

Postcommunist studies: once again through the looking glass (darkly)?

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Discussion of what is '(post)-Soviet studies' has become one of the most lively sub-fields of the discipline (if, indeed, it is a discipline), reflecting the mood of introspection and self-doubt that prevails in the area today.¹ What precisely, is the subject in question?² There is no consensus even over the name. The title of this short review was initially set as 'post-Soviet studies'. Although from the outset aware of the shortcomings of the term, it was only as I began to think how to approach the subject that I realised that it was impossible—or at least profoundly misleading—to work under such a rubric. The concept of 'Soviet' grounds the emerging discipline too narrowly in the experience of a single country. The notion of 'post-Sovietology' is also emerging as a contender to describe the field, but that is doubly misleading, inheriting at best a mixed intellectual baggage and controversial legacy of the original subject of 'Sovietology', now compounded by the addition of the prefix 'post'. The subject is indeed as much about the terms it uses and the methodologies it applies as it is about the events and processes it describes.

There is, however, a tentative way forward. The notion of 'postcommunist studies' appears to do justice to the field. It retains the 'post' element because we are indeed working in the shadow of the communist experiment, attempting to understand its philosophical roots, historical trajectory, social transformations, anthropological minutiae and ethnographic configuration, economic principles and operation, political practices and international relations, and above all its legacy in all these areas. The broad field of comparative communism was one of the most fruitful ways of studying the development of the societies concerned, and today the idea of comparative postcommunism once again stresses the commonality of many of the problems facing countries coming to terms with the state socialist experiment while allowing detailed focus on the particular experience of each one. It absorbs the insights of comparative politics while focusing on the specifics of the regions and the particularities of individual countries. Of course, the notion of postcommunist studies is very broad, and perhaps fails to identify a disciplinary core, but at least it provides a useful handle on the subject.

Postcommunist studies encompasses a field of 27 countries in Europe-Asia that have exited communism with greater or lesser success, while another six are undergoing what might be called the self-transcendence of communism. In China the communist regime is introducing capitalism, while in Vietnam, too, there are greater

¹ For a good collection of analyses, see Daniel Orlovsky (ed.), *Beyond Soviet Studies* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995).

² For an earlier attempt to come to terms with the question, see my 'Russian Studies: The Fractured Mirror', *Politics*, 16:3 (1996), pp. 175–86.

openings to the market, as there are now in Laos. Mongolia has unequivocally taken the capitalist path, and equally decisively North Korea has not, although the scale of recent intra-Korean contacts is often underestimated in the West. In Cuba, Fidel Castro's forty-year old regime is unlikely to astonish us all by reforging the link between socialism and democracy, and will therefore in all likelihood continue to stagnate until a new generation of leaders perhaps find a way of reviving Cuban society. The changes in some or all of these societies are examined in a new generation of 'postcommunist' books.³

There is a rich literature, focusing on social theory, that tries to come to terms with the reasons for the failure of the communist experiment.⁴ In France two books have been particularly stimulating, with the second, *The Black Book of Communism*, having provoked enormous controversy as the French left was forced to come to terms with its own illusions.⁵ Thus we come to one of the central issues in the development of the original field of 'Soviet studies', and an issue that is far from resolved: the relationship of knowledge and power. More specifically, to what extent was the academic discipline (if a discipline it was) of 'Sovietology' an accomplice (on whichever side) in the various conflicts that we designate as the Cold War? To what extent did the methodology, the philosophy and the concerns of the subject reflect not the search for objective truth (however unattainable, the attempt to achieve some sort of objective truth is at the heart of scholarly life) but enlistment in partisan struggles? Did explanation give way to exculpation?⁶ Did Soviet Studies, quite simply, 'get it wrong'?⁷

This is not the place to rehearse the trajectory of Western Sovietology, but only to note that the debate over the record of the subject now tends to focus on the question of prediction: why were specialists unable to predict the demise of the USSR? The debate has been as bitter as it has been unenlightening (these two characteristics, of course, are not unconnected). On the one hand, so-called conservatives have charged 'revisionists' (those who abandoned the notion of totalitarianism as a useful tool to explain post-Stalinist USSR) with having failed

³ Karen Henderson and Neil Robinson, *Post-Communist Politics: An Introduction* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997) focus on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; Leslie Holmes, *Post-Communism: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) examines the key themes of postcommunism; while my *Postcommunism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1999), takes a broad theoretical look at the issue.

⁴ Johann P. Arnason, *The Future that Failed: Origins and Destinies of the Soviet Model* (London: Routledge, 1993); Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure: the Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1989); Robert V. Daniels, *The End of the Communist Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1993); Leslie Holmes, *The End of Communist Power: Anti-Corruption Campaigns and Legitimation Crisis* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993); Walter Laqueur, *The Dream that Failed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); David Lane, *The Rise and Fall of State Socialism: Industrial Society and the Socialist State* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Larry Ray, *Social Theory and the Crisis of State Socialism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996); Robert Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse? Understanding Historical Change* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); Hillel Ticktin, *Origins of the Crisis in the USSR: Essays on the Political Economy of a Disintegrating System* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992).

⁵ François Furet, *Le Passé d'une Illusion: Essai sur l'Idée Communiste au XXe siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont/Calmann-Lévy, 1995); Stéphane Courtois (ed.), *Le Livre Noir du Communisme: Crimes, Terreur et Répression* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997).

⁶ The issue is discussed from various angles in Michael Cox (ed.), *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, the Death of Communism and the New Russia* (London and New York: Pinter, 1998).

⁷ The question is phrased in this way by Michael Cox in his 'Introduction' to Cox (ed.), *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse*, p. 3.

sufficiently to stress the points of weakness and decay in the old regime;⁸ while those who had embraced perhaps more pluralistic and certainly more open-ended approaches to Soviet development (above all, the younger generation of so-called ‘revisionist’ social historians) riposted that the conservatives, in exaggerating the coherence of the ‘totalitarian’ USSR, had been equally unable to spot the weaknesses that led to its fall.

There are both ontological issues involved, the nature of the USSR, and epistemological ones—how best could Soviet society have been studied? The two, of course, are connected. The gradual shift in the post-Stalin years towards a less dogmatic post-totalitarian approach, as Shlapentokh notes, meant that Soviet Studies ‘became increasingly inclined towards studying the small and the measurable rather than the large and the theoretical’.⁹ There are still no adequate syntheses of broadly sociological accounts of Soviet development and decay, whereby modernisation provoked an incompatibility between social realities and political practices, and more broadly political/institutional approaches.¹⁰ The debate between ‘societal’ and ‘institutional’ approaches to post-Soviet change continues.¹¹

More broadly, the very meaning of ‘Sovietology’ has been contested. How far back does it reach or was it mainly concerned with contemporary issues? Did it cover just the Soviet Union or all other communist countries? Was it mainly focused on political science or did it subsume all other disciplines concerned with the study of the area? Aryeh Unger notes the contrast between, on the one hand, Sovietology as a subfield of a single discipline and, on the other, as a collection of subfields, where it became Soviet Studies.¹² He is absolutely right to stress that we need to specify what we mean by ‘Sovietology’, and indeed (although he does not put it this way) its probably still-born offspring ‘Post-Sovietology’. As he notes, ‘The problem . . . is not in the name, but the name is part of the solution’.¹³ Post-Soviet Studies has a future to the limited technical degree that it deals with the Soviet period, but not for much else. There is little intellectual ‘spring’, as it were, in attempting to constrain the enormous diversity and challenges facing scholars in studying the past and present of the region, including its philosophical and political interaction with the West and others, in the rather wooden framework of ‘post-Soviet studies’. The underlying issue provoking the ‘crisis of scholarly consciousness in Slavic and Russian studies’, as identified by Laura Engelstein, is indeed the critique of Enlightenment certainties and the distinctive East European angle on this. In Engelstein’s words:

⁸ The exemplary article in this respect is Martin Malia, ‘To the Stalin Mausoleum’, *Daedalus*, 119:1 (1990); while Robert Conquest, whose courageous record in analysing what was central to the Soviet system is second to none, reiterated some of the points, ‘Academe and the Soviet Myth’, in John H. Moore (ed.), *Legacies of the Collapse of Marxism* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1994).

⁹ Vladimir Shlapentokh, ‘Soviet Society and American Sovietologists: A Study in Failure?’, in Cox (ed.), *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse*, p. 103.

¹⁰ A ‘neo-institutional’ approach to the issue is Philip G. Roeder, *Red Sunset: The Failure of Soviet Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹¹ See Harry Eckstein, Frederic J. Fleron Jr., Erik P. Hoffmann and William M. Reissinger, *Can Democracy Take Root in Post-Soviet Russia? Explorations in State-Society Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

¹² Aryeh L. Unger, ‘On the Meaning of “Sovietology”’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 31:1 (1998), p. 20. His discussion presents a concise and comprehensive survey of the main issues, including an exhaustive bibliography of the main works dealing with ‘Sovietology’.

¹³ Unger, ‘On the Meaning of “Sovietology”’, p. 26.

All of us in the humanities are rethinking assumptions and explanatory schemes. Russianists have their own issues and an ideologically burdened set of paradigms with which to deal, but our doubts about how to proceed, or about what it is we are supposed to be understanding, are not peculiar to us.¹⁴

The great boom in American Sovietology coincided with the onset of the Cold War, but the roots of the discipline lay in the Second World War and America's engagement in the world at large as inter-war isolationism gave way to alliance with the USSR. Indeed, in the immediate post-war years critics of the Soviet Union were forced to resign before the pendulum swung violently the other way.¹⁵ The debate over the name of the emerging professional association and journal of American specialists in the field was no less contentious at that time than it is now. Soviet (meaning primarily Russian) studies emerged as a distinct field in its own right, developing largely along the lines of a 'social science in one country',¹⁶ a development that, while allowing focus on the USSR and its bloc, nevertheless blighted the subject's development as a field of comparative social study. The adoption of the term 'Slavic Studies', although always acknowledged to cover many non-Slav peoples, was adopted as a relatively neutral term, but this fuzzy (and inaccurate) pusillanimity may well be said to have characterised the field for at least a generation.

The end of the Cold War has been accompanied by a dramatic falling off in students taking courses in Russian and allied studies. Commensurately, funding has also been curtailed. The whole academic discipline of postcommunist and Eastern European area studies is in a period of retrenchment. Whether this is a wise policy, when the challenges coming from the former USSR have only increased in complexity, and possibly even in danger as issues of nuclear proliferation, smuggling of fissile-grade materials and export of nuclear expertise come to the fore, can only be doubted. More profoundly, the nature of the postcommunist crises in most of the former Soviet Union, crises that threaten the stability not only of the region itself, requires profound study. Even with the apparent end of the Cold War issues of national security have not disappeared, and the earlier intermeshing of scholarship and intelligence will no doubt continue. At the same time, the opening up of new regions to capitalist exploitation requires knowledge of the context in which investment decisions can be made. Last but far from least, the intrinsic worth of long-term study is often forgotten in the clamour of competing short-term rationalisations and 'cost-benefit' calculations. The decline in the teaching of the languages of the region can only be regretted, a process that in Britain begins in secondary schools where the teaching of Russian, for example, has been severely curtailed.

One trend that has clearly manifested itself is the divergence between post-communist states. East Central Europe has emerged as a sub-region of relatively

¹⁴ Laura Engelstein, 'Paradigms, Pathologies, and Other Clues to Russian Spiritual Culture: Some Post-Soviet Thoughts', *Slavic Review*, 57:4 (Winter 1998), p. 865.

¹⁵ Norman Naimark records that by 1946 Henry Chamberlin had become a fierce critic of Soviet expansionism in Eastern Europe, and he was forced to resign as editor of *The Russian Review*, Norman Naimark, 'On the 50th Anniversary: The Origins of the AAASS', *Newsnet: The Newsletter of the AAASS*, 38:5 (November 1998), p. 3. In Britain, one of the early victims of the onset of the Cold War was the dismissal in 1948 of the veteran communist, Andrew Rothstein, as Director of the University of London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

¹⁶ Cf. Naimark, *On the 50th Anniversary*, p. 3.

successful transformers, the Balkans (with the exception of Slovenia) is an unstable mix, while in the former Soviet Union (with the exception of the three Baltic republics) both economic transformation and democratic consolidation are in question. The 'transitions' themselves now have a rich history and are becoming the core of a new area of transition studies. In economics this is a relatively clearly defined sub-discipline, focusing on economies in transition. The earlier bias against historians and political scientists with expertise in the area is gradually being transcended as the realities of the societies are tested against the abstract nostrums of 'comparativists' and the various 'consultants for capitalism'.¹⁷

It should not be forgotten that academic disciplines are only one context where the debate over postcommunist societies takes place. Just as the communist revolution in Russia and elsewhere became the 'property', as it were, of intellectuals, the workers' movement, and indeed part of the collective experience of the twentieth century, so, too, postcommunism is part of the common experience of contemporary humanity. From this perspective postcommunism has both a specific meaning, referring on the one hand to the countries who have exited or are exiting communism, and, on the other hand, to the universal dilemmas posed by the collapse of the revolutionary socialist challenge to the hegemony of capitalism.¹⁸ From this perspective, we are all postcommunist now.

The dilemmas posed by postcommunism are debated in the press, the subject of discussion by diplomats, and are in a sense one of the central philosophical concerns of our day. The constraints that might need to be imposed on the global reach of capital is one issue that has exercised many. It is at this point that the impact of globalisation and postcommunist studies intersect. The fall of the 'actually existing' socialist regimes coincided with the dominance of two inter-related paradigms: neoliberalism and globalisation. These are not just ideas about organising economies and societies, but carry within themselves a profound philosophical charge, the discrediting of alternatives and the marginalisation of the open-endedness of historical and political processes. The European postcommunist world became the site for changes *imposed upon* politics rather than *emerging through* politics.¹⁹ There is an emerging rich vein of 'comparative capitalism' studies,²⁰ while the globalisation paradigm has itself been questioned,²¹ and these debates must form the essential theoretical context for postcommunist studies. The end of the Cold War requires a change of paradigms, including the need for a re-evaluation of orthodox IMF strategies (insisted on even by the arch-exponent of neoliberal economic transformation, Jeffrey Sachs²²), and even the financial speculator and philanthropist, George Soros, has called for greater regulation of the global reach of capital.²³

¹⁷ This is the title of Chapter 2 of Janine R. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe 1989–1998* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998).

¹⁸ The point is developed further in my *Postcommunism*, in particular Chapter 1.

¹⁹ F. M. Barnard, *Pluralism, Socialism and Political Legitimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 138.

²⁰ See, for example, William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 1997); David Marquand, *The New Reckoning: Capitalism, States and Citizens* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); Lester C. Thurow, *The Future of Capitalism* (New York: William Morrow, 1996).

²¹ P. Hirst and G. Thompson, *Globalization in Question* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

²² Jeffrey Sachs, 'Going for Broke', *The Guardian*, 16 January 1999, p. 21.

²³ George Soros, 'The Capitalist Threat', *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1997, pp. 45–58; *The Crisis of Global Capitalism* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1998).

Less clearly formulated but perhaps of equal importance is the issue of what we might call ‘universalisation’, and it is under this nominal rubric that the most important questions of our day are discussed. This is the question of the extent to which the universal norms, as formulated above all in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are applicable to all countries, irrespective of their specific traditions. Thus globalisation is challenged not so much from a ‘left’ perspective as from a universal one, in which the rich array of international and national organisations established in the postwar years can be mobilised to establish a set of international norms.

From one angle (and by no means the most fruitful), the issue of universalisation has been tackled from the ‘clash of civilisations’ perspective.²⁴ Huntington has noted the degree to which some of the more successful Asian countries were able to separate modernisation from Westernisation, by adopting Western techniques but not capitulating to Western culture in its entirety. For postcommunist countries this question is particularly acute, although for most Eastern Europe countries the ‘return to Europe’ is not perceived as particularly problematic. For Russia, however, postcommunism has once again opened up the question that has racked the country for at least the last three hundred years: is Russia part of Europe or a separate and distinct civilisation sufficient unto itself? And what about Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus and Central Asia? These dilemmas have been richly debated in the burgeoning field of nationality and identity studies.²⁵

Another approach to the problem of ‘universalism’ has been the ‘Nuremberg’ question, the degree to which the perpetrators of old regime atrocities and excesses can be brought to book.²⁶ This has become a particularly acute issue in the 1990s, with various ‘truth and reconciliation’ commissions established in Africa and Latin America. In postcommunist Eastern Europe ‘decommunisation’ has tended to take the form of various lustration (‘ceremonial cleansing’) laws, but in most post-Soviet countries Robert Walpole’s injunction has been heeded: ‘let sleeping dogs lie’. However, in Russia and elsewhere the dogs are still far from sleepy and have plenty of bite left in them. The problem of coming to terms with the communist past is still far from over. In response to the atrocities of the Bosnian War, trials of war criminals have begun at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague, but above all an International Criminal Court is to be established.

A third aspect to universalism is more directly political. The question is often posed in the form of whether any universal agenda of human and liberal rights is no more than a covert form of imposing Western values on other societies. Old arguments about distinctive paths and ‘third ways’ are being mobilised by post-communist leaders (for example, President Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and the

²⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3 (Summer 1993), pp. 23–49, and his later book Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

²⁵ The flag-bearer for the development of the area has been the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN), and its journal *Nationalities Papers*.

²⁶ See, above all, John Borneman, *Settling Accounts: Violence, Justice, and Accountability in Postsocialist Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Neil J. Kritz (ed.), *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon with Former Regimes*, 3 vols. (Estover, Plymouth: Plymbridge Distributors, 1995); Istvan Pogany, *Righting Wrongs in Eastern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

Mayor of Moscow, Yurii Luzhkov), and leaders of the developing countries (for example, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed of Malaysia). To that extent, both the 'East' and the 'South' are now joined by a series of common dilemmas that transcend issues of globalisation (how to deal with IMF-imposed strategies, for example) and focus on the cultural and political identity of the nations themselves. The former Second and Third Worlds are still far from one, but when it comes to civilisational issues and developmental trajectories they do face some common problems.

The fundamental ontological issue has not yet been resolved: the 'Second World' was industrialised, mostly urbanised and highly literate at the time of the fall of communism, but its development, while recognisably modern, left societies which were modern in a different way to those of the West. Thus the core issue, unlike for students of the 'Third World', is not development but how to overcome the legacy of what has variously been called 'misdevelopment' or 'mismodernisation'. The issue of whether the 'misdeveloped' societies contained features that might actually be superior to comparable ones in the West, and how much was worth salvaging from the old systems, is becoming increasingly prominent just at the time when most of what was salvageable has gone. From the very beginning the name of Vaclav Havel is associated with the idea that instead of the 'East Germanisation' of the post-communist world, the *anschluss* of the East by the West, a convergence of the two systems would be preferable, taking the best of both systems, but his voice was a lonely one lost in the clamour of transition. The fall of communism did indeed create an 'open historical situation', to use Karl Wittfogel's term,²⁷ but the ability to take advantage of the new 'universe of possibilities' was limited to relatively narrow elite groups. In fact, the nature and scope of the openness of the historical situation needs to be examined further.

Although I suggested above that 'postcommunist studies' is a useful broad designation for the area, when it comes to more detailed studies the field has fragmented into numerous sub-disciplines. Russian area studies itself is on the defensive, although specific aspects continue to develop (Russian politics, Russian history, and so on). The fall of communism has made possible exciting new kinds of investigations, with access to archives (although still limited in some cases) much easier, and detailed local studies facilitated by the lifting of most restrictions on travel. The development of new states provides a testing ground for theories of state and nation building, while everywhere the comparative literature on 'democratisation', developed earlier to discuss the cases of Southern Europe and Latin America in particular, is facing a tough new assignment in the East.

It is over the question of 'comparative transitions' that one of the formative debates of postcommunist studies has taken place. The assumption that we are witnessing a transition to democracy in the postcommunist countries comparable to transitions elsewhere, above all in the other 'third wave' transitions of Southern Europe and Latin America,²⁸ has been questioned. There are as many differences

²⁷ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), p. 8.

²⁸ For Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), the first wave lasted from 1776 to 1922, the second from 1945 to the 1960s, and the third began in Southern Europe in 1974 (Portugal) before moving on the Latin America and then returning to Eastern Europe in 1989.

between the individual countries of these regions as there are between post-communist countries. Valerie Bunce has firm views on the issue: 'The key question, then, is whether the differences constitute variations on a common process—that is transitions from dictatorship to democracy—or altogether different processes—that is, democratization versus what could be termed postcommunism'.²⁹ Are the differences merely ones of degree or in kind? The fact that these are total transitions might suggest that the latter view is more appropriate, but when examined through the prism of universal postcommunism there is a commonality of problems that transcends the issue of whether a specific country was communist or not. In other words, there are common challenges facing all countries irrespective of their past.

Genuinely comparative studies have been attempted. In their recent transito-logical study covering all three areas, for example, Linz and Stepan stress the triadic relationship between the simultaneous development of statehood, nationalism and democracy in the postcommunist states.³⁰ While their book undoubtedly marks an impressive attempt to bring postcommunist studies into the mainstream of comparative politics and comparative post-authoritarianism, it is marked equally by the inadequacies of the approach. As far as their chapters on postcommunist countries are concerned, the text is at times misleading. For example, while from an abstract comparative democratisation perspective it might have been sensible to have dissolved the Russian legislature in autumn 1991 and held new elections in which 'democrats' might have strengthened their position, detailed knowledge of the situation at the time would reveal not only the obstacles but also the impracticality of elections at that time. Why dissolve an assembly that had stood shoulder to shoulder with President Boris Yeltsin in defeating the August coup? In this case, comparative politics has been stifling and reveals the difficulties in liberating stuffy old 'Russian studies' from its alleged fetishisation of empirical analysis with the fresh breath of comparative analysis.

The question posed by Ekiert is one that faces all students of postcommunism: 'Do the knowledge, research, and theoretical approaches developed over four decades of the existence of state-socialist regimes have any lasting values?'³¹ The sub-discipline of 'transitology' may have its uses, the broader perspective of comparative politics is helpful, but a profound historical knowledge is best of all. As Ekiert puts it in answer to his own question, 'we cannot adequately grasp the meaning and patterns of the massive changes occurring in the region today without reexamining past developments and their legacies'.³² The different 'modes of extrication'³³ from communism were determined by the past crises and their legacies, above all the attempts by the authorities to demobilise the collective actors which had emerged during the various crises.

For area studies specialists there are specific problems facing former communist countries derived equally from their former communism and the historical traditions of the countries themselves. To understand them we need to speak the language and

²⁹ Valerie Bunce, 'Should Transitologists be Grounded?,' *Slavic Review*, 54:1 (Spring 1995), p. 119.

³⁰ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), Ch. 20, pp. 401–33.

³¹ Grzegorz Ekiert, *The State Against Society: Political Crises and their Aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. xi.

³² Ekiert, *The State Against Society*, p. xi.

³³ Ekiert, *The State Against Society*, p. xiii.

understand the cultures and histories, and only then can we approach an understanding of patterns of political development. Perhaps the greatest difference between the postcommunist transitions and those elsewhere is the different role played by the military and the existing capitalist class. In addition to the 'triple transition' identified by Claus Offe (changes in regime, economy and, in some cases, borders as well),³⁴ the whole socio-political terrain of postcommunist countries is subject to change as 'bureaucratic crypto-politics' (Rigby) gives way to more pluralistic forms of interaction. The whole gamut of civil associations had to be reconstituted from scratch. While there were few defenders of the old regime in Central Europe, where the main conflicts were between 'proto-democratic' actors,³⁵ this is certainly not the case elsewhere. In Russia and Ukraine the strength of the communist parties testifies perhaps not so much to support for the old regime as to the security (in its last years) it had provided for the majority.

For teachers in the field, numerous questions present themselves. Thomas Remington has identified the three key ones:³⁶ what specific area is to be studied (Russia, all twelve countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States, all fifteen former Soviet republics, the whole of postcommunist Eastern Europe, the whole communist and postcommunist world?); the issue of historical balance (how much do we need to know about pre-revolutionary Russia and the USSR to understand postcommunist Russia?); and finally, what are the key organising themes (the rise and fall of empire, patterns of economic development and modernisation, political, legal and constitutional developments)? While these questions are particularly acute in the teaching of politics, they apply equally to other disciplines.

'Sociology', a broad and undefined subject, retains its prominence in the postcommunist societies themselves, particularly since it is the most effective 'trans-identity' discipline, one equally at home in Western institutions and in the countries themselves. In the field of survey work, opinion polling, tracking the great social changes of postcommunism, and applying the broad nostrums of social theory, sociology became the 'universal' discipline of postcommunism, a phenomenon marked equally in the West as in the East.³⁷ The hegemony of the public opinion survey has been criticised by Urban and Fish,³⁸ and instead they stress the importance of 'ethnographic research that aims to establish intimate familiarity with the subjects of study'.³⁹ This is undoubtedly a healthy corrective, but perhaps we can go further and argue that a distinctive type of 'political anthropology' is required combining 'intimate familiarity' with the subject of study (analysis of the debates in the societies themselves, a thorough study of the books, newspapers and think tank reports, and above all interviews and informal talks with the people involved) with

³⁴ Claus Offe, 'Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe', *Social Research*, 58:4, pp. 865–92; also in Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition: The East European and East German Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), ch. 3, pp. 29–49.

³⁵ Grzegorz Ekiert, 'Peculiarities of Post-Communist Politics: The Case of Poland', *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 25:4 (December 1992), pp. 341–61.

³⁶ Thomas F. Remington, 'On Teaching Post-Soviet Politics', *Newsnet: The Newsletter of the AAASS*, 38:4 (July 1998), p. 7.

³⁷ Cf. Ian Christie, 'Return of Sociology', *Prospect*, January 1999, pp. 34–7; Matthew Brown, 'Time to Take us Seriously', *Guardian Higher*, 19 January 1999, pp. ii–iii.

³⁸ Michael Urban and M. Steven Fish, 'Does Post-Sovietology Have a Future?', in Cox (ed.), *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse*, pp. 173–5.

³⁹ Urban and Fish, 'Does Post-Sovietology Have a Future?', p. 175.

macro social and political theory. These theories themselves need to be modified in the light of postcommunist developments.⁴⁰

History as a discipline also speaks a universal language, yet does not share sociology's 'transidentity' characteristics because, by definition, it is rooted in a specific context. Philosophy of course aims to speak in the language of universals, yet when it moves away from broad issues of human ethics and morality, it must adopt a native idiom if it is to have any specific resonance in the society itself. Thus 'Russian philosophy' becomes Russian when it draws on native traditions to address specifically Russian questions of national development. In general, the debate between area specialists and comparativists is superimposed over the larger methodological tension between more 'qualitative' social science and a more 'quantitative' one, and this in turn reflects the struggle for funding and resources.

Broader epistemological issues did not evaporate with the end of the Cold War, and in certain respects became sharper. In narrow academic terms, for example, the search for a spurious, forced and definitely premature comparability led the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to sponsor an ill-conceived East-West research project that yoked together very different capitalist and non-capitalist countries, instead of encouraging specialists to focus on precisely what had emerged out of the detritus of communism. Postcommunist studies was opened up to carpet-bagging academics, consultants and others with little knowledge of the language, history and politics of the region. While all social science is in effect the attempt to impose intellectual order on a chaotic reality, there remains something immanent in a society that is lost when the imposition becomes too heavy-handed.

This was certainly the case with most Western assistance and development schemes in the postcommunist world, especially in the early years. Janine Wedel has recounted the various lunacies, pretensions, self-deceit and arrogance of Western 'aid' agencies. Her description of the 'fly in fly out' (FIFO) brigade of Western 'consultants for capitalism' is unsurpassed. In many Western aid programmes a regional approach was adopted, suggesting the dominance, as Wedel stresses, of political goals over developmental ones. In her words 'This approach maximized Washington's control: regional, rather than country-specific, allocations meant that Washington could shift focus from one country to another when American domestic pressures changed or when a country failed to curry sufficient favour'.⁴¹ The regional approach was originally the one favoured by the European Union, seeking to encourage regional cooperation but at the same time ensuring that the slowest held back the fastest. Up to late 1998 the Council of Ministers had not once discussed general policy towards Russia since 1990. In the absence of a developed Common Foreign and Security Policy this perhaps is understandable, with policy left to individual member states, but it has had the regrettable effect of rendering EU policy reactive, minimalist and short-term. Not surprisingly, given the EU's introspection, Nato expansion leapfrogged over EU enlargement, and thus provoked one of the major crises of the postcommunist era.

The fall of the communist regimes and the establishment of constitutional politics has not put an end to Kremlinology. Far from it, and in Russia at least the arcane

⁴⁰ The need to incorporate the linguistic dimension, for example, was achieved by Hilary Pilkington, *Russia's Youth and its Culture: A Nation's Constructors and Constructed* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁴¹ Wedel, *Collision and Collusion*, p. 234, fn. 74.

arts of picking over the bleached bones of personal and institutional conflicts has become one of the main concerns for all those studying contemporary politics. This in itself indicates the failure to institutionalise political authority and the perpetuation of the sultanistic features of personalised rule typical of the communist period. It means, moreover, that only a detailed, daily, and exhaustive analysis of available materials can begin to provide an adequate picture of the evolving 'reality' of these societies. But what about grand theorising, about the development of new meta-theories of social and political development? This question is particularly acute when it comes to democratic theory and theories of democratisation. How can we talk of democracy in Russia, for example, when at least a third of the population are to varying degrees in a state of immiseration? How can we talk of democracy when the authorities lack accountability and flaunt their own laws?

While it might be premature to generate grand theories of postcommunist change, there are plenty of mid-level attempts to come to terms theoretically with what is happening. O'Donnell's notion of 'delegative democracy', for example, has enjoyed a wide resonance,⁴² as has to a lesser degree Zakaria's notion of 'illiberal democracy',⁴³ while the notion of 'regime politics' has emerged as a useful tool in analysing para-constitutional informal relationships.⁴⁴ The sharp divergence between the trajectories of the Central European states and most CIS states also throws up challenging questions. Can the divergence be explained in terms of political culture, the lack of intermediary civil associations in the CIS and traditions of civic initiative à la Putnam,⁴⁵ or is it a question of historical legacies (path dependency) or institutional choice (presidential versus parliamentary systems of governance)? These are the questions that will exercise students of postcommunism for a long time to come. In contrast to the 'Sovietologists' of an earlier generation, they are not going through the looking glass but trying to come back out. Whether they will be able to do so, and what they will find in the land of 'normalcy', can neither be predicted, nor even anticipated, with any certainty.

⁴² Guillermo O'Donnell, 'Delegative Democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, 5:1 (January, 1994), pp. 55–69.

⁴³ Fareed Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, 76:6 (November/December, 1997), pp. 22–43.

⁴⁴ Richard Sakwa, 'The Regime System in Russia', *Contemporary Politics*, 3:1, 1997, pp. 7–25.

⁴⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton University Press, 1993).