduct the search towards

1The period between 1974 and the early 1990s is generally referred to as “the third wave of democratization” in line with Samuel Huntington’s argument about the distinctiveness of the political transition towards democracy in a global context since the mid-seventies. See Samuel Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

novel approaches to transformation studies but also to contribute towards a new paradigmatic consensus within the social science research community.

Several essays reassess key conceptual tools and approaches to the study of transitions in order to correct for the inadequacies of the neoliberal paradigm. Kazimierz Z. Poznanski contends that the state with its crises, dysfunction, and failures in the transition process remains in the center of postcommunist transformation. The market-based orthodoxy of neoliberalism, which takes the functioning state for granted, has failed to explain variation due to differences in state institutional capacity and performance. Further in that direction, Bruno Grancelli and Martin Raiser contribute to the reversal of neoliberal assumptions by advocating an actor-based approach to transition, rather than path-dependency on existing structures. Grancelli reopening the black box of politics by studying social and economic networks in which hybrid forms of coordination evolve beyond the state-market dichotomy. The key actors in transition operate through novel networks creating human capital and investing it in local institutions. Similarly, Raiser defines the new type of leadership in terms of social trust and its determinants. A neoliberal-style entrepreneurship is thus replaced by agency in a socially rich context. Through the lens of case study inquiry, Peter Rutland underlines the need to seek solutions to individual transitions beyond the universalistic rules of the market. Comparative economics, the author contends, may be positionally useful in suggesting transition paths; however, nonmarket methods as well as regional approaches anchored in geopolitics and local conditions constitute a more viable alternative.

These essays illustrate the value of multidisciplinary perspectives on democratic transition and are representative of the significant contribution which the book makes in that direction. The plurality of approaches adopted by the authors is far from amorphous, however, thanks to an overall consensus on the importance of social institutions. In light of the increased complexity of social interaction under the constraints of policy reform, several authors elaborate on the need to redefine institutions in a social context, beyond market-based models. Institutional innovation is the core of transformation as it blends together the state, society, property rights, markets, networks, actors, and moral resources.

Willfried Spohn contends that the likelihood of a revival of nationalism, ethnic conflict, and non-democratic forms of government remains unaccounted for by the transition paradigm and “thin” versions of social theory. By introducing individual cultural context, identity factors in actors’ preference formation, and agency in nation-building, Spohn considerably expands the explanatory matrix and once again points to the obsolescence of modernization theory and its neoliberal version as transition paradigm. Spohn contends that democratic transitions are the product of “particular developmental trajectories with interrelated social structures and social actors as well as with changing internal components and external conditions.” (p. 216). Obviously, the market-based philosophy of neoliberalism failed due to its reductionism and monocausality.

By introducing pluralist approaches with a specific focus on social factors and consequences, the authors successfully resolve the complex triangular relationship state—market—democracy. They converge in their conclusions on the role of social and political institutions in postcommunist transition in Eastern Europe. Such research outcome may be interpreted as an instance of the recurrent (or standing) consensus within the scientific community on Samuel Huntington’s classic thesis of the role of complex institutionalization as the essence of political development.\(^3\)

Although empirical analysis suggests that neoliberalism has failed, the distinct subset of postcommunist transitology has not. As the authors’ commentaries to Greskovits suggest, claims to the effect that democratic transformation in Eastern Europe has stalled, lacks efficacy, or follows along uncertain and unchartered paths may be premature. The IMF and the World Bank readjusted their programs along the lines of conceptual and operational flexibility which most contributors to the book under review recommend as a remedy to the abstract institutional isomorphism of the early transition. In critical segments of Eastern Europe, postcommunist transition is on the road to success. International factors and conditions have acted as a powerful anchor and corrective to democratic transformation. They practically redefined the transition paradigm. The democratization of Eastern Europe emerged as a true process of “authoritative allocation of values” to produce a Kuhnian-type scientific consensus on

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a new paradigm, that of integration. The book will serve as a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners of democratic reform by providing conceptual richness, empirically based theoretical innovation, and methodological refinement to the paradigmatic study of postcommunist transition.

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It seems that in Western Europe and America the interdisciplinary approach to knowledge has of late been gaining in popularity. This is particularly true in two domains of knowledge that are of interest to the readers of REE, religion and philosophy. Philosophy has virtually ceased to have an independent identity, and has largely become the discipline of analyzing other disciplines. This is seen in the very names of many of the philosophy courses taught at most universities: philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, medical ethics, philosophy of law, etc. The interdisciplinary study of religion has likewise become commonplace. Religious thought has been stimulated by interdisciplinary interaction with philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, historiography, the natural sciences, aesthetics, text-critical studies, and other intellectual disciplines. This growth in interdisciplinary thought may reflect a growing liberalization of the Western mind (the term “liberal” is used here in its classical sense, without reference to political or theological positions). When a mind is given increased freedom, and when it becomes more used to this freedom, it becomes more open to hearing what other disciplines have to say about its own area of interest and specialization. When it discovers that other disciplines can make valuable contributions to its own projects, it embraces interdisciplinary study.

An interesting question is whether or not the growth of interdisciplinary study seen in Western Europe and America has any counterpart in Eastern Europe and the republics formed from the Soviet Union. Several factors might incline one to expect a lack of interdisciplinary thought in this region, including the lack of intellectual freedom under the former socialist governments of the region, the present political uncertainties and economic hardships, and the more conservative nature of the popular culture and religious institutions. However, there are also factors that contribute to a positive climate for interdisciplinary thought. These include the intellectual freedom now enjoyed in many of the countries of this region, the increased ability to travel outside of the region, and perhaps most of all, the ability to communicate quickly and affordably with people from around the world via email and the World Wide Web.

My own impression, formed while living in Eastern Europe for 21 months, is that interdisciplinary study of philosophy and of religion does exist, and that it is growing. One piece of evidence for this is the book under review. It is an orchestrated collection of articles united by two main elements: the shared topic of religion, and the relationship of all of the contributors to the city Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Each of the contributors to the volume has some close connection to Cluj-Napoca, a principle Romanian educational center, most of them living in Cluj at the time of publication. Each contributor also has a unique area of academic specialization, thus making the book a pluriperspectival examination of religion by authors within the same geographical and cultural region.

The articles reflect the specializations of the various contributors. Each author has contributed an article that in some way brings his or her own specialization to bear on the study of religion. Many of the contributors are from the philosophy department of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, while others are from other departments of the same university or other schools within the city. The contributors from the philosophy department of BBU are, first, Marcel Bodea, who is a doctoral candidate at the University of Bucharest and instructor of epistemology in the Chair of Systematic Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy of Babeș-Bolyai University. Bodea writes about the differences and similarities between scientific knowledge and religious knowledge. Second, Aurel Codoban, who is a professor of philosophy of religion in the Chair of Systematic Philosophy at BBU, writes about the Gnostic elements in popular Romanian Christianity. Third, Vasile Frâțeanu, who is a professor of philosophy of culture and chairs the Systematic Philosophy section of the philosophy department of BBU, contributes an article arguing that philosophy is in a unique position to make possible a

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