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A Sociology for the Second Great Transformation?

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At the turn of the millennium, sociology faces theoretical disorientation. The issue is not what we don't know, but how to interpret what we do know. Nowhere is this more true than in the transformations that have overtaken the former Soviet Union and its satellites during the last decade of the century. The salient realities with which we have to grapple are twofold: first, the general failure to realize utopian hopes for rebuilding postsocialist societies, and second, the diversity between and within postsocialisms. The disintegration of the Soviet order has taken many routes, from reprimitivization in Russia to the firm embrace of modern capitalism in Central Europe. What has the sociological canon to say about these epochal changes? And how might the canon be reconstituted to accommodate them?

One hundred years ago Marxism enjoyed its Golden Age, flourishing alongside a socialism it inspired, a socialism that had expanded from its German epicenter to embrace most of Europe. Socialism was fast becoming the international movement Marx and Engels had hoped and anticipated—a hope dashed by World War I and its aftermath. The writings of Weber and Durkheim were born on this political terrain. Durkheim claimed that socialism, although he did not call it that, understood as equality of opportunity and social justice, was an immanent tendency of industrialism that would appear as we patiently built up civic associations, while Weber argued that socialism would only bring more bureaucracy. Taking stock of the century—the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, fascism and even social democracy—the anticipations of Durkheim and Weber have endured remarkably well. Marxism, on the other hand, which inspired so many of these changes both by emulation and by reaction, has had to continually reconstruct itself to keep up with the twentieth century.

If the classic sociology of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber was invented to interpret the first "great transformation" to the market economy, how should we reinvent sociology to take up the challenge of the second "great transformation"? Let us deal with each in turn. The transition from socialism to capitalism was not something either Marx and Engels or their successors ever seriously contemplated. But their historical analyses do offer clues and guidelines. Working with the model of

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the transition from feudalism to capitalism, one might expect a struggle between a new bourgeoisie and an old nomenclatura class but, from what we know, it is hard to place that at the center of the transition, although the diversity of postsocialist formations might be interpreted as different accommodations of old and new classes. It is even harder to work with the model of the transition from capitalism to socialism, that is, to center the struggle between the working class and the nomenclatura, although this most definitely did play a role leading up to the Polish denouement (Solidarity) and the Russian exit (miners' strikes).

The alternative Marxist interpretation would be to consider the way state socialism fettered its forces of production, creating irresolvable contradictions. In this regard we could explain the divergence of state socialisms by the degree to which capitalism had already begun to incubate within state socialism. In this respect we might say Hungary was most advanced and Russia the most backward, leading to their radically different postsocialist trajectories. The molecular changes in Hungary's political and economic order during the last two decades of communism ensured that it was better prepared to enter the new era than Russia's more brittle communism. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there were none of the embryonic forms of capitalism around which a new order could crystallize. But even Hungary has belied the great expectations for the second great transformation.

A Durkheimian perspective might look upon the transformation as a "transition" from mechanical to organic solidarity, from a totalitarian order in which individuality was lost, in which, to use Hannah Arendt's phrase, individuals were bound together by the iron band of terror, to a civic order in which the division of labor becomes the basis of a new solidarity. Durkheimians might concern themselves with the development of those noncontractual elements of contract, that underlying consensus without which instability reigns. The collapse of Soviet institutions left little to replace them, creating institutional vacuum and anomie, whereas Hungary and Poland were better equipped for succession. Durkheimians might attend to the ways a new collective consciousness is being forged through the reinvention of tradition or through the enactment of national rituals. Equally, they could focus on the continuity of old values that might promote stability but at the cost of transformation. They might play up, for example, a Soviet-induced habitus of state dependence or hostility toward inequality as an impediment to entrepreneurialism. If the transition doesn't go as well as might be hoped, legacies of the old order can be blamed.

A Weberian approach to the second great transformation might conceptualize the past as a patrimonial order, in which the party state operated not so much as a modern bureaucracy but through particularistic and family-like ties. The collapse of the party state would be a condition for the rise of a modern rational legal capitalism but not its guarantee. Building capitalism on the ruins of state socialism is very different from building it from feudalism. The absence of an emergent bourgeoisie means, as Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley argue, making capitalism without capitalists.[1] They ask whether other actors—a cultural bourgeoisie in

[1]Gil Eyal, Iván Szelényi, Eleanor Townsley, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists* (London: Verso, 1998).

alliance with technocrats—can substitute for a class of independent entrepreneurs. Glancing over their shoulders to Russia, there they see capitalists but without the framework of capitalism. A Weberian sociology abandons the notion of socialism and focuses on the plurality of capitalisms.

Weberian sociology has always been ambivalent about the idea and inevitability of progress. The second great transformation confirms the skepticism. Some, such as Zygmunt Bauman, propose that the collapse of the Soviet Union signals the collapse of the enlightenment project, of the possibility of a rationally planned society. Others have argued that the second great transformation is a regression to previous orders, whether to merchant capitalism or even feudalism. In any event these perspectives refuse the celebratory visions that were packaged with the end of communism.

Consonant with this postmodern pessimism, one might think of postsocialist theory as analogous to postcolonial theory that attempts to grapple with the continued subordination of colonized people even after they have been blessed with nationalism, democracy, market, and all the other gifts of modernity. Struggles against colonialism at one level embrace the very premises of Western thought at another level—premises that founded their previous imprisonment. Postsocialist thinking could arrive at a similar conclusion—free markets, liberal democracies, and national independence are all chimera that bind new nations under Western hegemony.

Such postsocialist thought is even more pessimistic than postcolonial thought since it spells the demise not only of an old form of domination but also of the emancipatory visions that accompanied it. Postsocialist thought would be quintessentially postmodern, spelling the end of utopian visions as infeasible, unviable, and dangerous. Against this messianic pessimism we need not accumulate more facts that root us in an eternal present, but rather we need cultivate a critical imagination for feasible alternatives. Instead of empiricism we need new cognitive maps to help us see possibilities beyond the horizon. This is a time not for normal sociology, collecting more data, but for revolutionary sociology that reconfigures what we already know.

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