



Post-Communist Modernization, Transition Studies, and Diversity in Europe¹

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Abstract

The greater part of studies of post-communism – habitually grouped under the heading of ‘transitology’ – understands the transition ultimately as a political and cultural convergence of the ex-communist societies with Western Europe. Even those critical approaches that regard the post-communist transition as a relatively unique phenomenon (as in the approaches of path-dependency and neo-classical sociology) tend to conflate normative prescriptions with empirical descriptions and to move within an overall framework of what Michael Kennedy has aptly called ‘transition culture’. This paper argues instead that the transition’s nature can only be fully grasped if a case-specific and historical-contextual approach is taken. In theoretical terms, I argue for a three-step movement to grasp diversity in Central and Eastern Europe: 1) the acknowledgement of the plurality of modernizing agency and its creativity; 2) the acknowledgement of multi-interpretability and difference as primary elements of modernity; and, 3) a sensitivity to the resulting institutional variety in societal constellations. In substantive terms, I argue that diversity is a distinctive mark of Europe that is bound to persist in an enlarged Europe, despite the spirit of assimilation in the accession process.

Key words

• modernity • transition • historical sociology • diversity • enlargement

Introduction

Even if the incorporation of eight East European countries in the European project on 1 May 2004 has been heralded as the outcome of ‘our common commitment to unify our continent’,² and understood as the most significant litmus test for the stability and democratic consolidation of these former communist states, enduring differences, structural tensions, and potential conflict in the region should not be underestimated. Instead of calling for the ‘end of transition’, the fundamental differences that the post-communist countries bring to Europe,³ and the problems they face in terms of socio-economic welfare, political conflict, and collective identity construction should be the focal point of any analysis. The enlargement process and its spirit of assimilation (as embodied in the Copenhagen criteria) have not unequivocally led to the homogenization of the new member states (cf. Mair and Zielonka 2002).

In the same vein, rather than celebrating the achievements of the social sciences in the last decade and a half in analysing and understanding the transitions, and in developing new theoretical frames for grasping its idiosyncrasies, much is to be gained by a more reflexive and critical approach which admits that innovation in social theory has not kept pace with the implications of the changes in the region (cf. Szakolczai 2001). Transition studies have been too much occupied with assessing the progress of convergence of post-communist societies towards a European standard, instead of critically engaging with enlargement as well as exploring any diversifying implications of the transition process and EU membership.

In the approaches towards modernization and social change in Eastern Europe (commonly referred to as ‘transition’), which emerged after the collapse of the communist regimes, the normative affirmation of the Western modern project has been a diffused, but mostly unproblematized element.⁴ In this, the enlargement process of the European Union has been understood as the embodiment of progress and necessary ‘external anchor’ for the Eastern European societies. Membership of the EU implied the end state of the transition and stipulated the necessary steps to move away from the socialist past.

Until the end of the 1990s, the debate on ‘transition’ has been dominated by approaches that shared a number of elementary assumptions on the general nature of social change in Eastern Europe: the convergence of the post-communist countries with Western Europe, rather than divergence or persistent difference; a teleological view of social change with regard to the end-state of the transition in the form of a Western-type democratic market economy; a predominant attention to formal, procedural institutions (democracy, market economy) to the relative neglect of substantive issues (national and regional identity, culture); and an overall negative appreciation of the past (communism). Many have not failed to notice, though, that this ‘consensus’ shows a strong affinity with assumptions of ‘classical’ modernization theory as developed in the 1940s and 1950s, a theoretical strand that had, however, been thoroughly discredited by the 1970s.⁵ The re-emergence of modernization theory, or at least some of its

² Romano Prodi on ‘Accession Day’, Dublin Castle, 1 May 2004, Speech/04/221.

³ See the report ‘The Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe’ of the Reflection Group of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, published in October 2004. The accession of the three aspirant member states – Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, leave alone Turkey - will make structural diversity even more apparent.

⁴ Some recent publications indicate, indeed, that an affirmative - rather than self-critical - stance is increasingly considered untenable (see Bönker *et al.* 2002; Ekiert and Hanson 2003; for a review of both, see Blokker 2004b).

⁵ See, for similar observations, Alexander (1995); Altvater (1998: 592); Kennedy (2002); Knöbl (2001).

central tenets, means that those assumptions that had been held as untenable in the debate on 'classical' modernization theory were re-inserted into studies on post-communism.

If most transition theory uncritically endorsed a revived modernization paradigm which both normatively ('the end of history') and empirically ('designer capitalism') promised a rapid and relatively unproblematic convergence of East with West, rather early on in the debate, a number of critical approaches pointed out that straightforward convergence was not be expected as institutional legacies from communism would durably influence the nature of the new societies (Stark and Bruszt 1998), while others indicated the a-typical class structure underpinning the modernizing projects undertaken (Eyal *et al.* 1998) and, therefore, the *sui generis* status of the post-communist project, at least in the short run. Even if, however, these critical, 'second-generation approaches'⁶ provide well-founded critique, their overall argumentation tends to remain within the overall parameters set by the transition paradigm (cf. Kennedy 2002). The ultimate endorsement of the Western model means, in my opinion, that the critical approaches mentioned are ill-equipped to confront the structural diversity which the region displays in its experience with yet another project of modernization.

In this paper, therefore, I argue for an approach that leaves behind the 'convergence thesis' of the transition paradigm altogether by discarding the idea of a *telos* of social change in the post-communist countries, and by taking as a starting point persistent diversity instead. In theoretical terms, I will argue for a three-step movement to go beyond the existing inability to deal with diversity in the region: 1) the acknowledgement of the *plurality of modernizing agency* and its *creativity*; 2) the acknowledgement of *multi-interpretability* and *difference* as primary elements of modernity; and, 3) a sensitivity to the resulting *institutional variety* in societal constellations.

In substantive terms, I argue that, despite the assimilation that is part of the accession process, diversity is a distinctive mark of Europe that will endure in an enlarged Europe. Even if the framework for transition is set rather strictly by the spirit of assimilation towards the Western European standard, as embodied in the Copenhagen criteria and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, diversity persists, both between East and West and between singular states. My argument is based upon the observation that, first of all, the accession process only led to a partial (legal-technical) convergence of the new member states, while, second, the qualitative change in the European project (through both the enlargement and constitutionalization) in itself offers increased opportunities for the CEECs to articulate diversity.

Transition Studies and European Diversity

The debate on social change and transition in post-1989 Eastern Europe has been dominated, on the one hand, by *modernist approaches* which constitute the hard core of transitology.⁷ These approaches are mainly concerned with the transfer of Western models and institutions, assuming a universal quality to modernity and modernization. On the other hand, the modernism of transitology has been challenged with increasing success by *historicist approaches*. These approaches, often in the institutionalist vein, acknowledge that the transformations contain unique elements as a result of the particular (communist) experiences of the Eastern European countries, thereby admitting to a historical, contextual component of the transition (Stark and Bruszt 1998; Eyal *et al.* 1998; Eyal *et al.* 2003). The modernist approach is a-historical in that it largely ignores distinct historical legacies, which potentially have an important impact on the current transformations and thus render these

⁶ See, for this terminology, the introduction to Bönker *et al.* (2002).

⁷ I understand modernism as the affirmative reading of the dominant Western program of modernity, embodied by the Enlightenment and individualist liberalism. In terms of the attainment of social knowledge, modernist approaches tend to 'conflate the imaginary signification of modernity with the reality of social life in Western societies' (Wagner 2001: 4).

transformations different from other experiences. The historicist approaches show a sensitivity towards historical legacies, but often understand these legacies in the light of a rather narrowly circumscribed and non-critical vision of modern society (cf. Kennedy 2002). In my view, both approaches have been unable to fully incorporate diversity into their theoretical frameworks.⁸ Modernist approaches assume that there is essentially one pathway towards modern society; the post-communist societies can follow this pathway by closely implementing Western models and ideas. The historicist approaches question the modernist notion of a singular pathway and see various routes emerging out of the confrontation between the immediate past and the present, although they ultimately leave a singular definition of – and affirmative stance towards – modern society largely unquestioned.

Modernist transitology. The swift demise of communism as a real and viable alternative to Western modernity was widely interpreted as the apparent victory of a singular model of modernity throughout the world. This is particularly visible in the way policy-makers and the academic world have analysed the changes as such and have prescribed policies to be implemented in order to ensure a smooth transition process for the countries concerned. Debates have, until recently, been dominated by various strands of what we could call modernist or (neo-) modernization approaches (cf. Altvater 1998; Bönker *et al.* 2002; Spohn 2002). Modernist approaches perceive a singular answer to major social problems such as underdevelopment and poverty. The countries concerned need to adopt Western political, economic, legal and financial institutions and to rearrange their state structures and budgets according to Western norms. In short, they have to transform their communist societies into Western-type capitalist and democratic ones.⁹

Transitology is strongly informed by the idea that the collapse of communism has confirmed a singular view of modernity. For the 'transition countries' this means that their experiences are basically comparable and compatible with earlier experiences elsewhere.¹⁰ This means that theoretical concepts as well as models of modernization developed for social change in different temporal and spatial contexts can be applied to the current experiences without much amendment. The basic premise is that the 'democratic market society' is 'universally applicable' (Bönker *et al.* 2002). This order is transferred through institutional mimetism by 'functional elites' or 'change agents' that construct a new order on the basis of Western models, and which are identified with radical reformers on a political level (in contrast to conservative, obstructionist forces tied to the old regime). By means of the transfer of the right institutions by these modernizers, the right actors which can sustain the new order can emerge, i.e., the citizen and the entrepreneur, who are believed to share rather similar characteristics that are conducive to the new order.

Historicist approaches. The uni-linear and teleological assumptions of transitology have been the object of critique of those approaches that have regarded contextual sensitivity and the continuing significance of historical legacies a *conditio sine qua non* for the understanding of post-communist pathways. Both the path dependency approach of Stark and Bruszt and neo-classical sociology of Eyal *et al.* start from the assumption of diversity; in both diversity

⁸ This is not the place to fully elaborate a critique on transitology and its critical other. See for an elaborated version of the argument presented here, Blokker (forthcoming).

⁹ Cf. Alexander: 'Jeffrey Sachs and other *simpliste* expositors of the 'big bang' approach to transition seem to be advocating a rerun of Rostow's earlier 'take-off' theory. Like that earlier species of modernization idea, this new monetarist modernism throws concerns of social solidarity and citizenship, let alone any sense of historical specificity, utterly to the winds' (Alexander 1995: 44).

¹⁰ In particular, Latin America and Southern Europe; see, for instance, Przeworski (1991). For the problems this raises for nomothetical as opposed to contextual approaches, see the debate between Schmitter and Karl (1994, 1995) and Bunce (1995a and b).

is seen as the result of reproduced legacies in the present. Path dependency explicitly keeps open the possibility for innovation in the form of public-private networks (based on legacies of communism, rather than constituting their transcendence), while neo-classical sociology identifies the particularism of contemporary Central Europe in the post-communist *managerial-intellectual* project of modernization, heir to the nineteenth-century project of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. Despite the convincing arguments of both approaches against the teleology, assumptions of convergence, and a-historicism of transitology, and the well-argued attempts to reconstruct alternative trajectories to the modern, both approaches seem to equally operate with too restrictive an understanding of the *outcome* of the transitions in the post-communist societies, while neglecting potential constructions and dynamics of projects of modernization that do not fall in their respective *teloi* of transition (a network society in the case of Stark and Bruszt, a managerial-intellectual project in the case of Eyal *et al.*). Other experiences are then either considered outside the scope of analysis, or become instances of 'involution' rather than transition. Both the path dependency approach and neoclassical sociology seem to reason from a point of view that takes the transition towards a distinct society with a particular set of institutions for granted and therefore ultimately work within the mindset of modernist thinking (cf. Kennedy 2002). Even if the acknowledgement of diversity forms one of the main corrections on transitology introduced by both approaches, the diversity offered remains in the end within the confines of a rather strictly confined understanding of modern society, i.e., not always specified but clearly reminiscent to the Western post-industrial market democracy. Diversity becomes in this reading multiple pathways to a similar end destination while creative agency is confined to the invention of locally functioning, successful ways of reaching that goal.

European Modernity as a Generator of Diversity

As the above attests, mainstream transition theory as well as its most important critics are moving within an ideational space or ideological *forma mentis* that *a priori* precludes the perception of significant difference in the construction of modern society. This means that the analytical frames of both transitology and its critical other are fundamentally unable to deal with diversity in the modes of construction of national identity, statehood, and forms of society within the post-Soviet space. Indeed, the events following the memorable year of 1989 have shown that the assumption of a relatively unequivocal pathway from totalitarianism to democracy is defied by a reality of idiosyncracies in post-communist change. In the transitional context, and not only here, a singular view of European modernity as a universal phenomenon runs into problems; modernization cannot mean a single road to a singular end-state of societal evolution, as even the experiences of the Western states themselves are too diversified to justify assumptions of a global convergence.¹¹

I will here argue that significant diversity persists within the European space and is even likely to gain in importance in the future. I suggest that it is here where the debate on transition – which has by no means lost its validity with the accession of 8 post-communist societies to the European Union and the admission of 2 more countries in 2007 – could go beyond its own perceptive limitations. One fruitful way of doing so is by learning from recent debates on the theorization of modernity.¹² Recent sociological approaches towards modernity – grouped under the label of ‘varieties of modernity’, ‘multiple modernities’ or ‘entangled modernities’ – have taken the multi-interpretability and openness that result from modernity, and, therefore, plurality, conflict, and diversification, as their fundamental starting point. The question has been raised whether modernity should be understood as a loose constellation that is irreducible to Western civilization, or as a civilization among other civilizations which are

¹¹ This is, for instance, also highlighted in current discussions about varieties of capitalism, see Hall and Soskice (2001).

¹² For a similar suggestion regarding the reciprocal value of the debates on transition and modernity, see Allardt (2002).

or have been modern in their own way.¹³ The overall approach has a clear significance in that it tries to break with modernization theory in a radical way, in that it denies modernization to be a purely Western phenomenon and sees several ‘modernities’, of which the European manifestation is only one variant.¹⁴ Rather than understanding modernization as leading to the convergence of societies towards a unified, homogenized modernity, modernization is perceived as creating value pluralism and conflict.¹⁵ Furthermore, it is assumed that various patterns and visions of modernity have developed rather than merely a single main pattern constituted by European modernity. Instead, modernity (including the transition to an ‘authentically’ modern form of society as in the case of the former communist societies) should be understood as open to different interpretations and therefore cannot be reduced to a narrow reading of modernity as the historical experience of the West.

For the sake of clarity, I should make a short enquiry here into the significance of modernity for the debate on transition. If modernity as a concept is to have any heuristic validity for the analysis of different societies and their trajectories, it needs to be perceived as comprising at least some basic tenets and characteristics. Modernity is often defined in either a temporal and/or a substantive way. The first refers to the understanding of modernity as an epochal phenomenon, as a distinct period in time that has broken decisively with preceding periods. The second focuses on modernity as a set of key characteristics, which makes modern ideas and practices distinct from pre-modern ones. Although both conceptions are useful, they tend to be conflated (Yack 1997). Whereas by and large a modern epoch can be identified, it should not be perceived as an era in which only a singular programme of (Western) modernity reigns, but rather as an epoch in which major conflicts over the interpretation of modernity take place (cf. Arnason, n.d.). Here, it is helpful to be more explicit about the substantive components of what I mean by modernity. At least four interrelated characteristics of modernity can be identified. A first important characteristic is the negation of traditional authority and a religiously legitimated political order. By denying the foundation of political and societal order on other-worldly grounds, modernizing agents claim the possibility of constructing a new order on the basis of self-produced understandings of such an order. In the context of post-communist Eastern Europe, this means that transition is to be primarily understood as the rejection of the closure of modernity in its extreme communist variant and the emancipation of the East European societies from the dogmatic totalitarian order and the singular truth of the Marxist-Leninist political religion. A decisive rupture with ‘traditional’ understandings, however, simultaneously opens up the possibility for various, alternative visions of how modern society could be shaped. Modernity can therefore be understood as intrinsically generating diversity and conflict over its meaning. In post-1989 Eastern Europe, the transition should be seen as generating new conflicts over interpretations of modernity rather than as the end of meaningful conflict. I will argue below that this diversity does not necessarily disappear with European integration. A second, strongly related, key characteristic of modernity is the emphasis on human autonomy, i.e. the idea of the human being as a subject who is able to understand the world and act on these understandings. Post-communist emancipation can thus primarily be understood as the liberation of the subject from the heteronomy of a centrally administered and totally controlled order. An unequivocal attachment to liberal individualism does not follow from this, though. The emancipation of Eastern Europe also meant the re-articulation of collectivisms of various kinds. A third characteristic is the idea that society (and nature) is malleable, and that human beings can therefore reconstruct their own societies on the basis of their own visions (the latter two

¹³ See Arnason (n.d.); Eisenstadt (1999).

¹⁴ See for instance the Special Issue of *Daedalus* (2000); Arnason (1999); Eisenstadt (1999, 2000); Kaya (2004); Sachsenmaier and Riedel (2002); Therborn (2003); Wagner (1994).

¹⁵ See for the context of Europe, Delanty (2000); see also Blokker (2005). For the immanent nature of diversity in modernity, see Spohn (2003).

characteristics, which could be referred to as mastery and autonomy, or discipline and liberty, can, however, be interpreted in diverse ways and are in continuous tension (Wagner 1994). Thus, the 'institutional design' of 'transition culture' is only one way of perceiving the construction of modern societies in Eastern Europe. A fourth characteristic is the essentially future-oriented nature of modern ideas and programmes of modernization. By creating (utopian) visions of a better society, modern agents divide the present from the past, and claim that by means of decisive action these visions can be implemented in the present (cf. Eisenstadt 1999; Koselleck 1985; Therborn 1995). The transition has, however, not only opened the possibility for the present mimesis of the West but has also created the basis for the resurfacing of nationalism and religion as primary elements in the projection of a pre-communist past into the post-communist future. Therefore, not so much the 'catching up' of the East European societies with Western, or, more specifically, European modernity should be the main focal point, but rather the unique reactions of these 'later modernizing societies' is to be taken as a starting point.

The contemporary experience of the post-communist societies with European modernity is predominantly understood in terms of a gradual incorporation of the post-communist societies into the European project. This process is then mostly read as convergence in legal, institutional, and political terms (after all, the entry conditions set by the Copenhagen Council of 1993 were political and economic convergence as well as the potential to function within the EU by means of the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*).¹⁶ The process of accession could be, and has been predominantly, perceived in a spirit of assimilation¹⁷, in which the Eastern European countries shed their non-European or not-yet-fully-European status or Eastness in favour of Europeanness (Kuus 2004). In reality, convergence is limited mostly, however, to a surface, institutional level. Moreover, the idea that assimilation will lead to convergence is not as obvious and unproblematic as often assumed. The pursuit of assimilation of the East is shared by an 'epistemic community' of Western and Eastern elites, but European norms and values are both being strategically adapted to local circumstances by the latter and producing unintended consequences that do not necessarily reinforce convergence. The enlargement 'rite', in which the applicant states shed their non-European status and the European Union monitors progress in sameness through screening and regular reports (Jacoby 2002), does not, therefore, necessarily lead to comprehensive convergence which comprises, for instance, political cultures, collective identities, and perceptions of Europe (cf. Jacoby 2002; Kuus 2004; Mair and Zielonka 2002). In my view, rather than understanding accession as the logical outcome and further conveyer of convergence of the backward post-communist states, widening should be understood as both contributing to an immediate increase of diversity within the European Union, and, more importantly, as enhancing the potential for further manifestations of diversity in the future. This is so because of two reasons. First of all, the new (and prospective) member states gain membership status and therefore effective means for the articulation of difference. Even if the new member states are in an asymmetrical relationship with the old members¹⁸ (in terms of the actual suspension of the enjoyment of certain benefits of membership, such as the mobility of workers, participation in Schengen and the monetary union, and with regard to the internalization of the organizational culture of the EU, cf. Schimmelfennig 2000), accession

¹⁶ See for a forceful statement into this direction, Moravcsik and Vachudova (2003).

¹⁷ I use here, *mutatis mutandis*, the concept of assimilation as defined by Alexander (2001). An alternative and imaginative way of depicting the accession process is the portrayal of the EU as a family, and the accession process as the adoption of 'second cousins with lesser rights', who 'must undergo a probationary period of Europeanization before being ostensibly adopted by the family' (Borneman and Fowler 1997: 496).

¹⁸ For two forceful statements of this asymmetry, see Holmes (2003) and Grzymala-Busse and Innes (2003).

most importantly means the achievement of effective sovereignty (the full recognition as a European state) and the acquisition of the right to co-decide on European matters (see Priban 2005; Walker 2003). In this sense, the new member states gain considerably in autonomy and hence also in potential to articulate difference on a European and political level. This difference consists, among others, of the legacies of socialism and pre-socialism the new member states bring with them, which have not and could not have been completely eradicated by the accession process and the wider transition process (these legacies include, for instance, collectivism, a classical view of sovereignty, etatism, and social solidarity, see Albi 2003; Fuchs and Klingemann 2002; Walker 2003; see for the case of Romania, Blokker 2004a), but also new or renewed forms of difference can be expected to arise or to be accentuated (as in the leanings towards the US in the political cultures of countries such as Poland and Romania). Nevertheless, as Kubik argues (2002), legacies only have import in the present if articulated by significant actors. The acquisition of the status of membership by the post-communist countries is in this sense pivotal as it means that diversity can be increasingly articulated – and therefore acquire additional political meaning – on a European level. The new members states are thus not only suffering from an asymmetrical position as new members, but the accession to the EU also means the reconstitution of their national identities and effective sovereignty. Enlargement has not only exposed these countries to a more or less imposed adoption of norms and rules of a European model, and hence to a forced convergence towards a European standard, but, by embedding their recovered sovereignty in the larger European project, also enabled them to meaningfully exercise self-determination within and as a result of a European national identity. A significant example is the process of constitutionalization, in which the CEECs not only increasingly participated, but in which they also articulated distinct viewpoints on future Europe.¹⁹

This brings me to a second reason for expecting persistent diversity: the European project itself is in a process of qualitative change that in many ways might sustain further (political and cultural) diversity within Europe. While it seems undeniable that membership enhances the standing of the new members, the entity of which they became member is itself in flux, both as a result of a dynamic of political integration relatively independent of enlargement, and the political integration that is the result of the enlargement process itself (see Walker 2003; Wiener 2002). The gained momentum in the process of constitutionalization since the Council of Nice in 2000 attests clearly to the fundamental change the European project is undergoing. Whereas constitutionalization includes a redefinition of the *finalité* of the European project, without obtaining a definite result, the widening of the EU has *de facto* meant a considerable reshuffle of power within the EU in favour of the periphery (cf. Delanty 2003). Moreover, and in spite of an asymmetric participation of the new (and prospective) members, the open-ended nature of the European Constitution means that the current codification of the European foundations is by no means a ‘closed book’ (Walker 2003; Wiener 2002). New members will have ample future opportunity to defend national idiosyncrasies as well as distinct visions of future Europe. In sum, in the process of widening, the European project has definitely drifted away from its earlier restricted (predominantly economic) and exclusivist *raison d’être* as it is in a process of redefining its *finalité* which introduces elements of polity-formation and increased participation and can hence be seen as possibly moving towards a more open-ended form of integration (cf. Delanty 2003).

Conclusions

The diversity that the post-communist countries bring into the European project is ultimately to be related to the way political, social, and cultural actors have dealt with the collapse of the communist empire, and the projects of modernization they have embarked on in its wake. In

¹⁹ The most visible impact was the role of Poland in the reformulation of the Preamble, see Joerges (2005) and Ziller (2004); the participation of the countries of Eastern Europe was, however, wider than that, see Landfried (2005) and Priban (2005).

general, the importance of agency and subjectivity in modernization has been acknowledged in transition studies, in both ‘first-‘ and ‘second-generation’ theories. The conception of meaningful agency and subjectivity in these theories seems, however, to be confined to a small layer of the post-communist societies, that is, liberal and European-minded political and economic elites. If, however, we want to understand European modernity as generating multiple understandings of a modern order and as intrinsically producing conflict over its meaning, as I have sustained above, an analytical search for those modernizing agents that exhibit the Western mind-set forecloses the identification of agents with alternative programmes, and, therefore, the analysis of significant difference.²⁰ The analysis is then restricted to the identification of ‘functional élites’, ‘change agents’, or ‘interactionist-individualist élites’ (Kaminski and Kurczewska 1995), i.e., those agents that portray the right dynamic and rational attitude necessary for a decisive rupture with the old system and who are capable of designing and implementing a programme of modernization which coincides with Western self-understandings of modernity.²¹ I argue instead that *a plurality of modernizing agents* should be acknowledged. This means that, while recognizing the importance of designer elites in defining the pathways of transition, the co-responsibility of other, (extra-)institutional and social agents in determining the direction of transition should be part of the analysis. Such recognition will enhance a more complex understanding of transition as well as a sensitivity to potentially diverse paths of exiting from communism and the construction of modern societies (cf. Kennedy 2002: 22). The relations of the political centre with social actors (in the form of intellectuals, social movements), and the relation of the latter to the centre’s project, have a profound impact on ‘designed’ social change.²²

This brings me to a strongly related point. Next to a plurality of modernizing agents, *a multiplicity of programmes of modernization* should be considered. The fact that the post-communist elites articulate their programs in a context which is strongly conditioned by the global neo-liberal paradigm and the European project alike does not imply that the articulation of difference and the persistence of diversity is impossible in the face of imposed convergence. Transition should be regarded a recurrent project of modernization, which implies that emancipation is at the centre of post-communist social change, i.e., emancipation from the closed order of communism, and, by the same token, consisting of a fundamental opening up of society for alternative proposals. Admittedly, the post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe immediately experienced a closure of the discursive space, circumscribed by, on the one hand, the widespread perception of endogenous political elites that the imitation of ‘tested’ Western political and economic models as well as a ‘return to Europe’ were the only viable forms of emancipation, and, on the other, the shape this ‘return to Europe’ took in the conditionality of the accession process. But even if enlargement can be seen as a process of assimilation of Western European standards by the post-communist countries (in this sense membership of the EU is strongly compatible with transition culture), the conditions are sufficiently ambiguous to allow for the interpretation and adaptation of these norms (cf. Grabbe 2002; Jacoby 2002; Mair and Zielonka 2002; Wiener 2002). The ostensive reproduction of West-European norms, transition culture and discourses of Europeanization

²⁰ Cf. Stark and Bruszt: ‘[W]e should not be too quick or too confident in our a priori ability to distinguish strategies of survival from strategies of innovation’ (Stark and Bruszt 1998: 7).

²¹ As Kaminski and Kurczewska argue: ‘We find more of the interactionist-individualist type of élites in the Baltic states, where such traditions have survived from the interwar period, than in Bulgaria and Romania. This suggests that the first three societies will probably make faster progress in developing their democratic and market institutions than in the latter’ (Kaminski and Kurczewska 1995: 150).

²² The relations as they existed during communist times have a profound impact on the post-communist order, see Kubik (2003); for the relation of the populist-nationalist phenomenon and the emergence of democracy in Eastern Europe, see Blokker (2005).

by East European elites should be understood as potentially entailing a two-way relationship between the Western centre and Eastern periphery, thereby acknowledging manoeuvring space for the latter (cf. Jacoby 2002; Kuus 2004). With regard to national political arenas, it is further important to recognize that Eastern European politics does not only consist of the future-oriented programs of reformist forces (liberal political forces and business elites) versus the past-oriented programs of former communists-cum-social democrats and national-populists, but that the latter similarly contribute to the construction of the post-communist order.²³ And, as argued above, these alternative voices could gain increasing prominence in the future European order. The dichotomous understanding of pro- vs. anti-reformist/anti-European forces should further be replaced with an interpretative approach that is sensitive to the reciprocal influences of the various post-communist political forces. At the intersection of political and social actors' interaction, external influences, and historical legacies, creativity and alternativity can produce difference that significantly marks transition trajectories and participation in Europe.

This leads me to a final point, i.e., *the multiplicity of institutional configurations* that can underpin modern society. Multiple understandings of post-communist modernization inform multiple forms of institutions, in which key tenets of modernity are institutionalized in different ways (for instance, in terms of codified collective identities in national constitutions, see Priban 2004, 2005, and understandings of freedom and participation in different forms of democracy and political culture, see Dryzek and Holmes 2002, and Fuchs and Klingemann 2002). Within the context of the contemporary European project, the configuration of democracy, the market economy, and the nation-state constitutes the main pattern of European modernity, but this should not obscure the diversity in institutional patterns that can be imagined and realized within that overall frame, in particular since all three components are subject to both centrifugal and centripetal forces (cf. Borneman and Fowler 1997). Furthermore, of great importance for current configurations in Eastern Europe is the fact that the post-communist societies emerge from the most durable alternative pattern or counterculture to Western modernity, i.e., communist modernity, which in various ways – among others, political culture, constitutional traditions, conceptions of political participation – informs present societies.

The challenge is, therefore, not to reduce the outcome of the transition in post-communist Europe to a mere (converging) variety of the Western-European constellation, or 1989 to a *nachholende Revolution* (Habermas 1990), but to acknowledge significant difference in the emerging societal orders. Here, theory should be both interpretative, in the sense that it should be able to recognize the construction of similarity without leaning on normative prescriptions, and hermeneutic, in the sense of being able to provide understanding from within the particularistic contexts in which projects of modernization arise, and which fundamentally shape the contours and substance of these projects.²⁴ Breaking with modernism then means letting go of writing the stories of success and failure of transition, and, instead, providing a critical analysis of 'success stories' and an interpretative understanding of 'deviating' cases. It also means a critical revisiting of the impact of the dominating discourses of globalization, neo-liberalism and European integration on the sites of transition, while simultaneously

²³ Alternative programs can of course consist of illiberalism and anti-Europeanism and, therefore, threaten current efforts of democratization and further integration, see Holmes (2003); Tismaneanu (2002). In most Eastern European countries, however, the impact of such movements is intra-systemic (moving within democracy) rather than anti-systemic (refuting democracy as such), see Blokker (2005).

²⁴ Kennedy (2002) makes some convincing, but preliminary, steps towards a critical theory of transition which explicitly acknowledges difference. He argues for a critical opening up within 'transition culture', that is, to develop a critical theory of transition, which explicates possibilities for emancipation and alternative projects of transition.

acknowledging local adaptive and innovative power, and the continuing reformation of the present by legacies of the past. Even if it has taken a decade and a half, it is never too late to redirect transition theory (and social theory in general) radically away from the harmonizing and universalizing 'convergence thesis', and to embrace diversity as the guiding principle of research on societal change in the post-communist world.

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