

Post-Communist Modernization, Transition Studies, and Diversity in Europe

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Abstract

The majority of studies of post-communism – habitually grouped under the heading of ‘transitology’ – understand the transition ultimately as a political and cultural convergence of the ex-communist societies with Western Europe. Even those critical approaches that regard the post-communist transition as a relatively unique phenomenon (as in the approaches of path dependency and neo-classical sociology) tend to conflate normative prescriptions with empirical descriptions and to move within an overall framework of what Michael Kennedy has aptly called ‘transition culture’. This article argues instead that the transition’s nature can only be fully grasped if a case-specific and historical-contextual approach is taken. In theoretical terms, a three-step movement to grasp diversity in Central and Eastern Europe is proposed: (1) the acknowledgement of the plurality of modernizing agency and its creativity; (2) the acknowledgement of multi-interpretability and difference as primary elements of modernity; and (3) a sensitivity to the resulting institutional variety in societal constellations. In substantive terms, it is argued that diversity is a distinctive mark of Europe that is bound to persist in an enlarged Europe, despite the spirit of assimilation in the accession process.

Key words

■ diversity ■ enlargement ■ historical sociology ■ modernity ■ transition

Introduction

Even if the incorporation of eight East European countries in the European project on 1 May 2004 was heralded as the outcome of ‘our common commitment to unify our continent’,¹ and understood as the most significant litmus test for the stability and democratic consolidation of these former communist states, enduring differences, structural tensions, and potential conflict in the region should not be underestimated. Instead of calling for the ‘end of transition’, the

fundamental differences that the post-communist countries bring to Europe,² and the problems they face in terms of socioeconomic welfare, political conflict, and collective identity construction should be the focal point of any analysis. The enlargement process and its spirit of assimilation (as embodied in the Copenhagen criteria) have not unequivocally led to the homogenization of the new member states (Mair and Zielonka, 2002).

In the same vein, rather than celebrating the achievements of the social sciences in the past decade and a half in analysing and understanding the transitions, and in developing new theoretical frames for grasping its idiosyncrasies, much is to be gained by a more reflexive and critical approach which admits that innovation in social theory has not kept pace with the implications of the changes in the region (Szakolczai, 2001). Transition studies have been too occupied with assessing the progress of convergence of post-communist societies towards a European standard, instead of critically engaging with enlargement as well as exploring any diversifying implications of the transition process and EU membership.

In the approaches towards modernization and social change in Eastern Europe (commonly referred to as 'transition'), that emerged after the collapse of the communist regimes, the normative affirmation of the Western modern project has been a diffused, but mostly unproblematized element.³ In this, the enlargement process of the European Union has been understood as the embodiment of progress and necessary 'external anchor' for the Eastern European societies. Membership of the EU implied the end state of the transition and stipulated the necessary steps to move away from the socialist past.

Until the end of the 1990s, the debate on 'transition' was dominated by approaches that shared a number of elementary assumptions on the general nature of social change in Eastern Europe: the convergence of the post-communist countries with Western Europe, rather than divergence or persistent difference; a teleological view of social change with regard to the end-state of the transition in the form of a Western-type democratic market economy; the predominant attention to formal, procedural institutions (democracy, market economy) with the relative neglect of substantive issues (national and regional identity, culture); and an overall negative appreciation of the past (communism). Many have not failed to notice, though, that this 'consensus' shows a strong affinity with assumptions of 'classical' modernization theory as developed in the 1940s and the 1950s, a theoretical strand that had, however, been thoroughly discredited by the 1970s.⁴ The re-emergence of modernization theory, or at least of some of its central tenets, means that those assumptions that had been held as untenable in the debate on 'classical' modernization theory were re-inserted into studies on post-communism.

If most transition theory uncritically endorsed a revived modernization paradigm which both normatively ('the end of history') and empirically ('designer capitalism') promised a rapid and relatively unproblematic convergence of East with West, rather early on in the debate, a number of critical approaches pointed out that straightforward convergence was not to be expected as institutional

legacies from communism would durably influence the nature of the new societies (Stark and Bruszt, 1998), while others indicated the atypical class structure underpinning the modernizing projects undertaken (Eyal et al., 1998) and, therefore, the *sui generis* status of the post-communist project, at least in the short run. Even if these critical, 'second-generation approaches'⁵ provide well-founded critique, their overall argumentation tends to remain within the overall parameters set by the transition paradigm (Kennedy, 2002). The ultimate endorsement of the Western model means, in my opinion, that the critical approaches mentioned are ill equipped to confront the structural diversity which the region displays in its experience with yet another project of modernization.

In this article, therefore, I argue for an approach that leaves behind the 'convergence thesis' of the transition paradigm altogether by discarding the idea of a *telos* of social change in the post-communist countries, and by taking as a starting point persistent diversity instead. In theoretical terms, I will argue for a three-step movement to go beyond the existing inability to deal with diversity in the region: (1) the acknowledgement of the *plurality of modernizing agency* and its *creativity*; (2) the acknowledgement of *multi-interpretability* and *difference* as primary elements of modernity; and (3) a sensitivity to the resulting *institutional variety* in societal constellations.

In substantive terms, I argue that, despite the assimilation that is part of the accession process, diversity is a distinctive mark of Europe that will endure in an enlarged Europe. Even if the framework for transition is set rather strictly by the spirit of assimilation towards the Western European standard, as embodied in the Copenhagen criteria and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, diversity still persists, both between East and West and between singular states. My argument is based upon the observation that, first of all, the accession process only led to a partial (legal-technical) convergence of the new member states, while, second, the qualitative change in the European project (through both the enlargement and constitutionalization) in itself offers increased opportunities for the Central and East European Countries (CEECs) to articulate diversity.

Transitology and the Return of Modernism

The debate on social change and transition in post-1989 Eastern Europe has been dominated, on the one hand, by *modernist approaches* that constitute the hard core of transitology.⁶ These approaches are mainly concerned with the transfer of Western models and institutions, assuming a universal quality to modernity and modernization. On the other hand, the modernism of transitology has been challenged with increasing success by *historicist approaches*. These approaches, often in the institutionalist vein, acknowledge that the transformations contain unique elements as a result of the particular (communist) experiences of the Eastern European countries, thereby admitting to a historical, contextual component of the transition (Eyal et al., 1998, 2003; Stark and Bruszt, 1998). The modernist approach is ahistorical in that it largely ignores distinct historical

legacies, which potentially have an important impact on the current transformations and thus render these transformations different from other experiences. The historicist approaches show a sensitivity towards historical legacies, but often understand these legacies in the light of a rather narrowly circumscribed and non-critical vision of modern society (Kennedy, 2002).

As I will show below, both approaches have been unable to fully incorporate diversity into their theoretical frameworks. Modernist approaches assume that there is essentially one pathway towards modern society; the post-communist societies can follow this pathway by closely implementing Western models and ideas. The historicist approaches question the modernist notion of a singular pathway and see various routes emerging from the confrontation between the immediate past and the present, although they ultimately leave a singular definition of – and affirmative stance towards – modern society largely unquestioned.

Modernist Transitology

The swift demise of communism as a real and viable alternative to Western modernity was widely interpreted as the apparent victory of a singular model of modernity throughout the world. This is particularly visible in the way policy-makers and the academic world have analysed the changes as such and have prescribed policies to be implemented in order to ensure a smooth transition process for the countries concerned. Debates have, until recently, been dominated by various strands of what we could call modernist or (neo-)modernization approaches (Altvater, 1998; Bönker et al., 2002; Spohn, 2002). Modernist approaches perceive a singular answer to major social problems such as underdevelopment and poverty. The countries concerned need to adopt Western political, economic, legal and financial institutions and to rearrange their state structures and budgets according to Western norms. In short, they have to transform their communist societies into Western-type capitalist and democratic ones.⁷ A partial revival of modernist theoretical ideas as well as of ideas of totalitarianism has occurred (the later approach of totalitarianism, that departed decisively from Hannah Arendt's initial historical-philosophical study (1951), regarded communism as a pathology rather than as an extreme case of modernity, see Müller, 2003). In particular, totalitarianism ultimately denied any viability to the 'modern' aspects of the socialist experiments. Neo-totalitarianism pushes contemporary research towards normative and policy-oriented approaches that analyse current developments in terms of approximation to a Western model of society. While transitology accommodates a variety of approaches, its basic premises are widely shared:

the Soviet model is seen as having failed in competition with the west, and its legacy is reducible to after-effects: dysfunctional patterns of development and mentalities unadapted to the market continue to obstruct the progress of transformation. The victorious western model has, by the same token, become a blueprint for the future,

and the agenda of the transition can be defined in terms of measures and policies which would bring the countries in question closer to this really existing ideal . . . The most fundamental – albeit often latent – premise of transitology is that the current western constellation of capitalism, democracy, and the nation-state (allowing for some differences of opinion on the relative weight of the last factor) represents a universal and definitive model on its way to global ascendancy. (Arnason, 2000)

Transitology is strongly informed by the idea that the collapse of communism has confirmed a singular view of modernity. For the ‘transition countries’ this means that their experiences are basically comparable and compatible with earlier experiences elsewhere.⁸ This means that theoretical concepts as well as models of modernization developed for social change in different temporal and spatial contexts can be applied to the current experiences without much amendment. The basic premise is that the ‘democratic market society’ is ‘universally applicable’ (Bönker et al., 2002).

The announcement of the ‘end of history’, which implied the triumph of a singular modernity, concomitantly recreated the modernist dichotomy between the traditional and the modern. From this perspective, the institutional and cultural legacies of communism embodied the traditional, whereas (a specific image of) Western society represented the ultimate goal of any modern project. Although modernists reproached the communist project for its self-acclaimed capacity to reshape society from above, they proposed an equally ‘designer’-type of project in which the post-communist elites should copy and impose key Western institutions on their societies. The centrally planned economy was placed in sharp contraposition to the self-organizing market, thereby evaluating the philosophy of the scientific management of society through the state as traditional and counterproductive, and the allegedly spontaneously evolving logic of the market as the archetypal modern solution.⁹ State planning was associated with inertia and de-differentiation, and market forces with dynamism and differentiation. This contraposition of the state to the market was further exemplified in the distinction between self-reliant, closed economies, as opposed to open market economies, that were deemed highly functional in a globalized economy. Similarly, in the political sphere, the vision of a totally subordinated and homogeneous society to the monopolist party-state under communism was contrasted with the Western democratic pluralist party system of institutionalized political conflict and a counterweight to state power in an autonomous civil society. On the level of the individual, (implicit) assumptions are made of an atomized, apathetic, state-dependent individual under communism (*homo sovieticus*) as opposed to a participative, socially active, rationally calculating, and autonomously acting individual (*homo economicus*) in modern societies. The cultural legacies of communism are then predominantly assessed in their quality of obstructing the transition towards the pre-determined goal of a democratic market economy. The labelling of communist legacies as ‘cultural-civilizational syndrome’ or ‘bloc culture’ – the outcome of both being the internalization of communist norms and values and adaptive individual reactions towards communism – further underlines their identification in strictly negative terms,

consisting of passivism, political apathy, illicit behaviour, and the tenacity of 'welfarist' ideas (Sztompka, 1995).

One of the continuities in Eastern Europe is that the current projects of modernization are to a great extent elite-driven projects, i.e. they are carried out by relatively small groups of individuals in society who are capable of initiating projects of social change (see Eyal et al., 1998; Higley et al., 1998). In classical modernization theory, as well as in Marxism, there was a focus on either the urban bourgeoisie or the entrepreneur as the promoting agent of modern society. In the modernist approaches of transition theory, 'functional elites' or 'change agents' who will construct a new order on the basis of Western institutions are identified with radical reformers on a political level (in contrast to conservative, obstructionist forces tied to the old regime). By means of the transfer of the right institutions by these modernizers, the right actors who can sustain the new order can emerge, i.e., the citizen and the entrepreneur, who are believed to share rather similar characteristics that are conducive to the new order.¹⁰ As Eyal et al. argue, modernist thinking is based on the assumption that 'if you create the proper institutions, they will shape the individuals that occupy them so that individual behavior will conform to institutional constraints and imperatives' (1998: 8–9). This is so, because, by means of the withdrawal of the state from society (organized by the radical reformers), economic, negative freedom is created, which in turn also enhances political freedom, as individuals are less restrained by the state in their actions. In this institutional context, citizens and entrepreneurs emerge who hold the right mind-sets for the reproduction of the new order, whereas the role of the radical reformers is of a transitional kind. The absence of sustaining social forces is then interpreted as the need to create these social groups, partially to legitimate the new societal project, partially to create groups who actually promote the right vision of society.¹¹ However, the existence of the transformational elites identified with the modernizing project is taken for granted in most cases (Arnason, 2000: 89; Kennedy, 2002, Chapter 2).

History and Diversity

Modernist approaches generally fail to appreciate both historical diversity and the possibility of contemporary diverging paths and interpretations of modernization. Instead, the triumph of the Western model as the only and, therefore, universal one has been widely recognized (without, however, being granted the status of 'grand narrative'), whereas the communist systems are primarily understood negatively.¹² The main reason why modernist approaches have been criticized is exactly their assumption of uni-linearity and teleology, and their neglect of historical legacies. Alternative, critical approaches take as their direct starting point the historical nature of the current transformations. They do not regard transformation as basically 'a one-way process of change from one hegemonic system to another' (Pickles and Smith, 1998: 1). Rather, current social change is seen as directly bound up with old social relations and institutions, and therefore can only be understood in a historical way, resulting in various

trajectories from the past to the present. The presentation of social change as a mere process of 'catching up', achieved by adopting the right institutions is rejected (see Arnason, 2000; Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Pickles and Smith, 1998). Critical approaches focus on diversity, particularity and continuity with the past in order to explain and understand (diversity in) contemporary social change in Eastern Europe. The communist world is not then regarded merely as an aberration (as in totalitarianism) leaving behind only structures that need to be dismantled as soon as possible. Rather, its modern features are (often implicitly) acknowledged.

Here, I will focus on two of the most elaborate and convincing historicist alternatives to mainstream transitology: (1) the path dependency approach, of which the most important contribution is that of David Stark and Laszlo Bruszt; and (2) neo-classical sociology, as proposed by Ivan Szelenyi and others. The former consists of a predominantly historical institutionalist interpretation of the transition, as path dependency underlines the importance of institutional patterns of the past for the emerging forms of the present. The latter approach emphasizes the role of agency in any project of modernization, and the adaptation of an individually and historically accumulated habitus to the current transformation.

Path dependency theory points to the distinctiveness of the Eastern European experiences, in that current change is circumscribed by the endurance of older institutions. This means that a new order is not built in an 'institutional void', nor on top of the ruins of communism, but is rather constructed with the legacies of communism, leading to forms of institutional 'bricolage' which potentially end in some kind of innovation (Pickles and Smith, 1998: 1–4; Stark and Bruszt, 1998: 7). Path dependency theory sees 'political economic transformation' as an 'evolutionary and path-dependent process', 'based upon institutionalised forms of learning and struggles over pathways that emerge out of the intersection of old and new' (Pickles and Smith, 1998: 15). In other words, path dependency theory claims that current and future developments can only be fully understood if the past is reflected upon, so that the constraints and confinements as well as the possibilities for current transitions become clear.

Also neo-classical sociology (Eyal et al., 1998, 2003) explicitly underlines the importance of historical legacies for understanding current social change, in particular in the form of long-term continuities. At same time, contingency seems acknowledged as the outcome of the current transformations is considered 'an open question' (Eyal et al., 1998: 39). The neo-classical approach, like path dependency, problematizes the modernist assumption of a capitalism-by-design that can be imposed from above, creating institutions that will have similar outcomes everywhere. Instead, a potential diversity of outcomes is assumed, as capitalism itself can take the form of a 'diverse set of social actors and institutions'. According to neo-classical sociology, the particularity of post-communist (i.e. Central European, as distinct from Eastern European) capitalism is exactly a form of 'capitalism without capitalists', thus without the class that was historically significant in bringing about capitalism (Eyal et al., 1998: 3). Historicity is then

a correction of the assumption of timeless social mechanisms and a way to bring out 'the historical specificity of our times' (Eyal et al., 2003: 17). Eyal et al. introduce a diachronic comparison of historical projects of modernization, as 'Central European intellectuals have been attracted to various ambitious historical projects to reshape their societies, and . . . whatever else may be, the power bloc that rules contemporary post-communism is heir to their projects' (1998: 11). They identify different historical projects, in which different logics inform social agents: the nineteenth-century project of a *Bildungsbürgertum* creating a bourgeois society, a subsequent reaction to the slow modernization in the region in the form of communism and fascism, and the current re-emergence of bourgeois liberalism (Eyal et al., 1998: 24–36). These three projects have been shaped in different historical contexts, in which competing logics of social stratification existed, based on class and rank order. Different perceptions of the social order (legal-rational domination or clientelism) then informed the major social struggles, finding temporary solutions in institutionalized systems of stratification. Moreover, according to Eyal et al., actors are endowed with different forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural) which provide them with different opportunities, depending on the dominant logic of the period. The particularity of Central Europe (and Germany) is considered to be the relative historical importance of cultural capital, as opposed to the significance of economic capital in Western Europe (Eyal et al., 1998: 25–6). In post-communist Central Europe, it is again a coalition of agents endowed with cultural capital who shape the current social structures. Diversity in post-communist pathways, but also continuity are thus underpinned by specific forms of agency.

Both the path dependency of Stark and Bruszt and the neo-classical sociology of Eyal et al. start from the assumption of diversity; in both, diversity is seen as the result of reproduced legacies in the present. Path dependency explicitly keeps open the possibility for innovation in the form of public–private networks, while neo-classical sociology identifies the particularism of contemporary Central Europe in the post-communist *managerial-intellectual* project of modernization, heir to the nineteenth-century project of the *Bildungsbürgertum*.

The deterministic understanding and pre-defined nature of agency present in modernization approaches are seen as a key problem by path dependency theory and neo-classical sociology. One could read Stark and Bruszt's objection to considering the Eastern European civil societies as the main actors in the revolution and subsequent transformation as a critique of the assumption that a singular 'right' modernizing agent can be identified (Stark and Bruszt, 1998: 15–16). In this, they take issue with the exclusive focus on one set of actors supposed to bring about modernization. Instead, they argue for an interactionist approach in which they focus on relations between actors and their perceptions of their opponents' strategies (1998: 16). They see 'these capacities, perceptions and strategies [as] fluid rather than fixed . . . [T]he political organizational identities of major social actors change as they react to and interact with other competing strategies in the political field.' Indeed, a historicization of the role of elites further shows that in particular moments in history, in different societal contexts, different

constellations of actors play the role of pioneers in a new society. Neo-classical sociology indeed explicitly historicizes the role of agency in modernization. The 'right' agent of change, who, according to Eyal et al., is usually identified with a capitalist class of private owners in theories of transition to capitalism, can take various historical guises. This assumption underpins their hypothesis that the specificity of contemporary Central Europe is that there is a capitalism *without* a propertied bourgeoisie in the making. In other words, they perceive post-communism as a new order in which the agent of change is not a bourgeoisie of private property owners, but a bourgeoisie that possesses culture or knowledge (technocrats and managers), thereby including technocratic-intellectual elites in the emergence of a new form of society (Eyal et al., 1998: 1).

Despite the convincing arguments of both approaches against the teleology, assumptions of convergence, and ahistoricism of transitology, and the well-argued attempts to reconstruct alternative trajectories to the modern, both approaches seem to operate with too restrictive an understanding of the *outcome* of the transitions in the post-communist societies, while neglecting potential constructions and dynamics of projects of modernization that do not fall into their respective *teloi* of transition (a network society in the case of Stark and Bruszt, a managerial-intellectual project in the case of Eyal et al.). Other experiences are then either considered to be beyond the scope of analysis, or become instances of 'involution' rather than transition.

Paradigm Shift but Not Quite: The Need for a Radical Break with Modernism

The emergence of critical and historical approaches within the transition debate has been described as 'second-generation theory' (Bönker et al., 2002) and seems to entail the promise of a veritable paradigm shift, in that transition studies seem to be moving increasingly towards interdisciplinary approaches that explicitly denounce the ahistoricism, teleology, and Euro-centrism of early transition theory (Bönker et al., 2002; Ekiert and Hanson, 2003). In reality, however, only few have decisively transcended the idea of an inevitable movement from communism to market democracy and accept the contingent as well as historical nature of the construction of post-communist societies, which requires a truly open-ended and interpretative rather than pre-defined, normative *modus operandi*.¹³

For all their merits in opening up the debate, the critical approaches described here still leave something to be desired. Both path dependency and neo-classical sociology ultimately use either a restricted understanding of historicism (the former) or a rather teleological and one-sided reading of history (the latter). What is more, both ultimately remain within 'transition culture' by searching for ways in which post-communist societies can attain Western levels of modernity, which, in the case of path dependency, is understood as a network society, and, in the case of neo-classical sociology, as a managerial-intellectual project towards

Western capitalism. Thus, despite the primary attention to contemporary diversity and the relation of this diversity with the past, the treatment of the past itself remains rather cursory in many path dependency approaches. For Stark and Bruszt, the articulation of the past in the present has been confined to the moment of regime change that produces a variety of 'paths of extrication'. The specific ways societies emerged out of the revolutions of 1989 (reunification in Germany, electoral competition in Hungary, compromise in Poland, and capitulation in Czechoslovakia), consequently shaped political institutions and forms of interest mediation between state and society (Stark and Bruszt, 1998: 101). Thus, the outcome of the interplay between dominant actors (reform and orthodox communists, and ruling elites and opposition) at the – admittedly crucial – moment of regime change is taken as the primary factor in explaining diverse pathways in the 1990s (Burawoy, 2001; Dobry, 2000: 56). In short, the constellation of dominant actors at a particular intersection defines the specific pathway taken.¹⁴ Despite the acknowledgement of diversity, one can identify here a form of historical determinism in which the eventual outcome is defined by a designated earlier moment of change, between which the paths of extrication then merely run their pre-defined courses (Dobry, 2000: 62). What is more, it is not entirely clear why the moments of regime change embody the essentials of relevant history. Although the outcome of elite struggles in the moment of collapse of the old regime has important implications for the system that emerges afterwards, the potentiality of the emergence of historical legacies in a later moment of the transition or the possibility of the occurrence of highly contingent events should not be ruled out.¹⁵ So, other (long-term) continuities that might shape actors' behaviour after regime change then seem foreclosed, perhaps most importantly historically formed cognitive frameworks that potentially shape the course of transition (for instance, in the form of non-liberal and non-capitalist discursive traditions and the dynamics these discourses can create).¹⁶ Though neo-classical sociology goes a long way in historicizing the currently shaped societies in Central Europe, and is able to explain the specificity of post-communist societies by referring to historically formed attitudes and institutions, the primary emphasis on a cultural bourgeoisie 'whose project is to foster the transition from rank order to a system of class stratification' (Eyal et al., 1998: 47) forecloses analyses of alternative projects of modernization that might be pursued by actors with a very different mind-set. The insistence on the cultural bourgeoisie as the 'bearers of the project of modernization' (Eyal et al., 1998: 60) means that Eyal et al. see in Central Europe the emergence of a new project of modernization, whereas Eastern Europe and Russia are characterized as being in the mere process of 'involution, i.e. a form of adaptation to the imposition of capitalism from above' (Eyal et al., 2003: 15). In this, they read Central European history as a *bourgeois* history, without paying due attention to other modern actors and their projects.

Both the path dependency approach and neo-classical sociology seem to reason from a point of view that takes the transition towards a distinct society with a particular set of institutions for granted and therefore they ultimately work

within the mind-set of modernist thinking (Kennedy, 2002). Even if the acknowledgement of diversity forms one of the main corrections on transitology introduced by both approaches, the diversity offered remains in the end within the confines of a rather strictly limited understanding of modern society, i.e., not always specified but clearly reminiscent of the Western post-industrial market democracy. Diversity becomes, in this reading, multiple pathways to a similar end destination while creative agency is confined to the invention of locally functioning, successful ways of reaching that goal.

European Modernity as a Generator of Diversity

As the above attests, mainstream transition theory as well as its most important critics are moving within an ideational space or ideological *forma mentis* that a priori precludes the perception of significant difference in the construction of modern society. This means that the analytical frames of both transitology and its critical other are fundamentally unable to deal with diversity in the modes of construction of national identity, statehood, and forms of society within the post-Soviet space. Indeed, events following the memorable year of 1989 have shown that the assumption of a relatively unequivocal pathway from totalitarianism to democracy is defied by a reality of idiosyncrasies in post-communist change. In the transitional context, and not only here, a singular view of European modernity as a universal phenomenon runs into problems; modernization cannot mean a single road to a singular end-state of societal evolution, as even the experiences of the Western states themselves are too diversified to justify assumptions of a global convergence.¹⁷

I will argue that significant diversity persists within the European space and is even likely to gain in importance in the future. I suggest that it is here where the debate on transition – which has by no means lost its validity with the accession of eight post-communist societies to the European Union and the admission of two more countries in 2007 – could go beyond its own perceptive limitations. One fruitful way of doing so is by learning from recent debates on the theorization of modernity.¹⁸ Recent sociological approaches towards modernity – grouped under the labels of ‘varieties of modernity’, ‘multiple modernities’ or ‘entangled modernities’ – have taken the multi-interpretability and openness that result from modernity, and, therefore, plurality, conflict, and diversification, as their fundamental starting point. The question has been raised whether modernity should be understood as a loose constellation that is irreducible to Western civilization, or as a civilization among other civilizations which are or have been modern in their own way.¹⁹ The overall approach has a clear significance in that it tries to break with modernization theory in a radical way, in that it denies modernization to be a purely Western phenomenon and sees several ‘modernities’, of which the European manifestation is only one variant.²⁰ Rather than understanding modernization as leading to the convergence of societies towards a unified, homogenized modernity, modernization is perceived as

creating value pluralism and conflict.²¹ Furthermore, it is assumed that various patterns and visions of modernity have developed rather than merely a single main pattern constituted by European modernity. Instead, modernity (including the transition to an 'authentically' modern form of society as in the case of the former communist societies) should be understood as open to different interpretations and therefore cannot be reduced to a narrow reading of modernity as the historical experience of the West.

For the sake of clarity, I should make a short digression here into the significance of modernity for the debate on transition. If modernity as a concept is to have any heuristic validity for the analysis of different societies and their trajectories, it needs to be perceived as comprising at least some basic tenets and characteristics. Modernity is often defined in either a temporal and/or a substantive way. The first refers to the understanding of modernity as an epochal phenomenon, as a distinct period in time that has broken decisively with preceding periods. The second focuses on modernity as a set of key characteristics, which makes modern ideas and practices distinct from pre-modern ones. Although both conceptions are useful, they tend to be conflated (Yack, 1997). Whereas, by and large, a modern epoch can be identified, it should not be perceived as an era in which only a singular programme of (Western) modernity reigns, but rather as an epoch in which major conflicts over the interpretation of modernity take place (Arnason, n.d.). Here, it is helpful to be more explicit about the substantive components of what I mean by modernity. At least four interrelated characteristics of modernity can be identified. The first important characteristic is the negation of traditional authority and a religiously legitimated political order. By denying the foundation of political and societal order on other-worldly grounds, modernizing agents claim the possibility of constructing a new order on the basis of self-produced understandings of such an order. In the context of post-communist Eastern Europe, this means that transition is to be primarily understood as the rejection of the closure of modernity in its extreme communist variant and the emancipation of the East European societies from the dogmatic totalitarian order and the singular truth of the Marxist-Leninist political religion. A decisive rupture with 'traditional' understandings, however, simultaneously opens up the possibility of various, alternative visions of how modern society could be shaped. Modernity can, therefore, be understood as intrinsically generating diversity and conflict over its meaning. In post-1989 Eastern Europe, the transition should be seen as generating new conflicts over interpretations of modernity rather than as the end of meaningful conflict. I will argue below that this diversity does not necessarily disappear with European integration.

The second, strongly related, key characteristic of modernity is the emphasis on human autonomy, i.e. the idea of the human being as a subject who is able to understand the world and act on these understandings. Post-communist emancipation can thus primarily be understood as the liberation of the subject from the heteronomy of a centrally administered and totally controlled order. An unequivocal attachment to liberal individualism does not follow from this,

though. The emancipation of Eastern Europe also meant the re-articulation of collectivism of various kinds.

The third characteristic is the idea that society (and nature) is malleable, and that human beings can therefore reconstruct their own societies on the basis of their own visions (the latter two characteristics, which could be referred to as mastery and autonomy, or discipline and liberty, can, however, be interpreted in diverse ways and are in continuous tension – see Wagner, 1994). Thus, the ‘institutional design’ of ‘transition culture’ is only one way of perceiving the construction of modern societies in Eastern Europe.

The fourth characteristic is the essentially future-oriented nature of modern ideas and programmes of modernization. By creating (utopian) visions of a better society, modern agents divide the present from the past, and claim that by means of decisive action these visions can be implemented in the present (Eisenstadt, 1999; Koselleck, 1985; Therborn, 1995). The transition has, however, not only opened the possibility of the present mimesis of the West but has also created the basis for the resurfacing of nationalism and religion as primary elements in the projection of a pre-communist past into the post-communist future. Therefore, not so much the ‘catching up’ of the East European societies with Western, or, more specifically, European modernity should be the main focal point, but rather the unique reactions of these ‘later modernizing societies’ is to be taken as a starting point.

The contemporary experience of the post-communist societies with European modernity is predominantly understood in terms of a gradual incorporation of the post-communist societies into the European project. This process is then mostly read as convergence in legal, institutional, and political terms (after all, the entry conditions set by the Copenhagen Council of 1993 were political and economic convergence, as well as the potential to function within the EU by means of the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*).²² The process of accession could be, and has predominantly been, perceived in a spirit of assimilation,²³ in which the Eastern European countries shed their non-European or not-yet-fully-European status or Easternness in favour of Europeaness (Kuus, 2004). In reality, convergence is limited mostly, however, to the surface, institutional level. Moreover, the idea that assimilation will lead to convergence is not as obvious and unproblematic as often assumed. The pursuit of assimilation of the East is shared by an ‘epistemic community’ of Western and Eastern elites, but European norms and values are both being strategically adapted to local circumstances by the latter and producing unintended consequences that do not necessarily reinforce convergence. The enlargement ‘rite’, in which the applicant states shed their non-Europeaness and the European Union monitors progress in sameness through screening and regular reports (Jacoby, 2002), does not, therefore, necessarily lead to comprehensive convergence which comprises, for instance, political cultures, collective identities, and perceptions of Europe (Jacoby, 2002; Kuus, 2004; Mair and Zielonka, 2002). In my view, rather than understanding accession as the logical outcome and further conveyer of convergence of the backward post-communist states, widening should be understood as both

contributing to an immediate increase of diversity within the European Union, and, more importantly, as enhancing the potential for further manifestations of diversity in the future. This is so because of two reasons. First of all, the new (and prospective) member states gain membership status and therefore effective means for the articulation of difference. Even if the new member states are in an asymmetrical relationship with the old members²⁴ (in terms of the actual suspension of the enjoyment of certain benefits of membership, such as the mobility of workers, participation in Schengen and the monetary union, and with regard to the internalization of the organizational culture of the EU, see Schimmelfennig, 2000), accession most importantly means the achievement of effective sovereignty (the full recognition as a European state) and the acquisition of the right to co-decide on European matters (Prihan, 2005; Walker, 2003). In this sense, the new member states gain considerably in autonomy and hence also in potential to articulate difference on a European and political level. This difference consists, among others, of the legacies of socialism and pre-socialism the new member states bring with them, which have not and could not be completely eradicated by the accession process and the wider transition process (these legacies include, for instance, collectivism, a classical view of sovereignty, etatism, and social solidarity, see Albi, 2003; Fuchs and Klingemann, 2002; Walker, 2003; for the case of Romania, see Blokker, 2004a), but also new or renewed forms of difference can be expected to arise or to be accentuated (as in the leanings towards the USA in the political cultures of countries such as Poland and Romania). Nevertheless, as Kubik argues (2003), legacies only have import in the present if articulated by significant actors. The acquisition of the status of membership by the post-communist countries is in this sense pivotal as it means that diversity can be increasingly articulated – and can therefore acquire additional political meaning – on a European level. The new member states are thus not only suffering from an asymmetrical position as new members, but accession to the EU also means the reconstitution of their national identities and effective sovereignty. Enlargement has not only exposed these countries to a more or less imposed adoption of norms and rules of a European model, and hence to a forced convergence towards a European standard, but, by embedding their recovered sovereignty in the larger European project, also enabled them to meaningfully exercise self-determination within and as a result of a European national identity. A significant example is the process of constitutionalization, in which the CEECs not only increasingly participated, but in which they also articulated distinct viewpoints on future Europe.²⁵

This brings me to a second reason for expecting persistent diversity: the European project itself is in a process of qualitative change that in many ways might sustain further (political and cultural) diversity within Europe. While it seems undeniable that membership enhances the standing of the new members, the entity of which they became member is itself in flux, both as a result of a dynamic of political integration relatively independent of enlargement, and the political integration that is the result of the enlargement process itself (see Walker, 2003; Wiener, 2002). The gained momentum in the process of

constitutionalization since the Council of Nice in 2000 clearly attests to the fundamental change the European project is undergoing. Whereas constitution-alization includes a redefinition of the *finalité* of the European project, without obtaining a definite result, the widening of the EU has de facto meant a considerable reshuffle of power within the EU in favour of the periphery (Delanty, 2003). Moreover, and in spite of an asymmetric participation of the new (and prospective) members, the open-ended nature of the European Constitution means that the current codification of the European foundations is by no means a 'closed book' (Walker, 2003; Wiener, 2002). New members will have ample future opportunity to defend national idiosyncrasies as well as distinct visions of future Europe. In sum, in the process of widening, the European project has definitely drifted away from its earlier restricted (predominantly economic) and exclusivist *raison d'être* as it is in a process of redefining its *finalité* which introduces elements of polity-formation and increased participation and can hence be seen as possibly moving towards a more open-ended form of integration (Delanty, 2003).

Conclusion

The diversity that the post-communist countries bring to the European project is ultimately related to the way political, social, and cultural actors have dealt with the collapse of the communist empire, and the projects of modernization they have embarked on in its wake. In general, the importance of agency and subjectivity in modernization has been acknowledged in transition studies, in both 'first-' and 'second-generation' theories. The concept of meaningful agency and subjectivity in these theories seems, however, to be confined to a small layer of the post-communist societies, that is, liberal and European-minded political and economic elites. If, however, we want to understand European modernity as generating multiple understandings of a modern order and as intrinsically producing conflict over its meaning, as I have stated above, an analytical search for those modernizing agents that exhibit the Western mind-set forecloses the identification of agents with alternative programmes, and, therefore, the analysis of significant difference.²⁶ The analysis is then restricted to the identification of 'functional elites', 'change agents', or 'interactionist-individualist elites' (Kaminski and Kurczewska, 1995), i.e., those agents that portray the right dynamic and rational attitude necessary for a decisive rupture with the old system and who are capable of designing and implementing a programme of modernization that coincides with Western self-understandings of modernity.²⁷ I argue instead that a *plurality of modernizing agents* should be acknowledged. This means that, while recognizing the importance of designer elites in defining the pathways of transition, the co-responsibility of other, (extra-)institutional and social agents in determining the direction of transition should be part of the analysis. Such recognition will enhance a more complex understanding of transition as well as a sensitivity to potentially diverse paths of exiting from communism and the construction of modern societies (Kennedy, 2002: 22). The relations of the

political centre with social actors (in the form of intellectuals, social movements), and the relation of the latter to the centre's project, have a profound impact on 'designed' social change.²⁸

This brings me to a strongly related point. Next to a plurality of modernizing agents, *a multiplicity of programmes of modernization* should be considered. The fact that the post-communist elites articulate their programmes in a context which is strongly conditioned by the global neo-liberal paradigm and the European project alike does not imply that the articulation of difference and the persistence of diversity are impossible in the face of imposed convergence. Transition should be regarded as a recurrent project of modernization, which implies that emancipation is at the centre of post-communist social change, i.e. emancipation from the closed order of communism, and, by the same token, consisting of a fundamental opening up of society for alternative proposals. Admittedly, the post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe immediately experienced a closure of the discursive space, circumscribed by, on the one hand, the widespread perception of endogenous political elites that the imitation of 'tested' Western political and economic models as well as a 'return to Europe' was the only viable form of emancipation, and, on the other, the shape this 'return to Europe' took in the conditionality of the accession process. But even if enlargement can be seen as a process of assimilation of Western European standards by the post-communist countries (in this sense, membership of the EU is strongly compatible with transition culture), the conditions are sufficiently ambiguous to allow for the interpretation and adaptation of these norms (Grabbe, 2002; Jacoby, 2002; Mair and Zielonka, 2002; Wiener, 2002). The ostensible reproduction of West European norms, transition culture and discourses of Europeanization by East European elites should be understood as potentially entailing a two-way relationship between the Western centre and the Eastern periphery, thereby acknowledging space to manoeuvre for the latter (Jacoby, 2002; Kuus, 2004). With regard to national political arenas, it is further important to recognize that Eastern European politics not only consists of the future-oriented programmes of reformist forces (liberal political forces and business elites) versus the past-oriented programmes of former communists-cum-social democrats and national-populists, but that the latter similarly contribute to the construction of the post-communist order.²⁹ And, as argued above, these alternative voices could gain increasing prominence in the future European order. The dichotomous understanding of pro- vs anti-reformist/anti-European forces should further be replaced by an interpretative approach that is sensitive to the reciprocal influences of the various post-communist political forces. At the intersection of political and social actors' interaction, external influences, and historical legacies, creativity and otherness can produce a difference that significantly marks transition trajectories and participation in Europe.

This leads me to the final point, i.e., *the multiplicity of institutional configurations* that can underpin modern society. Multiple understandings of post-communist modernization inform multiple forms of institutions, in which the key tenets of modernity are institutionalized in different ways (for instance, in

terms of codified collective identities in national constitutions, see Priban, 2004, 2005, and understandings of freedom and participation in different forms of democracy and political culture, see Dryzek and Holmes, 2002, and Fuchs and Klingemann, 2002). Within the context of the contemporary European project, the configuration of democracy, the market economy, and the nation-state constitutes the main pattern of European modernity, but this should not obscure the diversity in institutional patterns that can be imagined and realized within that overall frame, in particular since all three components are subject to both centrifugal and centripetal forces (Borneman and Fowler, 1997). Furthermore, of great importance for current configurations in Eastern Europe is the fact that the post-communist societies emerge from the most durable alternative pattern or counterculture to Western modernity, i.e., communist modernity, which in various ways – among others, political culture, constitutional traditions, conceptions of political participation – informs present societies.

The challenge is, therefore, not to reduce the outcome of the transition in post-communist Europe to a mere (converging) variety of the Western European constellation, or 1989 to a *nachholende Revolution* (Habermas, 1990), but to acknowledge significant difference in the emerging societal orders. Here, theory should be both interpretative, in the sense that it should be able to recognize the construction of similarity without leaning on normative prescriptions, and hermeneutic, in the sense of being able to provide understanding from within the particularistic contexts in which projects of modernization arise, and which fundamentally shape the contours and substance of these projects.³⁰ Breaking with modernism then means letting go of writing the stories of success and failure of transition, and, instead, providing a critical analysis of ‘success stories’ and an interpretative understanding of ‘deviating’ cases. It also means a critical revisiting of the impact of the dominating discourses of globalization, neo-liberalism and European integration on the sites of transition, while simultaneously acknowledging local adaptive and innovative power, and the continuing reformation of the present by legacies of the past. Even if it has taken a decade and a half, it is never too late to redirect transition theory (and social theory in general) radically away from the harmonizing and universalizing ‘convergence thesis’, and to embrace diversity as the guiding principle of research on societal change in the post-communist world.

Notes

- 1 Romano Prodi on ‘Accession Day’, Dublin Castle, 1 May 2004, Speech/04/221.
- 2 See the report ‘The Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe’ of the Reflection Group of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, published in October 2004. The accession of the three aspirant member states – Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, let alone Turkey – will make structural diversity even more apparent.
- 3 Some recent publications indicate, indeed, that an affirmative – rather than self-critical – stance is increasingly considered untenable (see Bönker et al., 2002; Ekiert and Hanson, 2003; for a review of both, see Blokker, 2004b).

- 4 See, for similar observations, Alexander (1995); Altvater (1998: 592); Kennedy (2002); Knöbl (2001).
- 5 See, for this terminology, the introduction to Bönker et al. (2002).
- 6 I understand modernism as the affirmative reading of the dominant Western programme of modernity, embodied by the Enlightenment and individualist liberalism. In terms of the attainment of social knowledge, modernist approaches tend to 'conflate the imaginary signification of modernity with the reality of social life in Western societies' (Wagner, 2001: 4).
- 7 According to Alexander:

Jeffrey Sachs and other *simpliste* expositors of the 'big bang' approach to transition seem to be advocating a rerun of Rostow's earlier 'take-off' theory. Like that earlier species of modernization idea, this new monetarist modernism throws concerns of social solidarity and citizenship, let alone any sense of historical specificity, utterly to the winds. (1995: 44)
- 8 In particular, Latin America and Southern Europe; see, for instance, Przeworski (1991). For the problems this raises for nomothetical as opposed to contextual approaches, see the debate between Karl and Schmitter (1994, 1995) and Bunce (1995a, b).
- 9 Jeffrey Sachs has formulated the self-evidence of the superiority of market arrangements as follows: '[m]any of the economic problems solve themselves: markets spring up as soon as central planning bureaucrats vacate the field' (Sachs, in Bönker et al., 2002: 7).
- 10 As, for instance, Kaminski and Kurczewska note: 'The two roles [of citizens and entrepreneurs] relate to different functional areas in social life, but they share many of the same traits. They entail self-reliant, self-confident individuals endowed with a sense of self-respect' (1995: 132).
- 11 For similar reasons, communist elites considered it necessary to create the working class, and Eastern European liberal elites in the inter-war period perceived the need to construct the urban middle class.
- 12 Indeed, Müller suggests using the term 'negative sociology' for approaches that use 'a kind of applied theory of totalitarianism which maintains that, since the system of real socialism has totally failed, it will shortly totally disappear – a process often labelled "creative destruction"' (1995: 277).
- 13 For contributions to the debate that do significantly move beyond its early premises, see Kennedy (2002), Kubik (2003), and Spohn (2002).
- 14 As Burawoy remarks: 'the diverse ways of reworking the past spring from diverse political conjunctures in the moments of dissolution' (2001: 1108).
- 15 As Dobry asks:

why, after all, the focus on 'extrication paths', while details and descriptions frequently suggest the causal weight of the whole communist period, its social structures, and, in particular, the social networks generated during that period, which implies a whole other temporality than the short span of moments of 'extrication'? (2000: 58)
- 16 The unawareness regarding such features is clearly a consequence of path dependency's explicit focus on (a particular kind of) capitalism rather than other, alternative arrangements. See Kubik (2003) for the significance of discursive legacies on post-communist trajectories.

- 17 This is, for instance, also highlighted in current discussions about varieties of capitalism, see Hall and Soskice (2001).
- 18 For a similar suggestion regarding the reciprocal value of the debates on transition and modernity, see Allardt (2002).
- 19 See Arnason (n.d.) and Eisenstadt (1999).
- 20 See, for instance, the special issue of *Daedalus* (2000), Arnason (1999), Eisenstadt (1999, 2000), Kaya (2004), Sachsenmaier and Riedel (2002), Therborn (2003) and Wagner (1994).
- 21 See for the context of Europe, Delanty (2000); see also Blokker (2005). For the immanent nature of diversity in modernity, see Spohn (2003).
- 22 See for a forceful statement into this direction, Moravcsik and Vachudova (2003).
- 23 I use here, *mutatis mutandis*, the concept of assimilation as defined by Alexander (2001). An alternative and imaginative way of depicting the accession process is the portrayal of the EU as a family, and the accession process as the adoption of 'second cousins with lesser rights', who 'must undergo a probationary period of Europeanization before being ostensibly adopted by the family' (Borneman and Fowler, 1997: 496).
- 24 For two forceful statements of this asymmetry, see Holmes (2003) and Grzymala-Busse and Innes (2003).
- 25 The most visible impact was the role of Poland in the reformulation of the Preamble, see Joerges (2005) and Ziller (2004); the participation of the countries of Eastern Europe was, however, wider than that, see Landfried (2005) and Příban (2005).
- 26 According to Stark and Bruszt: '[W]e should not be too quick or too confident in our a priori ability to distinguish strategies of survival from strategies of innovation' (1998: 7).
- 27 As Kaminski and Kurczewska argue:

We find more of the interactionist-individualist type of élites in the Baltic states, where such traditions have survived from the interwar period, than in Bulgaria and Romania. This suggests that the first three societies will probably make faster progress in developing their democratic and market institutions than in the latter. (1995: 150)
- 28 The relations as they existed during communist times have a profound impact on the post-communist order, see Kubik (2003); for the relation of the populist-nationalist phenomenon and the emergence of democracy in Eastern Europe, see Blokker (2005).
- 29 Alternative programmes can of course consist of illiberalism and anti-Europeanism and, therefore, threaten current efforts of democratization and further integration, see Holmes (2003) and Tismaneanu (2002). In most Eastern European countries, however, the impact of such movements is intra-systemic (moving within democracy) rather than anti-systemic (refuting democracy as such), see Blokker (2005).
- 30 Kennedy (2002) makes some convincing, but preliminary, steps towards a critical theory of transition which explicitly acknowledges difference. He argues for a critical opening up within 'transition culture', that is, to develop a critical theory of transition, which explicates possibilities for emancipation and alternative projects of transition.

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