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Richard D. Anderson, Jr., M. Steven Fish, Stephen E. Hanson, and Philip G. Roeder: Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

George W. Breslauer

WHAT IS a democracy? How does it come into being? What variants of democracy exist in the contemporary world? How do those variants operate? How well do they govern? And what are their developmental trajectories? This cluster of questions about democracy has been perhaps the central concern of American political science throughout the discipline's history. There was a time, not too many years ago, when students of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe did not have to address these questions. Their scholarship was focused on nondemocracies, whether they were called "authoritarian" or "totalitarian" dictatorships. These were "democracies" only by self-definition or by a definition that removed political freedom and electoral accountability from the meaning of the term.

All this has changed since the collapse of communism. The successor states of the Soviet Union and the postcommunist states of Eastern Europe have gone their own ways—some toward procedural democracy, some toward new variants of dictatorship, and some in directions that are difficult to define. This has meant that some scholars specializing on this part of the world have suddenly become students of democracy, asking many of the questions that have occupied a great deal of attention among comparativists, Americanists, and political theorists during this century. Do Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Romania qualify as democracies? If so, what types of democracy are they? How can we explain their progress toward democracy—or their movement away from it? And how likely are they to make further progress in building democracies? The present volume makes an important contribution to these debates. But given the recency of transitions to democracy in many postcommunist states, the contributors to this volume are most concerned with questions of definition (are these really democracies?),¹ origination, and prospects for democratic consolidation, rather than with questions central to studies of the operations and performance of established democracies. The main concern of contributors to this volume is to address the vast literature on successful and unsuccessful transitions to democracy that has become a veritable cottage industry within political science in recent decades.

Students of democracy have always had an urge to understand the processes by which democracies emerge in the first place. For decades, the focus of such research was on the social, cultural, and economic conditions that had made possible the emergence of liberal democracies in Western Europe. These provided templates for the enforced democratization of West Germany, Japan, and Italy under occupation regimes following World War II. Retrospective analyses of the emergence of European fascism in the 1920s and 1930s attempted to fathom the conditions that led to the breakdown of regimes that had already embarked on democratizing projects. Bursts of decolonization from the 1940s to the 1960s, in turn, led to a huge effort by scholars to analyze and propose strategies for economic and political development in the Third World that might create the socioeconomic conditions for the eventual creation of stable democracies. The surprising emergence of apparently stable democracies in parts of southern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia during the 1970s and 1980s—the so-called Third Wave of democratization—fostered a large and growing literature that sought to explain how this came about; or, in the cases of works still in progress, to describe, analyze, and track an ongoing process of liberalization and democratization.²

Explanatory debates within this community of scholars focused on the necessary and sufficient conditions for procedural democracy to emerge. These debates were informed by differences concerning the relative weights to be assigned to structure versus agency, determinism versus “voluntarism,” inherited conditions versus creative leadership on the part of societal or political actors. Many students of the “Third Wave” contested the claim that procedural democracy is a product of cultural and socioeconomic conditions unique to Western Europe. They argued that, within very broad limits, democracy can be constructed in seemingly unpropitious (i.e., unprecedented) conditions. They specified the institutions that, if built, could provide the foundations for inducing democratic behavior even by actors of authoritarian inclination. They explored the international pressures and inducements that might offset unpropitious domestic conditions. They searched for functional substitutes for factors that were present in the history of Western Europe but not present in the Third Wave. They distinguished between the initial “transition from authoritarianism” or “democratic breakthrough” and the subsequent, longer period of “democratic consolidation,” each of which was marked by its own mix of social conditions and political creativity, and by its own policy requirements. Epistemologically, many of these scholars argued for open-mindedness about the possibilities—what Hirschman (1970) had originally called “possibilism”—and open-endedness of conclusions.

This literature was already well developed when communism collapsed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during 1989–91. Suddenly, the

Third Wave was enlarging, with close to thirty new countries providing sites for possible democratization. The literature on transitions to democracy expanded accordingly, with new journals, such as *Journal of Democracy*, *East European Constitutional Review*, and others being founded to track the latest developments. Naturally, optimism reigned among the “possibilists,” even as skepticism remained among those committed to the notion that initial sociocultural conditions, not political creativity, determine whether democracy can take hold. Optimists preferred to compare the postcommunist world to the success stories of the Third Wave, in search of common features. Pessimists, though equally committed to the ideal of procedural democracy, compared the postcommunist world to authoritarian regimes in much of the Third World and found unsettling commonalities between what they referred to as the “East” and the “South.” Most scholars, however, avoided these predictive debates and settled into a vast tracking exercise, exploring the construction and operations of democratic institutions in postcommunist countries, the development of popular and elite attitudes and behaviors, and the domestic and international factors influencing the trajectory of change.

Within a very few years, it became clear that the postcommunist world was not proceeding in just one direction, be it west or south. Instead, patterns of differentiation were emerging that included striking divergence across postcommunist countries. Gati (1996), based on a combination of political and economic observations, referred to “leaders,” “laggards,” and “losers.” Other scholars discovered four or five distinct clusters or types (Roeder, 1994). Still others conducted quantitative analyses that scaled postcommunist systems and located them at numerous points on the continuum (Frye 1997; Easter 1997; Fish 1998a, b). These studies were both encouraged and facilitated by the ongoing efforts of international and nongovernmental organizations to track “progress” in the democratization of these regimes. Their databases—such as the annual Freedom House scores—provided the foundation for many of these scholarly exercises.

The immediate purposes of the scholarly and public-organizational exercises are somewhat different, even though most individuals in each sector share a normative commitment to procedural democracy. Public organizations are principally concerned with influencing public policy: both the activities of governments and social organizations in the region and the attitudes and actions of the rich democracies vis-à-vis states and societies in the region. Though political scientists may also seek to influence public policy, their concern *as scholars* is to discover patterns that teach us something deeper about historical causality more generally. They treat the postcommunist region as a “laboratory” in which to test propositions about political life, or as a virgin land in which entirely new forms of

political organization may grow. In the case of postcommunist democratization (or its absence), they seek to draw lessons from the provisional “outcomes” they observe in that domain. Patterns of differentiation after a decade of postcommunist change become the basis for generalization about the conditions and policies that are most—and least—likely to foster democratization after communism. And those generalizations are in turn used to “test” the explanatory range of propositions derived from earlier literatures on the first, second, and third waves of democratization in modern world history.

This is the academic niche in which the present book is located. It is a contribution to “third wave” studies and it begins with the premise that the pessimism of first-wave theorists about the likelihood of democracy emerging in postcommunist states is misplaced. This basic premise is the product of several intellectual choices. One choice is definitional. Though their concrete definitions of democracy vary, three of the authors employ some variant of a more or less minimalist definition of “democracy,” be it derived from Schumpeter or Dahl. This leads them, in turn, to categorize the majority of postcommunist states as ones that have effected an initial democratic breakthrough (or more). Only Roeder explicitly dissents from this definitional choice, but he shares with his coauthors a sense of pleasant surprise that, despite sociocultural conditions propitious to authoritarianism, many authoritarian regimes in the region have failed to consolidate their hold. Hence, all four authors are closer to the optimistic “possibilists” of third-wave studies than to those who argued that postcommunist democratization was likely to be a fiasco.

The second choice that informs this perspective is temporal: The authors are looking back over a landscape that is only one decade (or less) in the making. They therefore treat the situation today as, in some sense, an “outcome” to be explained. They are not primarily interested in predicting whether a similar pattern of results will be observable in five or ten years, though some of their findings are amenable to conversion into a statement of the conditions that would lead to one or the other future scenarios. They do not share the view of those who would argue that it is much too early to draw conclusions, a view that can be associated with either high optimists (“eventually they will all choose democracy”) or abject pessimists (“just wait! even the alleged success stories are extremely fragile”). Instead, the contributors to this volume wish to provide broad theoretical grounding for understanding both progress and regression, democratic institution-building and institutional fragility since the collapse of communism. They search far and wide for theoretical understanding and, in the process, offer the reader a panoramic overview of both social theory and the variegated political landscape of postcommunist systems.

Thus, Professors Anderson, Fish, Hanson, and Roeder are concerned with the progress of democratization in the postcommunist region and the implications of that degree of progress (or shortfall, or regression) for our thinking about democratization more generally. Their chapters are products of an understanding of relevant theoretical and methodological literatures, detailed familiarity with the empirical realities of postcommunism, and powerful intellects. But the chapters are not strictly additive or cumulative. Instead, they employ diverse methodologies and even epistemologies for addressing varied aspects of the democratization of postcommunist states.

Hanson, for example, focuses principally on Russia as the empirical case, but mines several theoretical literatures in order to address the utility of the concept “democratic consolidation.” Hanson’s concern is to understand what it takes to consolidate a democratic breakthrough; his is a Weberian approach to the problem. Positing that Russia may indeed succeed in such an effort (shades of “possibilism”?), he asks us to consider what type of theory would be required to understand *both* the current fragility of Russian democracy *and* the hypothetical success of Russia’s democratic consolidation. He finds a satisfying answer neither in the theoretical literature on socioeconomic modernization nor in that on rational-choice institutionalism. Instead, he offers a novel definition of consolidation as an exercise in regime and elite re-formation under conditions of widespread social turbulence. Hanson, then, looks prospectively at the Russian future in order to explore what it would take to create a context in which elite actors would share incentives, time horizons, and interpersonal affinities propitious for the long-term maintenance of democratic institutions.

Anderson is also principally concerned with the empirical case of Russia and, like Hanson, devotes the bulk of his chapter to discussion of theoretical issues. But Anderson is concerned to explain the success of Russia’s initial democratic breakthrough, rather than the prospects for democratic consolidation. And Anderson is an antistructuralist who could not have reached the conclusions that Hanson does. Critiquing prevailing structural theories in the literature of political science, Anderson proposes instead that we focus on the language of political discourse in postcommunist countries. The driving force behind Russia’s democratic breakthrough, he argues, was the emergence within the elite of actors disposed to employ a new, more-democratic political language with which to appeal to the masses for support against representatives of the old order. Their success in following this strategy, he finds, hinged on the degree to which that language was intelligible and appealing to the masses of the population. For, absent a sense of shared identity between new elites and would-be citizens, individual members of the population could

not overcome their collective action problems and act upon newfound opportunities to involve themselves in politics. The discursive indicators of such identification, then, are Anderson's base of evidence for explaining Russia's success in effecting its democratic breakthrough.

Whereas Hanson and Anderson devote the bulk of their chapters to discussions of theory—and the shorter, empirical portions to the example of Russia—Roeder and Fish focus on a large number of countries and offer a balance of theoretical discussion and large-*n* empirical analysis. Roeder takes the fifteen states of the former Soviet Union as his empirical referents, while Fish looks at all twenty-eight postcommunist states. Both scholars begin by sorting the cases into categories reflecting degrees of democratization. They then employ the methods of “normal science” (including statistical methods) to test hypotheses about why the cases cluster as they do. But beyond that, they ask quite different questions about the progress of democratization.

Fish has elsewhere published statistical analyses specifying the factors that best explain progress toward democratization in the postcommunist world (Fish 1998a). In the present volume, he is concerned primarily with understanding why a certain subset of states in the region initially effected a democratic breakthrough, but later slid back toward regimes that were, marginally or substantially, more undemocratic. He finds that in contrast to the determinants of democratic erosion and reversal in other parts of the world, postcommunist reversals are best explained by their existence within the regressive subset of an institutional, societal, and international context that allowed chief executives to aggrandize and abuse their powers to an unusual (for the region) degree.

Roeder's chapter has a somewhat different emphasis. He had elsewhere published a seminal article on the early development of *authoritarian* patterns among postcommunist regimes (Roeder 1994). In the present volume, he notes the strength of a countertendency that has prevented the *consolidation of authoritarian regimes* in the region, despite propitious economic and cultural conditions, and he seeks to explain that anomaly. He finds the explanation in the divergent institutional legacies bequeathed by the communist regime to its successor. In contrast to those who posit a relatively uniform Leninist institutional legacy, Roeder argues that those regimes differed consequentially with respect to the degree of incipient fragmentation within the governing apparatus of the late-Communist Party and the degree of incipient autonomy of late-communist governmental bureaucracies from each other. Where fragmentation and autonomy were high by Leninist standards, efforts to consolidate authoritarian successors to communism have generally failed.

For Fish, the important outcome to be explained is democratic reversals; for Roeder, the outcome (indeed, for him, the anomaly) to be ex-

plained is the rejection of authoritarianism. For Fish, the danger in post-communist systems is overweening executives, while the hope is that social, institutional, and international forces can be mobilized to prevent chief executives from usurping power. For Roeder, the danger is also an excessive concentration of power. But the hope lies in the existence or development specifically of *institutional* pluralism *within* the authoritarian regime. For Fish, Ukraine and Russia are among the cases that have experienced democratic erosion or reversal. For Roeder, the same two countries are among the anomalies to be explained for having prevented the consolidation of stable authoritarianism. There are complementary and additive qualities to these two chapters, but readers will have to search beyond the definitional differences, and the differences in dependent variables, in order to find them.

In sum, Fish is concerned with explaining democratic regression, Roeder wishes to explain authoritarian failure, Anderson searches for ways to understand and measure democratic breakthroughs, and Hanson seeks theoretical understanding of the dilemmas of democratic consolidation. While they all share a commitment to treating degrees of progress (or lack thereof) during the 1990s as the outcome to be explained, they differ with respect to the specific patterns they treat as anomalous.

Thus, in the end, this book cannot be classified facily as derivative of either the “pessimistic” or “optimist” approach to the emergence of democracy. In contrast to most pessimists, it employs a minimalist definition of democracy, is written in the spirit of “possibilism,” and is impressed by how many postcommunist states have met that standard while lacking the structural or cultural preconditions enjoyed by the first wave of democratizers in Western Europe. But in contrast to most optimists, the authors in this volume are as impressed with the shortfalls as with the progress and seek frameworks that would help them explain both the scope and the limits of change. By focusing on backsliders, the (missing) requisites of democratic consolidation, and the failure of authoritarian regimes to consolidate themselves, Fish, Hanson, and Roeder come at the challenge of building (or explaining) democracy from diverse directions—and thereby broaden our ways of thinking about the problem. And by suggesting that we employ discourse analysis to get at presumably more enduring cultural indicators of change, Anderson reaches optimistic conclusions about progress in Russia to date, but sets a high (i.e., culturalist) standard for the evaluation of future progress and challenges the field to rethink structural explanations for changes taking place in turbulent environments.

Readers of this volume will learn a great deal about both social theory and the diversity of postcommunist politics. But they will also learn by inference about the trajectory of intellectual endeavor in this subfield of

comparative politics. Before Gorbachev's reforms began the process of liberalization and democratization in the Soviet Union, leading eventually to the collapse of communism in both Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, specialists on the region did not have to know much about democratic theory, the workings of democratic systems, or processes of democratic transition and consolidation. Only a narrow range of theoretical literature appeared to be relevant to the realities of established communist regimes. And an even narrower range was relevant to research topics that censors in those regimes allowed Western scholars to investigate empirically.

All this has changed with the collapse of communism. A much wider range of ideal-typical and real-world analogues or models, and a wide range of deductive and inductively derived theories, are now employed to fathom the complexities of postcommunism. With the collapse of communist censorship, many of these countries have come to be open for empirical research on the full range of topics normally studied in "open societies." Diverse research methodologies are now standard in the literature on postcommunism, including comparative case studies, survey research, elite interviewing, participant observation, the construction and statistical manipulation of large data sets, formal modeling, interpretivist analysis of texts, and more. Epistemological pluralism has also come to mark the subfield. Scientific methodologies are being challenged by postmodernist epistemologies, just as structural approaches of all sorts are being challenged by constructivist approaches. Such diversity is healthy; it is a reflection of the new openness of the societies we study and is a precondition for sustainable intellectual progress.

One of the interesting features of this volume is that it is written by a middle generation of scholars. All of them are tenured associate professors at major research universities. All of them were originally trained as political scientists while the Soviet Union was in existence. In all four cases, their first books were principally or exclusively focused on the Soviet Union in the communist era, though Fish's volume uniquely concentrated on the Gorbachev era (Anderson 1993; Fish 1995; Hanson 1997; Roeder 1993). And yet, they are all now among the leading researchers and interpreters of trends in postcommunist societies.

In fact, the seeds of such standing can also be found in their first books, all of which were steeped in, and informed by, social-theoretical concerns. None of them treated the Soviet Union as a "unique" case to be understood only on its own terms. All displayed skill in applying extant theory and in displaying both the extent and limits of its explanatory power. Several of the books went so far as to revise extant theory in order to incorporate the lessons of the communist or Gorbachev eras. All of them displayed an intellectual discipline that boded well for their embracing

methodological pluralism once postcommunist societies created opportunities for systematic research employing diverse methodologies. And all of them combined theoretical sophistication with an intimate empirical knowledge of the cases being treated in their books.

Since the collapse of communism, these four scholars have displayed a formidable capacity for absorbing and applying additional theories and methodologies, and for grappling with the challenge of describing and explaining divergent trajectories among postcommunist societies. But what is most striking about the chapters in this book is that the authors are not simply consumers and appliers of received theoretical wisdom. They are specialists on a region who are equally adept at the development of social theory. They are capable of being critical of regnant assumptions within several bodies of theoretical literature and are eager to revise or improve existing theories in light of the empirical realities of postcommunism. Thus, their commitment to *improving* or even *inventing* theory contrasts with the earlier commitment—in the 1970s and 1980s—of most specialists on the Soviet Union and East Europe to *consuming* and *applying* received theory. It no longer matters whether we call these four scholars “theoretically sophisticated area specialists” or “social theorists with an area specialization.” They do both equally well.

In these respects, the intellectual profiles of Anderson, Fish, Hanson, and Roeder are not atypical of other first-rate specialists on postcommunism who have been trained during the 1990s, or of veteran specialists who have successfully retooled, theoretically and/or methodologically, to address problems of postcommunism. The postcommunist subfield of comparative politics has matured to the point that it needs no special advice as to what constitutes “proper” theoretical or methodological standards, much less a single orthodoxy on either score. Rather, first-rate intellects are engaged in a joint exploration, through diverse methodologies and epistemologies, of the phenomenon of postcommunist change. Theirs is a joint effort to develop theory in ways that will account for the diversity in the postcommunist world and will explore the lessons of that diversity for our thinking about analogous phenomena in other regions of the world. The present volume is a significant contribution to that enterprise.

A Note on the Order of Chapters

The record of democracy in the postcommunist world is mixed. Some states never began the transition to democracy; others started and then turned backward; only a few can be counted as consolidated democracies a decade after the process began. The chapters in this book address the

ability of existing theories of democratization to account for the patterns in these outcomes. Each author highlights a different aspect of this complex process of political transition for which existing theories fail to provide an entirely satisfactory explanation. The order of the chapters reflects the rough chronological order in which the respective topics occur—from the rejection of authoritarianism to the consolidation of democracy. Roeder examines the initiation of transitions from authoritarianism; Fish analyzes regime stability once democratization begins; Anderson considers changes in politician and citizen behaviors in the transition to democracy; and Hanson explains regime consolidation. In the second chapter Philip Roeder examines the initiation of transitions within existing authoritarian regimes and asks why authoritarian leaders come to reject authoritarianism and choose democracy. By examining the experience of the fifteen Soviet successor states, Roeder finds that elites were more likely to reject authoritarianism and choose democracy where intrastate pluralism prevented agreements that could resolve the inherent dilemmas of authoritarian constitutions. In the third chapter Steven Fish examines the failure of transitions to democracy and asks why countries that begin a democratic transition then slide back to authoritarianism. In a comprehensive survey of all twenty-eight postcommunist countries, Fish finds that the most important variable explaining democratic reversals—but not the only variable—is excessive concentration of executive power. In the fourth chapter Richard Anderson examines the Russian transition to democracy and asks why previously cohesive authoritarian rulers begin competing with one another for public support and previously quiescent subjects begin taking sides in this competition. Anderson attributes these behavioral changes to shifts in political discourse that dissolve the political identity that had united despotic rulers and separated them from the ruled and to shifts in political discourse that create partisan identities binding citizens to politicians and motivating the citizens to take costly action on behalf of individual politicians. In the fifth chapter Stephen Hanson examines the successful consolidation of democracy. By examining alternative concepts of democratic consolidation and their application to Russia and other postcommunist states, Hanson concludes that democracy consolidates with the emergence of a staff of officials who are dedicated to the enforcement of democratic rules. As I note here, the authors' approaches diverge; they ask different questions and offer different reasons for the failure or success of democracy in postcommunist countries. The authors, however, find that their views have much in common. In the conclusion they draw out common themes and complementarities that link their separate approaches. For the authors, the differences among them are the beginning points for a continuing, fruitful exchange of ideas.