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Guido Franzinetti

## The moral economy of Post-Communism: A retrospective overview

**SOMMARIO.** Questo articolo si propone di adattare l'uso della categoria di "economia morale" (secondo la definizione data da E.P. Thompson, 1971) alle transizioni democratiche in Europa centro-orientale. Il fondamento di questo tentativo è una rassegna di quel che è stato ambigualmente definito "post-comunismo" (cioè quanto è avvenuto dopo il comunismo, ma anche quanto è rimasto del comunismo). Questa rassegna si incentra su tre tipologie: (i) e transizioni previste (Polonia, Ungheria); (ii) quelle impreviste (DDR, Cecoslovacchia, Bulgaria); (iii) quelle incontrollate (Romania, Jugoslavia, Albania). Si prendono in esame anche (ii) il ruolo delle diverse opposizioni al comunismo in questi paesi; e (ii) quello delle élites politiche derivate dal periodo comunista.

«It is a truth universally acknowledged, that the main beneficiaries of the changes of 1989 have been the former Communist elites». This statement (which follows the opening of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*) may sound paradoxical to so-called "Westerners". It may well be an inaccurate description of the realities of "post-Communist" Eastern Europe (leaving aside the republics of the Former Soviet Union). The fact remains that it reflects a view which is widely shared throughout the countries which emerged from Communist systems after 1989.

An empirical refutation of such a statement is certainly possible, but it does not explain its widespread acceptance and persistence throughout the region. This paper is intended as a preliminary outline. It does not intend to examine the accuracy of the opening statement. Instead, it intends to offer a plausible explanation of the fact that the statement is widely accepted.

### 1. *Varieties of transitions*

First of all, how did the Eastern European democratic transitions take place? Transitions may be roughly classified as follows: (I) anticipated transitions; (II) unexpected transitions; (III) uncontrolled transitions.

*Anticipated transitions* were those which took place in Communist systems which actively prepared (and sometimes encouraged, at some crucial stage) the political and economic transitions. This is what happened in Poland and Hungary.

In Poland, the experience of an independent and consolidated social movement in 1980-81 (*Solidarność*), and its subsequent repression following the introduction of the state of emergency on 13 December 1981, created a complex situation. This was especially the case after the crisis created by the kidnapping and assassination of father Jerzy Popiełuszko in 1984 by members of the security services. All sides (the Communist Party, the Army, the Catholic Church, and the underground opposition) had an interest in defusing the situation. In a sense, this was a boxing match in which both sides were on the verge of collapsing. In 1987, a referendum organised to endorse economic reform had actually produced a *defeat* of the government. When spontaneous strikes broke out in the summer of 1988, *Solidarność* presented itself not as the *organiser* of the strikes, but as a *mediator* between the strikers and the government. The launching of the Round Table negotiations (January 1989) and their conclusion (April 1989) reflected these realities. Finally, the Polish negotiating process was marked by the fact of being the *first* one to be carried out and completed. The negotiators had no precise idea of how far they could go, despite the acquiescence and encouragement from Moscow.

Inevitably, from the very beginning of the transition process rumours of behind-the-scenes secret deals emerged. In particular, the meetings between members of the government and of opposition at the Magdalenka meeting centre were seen as part of Communist (and Soviet) manoeuvres to condition the Round Table negotiations. Broadly speaking, these facts are undisputed; they were already in the public domain in 1989. The controversy concerned (and still concerns) the actual impact of the Magdalenka talks.

The fact is that the transition process moved ahead much faster after the Polish elections of June 1989. The terms of the deal between government and opposition rapidly came to be seen as too favourable to the outgoing Communist government. The movement which had re-emerged from the ashes of the first *Solidarność* (1980-81) had by then split into innumerable factions. Conspiracy theories flourished (and continue to flourish to this day).

In Hungary, whatever opposition had existed in society had been crushed in the aftermath of the Hungarian Rising of 1956, and the subsequent process of extensive normalisation which went under the name of Kadarism. Through a series of cautious economic reforms, János Kádár managed to establish a regime which managed to be simultaneously acceptable to the

Soviet Union, to the West and to the majority of the Hungarian population. A generous estimate of the size of the Hungarian opposition in the mid-1980s would be of two hundred individuals.

All this meant that the Communist government had to actively promote the *creation* of credible negotiating partners. In any case, the negotiating process took place after the launching of the Polish Round Table. As a matter of fact, the government put itself in the forefront of the changes in 1989 through *external* actions (e.g., the dismantling of barriers on the border with Austria), rather than through internal actions (as Poland had done). In this case there was no need to elaborate conspiracy theories: the negotiating process was, if anything, more transparent than the Polish one.

In short, in the case of these two well-prepared anticipated transitions there was a quite evident "original sin" (from the point of view of those who had been excluded from the negotiating process, i.e. the majority of the Polish and Hungarian populations, as was inevitable in political systems lacking a formal democratic legitimation). Unsurprisingly, social resentment against this "original sin" grew as the transition process reached its peak (around 1997), as the division between "winners" and "losers" from the process became progressively clearer.

*Unexpected transitions* (German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria) were "unexpected" in the sense that these took place in societies in which there was no significant convergence of interest in going through a negotiating process on the part of the ruling elite and some entity which could be credibly presented as an opposition. In the DDR it was all too obvious that the Communist leadership was uninterested in any significant process of change (including the one which was taking place in the Soviet Union). The opposition which did emerge was essentially a product of social dissent which solidified only after the flight of refugees from the DDR via Hungary and the Western embassies in Czechoslovakia. The specific constitutional position of the DDR (i.e. an entity which was potentially a part of another state, the Federal Republic of Germany) ultimately led to a collapse of the state. The DDR was always a historical anomaly, even from the point of view of Communist systems. There was never any scope for any kind of negotiated transition in this case. There is now a post-DDR legacy in the BRD, but not a "post-Communist" legacy.

The case of Czechoslovakia is almost symmetrically divergent from the case of the DDR. A generous estimate of the Czechoslovak opposition would count approximately sixty individuals. This was the predictable result of the process of Communist "normalisation" in an advanced industrial society (as it had been since the interwar years): there was no room for any organised

form of political dissent after the invasion of 1968. This actually facilitated the smooth transition in the autumn of 1989: the security services had no desire to sully their record with a bloody repression, which at that point would have served no purpose.

The transition was a "Velvet" one not because of the relative absence of violence, but because it was smoothly carried out by the Communist-dominated Parliament (with the addition of a certain number of unelected members of the opposition). There was therefore no need for any conspiracy theory to explain what had happened: it was an orderly transition. (There actually had been a conspiracy to install a Gorbachevite government in Prague, but it had failed through lack of interest on the part of the candidate designated to succeed the old regime.) Even the subsequent division between the Czech and Slovak republics was an orderly process, itself the product of a federal system created by the Communists. In a long-term historical perspective, this was a return to normality (a Czechoslovak entity had existed for barely 64 years)<sup>1</sup>.

Bulgaria was instead a case in which a Gorbachevite conspiracy did succeed. It was a genuine palace coup (which accidentally overlapped with the opening of the Berlin Wall). Again, there was no ambiguity in this case. Predictably, the new Gorbachevite team managed to hold onto power, having all the advantages of being an incumbent government. This was a mixed blessing in the long term, since it meant that there was no way of avoiding responsibility for the economic decline of Bulgaria throughout the 1980s.

The uncontrolled transitions were a quite different matter. These were transitions which were uncontrolled because they lacked the crucial element of the peaceful transitions: the presence of Soviet troops. Romania, Yugoslavia and Albania did not have any. There was therefore no safety net which, in the circumstances, would have dissuaded both governments and oppositions from using force to re-establish or obtain power. In the Romanian case there occurred a mixture of a palace coup coupled with a genuine popular rising (in a sense feeding on each other). There could not have been any organised opposition in Romania, so what did take place was a traditional palace coup, which latched onto an uncontrolled rising. Predictably the palace coup prevailed, to the satisfaction of both the Soviet Union and the USA. This allowed a post-Communist government (with strong

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive discussion of the case of (former) Czechoslovakia, see G. Eyal, *The origins of Postcommunist elites. From Prague Spring to the Breakup of Czechoslovakia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Eyal's approach differs from that of the present paper, but it addresses all the relevant issues.

elements of continuity with the old regime, at all levels) to remain in power for the greater part of the 1990s.

The Yugoslav case was quite different, in the sense that there was *never*, strictly speaking, a transition from Communism. There was, indeed, a break-up of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (in 1990), which was followed by a series of *republican* transitions, i.e. transitions in each individual republic (which since 1974 had always been separate entities, even from the point of view of their security services). It was a transition from a federal system to full independence. Most republics maintained a strong element of institutional continuity with the Communist regime. After all, the federal system itself was a legacy of the regime.

Finally, in the case of Albania there was the ultimate kind of transition: a genuine revolutionary transition. There was a collapse of the state structures, together with a split in the ruling class (this was essential, as there could never have been any kind of opposition under the Albanian dictatorship, probably the strictest Communist dictatorship in Europe).

## 2. *The role of elites in the process of transition*

It should be quite clear at this point that elites played a crucial role in all the transitions. The myth of "people's revolutions" should have been dispelled by now. In any case, the average Eastern European citizen has little time for myths of that kind. If he (or she) does still harbour such myths, this in any case would feed a conspiracy view of the events of 1989-91. After all, if the Revolution was so pure, why have the results been so meagre (in the eyes of many Eastern Europeans)? The answer must be, of course, that there has been a Great Conspiracy: 1989 was simply a colossal trick, to enable the local Communist elites to refashion themselves as "post-Communists", to benefit from the privatisation process, and maybe even regain political power. This view has been expressed in a more articulate form by George Schöpflin (as summarised by Judy Dempsey):

«The failure to build independent political institutions goes back to the fall of the Communist regimes in 1989. When their visible structures of power collapsed, Communist elites quickly and discreetly moved their power base to the economy. During the chaotic phase of privatization, urged on by Western consultants as the fastest way to transform the centralized economies, these former officials grabbed hold of the new levers of power».

«During those rapid privatizations, the new Communist managers often seized control», said George Schöpflin, a political science professor who

is a European Parliament legislator for Hungary's opposition party Fidesz. «Later, they converted their economic power back into political power».

Over time, as privatization moved forward, these new post-Communist enterprise managers acquired huge wealth. With their new money, they revamped the ex-Communist parties, giving them a new image and name. Particularly in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia, the enterprise managers of the 1990s have become party bosses of the 21st century<sup>2</sup>.

It is all too tempting to dismiss as a partisan view, as an exaggeration, as a sophisticated version of conspiracy theories. The issue would need to be discussed further, and analysed adequately. But even if, as some commentators allege, these views are gross exaggerations, these views are shared by many Eastern Europeans (on all sides of the political spectrum, and not just right-wingers), because they appear to be all too credible.

The role (and the responsibilities) of the Communist elites in assisting, allowing and shaping the processes of democratic transitions is indisputable. To a lesser degree, the same applies to the opposition counter-elites (where such existed). Were the transitions all part of a Great Deception? Why is the average Eastern European citizen so disinclined to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great changes of 1989? Why is he (or she) so disenchanting?

One could try to provide an answer using a metaphor. There is a car with a driver and a passenger. The driver knows that he will come to an abrupt stop. He presses the breaks, and holds on to his safety belt. He is unharmed. The passenger, instead, does not know that the car is about to stop, and is not wearing a safety belt. The car stops abruptly, and he smashes his head against the window pane. There is no conspiracy. This is just an objective process.

Let us unravel the metaphor. The driver represents the elites of the Communist period. They knew what was coming, for a very simple reason: they had decided (more or less) what was coming: some kind of democratic and market-oriented transition. They knew something was really happening in Moscow. In short, they were prepared. They were also prepared in terms of social skills, networks, knowledge of languages, technical knowledge, knowledge.

The passenger represents the average Eastern European citizen. He (or she) did not know what was coming in 1989. So many times he had had hope of some radical transformation of his society or at least some kind of liberalisation. Perhaps he came from a family with a "bad" political back-

<sup>2</sup>J. Dempsey, *Letter from Europe: Post-revolution nations stand on shaky ground*, "International Herald Tribune", 8 August 2006.

ground. He may have been penalised in his studies. He would lack social skills, networks, knowledge of languages, technical knowledge, knowledge. Some years ago Fatos Lubonja pointed out that in Albania the (right-wing) Democratic Party tends to include “the most ignorant [former politically persecuted persons], while the Socialist Party (i.e. the ex-Communists) have “kept the children of former communists [who] have belonged to the most privileged layer of society”<sup>3</sup>.

The moral of the story is that the “driver” is a winner, at least until the end of the 1990s. The passenger is definitely a “loser”. What might have changed in some Eastern European societies that by that stage there was a significant increase in the number of people who felt they were net “losers”, who no longer hoped to achieve what they thought 1989-1991 had somehow promised them.

There is, at this point, an additional problem. That is the structural *weakness* of the Right in Eastern Europe. (Winning a few elections does not mean that structural weaknesses disappear.) Because of the social and political dislocation brought about by the Communist transformations since 1945 (or 1948) the Eastern European Right did not have (at the time of the democratic transitions) the social and political backing it would have had in the pre-Communist period. This is why it performed so badly in the first elections of the “post-Communist” period. (Even when it did win, it soon lost power.) The social base which *should* have been supporting the Right was simply not there. Furthermore, many of the themes which *could have belonged* to the Right had been appropriated by the “post-Communist” Left. In any case, the Right would have been unable to use the traditional language of social deprivation, since this belonged to the historical baggage of the Left. So the natural reflex of the Right has been to adopt a populist profile, to adopt a language of confrontation, often based on conspiracy theories. As Balazs Trencsenyi has lucidly demonstrated, the Right has focussed on the *Kulturkampf*<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>F. Lubonja, (Editorial), *Koha Ditore* [Prishtina], 18 September 2000 (as summarized by F. Schmidt, “Albania’s Culture Of Conflict”, RFE).

<sup>4</sup>B. Trencsenyi, *Dal gulash-comunismo al gulash-autoritarismo: alcune riflessioni sul dibattito ideologico e sulla costruzione del Sistema politico nell’Ungheria post-transizione*, in “Fenomenologia e società”, 2014; B. Trencsenyi, *Beyond Liminality? The Kulturkampf of the Early 2000s in East central Europe*, in “Boundary 2”, vol. 41 (2014), n. 1, pp. 135-52.



### 3. The "moral economy" of post-Communism

E.P. Thompson deployed the category of "moral economy" to explain the logic of late eighteenth-century riots<sup>5</sup>. In short, he argued that, far from being "simple responses to economic stimuli" (let alone expressions of collective irrationality) these crowds actually followed a quite clear "moral economy".

«It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimizing notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community»<sup>6</sup>.

The suggestion made in this article is that the behaviour of Eastern European voters, and in particular those on the Right, requires an equally nuanced analysis. This analysis might produce results less reassuring than facile demonisations.

<sup>5</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the eighteenth Century*, "Past & Present" (1971), n. 50, pp. 76-136.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.