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Alexander Callinicos  
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Reviewed by Cædmon Staddon

**1. Sovietology and Studies of Transition: A Post-Mortem**

To the chagrin of many, western social science proved itself spectacularly unsuccessful in anticipating the collapse of the former command economies of Europe and Asia. As the distinguished "Sovietologist" Alfred Meyer recently put it:

It is safe to assert that every important event that has taken place in the communist world within the last five years or so has come as a surprise to the profession.<sup>1</sup>

Though the ranks of Soviet socialism's detractors have always been formidable, I can think of only a small handful of sources which prognosticated the failure of Soviet-style socialism for other than blindly doctrinaire reasons. In this review essay I will discuss three recent works which focus specifically on theorising the transformation of the domestic political structures of the former socialist states. Distinct from that literature which remains fixated upon the precise technical means of economic transition as the key to current events in the former socialist states<sup>2</sup>, the books discussed here approach their subject matter with a clearer dedication to variants of critical political economy, and contextually sensitive analysis. Specifically these works are founded upon the recognition that economic restructuring is fundamentally inextricable from political change and vice versa. As a consequence of reading these works, economically fixated transition programmes such as those proposed by Klaus in former Czechoslovakia, Balcerowicz in Poland and Sachs in his self-appointed role as Grand Czar of "shock therapy" should appear as overly



simplistic and indeed untenable. As well, we should be able to put to rest simple-minded and ideologically suspect claims that the "yearning for freedom of the oppressed masses" under really existing socialism was singlehandedly responsible for the conflagrations of late 1989 and early 1990. Each of the works examined here eschews simplistic understandings and the intellectual hubris often accompanying them.

## 2. Democratisation and Marketisation: The Potentials of Game Theory

Everyone is aware that the former socialist states are experiencing definite political as well as economic restructuring. The implementation of western type electoral systems has been every bit as important for the transition process as the replacement of economic systems based on central planning with systems organised by Adam Smith's "invisible hand". What are far less obvious of course are the complex linkages between the economic and political in the restructuring process. This is not so merely because real economic reform requires political will, but rather because the two are fundamentally intertwined and inseparable. This realisation is one of the starting points for Adam Przeworski's *Democracy and the Market*: political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America, which links the political and the economic through the careful analysis of political and economic interest group formation and competition. From his rational choice perspective the problems of democratisation and marketisation are approached through the largely abstract analysis of interest group generation, competition and accommodation. A refreshing change from the large corpus of political analysis which sees democracy as normatively superior by definition<sup>3</sup>, Przeworski argues that such understandings are shallow compared to more complex analyses of the relations between political-economic interests and the distinctive forms of competition and cooperation which result. As he says,

I am not claiming that normative commitments to democracy are infrequent or irrelevant, only that they are not necessary to understand the way democracy works.<sup>4</sup>

Przeworski subsequently works the equation both ways, exploring the penetration of political interests into economics, as well as the influence of economic interest generation on political possibilities. The result is a highly stimulating exegesis which well repays the careful attention his formal mathematical style of presentation demands.

In the first two chapters of his book, Przeworski develops rational choice models of democracy and the transition towards democracy from actually existing socialism. "Democracy" is understood by Przeworski as that set of institutions which arrange and channel the competition between social actors such that losers accept their losses (in elections, legislation, etc.) without

threatening either the integrity or the legitimacy of the system itself. For Przeworski "the problem of establishing democracy is the following: will political actors agree to a framework of democratic institutions that will evoke their compliance?"<sup>5</sup> As such Przeworski's definition of the concept is rather different from that deployed by a Giddens or a Habermas who do not separate their concepts of democracy from the historical-geographies of western democratic states.<sup>6</sup> Rather than seeing "democracy" as an historico-geographically contingent formation founded upon the state's monopoly over the "means of violence", Przeworski's minimalist conception allows him to separate the theoretical potentials of democracy from the realities of western liberal capitalism. In the second chapter Przeworski uses this minimalist conception to articulate several possible routes from totalitarianism to democracy. These routes take the form of a matrix of democratic possibilities, each marked by different allegiance between four primary interest groups: "hard-liners" and "reformers" (interests located endogenous to the extant institutional structure), and "moderates" and "radicals" (interests located exogenous to structure). The final two chapters treat respectively the reciprocal critiques of capitalism and socialism and the relationships between economic restructuring and political democratisation. Przeworski ultimately decides, on both logical and generally empirical grounds<sup>7</sup>, in favour of some form of social democracy or market socialism:

The socialist critique of the irrationality of capitalism is valid, but the socialist alternative is unfeasible. In turn, either social democracy—a system in which no forms of private property are banned and in which the state plays an active role in regulating markets and redistributing incomes—or market socialism—a system in which large firms are owned by employees or the public and the state plays the same role with respect to markets—both offer reasonable second-bests.<sup>8</sup>

It is critical to note however that the route to either of these is necessarily through liberal capitalism. Przeworski clearly does not believe that any political economy within which social interests are determined exogenous to individual actors themselves is warranted or tenable.

One of the obvious critiques which could be assessed against Przeworski's work is that it is too far removed from the fine detail of economic and political life in former socialist countries. Despite the fact that his work is framed largely as a comparison of experiences between those Latin American nations which underwent degrees of marketisation and democratisation in the 1970s and 1980s the evidence applied in support of his claims rarely incorporates carefully detailed analysis of local conditions. Thus, the ease with which Przeworski moves between Argentina, Chile and Brazil on the one hand, and Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria on the other is at once a strength and a weakness. After



all, his general claims about "hard-liners" and "radicals" only seem warranted from the rather distanced and general understanding of events in any particular nation. To be sure there are "hardliners" in the Czech Republic as there are in Brazil. Yet it remains to be established that these groups of "hardliners" are geographically commensurable in the ways implied by Przeworski's analysis. Perhaps this criticism is tantamount to saying that *Democracy and the Market* is a better book about Eastern Europe than it is about the Czech Republic, Hungary or Bulgaria.

### 3. On the "Re-emergence of Civil Society"—and Other Modern Shibboleths

This criticism of Przeworski's book is sharpened all the more by several of the essays in *Constructing Capitalism: the Reemergence of Civil Society and Liberal Economy in the Post-Communist World*. The volume's three sections, "Regional Political Economy", "Reconstruction of Markets" and "Dilemmas of Democratisation" bring together some of the most thoughtful essays I have yet seen on the problems and prospects of democratisation and marketisation in the former socialist world. The essays in the first two sections will be of interest primarily to technical specialists in the relevant areas as they do not significantly depart from already well-established research. Moreover, but for Valerie Bunce's essay on "Two-Tiered Stalinism," the section entitled "Regional Political Economy" is entirely misnamed and exists in an uneasy relationship with the rest of the volume. In particular, Leszek Kolankiewicz's essay seems out of place here, a situation not at all ameliorated by the fact that this surely one of his least convincing efforts (See footnote 3).

The most important "dilemma of democratisation" broached in the essays of the third section pertains to the currently fashionable issue of "civil society". How does one theorise the presence or absence of civil society, defined rather broadly as that sphere of activity separate and autonomous from the state, in transforming societies? In "The Reconstruction of Citizenship: Reverse Incorporation in Eastern Europe", George Kolankiewicz argues that the historical trajectories of the capitalist and non-capitalist worlds have been significantly reversed:

whereas social movements in Western societies were aimed at achieving inclusion of new categories of persons into citizenship rights as well as at creating new types of rights (which were collective and social); in real socialism, social movements sought to counter the inclusionary power of Leninist regimes and to redefine citizenship rights.<sup>9</sup>

As a consequence Kolankiewicz cannot see former command economies "returning" to any "suspended" path of capitalist-democratic modernisation—these societies have gone too far down a path in which political identity was as much

founded on collective social rights as it was on any Stalinist imaginary of the "New Soviet Man". Mira Marody, in "From Social Idea to Real World: Clash Between New Possibilities and Old Habits", concurs with this observation adding the important wrinkle that collectivist political consciousness rested uneasily on an endemic contradiction between the logic of the socialist system, oriented towards ultimate goals (*wertrationality*) which justify individual sacrifice and suppression, and the far more atomised and pragmatic logic (*zweckrationality*) governing the actions of citizens of socialist states. In her view then the key issue for regime transition from actually existing socialism involves creating a basis for the "...unification of the rationalities operating in public life and in individual private activities."<sup>10</sup>

What then are the proffered solutions to these difficulties? Given the emphasis in these essays on activities at the local level, and on the issue of civil society in particular, it is not surprising that there is a certain unanimity in the prognostications and prescriptions offered. Kolankiewicz is quite forward in this respect:

It is to local and territorial self-government that the task of limiting central state power in the future is to be accorded. Perhaps the most distinctive nature of citizenship rights in post-Communist societies will be that these rights will be guaranteed at the level of the community and that citizen as subject rather than object will be devolved to the lowest level possible, reducing the sphere of state intervention to a minimum.<sup>11</sup>

Movements towards increased local autonomy and political self assertion would be in his view the most positive indication of a healthy democratic civil society. He does however recognise that this suggestion poses serious difficulties for central and eastern European states which essentially were subjected to "revolutions from the top".<sup>12</sup> Marody adds the observation that at present one of the biggest impediments to real political change may, paradoxically, be the "people" themselves. By this she does not mean the simplistic and patronising formula that the "people" must somehow unlearn the "totalitarian mindset". Instead, as I've already indicated she focuses her attention on the articulations between system rationality at the bottom and at the top. For Marody the central difficulty of transition pertains to the relations between the two levels of change. In the absence of a satisfactory realignment and rearticulation of system and lifeworld she contends that "...the only potential form of political reaction...to unacceptable decisions of the authorities still consists in society's declaring its disobedience to those authorities."<sup>13</sup> Certainly this conclusion appears to be underwritten by the continued instability of some of the new democratically elected regimes.



But what does it really mean to pin so much significance on local governance and "civil society". If by civil society one means a form of individual and collective association free from state intervention (what I take to be the general minimalist definition) then the concept is largely meaningless. After all, it is rather farcical to point to the presence of groups such as the Boy Scouts (conceived explicitly by Lord Baden-Powell as a means of instilling a militaristic nationalism in young boys) or the Chamber of Commerce as manifestations of collective local autonomy!! If then one is forced to accept that the weight of the definition of civil society rests on the existence of activities only relatively free of state intervention, then civil society is surely ubiquitous in all societies, capitalist or socialist. For example Bulgaria, which is considered to have been a model Stalinist state, has a long tradition of locally controlled and relatively autonomous "reading rooms" which functioned as community centres.<sup>14</sup> Of course I do not for a moment mean to imply that the totalitarian character of the Bulgarian state meant that people did not need to be circumspect and perhaps even fearful of state surveillance and discipline. But while this remains true in rightist states such as Peru, Bolivia, South Africa, South Korea and Malaysia, we do not often hear of the "submergence" of civil society in those states. I remain suspicious of a concept whose current popularity appears to have less to do with rigorous intellectual analysis than it does with the continued western need to damn the socialist past, or the socialist prospect.

For these reasons I rather like the focus on system integration, the coherence of polity/economy/society rather than the specifics of any single element, adopted by Mira Marody and Jadwiga Staniszkis. This allows Staniszkis in his contribution "Main Paradoxes of the Democratic Change in Eastern Europe" to relate the emerging corporatist (the term he uses is *standestaat*) character of social and political relations in former socialist states to both the ancien regime and the present mechanisms of transition. As he points out "[t]he strong impact of the new elite on the evolutionary character of change...[has] also increased the passivity of society, leading to all the paradoxes of representative democracy in an apathetic society."<sup>15</sup> This seems to me to be the strongest and most important conclusion reached via the different paths taken by Marody, Kolankiewicz and Staniszkis. This locates very clearly an issue which seems to be present in all transition societies: elites and the development of horizontally segmented spheres of political and economic activity and authority.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Rewriting the History of Actually Existing Socialism

With *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the Eastern European Revolutions*, Alex Callinicos' contribution to the analysis of transition is not so much prescriptive in the same sense as the works by Przeworski and the contributors to *Constructing Capitalism*. While Callinicos does provide a careful historical account of the development of the actually existing socialism of the 1970s and 1980s, he is more concerned to reassert the promise of critical Marxist thought

and praxis. As he says in his introduction, he felt spurred to write *The Revenge of History* by what he perceived to be the alarming readiness of virtually all observers to abandon the socialist perspective together with its discredited Soviet variant. In his view actually existing socialism diverged disastrously from its foundations in the political economic analyses of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. The real promise of those foundations was essentially steered wrong by the totalitarianism, and indeed anti-soviet outlook, of Joseph Stalin and the legions of bureaucrats who followed him. Consequently those on the political right who celebrate the collapse of Stalinist actually existing socialism as the final triumph of capitalism—as the "end of history"—have fundamentally misunderstood the significance of the events of 1989. At the same time Callinicos has no patience for those on the left who have abandoned the basic principles of real feasible socialism for some socially conscientious form of market democracy; what Polish activist Adam Michnik has called "the market with a human face".<sup>17</sup> Thus he hopes to demonstrate "...that the Eastern European revolutions should not be seen primarily as a crisis for the left, but as an opportunity finally to free socialism from the incubus of Stalinism" and indeed that "it is time to resume unfinished business."<sup>18</sup>

Callinicos' book is remarkable in a number of respects. First, the book provides a highly readable account of the historical development of actually existing socialism, especially during its most important generative phase, beginning roughly with the 1917 Russian Revolution and ending with Stalin's consolidation of absolute power and basic reorientation of the revolutionary project evinced in the doctrine of "Socialism in One Country". Most readers will already be aware of some of the divisions between Lenin's and Stalin's programmes; for example between Lenin's emphasis on the organic activity of local soviets versus Stalin's greatly increased reliance on the vanguard role of the Party's central organs.<sup>19</sup> Fewer will be aware however of just how sophisticated, and indeed contemporary, was the analysis which led Lenin in 1921 to scrap the initial utopian-socialist programmes in favour of the much more gradualist and mixed "New Economic Plan".<sup>20</sup> So too, Callinicos shows us a Russian Socialist intellectual milieu which was far more complex and conflicted than the prevailing western views of Stalinist uniformity allow. Though the defeat of the Kerensky Mensheviks in 1918 is generally understood as the extinguishment by the Bolsheviks of political dissent, Lenin and Stalin were both part of an intellectual milieu which included challenges from the right (Nikolai Bukharin) as well as the left (Leon Trotsky). Moreover, Callinicos takes great pains to show how these intellectual divisions were not created *ex nihilo*, but proceeded instead from the interests of different social groups, geographical regions and visions of the future. Having read his account, one should probably reject as too cynical the view of many contributors to Poznanski's volume, articulated by Kolakowski and Bunce, that programmatic reform, such as the NEP, was only pursued to provide space for the subsequent retrenchment



of Stalinism. Instead Soviet development is presented as a function of a society riven by ideological, geographical, social and other divisions, however much central authorities tried to impose absolute control.

Out of this maelstrom of competing interests and factions the recognisable edifice of Stalinism, integrating social and political totalitarianism with an extreme form of bureaucratic state capitalism, had emerged by the mid 1930s. That this formation achieved a remarkable degree of stability through the mid-1950s was undoubtedly a function of the ruthless logic of the cadre system of organisation, the "personality cult" around Stalin himself, and the dire exigencies imposed by economic depression and world war. But Callinicos reminds us that virtually the entire period from the death of Stalin in 1953 to 1989 is characterised by the advance and retreat of various economic and political reform programmes. Ironically, these reform attempts appear to have had the opposite effect to that intended; fostering the "hollowing out" of Soviet society whereby people retreated from official public culture and into various forms of alternative private culture.<sup>21</sup> In part this occurred because, as Przeworski also observed, reform tended inevitably to work against the interests of the Soviet population at large. As Callinicos says

Privatisation 'might simply transform a public monopoly into a private one' and lead to 'large transfers of wealth either to old managers and former nomenklatura members or to Western newcomers'.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, this observation applies just as well to the current period of "transition" in which it is becoming increasingly obvious that those who previously occupied positions of power have gained the most from liberalisation and privatisation. But the "hollowing out" of Soviet society signalled by Callinicos also had deeper roots, namely in the failures of "system integration" analysed by Kolankiewicz, Marody and Staniszkis and discussed earlier.

### 5. A Preliminary Summing Up

All three books discussed in this review essay bear directly, though differently, on the analysis of post-socialist societies. They are all remarkably concise and well formulated, guiding readers through complicated issues with considerable surety and aplomb. But more to the point, each of these books seems to address lacunae exhibited the others. For example, the relative lack of local knowledge and historical depth in Przeworski's *Democracy and the Market* is amply addressed by both the *Poznanski* and *Callinicos* volumes. So too, the insidious historical revisionism apparent in several of the essays in *Constructing Capitalism* is countered by Callinicos' concise and fine grained analysis of Soviet history. To complete the critical 'triangle', let me add by noting that Callinicos' lack in *The Revenge of History* of anything concrete and practical to offer

current conditions in the former socialist states is ameliorated by both of the other two books.

Having said all of this, it nevertheless behooves me to underline the fact that each of these volumes is grounded in very different intellectual perspectives, and they are therefore in some respects incommensurable. Przeworski's analytical Marxism is well known and is part of a larger and growing corpus of research.<sup>23</sup> Callinicos works squarely within the neo-Trotskyite stream of British socialist thinking, including also the many works of Tony Cliff and others on "state capitalism". While no single intellectual perspective unites the contributors to Poznanski's *Constructing Capitalism*, they do seem united in their blanket rejection of the socialist past. Unfortunately, in the absence of any strong positive visions of desired futures these essays risk lapsing into uncritical celebrations of western liberal capitalism—the treatment of "civil society" discussed in section three of this essay is a case in point. Nevertheless all of the works reviewed here merit close attention and the student of socialist transition ignores them at her or his peril.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Alfred G. Meyer 1993. "Politics and Methodology in Soviet Studies" in Frederic Fleron and Eric Hoffmann (Eds). *Postcommunist Studies and Political Science*, (Boulder, CO: Westview) p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> The most egregious examples of this sort of literature espouse the universal application of the "shock therapy" programmes associated with Anders Aslund and Jeffrey Sachs.

<sup>3</sup> The essay by Leszek Kolakowski in Poznanski's *Constructing Capitalism* is a good example of an orthodox analysis which assumes precisely what it should in fact be more careful about demonstrating: that something called "democracy" is normatively superior to something called "socialism."

<sup>4</sup> Przeworski, p. 24, my emphasis. Gabriel Almond and Laura Roselle 1993. "Models Fitting in Communism Studies" in Fleron and Hoffmann, *op cit.*, p. 57 point out that within the community of sovietologists and political scientists studying actually existing socialism very little use has been made of rational choice models.

<sup>5</sup> Przeworski, p. 39

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Giddens. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: volume one of a contemporary critique of historical materialism*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).

<sup>7</sup> For his empirical examples Przeworski tends to let Brazil and Argentina speak for Latin America and Poland and former Czechoslovakia speak for central and eastern Europe.

<sup>8</sup> Przeworski, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> Kolankiewicz, p. 145.



<sup>10</sup> Marody, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> Kolankawiecz, p. 153.

<sup>12</sup> It is arguably the case that only Czechoslovakia underwent a popular revolution "from below". Even Poland's well known Solidarnosc movement was eventually coopted by the top level process initiated by Walesa and Jaruzelski. And it is unarguably true that the nations of southeastern Europe, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and former Yugoslavia experienced revolutions which were not only orchestrated by political elites, but by the Communist Party and its successors as well!

<sup>13</sup> Marody, p. 171.

<sup>14</sup> Called "Chita Lishte" in Bulgarian.

<sup>15</sup> Staniszki, p. 181. See also the important but relatively little known work of the Russian critical socialist Boris Kagarlitsky.

<sup>16</sup> See also Mira Marody in *Crisis and Transition: Polish Society in the 1980s* Edited by Jadwiga Koralewicz, Ireneusz Bialecki and Margaret Watson. (New York: Berg).

<sup>17</sup> Michnik in Callinicos 1991, p.12.

<sup>18</sup> Callinicos 1991, p. 3, 136.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the investiture in constitution and law of the Communist Party as the sole political and economic authority actually occurred relatively late in most socialist countries. In Bulgaria for example, this function of the Party was not codified until the promulgation of the 1971 Constitution. What this fact highlights, I think, is the uneven and gradual process whereby the vanguard role of the Party was transformed into an absolutist form.

<sup>20</sup> Which Valerie Bunce describes as one of the few moments of "sanity" in an otherwise insane social project.

<sup>21</sup> Callinicos, p. 48, 106ff.

<sup>22</sup> Callinicos, p. 59.

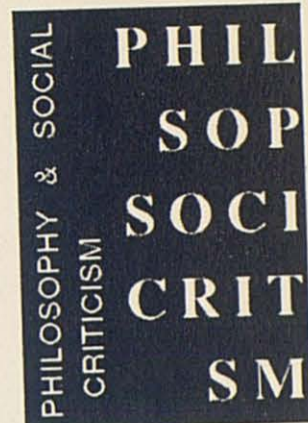
<sup>23</sup> Within the historical literature see Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliot Sober 1992. *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History* (New York: Verso); within geography see Eric Sheppard and Trevor Barnes 1989. *The Capitalist Space Economy*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

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