

# Theories of Postcommunist Transformation. Approaches, Debates, and Problems of Theory Building in the Second Decade of Research

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## Abstract

The article explores the current theoretical debates on postcommunist transformations. After identifying important novel or reinvigorated approaches, three of them are critically discussed: the postcommunism approach, the governance approach, and the Europeanisation approach. The examination leads to the result that, indeed, a 'second generation' has emerged. It has largely overcome universalistic assumptions and gained explanatory power by more complex theoretical architectures as well as systematic time-space-embeddings or contextualisations. A final consideration makes the case for interdisciplinary and general theories of *societal* transformations as a necessary step in the advancement of the debate.

**Keywords:** postcommunism, transformation, transition, social theory, Central and Eastern Europe.

## Introduction

The theoretical debate on postcommunist transitions seemed to have reached a dead end by the late 1990s. The heated disputes of the initial years had cooled off. By the mid-1990s, empirical research had applied its standard methodological repertoire in dissecting the new phenomenon and was gradually getting a grasp on the emerging postcommunist world. We soon no longer heard of the hopes initially fuelled in the first three years by the prospect of theories of transformation and expectations of new theoretical syntheses looming on the horizon (for instance, Eisenstadt, 1992).

Three reasons have been given for this theoretical drought: the transformations have mostly reached completion, the dominant approaches have proved inadequate, and the debate has been sterile and failed to provide any significant contribution to advancing theory in general (cf. Burawoy, 2000; Dobry, 2000a; Gans-Morse, 2004; Kubicek, 2000).

In the light of this perceived crisis, it comes as no surprise that many scholars expected the rapid demise of any kind of theoretically ambitious transformation research. Yet this did not happen. Quite to the contrary, the debate flared up once again in the late 1990s. A host of new publications not only continued to focus on postcommunism but also reflected on what transformation theory of the first decade had accomplished. The declared intention was not to take final stock of theory development but to further advance it (cf. Anderson, Fish, Hanson & Roeder, 2001; Bönker, Müller & Pickel, 2002a; Bönker & Wielgoths, 2008; Diamond & Plattner, 2002; Diamond, Plattner & Costopoulos, 2010; Dobry, 2000b; Ekiert & Hanson, 2003a; Lane, 2007; Outhwaite & Ray, 2005). One of the programmatic articles not only speaks of a 'second generation' but even proposes the goal of formulating a 'new paradigm' (Bönker et al., 2002b, pp. 19-22).

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In the following, I aim to shed light on the new hopes and approaches in the *social science debate on postcommunism during the second decade (1999/2000-2010)*.<sup>1</sup> One of the key issues will be to what extent the new approaches extend beyond the foci and insights of the first decade and, therefore, actually prove to be 'second generation theories'.<sup>2</sup> In a first step, I will (1) outline the fate of the traditional leading theories in the field and then (2) discuss new approaches and dominant conceptions, three of which I will address in greater detail: the approaches of postcommunism, governance, and Europeanisation. On this basis, I will (3) summarise the current state of theoretical research in the field and (4) close by discussing challenges and remaining problems of theory building.

## The fate of the early dominant theories

Variants of modernisation theory and the transition approach were the two dominant lines of theory during the first decade, which continued to play a role after the turn of the millennium.<sup>3</sup> However, under the dual impression of new problems apparent in concrete social practice and ideological change, they were subject to fundamental revisions.

As is well known, approaches drawing on *modernisation theory* immediately came under attack upon entering the scene (Tiryakian 1991). The main objections were that they placed emphasis on systems while neglecting action and subscribed to evolutionism and Westernisation in the sense of believing in the need for the transition societies to catch up with and model themselves after Western society and its basic institutions. Although this fundamental critique of the modernisation paradigm was mostly right on the mark, particularly as far as its neo-evolutionist variants (e.g., Zapf, 1991) were concerned, it often failed to recognise the explanatory power of those approaches relying on historical, cultural, or institutional perspectives (e.g., Lipset, 1994). Nevertheless, the early disputes had an influence on all versions thereafter. The efforts at modernising modernisation theory during the second decade can be summarised as attempts to reformulate its place in the debate on transformation theory. Especially, but not only, for the neo-evolutionist variety we can observe a tendency to be more cautious in its treatment of the actual process dynamics while holding onto its theoretical, methodological, and often normative framework (cf. Blokker, 2005; Kollmorgen, 2010a; Merkel, 2010, pp. 70-76; Pollack, 2008). So, recent debates in modernisation theory have focused on the relation between *levels of socio-economic or social structural development* (worldwide) and opportunities for the emergence and consolidation of democratic regimes (e.g. Adamski, Machonin & Zapf, 2002;

1 For reasons of space, I cannot address the line of debate more closely associated with economics. For a more recent overview, see, Åsslund 2007; Bönker & Wielgoths, 2008; Havrylyshyn, 2006; Lane, 2007; Lane & Myant, 2007.

2 Of course, the notion of 'theory generations' and the indication of corresponding time periods are arbitrary to a certain degree. Some research had been done much earlier than the results were first published; certain contributions of the second generation have been obviously elaborated before 1999 or 2000 (see the discussion below). But this is not the crucial point. The main argument in favour of the idea of theory generations in the transformation debate is that a majority of theoretical work done since the turn of the century considers its own attempts as an explicit critique of the dominant approaches in the first decade. It tries to transcend the 'old' paradigms, their questions as well as their theoretical answers – as Bönker et al. (2002b) formulate it exemplarily. Following K. Mannheim's approach, theory generations are not formed by year dates or clear-cut cohorts (of research projects). Rather, they are built around shared historical experiences and, hence, specific themes, directions and styles of discourse. A new theory generation is then given by new discursive constellations, distinctions and hegemonies. This difference is to be proven for the theoretical debate on the postcommunist transformations in the coming sections.

3 Discursive hegemony does not necessarily mean quantitative dominance but can be a matter of 'merely' providing the ideological and basic theoretical matrices guiding the research process. Gans-Morse (2004) fails to recognise this in his otherwise instructive article on the dominant theories of the first decade.

Boix & Stokes, 2003; Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub & Limogi, 2000). Or alternatively, the debates have concentrated on the *culturally rooted* diversity of the paths and outcomes of modernisation (e.g. Eisenstadt, 2000; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Spohn, 2002).

We can also identify substantial changes in the *transition approach*, which underwent a metamorphosis to become '*consolidology*' in the course of reflecting on the actual stages and paths of democratisation in Central Eastern and Eastern Europe compared to other world regions and in the wake of an intensive, critical debate (cf. Bunce, 1995; Carothers, 2002; McFaul, 2001; O'Donnell, 1996). Much more so than its traditional predecessor, the transition approach since the mid-1990s has incorporated the long-term path-dependencies of democratisation, the problems of stateness, and the relation between the architecture of political institutions and actual actor behaviour along with its political-cultural foundations. On the other hand, the once dominant bias towards a logic of consolidation has been dismissed to allow for the possibility of deconsolidation as well as for enduring autocracies, 'defective democracies', or 'hybrid regimes' (cf. Geddes, 1999; Pridham, 2000; Anderson et al. 2001; Diamond & Plattner, 2002; Merkel, 2004; Diamond et al., 2010). With this in mind, it would certainly be exaggerated to speak of the 'end of the transition paradigm' (Carothers, 2002). It would seem more appropriate to describe this shift in terms of correcting the initial ideological optimism and lean theory design – particularly in case of the rational choice based approaches – without sacrificing the key role assigned to actors and actor-transformed political institutions (cf. O'Donnell, 2010; Merkel, 2010, pp. 431/432, 488-490). We can interpret the historical and structural contextualisation of the transition approach in terms of embedding it in modernisation theory, so that the two are now no longer competing but complementary approaches (for this discussion cf. Blokker, 2005; Gans-Morse, 2004; Kollmorgen, 2010a).

## Reconfigurations: The new and reinvigorated approaches of the second decade

A second main strand of development is the reinvigoration of initially marginal approaches and the emergence of new approaches or varieties of approaches. The most important ones are:<sup>4</sup>

- (1) *Postcommunism approach* (Bunce, 1999; Bunce, McFaul & Stoner-Weiss, 2010; Ekiert & Hanson, 2003a; Hann, 2002; Holmes, 1997; Kitschelt, Mansfeldova, Markowski & Tóka, 1999; Sakwa, 1999; Segert, 2007a; Staniszkis, 1999; Rose, 2009);
- (2) *Governance approaches* (Beyer, Wielghohs & Wiesenthal, 2001; Beyer, 2008; Diamond et al., 2010; Elster, Offe & Preuß, 1998; Wiesenthal, 2002);
- (3) *Historical institutionalism, theories of path-dependency, disciplined contextualism* (Beyer, 2006; Ekiert & Hanson, 2003a; Stark & Bruszt, 1998; Tatur, 2002);
- (4) *Social mechanism approach* (Elster et al., 1998; Pfaff, 2006; Pickel & True, 2002; Schmid & Wehrich, 2001);
- (5) *Interpretatively oriented approaches in the tradition of action theories, cultural theories or network analyses* (Badescu & Uslander, 2003; Höhmann, 2002; Kennedy, 2002; Ledeneva, 2006; Marková, 2004; Meyer, 2006; Müller, 2008; Pollack, Jacobs, Müller & Pickel, 2003; Spohn, 2002);
- (6) *Post-colonialism, ethnography, social anthropology* (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999; Hann, 2002; Korek, 2007; Kovacevic, 2008);
- (7) *Discourse analysis* (Dryzek & Holmes, 2002; Glasinska & Krzyzanowski, 2009; Jacoby, 2004; Kennedy, 2002; Kovacevic, 2008);
- (8) *Approaches of exogenous promotion of democratisation and transformation* (Bönker & Wielghohs, 2008; Bunce et al., 2010; Cernat, 2006; Jacoby, 2004; Kutter & Trappmann, 2006; Orenstein, Bloom & Lindstrom, 2008; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005);
- (9) *Approaches of theoretical combining* (Bönker et al., 2002b; Kollmorgen, 1996; Merkel 2010).

<sup>4</sup> In listing the approaches I largely follow the self-designations of the scholars.

Although it doesn't go without notice that several approaches overlap in their theoretical substance (e.g. 1. and 3., 2. and 4. or 5. and 6.), the plurality and heterogeneity of the approaches listed above is obvious already at first glance. Following the well-established paradigmatic distinctions within the field of social theory, we find approaches in the tradition of the methodological individualism (4., parts of 2. and 3.), as well as those of the collectivistic paradigm (in 5. and 6.). Equally, the difference between explanatory or causal theories (2.-4.) and interpretative approaches (5. and 6.) is represented here. Looking from this point of view, the idea that the second generation theories would belong to a common paradigm seems to be at least problematic.

If one moves on to a developmental perspective and refers to the reasons and directions of theoretical work, the approaches could be arranged along two axes. The first one distinguishes (rather) universalistic and/or global approaches from contextual and/or regional approaches. The first group seems (rather) to be interested in theories of social change or transformations in general, whereas the second group is specifically interested in post-communist transformations and their theoretical elucidation. Besides the two early leading theories and a number of important contributions within the approaches 2., 3., 4. and 9., the great majority of second generation theories aims exclusively at the postcommunist transformations and their theorisation. The second axis refers to the decisive source and the driving force of theoretical working. The first pole is given by approaches driven by the idea to achieve theoretical advancement via applying or integrating new theoretical models or theoretical strands circulating generally within social sciences. The best examples here are the social mechanism approach (4.) or the discourse analysis (7.). They have entered the scene of transformation theory after their dissemination and success in other research fields. Thus, we could speak of a more deductive procedure, theory transfer and a phenomenon of theoretical fashions. On the opposite pole, the theoretical work is largely based on intensive historical studies and empirical fieldwork in the transformation societies. Progress in theory building can be achieved by inductive methods using theoretical models that have to be adopted, recombined and renewed this way. Good examples for this type of theory work in the second decade are the postcommunism approach (1.) as well as larger parts of the approaches 3., 5., 6. and 8.

In order to gain deeper insight into these different forms of theoretical work in the second decade and their methodological results, I will discuss three of the approaches in more detail. These approaches (the postcommunism approach, theories of governance and the Europeanisation approach) have been chosen, on the one hand, because of their contrastive programs in achieving theoretical advancement. On the other hand, they appear to have been prominent as well as highly influential in recent years.

### Postcommunism – a coherent theoretical approach to transformation?

In the second decade, the postcommunism approach received new appreciation while also undergoing theoretical revision. We can distinguish three strands. (1) The first strand derives from *the theory of totalitarianism* (cf. Siegel, 1998; Sztompka, 1995). Although this strand has lost significance, it remains present in other theoretical currents in terms of the emphasis given the socio-structural and, particularly, the cultural legacies of communism, ranging from the 'atomisation of the social', via 'us versus them' dichotomies, to statist and wait-and-see attitudes.

(2) A second strand of postcommunism theory is mainly in the line of Eastern European area studies before 1989 (cf. Bunce, 1999; Bunce et al., 2010; Hann, 2002; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Ledeneva, 2006; Rose, 2009; Segert, 2007a; Staniszki, 1999). It is based on two, somewhat paradoxical lines of argument regarding the postcommunist societies of Central Eastern and Eastern Europe. The first claim is that the region's state socialist past has not been erased after 1989 but remains present in everyday practices. The legacy of the past has played a significant role in shaping the content, form, and direction of the radical social changes after 1989. It is the root of similar structural, institutional,

and cultural conditions and dynamics in Central and Eastern European countries with a state socialist heritage. Thus, it is a *particular type of transformation* that we are looking at here. The classical themes of postcommunism research are:

- phenomena resulting from the erosion of the socialist planned and commando economy, such as ‘nomenclature’, ‘political’, ‘clan’, or ‘oligarchic capitalism’ (D. Stark, J. Staniszkis, M. Tatur),
- the peculiar social structures marked by a small group of the new rich, the intelligentsia, a high proportion of industrial and rural labourers, and a largely absent propertied middle class,
- a fragmented, strongly elite-based party landscape grouped around a certain ideological orientation or ethnic affiliation, lacking any broad support base in civil society,
- significant levels of conflict over collective affiliation and minorities but also about (informal) everyday practices and customs peculiar to these groups.

An important aspect of this strand – as opposed to the first one – is that the state socialist legacies are not perceived only in terms of obstacles or burdens. Rather, certain elements of these legacies are also viewed as *assets* bearing the seeds for the formation of a modern, democratic welfare society. Assets in this sense are the civilian control of the military, the education system and level of education, or the integration of women in the labour force, and female emancipation. Other elements of the socialist heritage have the capacity to serve as media of transformation in the sense of ‘dual functionalities’ (Staniszkis, 1999). This pertains to, for instance, social networks or forms of ‘political economy’ (cf. Bunce, 1999; Grabher & Stark, 1997; Rose, 2009; Staniszkis 1999).

The second main line of argument shatters the claimed homogeneity of state socialist societies: state socialism displayed considerable diversity in terms of structures, institutions, and the cultural context in which the latter were embedded. No matter how much the state socialisms were aligned along a single set of structural principles and forged into a Second World system held together by imperial power, Soviet socialism in the mother country of the proletarian revolution and its Albanian or Polish offsprings or “socialism in the colours of the GDR” were ‘*worlds*’ apart. These regional and national differences are key factors in postcommunist development because they contributed to the emergence of different *paths of transformation* and *variants of postcommunism*. Depending on the analytical approach, postcommunist diversity is explained by emphasising different aspects. While certain studies refer to factors of *longue durée* (such as religiously influenced cultural codes) (e.g. Staniszkis, 1999; Brzezinski, 2002; Offe, 1996; Pollack et al. 2003), others focus either on the specific types of state socialist regimes and their late-socialist reforms (e.g. Bunce, 1999; Bunce et al., 2010; Burawoy & Verdery, 1999; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Segert 2007b) or the models of transition during the early stage of transformation (reform from above, negotiations, implosion, etc.) (for complex models, see Ekiert & Hanson, 2003b; Kitschelt, 2003). The differences in the societies and paths of transformation visible today between post-Soviet Eastern Europe (e.g., Ukraine or Moldova) and Central Europe (e.g., Poland or Slovenia) validate these findings empirically and at the same time underscore the dual argument stressing the major influence of *diversity within postcommunist unity* on the structure and development of these societies.

(3) The third strand of postcommunism broadens the perspective in two ways. On the one hand, it is interested in the global dimension of postcommunist sociality. On the other hand, it systematically incorporates in its global perspective the dimensions of ideas, ideologies, and social movements in (post-)communism (cf. Sakwa, 1999; Outhwaite & Ray, 2005). The main argument at the theoretical-conceptual level is that postcommunism, as communism before, can be adequately explained only as a *global project* and phenomenon. What characterises postcommunism is by no means limited to those particular countries and their medium-term prospects of development. Since 1989, we are rather in the midst of a global postcommunist world that, in terms of the dichotomies capitalism vs. socialism or First vs. Second World, has indeed largely lost a major dimension structuring international relations and conflict and yet has retained key elements of communist ideology and social movement potential while it is itself undergoing an open-ended process of transformation.

The various types of orientation and logic of explanation offered by the postcommunism approach have not remained undisputed. Reviewing the criticism, we find two intertwined arguments, which Jacques Rupnik, pinpointing the crux of the matter, put in these words: “*Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet empire, one thing is clear: The word ‘postcommunism’ has lost its relevance*” (Rupnik, 2002, p. 103; cf. Bozoki, 2004; Carothers, 2002; Clark 2002). The waning explanatory power of postcommunism over time is an argument that cannot simply be swept aside. As true as it is that the immediate influence of the communist era is diminishing – not least in the wake of generational change – and that the specific conditions at the onset of transition (1989/90) along with new factors and constellations after 1989 have (had) an increasing impact on the processes of transformation (e.g., the EU accession processes – see below), this does mean that the relevance of communist history is dwindling in a linear fashion. The project of state socialism once aimed at pervading and revolutionising society in total; its goal was the formation of a new *civilisation*. The outcomes of this project are deeply inscribed into the social structures, the tangible and intangible expressions of culture, and the everyday practices of those societies (cf. Bunce et al., 2010; Burawoy & Verdery, 1999; Outhwaite & Ray, 2005). One cannot rid oneself of this history. Rather, this history is the ‘material’ that the present ‘works’ with, by recombining it in selective ways (cf. Stark & Bruszt, 1998). This recombination even includes the possibility of reinvigorating some of its elements. Considering the specific type of change implied in the transformation of a society, we can furthermore even reverse Rupnik’s statement if we accept that the early years of transformation represented a period of action under exceptional circumstances, which led to marginalising or suspending material and symbolic constraints (from structures of economic (re-)production, via institutionalised channels of social mobility, to ideological patterns of expectations and interpretation). The years 1991 and 1992 in Russia are prototypical examples of this exceptional situation. Over time, with the need to restructure and consolidate the social system, those constraints begin to reassert themselves and do so by merging with the now *changed* contexts and constellations in peculiar ways (cf. Kollmorgen, 2010b).

When we review the postcommunism approach from the perspective of *transformation theory*, we see three heterogeneous strands lacking a model based on a common set of logical elements. Moreover, the first and especially the third strand cannot really be considered instances of transformation theory in the narrow sense. The second strand, which we might refer to as ‘*new Eastern European area studies*’, is different.<sup>5</sup> The common conceptual ground here is reference to a *region conceived as a socio-historically and socio-geographically evolved one marked by diversity*, with roots going back at least to the inter-war period (see also Holmes, 1997; Segert, 2002; Berend, 2005). The contemporary societies of Central and Eastern Europe are described and explained against the background of their *common* state socialist and postcommunist past, while emphasising their ‘*diversity in unity*’ before and especially *after* 1989. The main theoretical models employed in *process* analyses are adopted from historical modernisation research and historical institutionalism, but also include actor and network theories, ethnological and interpretative approaches, social movement approaches as well as civilisational analysis. The most advanced variants of the postcommunism approach show a theoretical architecture with an explicit – to adopt D. Stark’s notion – ‘recombinant’ character reflecting the recombinant social practice in postcommunist societies (cf. Stark & Bruszt, 1998; Ekiert & Hanson, 2003b).

## Beyond the theorem of impossibility? New perspectives in theories of governance

From the beginning, the problem of controlling, steering or governing the postcommunist transformations represents an important research field, particularly in the political sciences. Since it is impossible to cover all aspects of this theoretical discussion and its evolution during the last ten years, I focus solely on one key issue of the governance debate.

5 For more recent attempts at extending this approach to other regions, particularly Asia but also Africa, see Hann, 2002; Segert, 2007a; Cheng & Sil, 2007.

One of the strongest predictions against the euphoric hopes in Central and Eastern Europe was formulated in the notion of the *dilemmas of simultaneity*. The argument, rooted in the *rational choice* tradition, mainly referred to, in John Elster's words, "*the necessity and impossibility of simultaneous economic and political reform*" (Elster, 1990; cf. Przeworski 1991). Claus Offe expanded the dilemma situation to a trilemma by including problems of territorial and national restructuring. At the same time, he pointed out the need for simultaneously restructuring society at all levels, specifically the polity level, and the impossibility of doing so (Offe, 1996).

The dilemma theorem predicted that the strict pursuit of a democratic-capitalist shock therapy was not only not viable but also definitely not very promising, and, for this reason, we are more likely to see forms of gradualism. This line of argument was attacked by advocates of neo-evolutionist modernisation theory and neo-classical economic theory in the early 1990s as either completely off the mark (e.g. Balcerowicz, 1996) or, at best, as the description of an extreme case (e.g. Zapf, 1991). The proponents of actor-oriented governance theories, on the other hand, were concerned with the first modifications of this theory. They drew attention especially to the reform-promoting effects of so-called 'pre-emptive', i.e. authoritative and preventive, institution building and weak intermediate systems (Wiesenthal, 1996).

However, an intensive and henceforth empirically grounded debate began not before the late 1990s. The decisive reason for the emergence of this debate is the empirical criticism of the 'impossibility theorem' by the actual reality of those transformation societies. Particularly in the Central European and Baltic reform states, the apparent success of a combination of drastic economic reforms of the shock-therapy kind (big bang strategy) and radical democratisation could no longer be interpreted as an ephemeral phenomenon or owing to a coincidental constellation of favourable circumstances. Successfully coming to grips with the 'triple transition' (C. Offe) quandary indeed seemed possible.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the postcommunist transitions proved to be an arena for complex and surprisingly effective political governance.

In this light, some researchers in the more recent debate on transformation theory have straightforwardly raised doubts as to whether there ever was a dilemma of simultaneity in the first place (Beyer, 2008, p. 92; Dobry, 2000c: pp. 3-4). Others scaled it down to a "problem" of simultaneity and recognised the need for serious revisions (e.g. Merkel, 2010, p. 325; Wiesenthal, 2002). The criticism was launched at three levels, identifying either metatheoretical shortcomings, theoretical fallacies or gaps, or instances of empirical falsification.

At the meta-theoretical level, Wolfgang Merkel sees the main shortcoming in the limitations of a narrow actor-theoretical or, more precisely, *rational choice* approach and points out that broadening the perspective to include theoretical considerations at the structural and cultural level makes "the interdependent triad of modernity, stateness, and EU accession" visible, which solves the dilemma (Merkel, 2010, p. 434).

Helmut Wiesenthal (2002) underlines that many important theoretical insights regarding the difficulties of 'holistic reform projects' under democratic conditions have been confirmed, yet a number of new conditions for success have been identified, which allows improving and expanding the previous model. Apart from the reinterpretation of cultural legacies (see above), the main revisions refer to the opportunities for lesson drawing and policy transfer and the extent to which these opportunities are actually seized by state actors. In this governance perspective, 'imitative holism' is much more promising than a 'utopian' one, which cannot draw on models of functioning

6 From this, we must distinguish the debate on the dilemma of a parallel process of nation-state building, or rather establishing a state based on the rule of law, and democratisation in which similar strategies of 'gradualism' and 'sequencing' (first nation building, then democratization) have been discussed. See already Linz & Stepan, 1996, pp. 16ff; for more recent contributions see Diamond & Plattner, 2002, part III; Diamond et al., 2010, pp. 129-176; Merkel, 2010, pp. 325-326.

actor-institution arrangements and the advice of outside experts. This involves, as factors of great importance, the willingness to quickly learn from one's neighbours and one's own mistakes combined with amazing 'political skills', as well as the institutionalised and, in this way, controlled and sanctioned forms of transfer as implemented especially in the EU accession processes (Beyer et al., 2001; Beyer, 2008; Wiesenthal, 2002).

In terms of disconfirming empirical evidence, the first aspect worth noting is (a) the weak actual organisational capacity of the socially disadvantaged, thus their weak blocking power against far-reaching economic reforms. Furthermore, (b) there are the restraints on democratic responsiveness, for instance, by semi-presidential systems of government or even forms of defective democracy, which are by no means conducive to the pursuit of radical economic change with some degree of continuity. In such conditions, the early beneficiaries of reform (often the former members of the nomenclature) are more likely to have ideal opportunities for pursuing rent-seeking strategies, eliminating economic competition, and engaging in corrupt state capture (in this respect specifically, see Hellmann, 1998). Seen in this way, substantial democratisation can be perceived as a driver also of economic competition, yielding gains in productivity and welfare accordingly. Finally, (c) the past ten years testify to the fact that the legitimacy of the newly emerged social orders indeed rests on a diffuse form of system support to a much greater degree than initially assumed. Today, this is mainly attributed to the profound delegitimisation of the old system and the resulting 'honeymoon effect' (F. Bönker) as well as the culturally coded (seeming) absence of alternatives to the new system ('return to Europe') (ibid.; Müller, 2008).

In terms of transformation theory, we are led to conclude (1) that the models in this field of research have in fact undergone substantial modification. The key here is not just the new recognition of the complex nature of the prerequisites and the contextual embeddedness of dilemma situations. Rather, research today accepts that there exist specific opportunities for political governance in postcommunist transformations that partially suspend the classical theorems claiming the 'impossibility of holistic reform projects' in modern democracies. In order to properly substantiate the new 'theorem of possibility', we must go beyond the horizon of rational choice theory, upon which the classical dilemma conception relied to include not only socio-structural institutional, national cultural factors, as well as the international or transnational contexts of reform, but also multidimensional orientations of action, relations of social power, the resources for legitimising them, as well as the multiple capacities for governance. (2) The conclusion repeatedly drawn from this, however, that the (classical) impossibility theorem is systematically flawed is itself questionable. First of all, as a matter of principle, we must beware of finalist interpretations that take the progressive 'solution' of the dilemma situation as proof of its non-existence. Second, the early lines of argument appear to have formulated an unconditional and model-based theorem of impossibility only at first glance. On closer scrutiny, it is more so that while Elster, Przeworski, and Offe analyse constellations of action in transformation settings in terms of dilemmas of action that derive from the logic of the situation, at the same time they not only identify the empirical conditions (although at times only implicitly) that must be given for such dilemmas to materialise, but are also aware of social actors' counterlogical ability, so to speak, to overcome such dilemmas in social practice. Third, in light of the fact that the social transformations have yet to be completed and of the recent crisis phenomena even in those reform economies considered the epitome of radical solution strategies (such as Estonia), the question as to what *long-term* successes will eventually be achieved under conditions of a possibly changing world society should be treated as one that research has yet to answer.



## Europeanisation as a new theoretical approach?

If we direct our attention to approaches of exogenous promotion of democratisation and transformation, we find a great variety of substantial aspects and theoretical levels of the discussion. The earliest analyses (cf. Dahrendorf, 1990; Karl & Schmitter, 1991; Offe 1996) focused on factors such as snowball effects and other transmission processes in Central and Eastern European countries in the time span between 1988 and 1991, as well as on political-cultural orientations toward the West. Together with the new dimension of Europeanisation in the context of the EU accession processes a new chapter has been opened, which represents the most influential aspect in the current debate. Since I am again forced to select specific issues from the broader theoretical discussion on this subject, I focus on the approaches dealing with Europeanisation.<sup>7</sup> We can distinguish two conceptual approaches here:

(a) The first strand, more in the line of cultural sociology, is mainly concerned with the European dimension of *cultural and ideological orientations* (codes, guiding concepts, ideological programs) and the *embedding* of transformation processes (e.g. Bönker, Beichelt & Wielgohs, 2004; Müller, 2008; Spohn, 2002). Three interrelated lines of argument were developed. First, especially in the early stage of the transformation, the catchphrase of ‘the return to Europe’ concealed ideological and strategic differences among reform-oriented actors, while at the same time creating cultural ties and motivating self-commitments that led to alleviating dilemma situations in important ways. This early ‘cultural codification’ easily linked up with pre-socialist and state socialist traditions of modernity and served as a bridge to Western conceptions of reform. Second, and in a sense conversely, Europeanisation in the second period of reform proved to be a cultural medium for warding off or mitigating radical free market conceptions of transformation as pursued, for instance, by the IWF. Here, Europeanisation served as a code for a model of welfare capitalism based on democracy and solidarity (‘European social model’), thus benefiting the EU accessions, which were far from uncontroversial. Third, reference to Europeanisation, as a guiding vision and cultural resource for change, allowed differentiating different paths of postcommunist transformation and the different outcomes observed so far, especially between the reform countries in Central, South Eastern, and Eastern Europe, as well as in Asia.

(b) We see a stronger focus on aspects of actor and institutional theory in *research on Europeanisation* and *European integration*. Of special interest in this context are approaches that adopt a critical view of how the promise of EU membership, the conditionality of the accession processes (2000-2004/2007), and the newly achieved membership status have shaped postcommunist change. Innovative contributions have particularly come from approaches that address various key issues from the angle of theories of governance, power, and discourse. Among those issues are the concrete processes of lesson drawing and policy transfer, the agents and supporters of these processes, the capacity for implementation, and (national) problems of legitimating (cf. Kutter & Trappmann, 2006; Mansfeldova, Sparschuh & Wenninger, 2005; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). An equally innovative source have been approaches that trace the systematic discrepancies between discursive and socio-practical adjustment to norms (e.g. Jacoby, 2004) as well as the paradoxical effects on future democratisation and economic and welfare state reforms (cf. Kutter & Trappmann, 2006).

For almost all the Europeanisation approaches, it holds true that they are not designed to – and in their own understanding also do not intend to – replace transformation research and theory. Rather, they criticise explanations that attribute major significance to endogenous or internal factors of change (as the early leading theories did it). Instead, they emphasise the great importance of international and (European) transnational influence, embedding, and ties. In other words, they plead for the complex integration of international and transnational contexts and causal factors in theories of (postcommunist) transformation.

7 For the broader international debate on factors that promote democracy and transformation from the outside, see Diamond et al., 2010, pp. 179-253; Merkel, 2010, pp. 436-486; especially on Eastern Europe: Bönker & Wielgohs, 2008a, part II; Bunce et al., 2010, part I-III.

## Second decade research agendas and basic orientations

Reflecting the insights gained by the (selective) discussion above, it can be confirmed that a new second generation of transformation theories has been emerging since the late 1990s. On the one hand, it reflects changed social practices and new challenges in the transformation societies, including altered ideological discourses (not last the weakening of neoliberal universalism). On the other hand, the rise of the new generation is the result of intensive critical discussions and internal advancements of established theories as well as the penetration of new theoretical and methodological approaches into the transformation research. Altogether, we find indeed new actors, styles and lines of discussion, and changed hegemonies in the theoretical discourse that can be summarised as follows (cf. Bönker et al., 2002b; Bönker & Wielgohs, 2008, part I; Greskovits, 2002; Merkel, 2010, pp. 67-88; Wiesenthal, 2002):

(1) The second generation theories of transformation made the final step to go *beyond the 'deficit' or 'negative sociologies' of postcommunist transformation*. The research is no longer geared toward identifying the shortcomings of postcommunist societies compared to perceived universal models of modernity and modernisation. Instead, the inquiries now aim to explore the specific conditions, capacities, and opportunities for former socialist societies to pursue an autonomous path of transformation in the wider context of world society. Apart from the emergence of specific types of new authoritarian and hybrid regimes (cf. Bunce et al., 2010; Merkel, 2004), as well as the opportunities and characteristic features of successful projects of holistic reform discussed above, for some researchers this involves the discussion of *avant-gardisms* of postcommunist societies. This research addresses, for instance, the extent of transnationalisation, dominance of financial capital, and neoliberal hegemony observed in those economies and welfare regimes (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; Bönker, 2008; Cerami & Vanhuyse, 2009; Kollmorgen, 2010b; Lane & Myant, 2007; Poznanski, 2002) as well as possibly 'trend-setting' processes of political mass communication, organisation, and decision-making that go beyond the patterns encountered in classical Western democracies (Bos & Segert, 2008) or also other topics such as postmodern lifestyles and value orientations (e.g. Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

(2) This perspective owes not least to a twofold trend in transformation-theoretical discourse that we might characterise as an *increase in complexity from contextualisation*. While universalistic approaches are on the retreat, approaches emphasising context factors, such as time and place, are experiencing a revival, however, without returning to traditional area studies or adopting the widespread methodological globalism of the 1990s. This goes along with efforts at further advancing transformation theory based on a *historical and comparative perspective*. One of these attempts has become known as 'historical institutionalism', which has proposed a model explicitly designed to accommodate multiple configurations of conditions, formation processes, and variants of development (for a pointed account, see Pierson, 2003, pp. 353ff). Orientations of this kind have been adopted and have proven their analytical potential in a number of dominant approaches in current research, among them the theory of postcommunism, path-dependency theories (Beyer, 2006; Stark & Bruszt, 1998), disciplined contextualism (Ekiert & Hanson, 2003b), and politico-economic governance theories (see above).

(3) In a meta-theoretical perspective, such increases in complexity typically involve certain strategies of *combining theories*. Apart from the ones mentioned above, Pickel and True's approach (2002) is example of such a strategy at the level of medium-range theory. In their study of the inter-relatedness of global, transnational, and national mechanisms of change, they design an analytical model linking the 'approach of systemism' and the 'concept of mechanism'. Whereas the first approach combines structural and actor perspectives, the second one incorporates process-related and functional structures in a multi-level model. Other examples of multi-level and multi-perspective models are Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss (2010), who link endogenous and exogenous factors of democratisation, the sophisticated research program of 'disciplined contextualism' (Ekiert & Hanson 2003b), or the approach proposed by Bönker, Müller, and Pickel (2002b). The latter addresses the

problems of ‘institutional consolidation’ by combining a number of approaches revolving around “trust, networks, social capital, and civil society” while preferring organisational sociology to get a grasp on the demonstration effects of Western societies and institutional transfers and turning to cultural sociology to explain changes in value systems as a source of legitimacy for complex social orders (ibid., pp. 23-27).

(4) Regarding the *innovativeness of second generation transformation research*, we must note that a number of the new ideas pursued in the second decade had already been proposed during the first, already laying the foundations for important paths of development to come. This is apparent in Weberian theories of modernisation, in the idea of ‘structural contingency’ of the transition approach (Karl & Schmitter, 1991), in the postcommunist path-dependency approach (Stark & Bruszt, 1998), or in the proposed strategies of combining theories (cf. Kollmorgen, 1996). This observation, however, is not to deny substantial theory developments since then. These have occurred especially in areas where new approaches have emerged aimed at *modal specification and temporal and spatial contextualisation*. Moreover, there have been important attempts to exploit the potential of new basic developments in social theory, ranging from the ‘institutional’, ‘cultural’, ‘linguistic’ or the ‘spatial turn’ to revisions of the rational choice paradigm among them, for instance, the social mechanism approach, new models in governance and policy research, as well as new approaches in social geography and discourse analysis.

(5) Merely listing the approaches and their many combinations in currency today already lends some plausibility to the claim that the ‘second generation approaches’ *cannot* be subsumed under a ‘single new paradigm’. They are too diverse and, in terms of the underlying paradigms, too heterogeneous – also in the ways they are combined. Considering the different social and academic contexts and affiliations, research agendas, and criteria of judgment, we can expect this to continue to be the case in the future.

(6) Finally, we must note a peculiar *paradox of the more recent theoretical debate*: Although the renewal of transformation theory at the turn of the millennium explicitly raised the demands on interpretations of *postcommunist transformations*, scholars have shied away from tackling the *challenge of a theory of societal transformation*. Medium-range theories seem to be the measure of all things. More ambitious endeavours have been shunned as if to avoid burning one’s fingers a second time. Although such caution may be understandable from a psychological point of view and is also in line with the defensive *zeitgeist* in social theory, it nevertheless is unjustified in the light of the subject matter. However, the project of a theory of transformation – as any other project of this kind – is a promising one only if it is elaborated and permitted to evolve as an open and interdisciplinary endeavour allowing for ‘unity in the diversity of its many voices’. Over the past twenty years, an abundance of empirically grounded taxonomies, models, and partial theories have been developed, elaborated, and subjected to critical debate so that we, at this point, would be greatly mistaken in speaking of an early stage of theory development or of helpless or barren efforts (for complex approaches, see for instance Elster et al., 1998; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Merkel, 2010; Rose, 2009 as well as the contributions in Bönker et al., 2002a; Bönker & Wielgoths, 2008; Ekiert & Hanson, 2003a).

## Theories of transformation: Old and new challenges

In light of the achievements and problems of the second generation of social transformation theories, what are the challenges facing a possible third generation?

(1) The overarching task remains of constructing *interdisciplinary social science theories of societal transformation* in the sense of establishing a sufficiently elaborated and coherent theoretical edifice. This involves, as a crucial desideratum, the need to determine the core subject matter and the necessary range of such a theory. I tend to insist that, in principle, such a theory can only be designed as a

*general* and, therefore, explicitly *comparative theory* and for this reason cannot be limited to explaining postcommunist change alone. Such a theory must not only apply to other cases of democratisation and, in a broader sense, to processes of political transition and other forms of ‘development’ in general, but must above all also address the most important subtypes of social transformations, i.e. the Meiji restoration in Japan (1868 ff.) and similar cases (e.g., Turkey after 1922) as well as the state socialist transformations in Europe (particularly 1948ff). From this vantage point, we can see that societal transformations must be conceived as *projects of a fast-paced, radical, and controlled change of a social formation, selectively geared toward a specific model and occurring in the context of development disparities and rivalries within the framework of global modernity*.<sup>8</sup> With the problems of modernity and modernisation in mind, we might pointedly describe societal transformations as the perhaps most rigorous attempts at achieving *the most advanced stage of modernity by the most advanced means of modernity* (cf. Kollmorgen, 2010a, b). Based on this typification, certain instances of postcommunist development in South Eastern and Eastern Europe as well as Asia *do not* represent cases of societal transformations (such as Albania, Belarus, or Turkmenistan still today). Second, a theory of societal transformation must have at its core a *theory of process and action*, which is capable of integrating the focus on (individual, collective, and organised) actors and regulative institutions with the culture in which they are embedded and in the wider context of global modernity. From a theoretical and methodological point of view, *combinatory procedures* are the only way to accomplish this.

(2) With this in mind, I believe there to be another important challenge in developing a suitable theory to account for the *differences and variety* among the postcommunist and other historical or contemporary social transformations *within the context* of both regional and global dynamics. Conversely, we need to more strongly consider the contexts of the respective global processes of development in which the waves of social transformations have taken place (in the late 19th, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the Second World War, and during the latter third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). In so doing, we need to overcome reductionist conceptions of ‘recursive effects’ (cf. Bönker et al., 2002b; Castells, 1996; Ekiert & Hanson, 2003b).

(3) From a meta-theoretical perspective, the problem of combining approaches to construct a complex theory of transformation remains an issue calling for attention. Although there have been a number of meta-theoretical analyses of such combinatory strategies attempting to determine which approaches can be meaningfully combined to achieve what kind of results (cf. Kollmorgen, 1996), important problems have yet to be addressed. Apart from the general issue of the paradigmatic foundations, another topic of controversy is how precisely spatial, temporal, and social levels along with other aspects and dimensions of the social (structure, action, culture, etc.) can be incorporated into an combinatory *social theory* of transformation capable of doing justice to the complexity of social processes while allowing for the reduction of complexity required to arrive at a manageable theory (cf. Bönker et al., 2002a; Ekiert & Hanson, 2003b; Merkel, 2010: pp. 87-88). I prefer an approach that proceeds by applying perspectives based on different analytical paradigms in a *sequential* fashion while reflecting the historical variations in the conditions of action and structural development. Simplifying the matter somewhat, this means giving priority – but not the exclusive power of explanation – to theories of action and actors in explaining revolutionary processes of transition and switching to analyses based on institutional theory or systems theory when addressing the extended subsequent period of structural reorganisation and consolidation (for details, see Kollmorgen, 1996, pp. 309-323).

(4) The latter problem obviously touches upon general problems of theory building in the area of social change. This leads to the final question – which critics at the end of the first decade have frequently raised in apodictic terms – whether the transformation theory debate on postcommunism

8 Given this characterisation, it should be clear that I draw an ideal-typical distinction between original formational changes as they took place, e.g. in the rise of the ‘modern bourgeoisie society’ (K. Marx) in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century or in the Russian Revolution after 1917, and ‘societal transformations’ referring to such forerunning and successful models by combining imitative and innovative elements in the process of accelerated social change.

has indeed failed to contribute in any way to the general advancement of theory. To start with, we can counter this verdict by pointing out that the preoccupation with postcommunist change inevitably opened a new chapter in the analysis of social change and, thus, made a valuable contribution just for this reason alone. Moreover, there are indeed publications on theories of social change that explicitly acknowledge the postcommunist transformations and the theoretical reflections thereof for the important impetus they have given to theory development (cf. already Sztompka, 1993; for recent discussions: Anderson et al., 2001; Beyer, 2006; Ekiert & Hanson, 2003b; Wiesenthal, 2002). Against this backdrop, I suggest reversing the skeptics' and critics' claim and propose that theoretical progress in the field of social change will hardly be possible anymore without considering and integrating the insights from transformation theory, or at least not doing so would rob theory development of important potential.

Hence, in this respect, too, the debate on transformation theory is far from over. All the more so as there has not only been a second wave of so-called 'colour revolutions' in Eastern Europe after the turn of the millennium (from Serbia, via Georgia, to Ukraine). However, although the transformations in Central and Eastern Europe can be considered as successfully completed in major dimensions, in other dimensions – with regard to (inter-)institutional and socio-cultural aspects – they are still underway. In my view, ideas of a dawning *post-transformation* period (for instance, Rose, 2009) are therefore premature, at least as long as we do not restrict the notion of *societal* transformation to political and/or economic transitions alone but also include the lengthy processes of institutional and socio-cultural restructuring, which extend over a period of some 35 to 55 years (cf. Dahrendorf, 1990; Kollmorgen, 2010b). Moreover, I think it is fair to assume that the type of change we refer to as transformation will continue to be a significant form of radical social change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well.

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