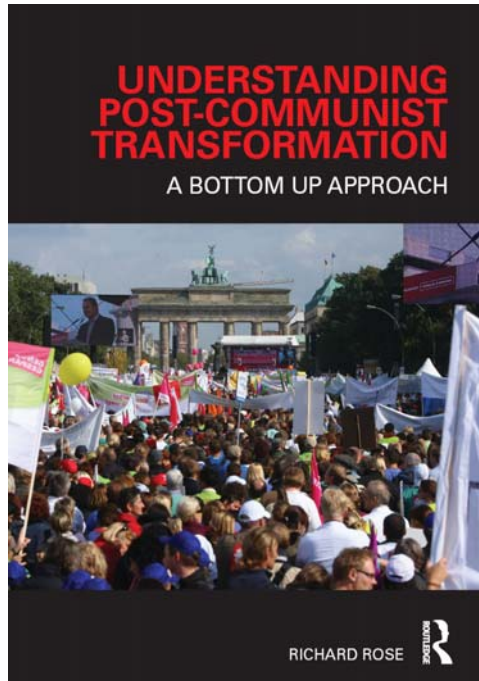


UNDERSTANDING POST-COMMUNIST TRANSFORMATION A BOTTOM UP APPROACH

Richard Rose, University of Aberdeen, UK



In *Understanding Post-Communist Transformation*, Richard Rose provides an unrivalled perspective on the post-communist democratic experience. Using a unique set of surveys conducted over 18 years in all of the post-communist societies, he charts the sometimes uncertain course of the democratic transformation. This book is essential reading for those wanting to understand post-communist politics and the transition to democracy.

Ian McAllister, The Australian National University

Richard Rose is one of the world's leading political scientists, and one of those who have the most to contribute to the study of a changing Europe. This new collection has much to say to comparativists who want to make sense of Russia, but just as much to Russianists who want to place their country in a meaningful comparative perspective. Essential reading.

Stephen White, University of Glasgow

The fall of the Berlin Wall launched the transformation of government, economy and society across half of Europe and the former Soviet Union. This text deals with the process of change in former Communist bloc countries, ten of which have become new European Union (EU) democracies while Russia and her neighbours remain burdened by their Soviet legacy.

Drawing on more than a hundred public opinion surveys from the New Europe Barometer, the text compares how ordinary people have coped with the stresses and opportunities of transforming Communist societies into post-Communist societies and the resulting differences between peoples in the new EU member states and Russia.

Subjects covered by *Understanding Post-Communist Transformation* include:

- Stresses and opportunities of economic transformation
- Social capital and the development of civil society
- Elections and the complexities of party politics
- The challenges for the EU of raising standards of democratic governance
- Differences between Russia's and the West's interpretation of political life

Written by one of the world's most renowned authorities on this subject, this text is ideal for courses on transition, post-communism, democratization and Russian and Eastern European history and politics.

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Understanding Post-Communist Transformation

A bottom-up approach

Richard Rose

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Introduction

Transformation and its aftermath

We are making such a large turn that it is beyond anyone's dreams. No other people has experienced what has happened to us.

(Mikhail Gorbachev, speech at Khabarovsk, 1991)

While every society is in transition, few have experienced transformation as abruptly and pervasively as nations once in the Communist bloc. Transformation is different in kind from the adaptation that established political systems periodically engage in to maintain their stability. Transformation is abnormal; it starts with the disruption of a steady state. It is a relatively short phase in a country's history, an interlude between a way of life that has been upset and the establishment of a new way of governing society. In the case of the Communist bloc, it was more than a political revolution. There was the treble transformation of the economy, society and the political regime – and often of the boundaries of the state as well.

Understanding post-Communist transformation is important because the bloc that Moscow dominated had upwards of 400 million subjects. Moreover, substantial elements of Communist practice, such as using a party as an organizational weapon and a state-controlled economy, have appeared in dozens of countries across Asia, Latin America and Africa. From a changing China to Cuba, more than 1.5 billion people have been or are now under Communist rule.

The actions of charismatic leaders such as Boris Yeltsin and Lech Walesa could disrupt a Communist regime; doing so left a wreckage as the starting point for building a replacement. It was politically convenient to describe what was happening as transition. Doing so implied predictability: we not only knew where a country was coming from but also knew where it was going. Many transition studies assumed that even if transformation was not literally the end of history, it would lead to the creation of societies from East Berlin to Vladivostok that would become 'just like us'.

In the midst of transformation, it was clear what was being left behind, but it was not clear what lay ahead. As the Soviet Union was sliding toward the political abyss, no one, including its leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, knew what would fill the void created by its collapse. At the time, the only thing we could be sure of was that our knowledge of how a Communist system worked was no longer adequate to understand new regimes that were holding free elections in order to demonstrate their break with it. It quickly became evident that our knowledge of how a neo-classical economic system works in theory was inadequate to understand how economies in transformation were working in reality. As a Russian central banker subsequently reflected, 'Life has

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proved to be richer and more complex than the theoretical notions that all of us were guided by' (Johnson, 2001: 253).

The collapse of the Berlin Wall was an event, while transformation and its aftermath is a process of learning. This book's purpose is to understand that process from the bottom up, that is, from the point of view of ordinary people. Whereas many political events happen 'over the heads' of ordinary people, the upheavals and opportunities of transformation immediately affected everyone's daily life. How did ordinary people respond to the collapse of the institutions that had been the framework of their lives? This book shows how the skills that ordinary people developed to get around the old regime could be used to cope with the shocks of transformation; it also shows whether two decades later they are still in use or fading into the distant past. It also highlights the benefits and opportunities that freedom has brought to people, especially in Central and Eastern European countries that are now member states of the European Union (EU).

Beliefs about how the world works. Beliefs about how the world works are the basis for economic and political understanding. When people live in different 'worlds', then their beliefs ought to be different. Notwithstanding differences in national histories, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union had been governed for generations by Communist party-states with institutions very different from those of Western societies. While the ideology of Marxism-Leninism was capable of multiple interpretations, the operation of Communist regimes was distinctive: the dismissal of the rule of law and individual freedom as signs of bourgeois 'false' consciousness, the rejection of private property and market mechanisms, the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat with the Communist Party mobilizing people to conform to its doctrines. The means used to pursue totalitarian goals were unconstrained by Western institutions and values.

Amidst the confusion of transformation, what you see depends on when you look. Since the world of Western societies was very different from that of the Communist bloc, its collapse was a test of the extent to which theories based on Western behaviour are equally relevant in unfamiliar circumstances. Many succumbed to the temptation first identified by Leon Trotsky, who characterized such observers as 'seeking salvation from unfamiliar phenomena in familiar terms' (Jowitt, 1992: 124). Lawrence Summers (1991), then chief economist of the World Bank, confidently prescribed that the way to deal with transformation was: 'Spread the truth – the laws of economics are like the laws of engineering. One set of laws works everywhere'. In Russia Summers's approach was characterized as 'market Bolshevism'. Such naive views could not be ignored and they could be exploited by those who understood their limitations.

Historians tend to generalize from the past to the present and in a steady-state society this may be appropriate for a period of time. However, in a society such as Germany, with very different twentieth-century experiences, this leaves open which past is chosen. Because transformation is about discontinuities, it implies that the past is an inadequate guide to the present. The dramatic events that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union encouraged a focus on the present, for example, the first free elections in Central and Eastern Europe in 1990 and Boris Yeltsin's televised defiance of an attempted counter-coup in Russia in August 1991. However, since Communism collapsed, more than 6,000 evening news bulletins have been televised and most days have been without dramatic news in Eastern Europe or in Russia.

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Whereas journalists err in overreacting to what has happened in the last 24 hours, academics can err in thinking that a newly published book based on fieldwork undertaken some years previously is sufficient to understand the ongoing process of transformation and its aftermath. Studies may be an account of past events that stop before the present or a snapshot of a particular event, for example, voting in an election in which major parties have since ceased to exist. To avoid these traps, this book adopts a dynamic approach. It starts with the world of the Communist bloc as it was when it appeared as solid as the concrete of the Berlin Wall. It continues to the world as it is two decades later.

The actions of governments during transformation and its aftermath have led to divergences between peoples once subject to Moscow. Ten Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia – are now member states of the European Union. By contrast, Russia and other successor states of the Soviet Union have gone in another direction. The Russian Federation has been transformed into what Vladimir Putin calls a ‘sovereign democracy’ rather than a European democracy and economic activity is affected by the rule of the *siloviki* (security agents) as well as by the rule of law. The institutions that are visible from the bottom-up view of post-Soviet citizens are different from those in new European democracies.

Approach of the book. Transformation is unsettling, because it introduces unpredictability. Thus, any theory used to understand it should be sufficiently open to learn from the existential problems of post-Communist societies. Like policymakers proceeding by trial and error to cope with these problems, social scientists should look out for ideas and evidence that fit the problems at hand. Since transformation disrupted the official sources of information that Communist systems used to portray progress, to understand how ordinary people have responded we need unofficial as well as official data.

The most straightforward way to understand how people have coped with transformation is to ask them. Social science offers a familiar methodology for doing so, the nationwide sample survey. This book draws on a unique resource: a programme of surveys that the Centre for the Study of Public Policy began in 1991 to monitor mass behaviour and attitudes from the bottom up. Since then, in collaboration with researchers from Vienna to Moscow, I have directed more than 100 surveys interviewing 120,000 people in 20 countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union from 1991 to 2008 (see Appendix A). In order to understand important differences in national contexts, this book compares the results of two parallel sets of long-term surveys. The New Europe Barometer (NEB) covers the ten Central and East European countries now in the European Union. The New Russia Barometer (NRB) has completed 17 surveys since it was launched in January 1992, the first month of the Russian Federation and, to test the generalizability of the Soviet legacy, Belarus and Ukraine have been frequently surveyed too.

To construct a questionnaire requires observation of the realities of everyday life. Questions should follow the KISS principle – Keep It Simple, Stupid. But what is talked about in colloquial language must also be related to abstract concepts such as support for democracy and national economic data. Observation calls attention to the importance in transformation societies of concepts taken for granted by contemporary Western social scientists, such as the rule of law and freedom from the state. It also turns other concepts inside out because of the importance of the legacy of an

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anti-modern society, and democratization backwards, and substitutes the idea of an hour-glass society for the concept of civil society.

A questionnaire that asks questions relevant to respondents in their everyday life and to seminars of academics is a pre-condition of meaningful statistical analysis. Doing so integrates evidence of what people say and do with theories of behaviour consistent with Herbert Simon's theory of bounded rationality (1978) and Max Weber's (1947: 8f, 94ff) idea of *verstehen Soziologie* (sociology for understanding). It avoids the photocopying of questionnaires based on alien theories, a practice that can lead to *missverstehen Soziologie* (a sociology based on misunderstanding).

This book is written for a broad audience of people who are not only interested in understanding how ordinary people have reacted to upheavals that are now becoming part of the past but also what it means for their lives today – and for the lives of their fellow Europeans. Readers familiar with top-down accounts of transformation will find this book adds to their understanding by showing how people behaved outside the beltways of capital cities and out of sight of diplomats and inside dopesters. Not least, this book can show people who have lived through transformation and its aftermath how their own experiences may compare with those of others in their own and neighbouring societies.

In writing this book I have had the advantage of experiencing history forwards rather than backwards; this makes one aware of the contingencies of history (Rose, 1997). I saw my first Soviet troops in Vienna when Austria was then under four-power occupation pending the negotiation of a Cold War peace treaty. I first experienced the absence of a market in Moscow during the premiership of Leonid Brezhnev. I experienced the *nomenklatura* class system at the 1979 International Political Science Association convention in Moscow, when the same hotel served me differently on three different occasions, depending on the rank of the person accompanying me. I first saw the Berlin Wall in 1968 and visited Dresden, an example of the contradictions of European culture and Soviet controls, half a dozen years before Vladimir Putin went there to control the *Stasi* (security police) that spied on Germans. The Saturday before the Wall came down, I did not attend the demonstration in Alexanderplatz, East Berlin, because I had a cold – and because I did not know whether the East German police would shoot. I sat in a flat in suburban Moscow working on the first New Russia Barometer questionnaire in autumn 1991 as the snow and the Soviet Union were falling and we did not know what would be there when the snow melted in spring.

The head of a British university once asked me: How do you study post-Communist countries? My answer was simple: I work with people who live there. Over the years many individuals and institutions have contributed to this book. Co-authors of materials used here are named in full in the Acknowledgements (see Appendix B). They have come from countries on three continents – including Austria, Germany, Hungary, Russia, Sweden, the United States and Australia as well as the United Kingdom. Results of research in progress have been presented to interested and interesting audiences in Russia and all 10 Central and East European countries that were once part of the Communist bloc; across almost all old member states of the European Union; the United States, Canada, and places as far afield as Beijing, Cape Town, Mexico City, Tbilisi and Tokyo.

Plan of the book. Part I shows how the division of Europe came about and how people living in hour-glass societies kept their private opinions separate from opinions that they had to endorse in public. Soviet society appeared modern, because it

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could produce steel and put a man in space, but was in fact anti-modern, rejecting the values and institutions of modern European states. Subjects of Communist regimes had the bittersweet reward of seeing their societies make progress while simultaneously falling behind countries of Western Europe. Given no choice, people patiently endured what seemed to be a system built to last, only to have it collapse in a matter of months.

The starting point for transformation was the ruins of a Communist system. Part II shows how the distinctive forms of social capital that people had developed to cope with its pathologies were useful in dealing with the immediate shock of economic transformation. In the absence of a civil economy, people turned to uncivil economies or grew food on urban plots to eke out what could be bought with depreciated currency at inflated prices. Juggling multiple economies enabled households to avoid destitution. In the aftermath of transformation, people have taken advantage of new opportunities to buy consumer goods and enjoy better health than under the old regime.

The collapse of Communist regimes has given ordinary people freedom from the state. However, as Part III shows, the legacy of the past means that democratization began backwards, for free elections were introduced before the rule of law was properly established. With different degrees of success, politicians have sought to replace or adapt the institutions they inherited. East Germans have had a unique experience. Instead of being compelled to create new institutions from scratch, they have benefited by becoming part of a ready-made state, the enlarged Federal Republic. Elsewhere, many ex-Communists have shown that they have not changed – ‘Once an opportunist, always an opportunist’ – and used their old networks to create social democratic and populist parties.

Competitive elections have now been held in Central and Eastern Europe for almost two decades. Instead of voting as government commands, citizens have often exercised their democratic right to turn the government out. However, as Part IV shows, this has yet to create a properly accountable party system. In the absence of civil-society institutions, parties that politicians have launched often sink after one or two elections. The result is a floating system of parties. Electors are forced to become floating voters when the party they voted for at the last election does not appear on the ballot at the next. The problems of volatility are compounded by popular distrust of parties, which results in individuals with political values often being unsure whether any party on the ballot represents their views.

While the shocks of transformation are large and pervasive, they are short, whereas the aftermath of transformation is long. Part V shows how time matters. The period since transformation now spans more years than that from the final battles of the Second World War to the time when six participants in that war banded together to form the European Community. For young voters in the European Parliament election of 2009, the Communist era is becoming like centuries of kingdoms and wars, something that happened before they were born. The aftermath of transformation has given ordinary citizens time to learn what their new political, economic and social institutions are like, and to adapt to them. This has been for the better in Central and Eastern Europe. In successor states of the Soviet Union the passage of time has created something that people now recognise as *normalno*.

Even though what were once Communist systems may claim to be stable states, they are not static states. There is unfinished business from the past, such as the problem of low standards of governance and corruption in some old as well as new EU member

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states. There are opportunities arising from the emergence of a European public space with the free movement of people, goods and ideas across a continent. The heterogeneity of a Europe with some 30-odd states challenges West European as well as post-European societies to adapt to a re-made continent and to a transformed Russia.

Every chapter in this book is freshly written and freshly thought, while each draws on one or more of the many studies that I have written since the early 1990s. Whereas an article must focus narrowly on a single topic, a book can link major political, economic and social themes arising from transformation. Although Russia is referred to more often than any other country, within a book there is scope to show that transformation is a process in which the outcome has differed between individuals within a country and between countries. In the course of writing a book for a wide audience, I have left out reviews of academic literature and statistical analyses more appropriate to specialist journals. They can be found in publications referenced in the Acknowledgements (Appendix B). This makes it possible to begin to do justice to the experiences of ordinary people during the great transformation of Europe and beyond.

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