The Postsocialist Experience and Comparative Politics

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I see four areas where the study of postsocialism has made significant contributions to our understanding of politics. One is in providing an ideal laboratory for comparison. Here, I refer to three aspects of the region. First, it contains a large number of cases—28 in all and a good deal more, once we take into account "patchwork" politics and economics of the Russian Federation, for example. Second, the "great transformation," to borrow from Polanyi and to refer in this instance to an even "greater" process involving the construction of economic and political regimes, nations, and states, deals with virtually *all* the fundamental issues of politics. Finally, the region exhibits enormous variation in political and economic outcomes, whether we focus on economic and political regime types and the institutional details of these regimes; economic performance, levels of economic development, types of economic reforms, and the role of foreign capital; the age and size of the state and its capacity to define and defend borders, command compliance and extract resources; and the national composition of the population. At the same time, causes are limited, largely because of the homogenizing effects of state socialism and the temporal similarities in when these great transformations commenced. This combination of variable outcomes and constrained causes is, of course, precisely what comparativists value.

Assumptions

A second contribution involves questioning common assumptions. One example is the study of nationalism. What we have learned from the postsocialist experience is that national identities are constructed and quite fluid; that conflict among nations is the exception, not the rule; that such conflicts are often not about national differences and dislikes, but, rather, about class conflicts and rising contestation about regime alternatives; and that the nationalist rhetoric of leaders does not necessarily mean either nationalist publics or the existence of a nationalist movement (as Valere P. Gagnon [1994/5] has argued persuasively for Serbia). All these considerations counter prevailing assumptions--about nationalism and about the politics of socialism and postsocialism.

Another case in point is the study of recent democratization. In that area of scholarship, it is commonly assumed that: (1) there is a thick line between democracy and dictatorship; (2) democracy may be crafted with predictable consequences for its quality and sustainability; (3) state building and democratization are at odds with each other; (4) nationalism is a problem for democratization, and; (5) the quality of democracy predicts its sustainability.

What the postsocialist experience suggests, by contrast, is that the line between democracy and dictatorship is blurred—both in the sense that the "collapse" of state socialism was in fact uneven across country and even across regions and sectors within countries; and in the sense that the successor regimes were in most instances either dictatorships, albeit usually amended to be oligopolies, not monopolies, or hybrid regimes that combined elements of these two ideal types (with far from ideal consequences).

Moreover, political institutions may be a facade with real politics taking place elsewhere; these institutions often have perverse consequences because they lack many of those associated characteristics that in the West create predictable incentives that in turn produce predictable patterns of political behavior, efficient and effective or otherwise. Moreover, choice is rarely easy or stark, but rather a matter of selecting among various types and degrees of rentseeking. Indeed, only under the rare condition where a popular consensus supported both democracy and capitalism was choice a simple matter of selecting the best institutional arrangement.

At the same time, only two of the seven robust democracies in the postsocialist region are "old" states—that is, Poland and Hungary, but not the Czech Republic, Slovenia, or the Baltic states. State building, in short, can support democracy—especially when many of the most authoritarian-induced aspects of state building were already completed by virtue of the structure and dynamics of federalism during the state socialist period, when liberalizing dynamics within the republic

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were compromised by authoritarian rule and domestic contestation over regime alternatives, and when declarations of sovereignty were, as a result, joined with a liberal economic and political regime project.

Fourth, nationalism is a problem for democracy, but only sometimes. While it compromised democracy in Croatia, it supported democracy in Poland. In the latter setting, nationalism provided the foundations for not just the collapse of state socialism, but also the construction and sustainability of both democracy and capitalism. It did so by de-legitimating authoritarian rule, by marrying liberalism and the national project and thereby creating a popular concensus, and, with the departure of state socialism, by lengthening the time horizons of publics and expanding the political capital of leaders.

Finally, as the Russian case in particular reminds us, the quality of democracy may not predict its sustainability. One may argue, for example, that it was precisely the limited character of Russian democracy that has managed to prolong it. A more radical approach, for example, that would have been less tolerant of rentseeking might very well have achieved what no new democracy wants and what is now thankfully absent from the Russian scene: a sense among authoritarians that they may get what they want, or at least some of it, only by coalescing and terminating the democratic experiment. Indeed, a similar argument may be made about both Russian capitalism and the Russian state. Half a loaf is preferable to what may be the only realistic alternative: no loaf at all. To reflect back to an earlier point: The analysis of choice must take into account the actual alternatives available and their various consequences, not a clearly defined set of choices informed more by theory than by politics as usual.

Concepts

Central to comparative politics there are two concepts that have had to be reconsidered in light of the postsocialist experience. The first is revolution. Central to most definitions of revolution are three characteristics: a sudden collapse of the old order, violence, and the construction of a new order. What we find when we survey the postsocialist world from 1989 to the present, however, is evidence of the first and the third, but not always or even usually the second. Moreover, at least in east-central Europe, the more violent the process, the more circumscribed the changes that followed. Revolutions, in short, may be peaceful. This suggests that violence is not a necessary condition, either as a response to the collapse of authority or, later, as a predictor of the speed of regime change or the ideological distance regime creation travels. What we have also learned is that revolution may be a matter of less and more, rather than absolutes; that revolutions may succeed or fail, and the definition of revolution, as a result, should separate processes from outcomes; and that the revolutionary process often takes spatial forms, producing both micro-regimes and micro-states. This final aspect of revolution has received limited attentions, despite the purported emphasis of theorists of revolution on the state—itself a spatial concept—and the empirical support provided, for example, by the historical cases of both Russia and China.

The other concept that needs to be rethought is democracy. Many scholars have preferred a minimalist definition—or one that emphasizes, variously, uncertain results or civil liberties/political rights. This is highly problemmatic when viewed from the vantage point of the postsocialist world—or, indeed, most new democracies. What we have learned is that democracy rests on three legs: civil liberties; institutionalized competition for political office; and rule of law. These three dimensions, which rest on a number of preconditions too detailed to elaborate here, but necessary if they are to support democratic governance, have several implications. One is that competition and civil liberties are best understood as necessary but not sufficient conditions for democratic governance. Another is that the experiences of new democracies suggest that these three dimensions are in rough order in terms of both ease and frequency of attainment. However, the most important lesson is that democracy requires a capable state—or such factors as compliance with the law and the transparency of law, along with its consistency across time, space, and circumstance. As Stephen Holmes has argued for the Russian case: "There is no rule of law until the Mafia needs lawyers... The largest and most reliable human rights organization is the liberal state" (1997).

Once we use this definition of democracy, moreover, we are released from another problem: the sprawl of arguments sitting beneath the term, democratic consolidation. If we are more choosy about what constitutes a democracy, then we can be more precise about what consolidates democratic orders.

Arguments

The comparative study of recent democratization in Latin America and southern Europe has generated a consensus around two arguments. The first is that the prospects for a successful transition from dictatorship to democracy are enhanced when the two orders are bridged: pacting between authoritarian and opposition leaders, and founding elections that assure some continuity in governing personnel and political coalitions. The presumption is that these developments give authoritarians a stake in the new order and, as a result, prevent their coalescence against it. The second argument is that democratization and economic reform should be sequenced, because the latter may undermine the former.

The postcommunist experience provides the opposite lessons. In this setting, breakage, not bridging has been the strategy that has been the most successful—whether in building robust democracy or capitalism. At the same time, there is a high correlation between democratization and economic reform.

One could leave these observations with the simple point that postsocialism is "unique." However, this begs the question, in part because we are referring to patterns across 28 cases and in part because the real question is the cause of the difference, not the difference itself. I do not have the space to develop arguments about the intervening variables that produce these divergent relationships. However, the main point is that three considerations are paramount: differences in the authoritarian pasts of these two regions, differences in the timing of these changes and its effects on uncertainty, and, finally, differences in the agenda of transformation.

I close with a larger point. The postsocialist experience has affirmed many arguments in the literature, while challenging others. As such, its most significant contribu-

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tion to comparative politics has been to challenge our conceit as social scientists; that is, what we conclude is generalizable. What emerges is not that this region is unique. Rather, the real point is identifying intervening factors when varying relationships demand them, and addressing what could be termed, as a result, the "width" and not just the validity of our generalizations.

References

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