

Communism and the emergence of democracy

by Harald Wydra, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 314 pp.

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The long crisis of communism was a powerful impetus for the development of critical social theory, but critical social theory has not had much to say about the end of communism and what has followed in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. There are some monographs and edited collections on post-communism that use ideas and concepts from critical social theory, but they are few in number in comparison to work that starts from mainstream social science perspectives. This is especially the case for the study of post-communist politics where perspectives from 'mainstream' comparative politics have shaped debate about the nature of post-communist political development. Harald Wydra's *Communism and the emergence of democracy* should therefore be welcomed for attempting to apply ideas from critical social theory to the study of post-communist politics and filling in a significant intellectual lacuna. There is a need for a volume written from this perspective, ideas about transition should and can be criticised, and there is nothing wrong with interpretation of events through secondary sources. Unfortunately, Wydra's book fails at almost every level: it fails as a critique of conventional wisdoms, which are parodied rather than rebutted; it fails as a theoretical alternative because of the confusion of ideas and terms used and the avoidance of any effort to establish the relationship between the concepts deployed in the book; and it fails as interpretative analysis because analysis takes second place to the avalanche of concepts that Wydra deploys and what is left of it after the theoretical deluge is often conventional, frequently simplistic and sometimes erroneous.

Wydra's argument is that positivist approaches to communism and democracy cannot appreciate the relationship between the two because they divide democracy from the experience of communism. They do this by imposing ideas about historical periods and because of the 'outcome-logic' that guides their analysis. Periodisation, talking about pre-communist, communist, post-communist eras, creates clean breaks and smooth historical progression where in reality there were messy continuities and outcomes were tentative and contingent. Outcome-logic simplifies reality as analysis is shaped by the eventual outcome of political processes and does not consider the range of developmental possibilities that exist at moments of crisis. Against

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periodisation and outcome-logic Wydra argues that the experience of communism was punctuated by a series of critical liminal situations, periods of high uncertainty in which social identity and agency are highly fluid and political outcomes are indeterminate. Understanding these liminal situations and their 'symbolisations' will, Wydra claims, allow us to develop what he variously calls an 'experiential' or political 'anthropological' account of change. The advantages of such an account are that it reveals 'the complexity of the sociogenesis of political order' rather than concealing this complexity as do positivist approaches (p. 1). Simply, what Wydra means by this is that there are democratic (and other) possibilities, moments and actions under communism before democracy is institutionalised, and that these possibilities etc help to create and shape 'post-communist' democracy. They should not be forgotten, ignored or their democratic nature denied because they did not lead to democracy at some date prior the designated 'end' of communism between 1989 and 1991. Positivist accounts, Wydra argues, ignore the past because they do not see events, attitudes, actors or their actions as being 'democratic' where there is no institutionalisation of democracy. They cannot see that democracy can arise from instances of incivility – violence or disorder – that is inimical to democracy itself. Wydra highlights four such liminal situations, the 'rise of Bolshevik power' (that is the Russian revolution of 1917 and its immediate aftermath), the start of the Cold War, the 'articulation of dissidence' (the revolts against communism in Eastern Europe in 1956, 1968, and the early 1980s, and the phenomenon of dissidence more generally), and the collapse of communism itself.

Wydra's argument depends in the first instance on the validity of his critique of 'positivist' approaches to post-communism and the study of democratic transitions more generally. Wydra's argument is not novel. The accusation that transitology views democratisation as a teleological process and that it therefore covers up many of the complications attendant on political change and obscures culturally specific or other local factors that shape democracy, has been a commonplace critique of transitology's use to study the collapse of communism. There is a small kernel of truth in this argument insofar as there is an over-selection of cases in transitology on the dependent variable (democratisation) so that other outcomes are understudied. This (and the argument's ubiquity) does not make it argument right, however. A key argument of transitology is that democracy is, in Adam Przeworski's words, a 'contingent outcome of struggle'; democracy, in other words, is not a guaranteed outcome of autocratic collapse (even if failure to achieve democracy has been understudied in comparison to democratic consolidation). The first paragraph of the bible of transitology, Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillippe Schmitter's *Transitions*

from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 3), mentions four possible outcomes of transition: democracy, authoritarianism, no stable outcome and cycling between unstable regimes, and violent revolution. That pretty much covers all political forms that have existed in the modern era; if the outcome of a transition can be anything, where is the teleology?

The teleology and determinism of the comparative politics literature on democratisation (as opposed to the democratic boosterism of authors like Fukuyama) is thus a myth. Wydra's insistence that 'the monism of liberal democracy as a developmental goal reproduces the determinist historicist account of the concept of transition in Marx's philosophy of history' (p. 88) – is a caricature of the literature rather than an insightful critique. Being a caricature Wydra's argument is made by assertion rather than by engagement with the literature. There is very little quotation or direct reference to the transitological literature to prove the charges that Wydra makes. Where he does cite the literature Wydra does so in a very tendentious or exaggerated manner. One could pick out many examples of this: his assertion about 'the renaissance of the paradigm of totalitarianism' (pp. 82-3), there has not been one; his reading of what uncertainty means in transitology as opposed to what it means for him (pp. 191-2), which leads him to distort the notion of uncertainty in transitology to support an argument about the literature that he has made up; his assertion that it 'has been a central claim of the literature on democratic transitions that anti-politics or 'living in truth' are dispositions that are not adapted to institutionalising a new political order or to conducting public policy' (p. 205), which is backed up by reference to one source – hardly central then – that actually makes only half the argument Wydra claims.

The paucity of his argument about 'mainstream' 'positivist' approaches leads Wydra to back his argument by making conceptual connections that do not exist or are very fragile at best. He asserts, for example, that the literature on transition is shaped by notions about totalitarianism since the idea of totalitarianism and modern political science definitions of democracy date from the same time, the Cold War. Definitions of totalitarianism and democracy thus shaped each other; transition theories, being about democracy, are shaped by notions of totalitarianism because they take their idea of democracy as a constitutional form from the Cold War. This is a very tenuous line of argument. It ignores the fact that transition theories do not share a common view of what democracy is (as a constitutional form, a system of governance, a particular form of citizenship, some combination thereof). It also ignores the fact

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that transitology has no time for the idea that communist regimes were totalitarian. Indeed, transitology can only 'work' to explain the end of communism and its aftermath by denying that communist regimes were totalitarian (hence the notion of 'post-totalitarianism' in the work of people like Linz and Stepan). This denial of totalitarianism in its classic Cold War mode has to be made to enable comparability with non-communist transitions. For comparison there have to be elements of, or within, communist systems that could serve to generate pressure for democracy, or support it, as there are in non-communist autocratic systems. In other words, transitology can only be applied to democratisation in formerly communist states if it does the very thing that Wydra accuses it of not being able to do: see development possibilities in communist regimes. Wydra, of course, misses this point entirely since he is so keen to damn transitology and argue that all theories bar his are wrong because of their limited view of democracy as a constitutional form.

Overall then, Wydra's appreciation of the literatures that he roundly and freely condemns is very limited. He has nothing to say about work that does what he says is impossible, i.e., that uses themes from transitology and that looks back to the past to explain post-communist politics (for example, Tökes's book on Hungary's negotiated revolution that dates change back to 1956 and is all about how the experience of communism shaped the regimes collapse and the politics that followed). The shallowness of Wydra's appreciation of the literature is best summarised by his treatment of Steven M. Fish's *Democracy from scratch* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).¹ Wydra takes the book's title as arguing that the 'complete disappearance of coercive communist power system leaves a tabula rasa' (p. 273). In fact M. Steven Fish's *Democracy from scratch. Opposition and regime in the new Russian revolution* (Princeton University Press) sources problems with Russian democracy to communism's shaping of people's ability to participate in politics: there is no *tabula rasa* except in Wydra's interpretation of the book's title. Truly, one should never judge a book by its cover (and that goes for Wydra's book too: the cover is excellent).

Wydra's weak critique of the 'literature' is a fragile base for the rest of the book. He endlessly returns to his critique over the course of the work as though repetition will make his argument stick. This continual repetition of his charges against other arguments about democratisation is one of the reasons that Wydra's own approach is so disjointed. Wydra's assertion that communist systems did not settle down and create stable social orders so that there were always possibilities for change within them is correct, but it is not proven by endless exegesis of theoretical texts and

notions that Wydra produces. The large range of concepts that Wydra introduces, in part to sustain his critique of democratisation theories, do not build up into a coherent schema. It would take too long to go through all the concepts used to show how this is the case since every chapter sees the introduction of new ideas that are recounted for a few pages and then frequently disappear again. Wydra draws on insights from a vast number of theorists – Max Weber, Claude Lefort, Eric Voeglin, Victor Turner, Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Dobry, René Girard to list but a few of the people thrown in to the mix . No clear conceptual scheme emerges from Wydra's engagement with these authors to structure his analysis and make it worth the reader's effort to follow him through the theoretical maze that he constructs. The various concepts he uses are not related to one another and developed to the point where they can actually be considered as an alternative to the mainstream approaches that Wydra criticises. I really would like to discuss Wydra's approach but even after reading his book twice I simply have no idea what it actually is outside his belief in liminality. This is such a thinly developed concept – I cannot tell you when a situation is liminal from Wydra's definition of it and when not – that it is practically meaningless: most people, even convinced structuralists, probably already think that people's experience of events like the revolution of 1917, Stalinist industrialisation, or the collapse of communism is an experience of uncertainty and fluidity in which their social identity is fractured and subject to repeated redefinition.

Wydra's constant introduction of new ideas and their lack of definition or development would not be so serious if there was some deep uncovering of the rich empirical reality of communism and its aftermath through which we could read the bits of theory that he uses and at least understand them contextually. Unfortunately, his constant theoretical diversions and peregrinations prevent Wydra from saying anything particularly deep about the liminal situations that he claims are so important. Wydra's accounts of these situations are very much secondary to his discussions of theory. As a result his discussions of liminal situations are often either remarkably conservative, old fashioned, simplistic, or some combination thereof, and at times his history is simply muddleheaded. Wydra's discussion of the 1917 revolution, for example, relates nothing of the social history of the revolution that has been uncovered over the last thirty years. This literature demonstrates very clearly the fluidity that Wydra makes so many claims about but the only text used at any length is Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic mountain. Stalinism as a civilization*, University of California Press, 1995 (although see below for how the text is used). It is difficult to believe that we are being confronted with

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an 'experiential' or 'anthropological' account of the revolution when we are given the old story about the Tsar, Lenin, the Provisional Government, Stalin etc: how can you have anthropology without people? The same goes for Wydra's discussion of the collapse of communism when the experience of collapse in a country is dealt with in a paragraph or at best a couple of pages of simplistic analysis that focuses on leaders and their choices.

The thinness of Wydra's research and descriptive analysis is simply stunning. As is often the case with potted history, interpretation is sometimes so abrupt that it leads to errors. It is incredible how off the mark Wydra is at times and this has to cast doubts on how much he actually knows about the subjects he is writing about and the diligence of his research. For example he tell us that Stalin's idea about the intensification of class struggle under socialism dates from 1937 (p. 71), i.e., from the middle of the 'great purges,' when it in fact it was well rehearsed by Stalin in 1920s. Incredibly he states that 'people's democracy or democratic centralism' – actually the latter, Wydra's phrasing is poor; the former has nothing to do with internal party organisation and is anyway a concept from the post-war era – was designed to limit the power of the Central Committee and only became a 'hierarchically top-to-bottom principle of strict inner party discipline after 1934' (p. 93). It is a shame no one told this to the oppositions of the 1920s they could have avoided all those executions and years in exile in late 1920s and early 1930s; the 'Democratic Centralist' opposition of 1920-21 with their critique of authoritarianism in the party and Lenin's use of democratic centralism would seem to have had nothing to complain about at all. Such errors are the product of limited knowledge and inadequate research. Both are sourced to Kotkin's *Magnetic mountain*. Kotkin's book is one of the most significant pieces of historical research on the USSR of the last twenty years and one of the most highly praised. It is inconceivable that he makes errors that would be slapped down in an undergraduate essay. And, of course, he doesn't, the errors are Wydra's alone. The first error does not appear in Kotkin's text at all: the page referenced by Wydra makes no mention of Stalin's theory of the intensification of class struggle under socialism. The second error derives from a misreading of one of Kotkin's footnotes. Kotkin does mention that one of the pre-revolutionary intentions of 'democratic centralism' was 'ironically' to help control the Central Committee, but does not claim that it only became an instrument of control after 1934; all he does is point out that 1934 was the year that democratic centralism was fully codified in the party's rules. Wydra's misreading is ironic: he constantly berates others for supposedly studying democracy only after it has been institutionalised and given a constitutional form and then himself only accords a

key facet of Soviet dictatorial rule a repressive function after it is institutionalised – turned into an explicit set of rules – in the communist party's 'constitution,' its rulebook.

It could be argued that these are minor historical points and can be forgiven: everyone slips up now and then. But Wydra can make mistakes over recent matters as well, matters that in some cases can be defined plausibly as common knowledge amongst people with an interest in politics. For example, Wydra defines *glasnost* (sic), Gorbachev's media management policy that eventually became shorthand for a measure of press freedom, as 'constitutional guarantees of basic human and civil rights,' and *perestroika*, the term that came to stand for the full range of Gorbachev's initiatives, as 'transformations of economic and property order and the orderly political management of pressing production and distribution problems' (p. 190). To say that someone's treatment of history is muddleheaded is harsh but it is hard to avoid such a conclusion when they not only make such basic errors but know that they are making them: the ridiculous definitions of 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' just given are pretty much corrected within a couple of pages so why make such basic errors in the first place? I have no answer to this question, but my impression, taking these errors and the quality of the rest of Wydra's empirical work and its lack of attention to the actual events or experiences of people who lived through communism together, is that Wydra does not really care about these experiences: he is only really interested in the theories that he can place around them. To my mind this negates the claim he makes about developing an anthropological or experiential account.

A good take on the end of communism from a social theory perspective would have been a major addition to studies of this topic. However, the shallow empirical base of Wydra's work, its theoretical density and the opacity of the concepts used will probably mean that the book has the opposite effect to what he intends. Instead of changing the terms of the debate on communism and the emergence of democracy most people engaged in studying these topics who are exposed to this book will think that critical social theory has nothing to say about them and can be safely ignored.

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