

**Communism and the Emergence of Democracy** by Harald Wydra. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. PP ix + 314; index;. £45.00 (hardback). ISBN 13-978 -0- 521 - 85169-5.

*Communism and the Emergence of Democracy* examines communism and its demise through the prism of social theory and political thought. After setting out a critique of conventional approaches to post-communist democratization, Harald Wydra develops his arguments in four historical chapters reflecting on the Russian Revolution and Soviet communism; the beginnings of the Cold War, the East European dissident movement; and the collapse of communism. A final section explores alternative conceptions of ‘democracy as meaning formation’.

Much on democratization and the fall of communism, Wydra argues, simply bypasses the lived experience of those involved and the meanings they assigned to social change. In addition to conventional economic and institutional factors, Wydra argues, the staying power and sudden demise of Soviet-type communism must be explained in terms of ‘political spirituality’. Even the most apparently rational-bureaucratic forms of rule, he suggests, rely on a Weberian charismatic quality or ‘social magic’ rooted in essentially religious, mythic appeals, whether overt or secularized. Lacking stable constitutional forms, Communism was a militant civil religion permanently undermined by contradiction between the utopian myth of a unified People and a need to seek out internal enemies to maintain a perpetual state of emergency.

Many social science studies of democratization in former communist states, Wydra claims have a narrow focus on formal institutions and outcomes (elections, parliaments, parties etc); impose abstract prefabricated periodizations and abstract macro-concepts such as state-building or modernization on the experience of regime change; and reify the experience of communism into abstract notions of ‘legacies’, which brutally and misleadingly compartmentalizing communism and democracy. Others fall into lazy cultural determinism, reducing the historical experience of Russia or the Balkans to a mere obstacle to the onward march of liberal democracy. Such teleological approaches he suggests overlook the fact that democracy is a multifaceted and contingent concept straddling both the liberal project of individual freedom under a limited state and more populist notions of majority rule, which can legitimate authoritarian forms of government. In some senses, therefore, communism could legitimately claim to be part of the democratic project.

In this perspective, democratization in Eastern Europe must be viewed *longue durée* as ‘a process of meaning formation’, as much ‘a quest for meaning and self-grounding in response to traumatic experiences “within” communism’ (p. 26) rather as a playing out of impersonal social forces finally resulting in a snap change of system. The fall of communism like other traumatic social crises transformed identities, intentions and rationalities as it unfolded. Such ‘transformative experiences’ he argues are better explored using an ‘experiential perspective’ fusing anthropological methodology, social psychology, interpretative sociology and social theory. Communism totalitarianism should be approached from a philosophical perspective in the Arendtian tradition, rather than being treated as the binary opposite of liberal democracy. As regards

democratization, Wydra argues for greater sensitivity to local and historical understandings of democracy, such as Russian communitarian traditions of *sobornost* or the moral anti-politics of East European dissidence. Such traditions, he suggests, allowed East European societies seemingly lacking liberal democratic traditions to challenge communist regimes by creating as the bases of autonomy and subjectivity needed for democratization. Such understandings emerged in reaction to imposed utopian 'second reality' of communism which, like other episodes of social trauma, fragmented social memory but also regenerated it. Overall, Wydra argues, the (post-) communist case shows that democratic preference are produced not by structural factors (whether socio-economic or socio-cultural) or elite strategising, but by a historical mosaic of individual reactions to revolution, war and dictatorship. Democratization should thus be conceived first and foremost as a (potentially reversible) civilizing process of overcoming social violence.

*Communism and the Emergence of Democracy* is an erudite book taking in an impressively wide range of literature. Its concern with re-examining the philosophical underpinnings of empirically-oriented democratization research is welcome and overdue. However, its critique of conventional democratization theory exaggerates its abstract structural biases and offers up a somewhat stale critique of transition as a teleological, one-size-fits-all liberal straitjacket. Its central case a more anthropological approach to post-communist democratization and transitions from communism is solidly if laboriously argued. However, as numerous studies cited make clear this is a challenge already taken up by a small but significant body of researchers.

Overall, however, the book is a somewhat unhappy marriage between social theory and political history. Its historical chapters skilfully distil secondary sources into coherent narrative, but do little to advance or explain the author's 'experiential perspective'. The book's theoretical argumentation is also problematic. Too often it simply restates familiar understandings of historical and political change in a denser social theory idiom. Few political scientists and historians familiar with the region will be surprised to read that the communist collapse of 1989-91 was uncertain; drew on popular memory and dissident experiences, saw actors' think in grand, but contradictory, visions with little relationship to 'objective' possibilities or eventual outcomes; and radically remade socio-political identities and political symbolisations. Sadly, such intellectual saturation coverage drowns out the book's more elusive original insights.

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