



Pergamon

Communist and Post-Communist Studies 35 (2002) 105–114

Communist and
Post-Communist
Studies

www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

Transformation theory: scientific or political?

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Abstract

This essay argues that the search for a scientific theory of transformation is ill-conceived. Postcommunist transformation is not a scientific project but a political project. It therefore requires a political theory rather than a scientific theory of transformation. The distinction is important because social scientists as political actors have played a significant role in the transformation process. Several examples are provided to illustrate the relationship between social science and transformation. In political theories of transformation, social science knowledge is subordinated and instrumental. This does not reduce the significance of social science, but rather reconceptualizes it. The legitimate functions of social science in transformation theory have critical, constructive and applied dimensions. © 2002 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The work of the scientist does not start with the collection of data, but with the sensitive selection of a promising problem—a problem that is significant within the current problem situation, which in its turn is entirely dominated by our theories. [...] Scientific problems are preceded, of course, by pre-scientific problems, and especially by practical problems (Popper 1994, pp. 155–156).

Let us begin our discussion of transformation theory by posing a preliminary question: what problem or problems is transformation theory designed to solve? The change processes to which the phrase ‘post-communist transformation’ refers pose

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a variety of problems. The problem for social science could perhaps be generically and loosely formulated as, how do we explain what's going on. Here, transformation is treated as posing cognitive problems. The problem for social actors participating in these change processes is, how do we respond to what's going on. From the actor's vantage point, transformation is treated as posing practical problems. These can range from physical survival and coping with identity problems to problems of designing and implementing political and economic reforms. In their attempts to deal with practical problems, social actors draw, among other things, on cognitive resources. I propose to use the term transformation theory broadly to refer to the knowledge social actors bring to bear on their problem situations in the post-communist context.

Thus, rather than restricting our view to what is produced by social scientists with an interest in post-communism, I believe it is important to remind ourselves that theoretical assumptions about transformation are held—even if for the most part implicitly—by a large number of actors. This is of course not peculiar to the area of post-communist transformation, but rather is typical for and distinct about the social sciences more generally. Social actors base their actions in part on theoretical assumptions, which in turn are often related to knowledge generated by the sciences that study them. The causal arrow at the same time also runs in the opposite direction. The social sciences take their cues from the theoretical assumptions and practical agendas of social actors. In the context at hand, the relevant social actors include anyone who is directly involved in post-communist transformations—from the populations of former Communist states to the various decision makers inside and outside these states. All of these actors inadvertently employ some theoretical knowledge—more or less valid, more or less sophisticated—as they confront their specific practical problems from physical and spiritual survival to business activities and policy making. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the most integrated theories of post-communist transformation are action-oriented, and are therefore probably more accurately described as political programmes, social technologies, myths and ideologies. The two most influential ones in the post-communist context are neoliberalism and nationalism.

Not all readers may be comfortable with my broad use of the label theory. Admittedly, neoliberalism, like nationalism, is *not scientific* theory, notwithstanding knowledge claims to the contrary by some of its proponents. Neoliberalism is theory in the sense that we speak of the political theories of Plato, Machiavelli, Bodin, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Marx. Based on strong claims to epistemological authority and a persuasive account of the problem situation, the burning political and moral problems of the time are theorized and solutions of practical significance proposed. Such theory enlightens in order to mobilize. The ethos of modern science, by contrast, is on the whole more committed to detachment and objectivity when it comes to dealing with cognitive problems. Of course, ideological and political concerns do play a role in social science—not merely as objects of study but also as various inputs for theorizing from 'reflexive monitoring' (Giddens) to explicitly normative approaches to social science (e.g. critical theory). This has clearly been the case in the transformation debate in the social sciences, as we shall see subsequently. Questions concern-

ing the role of the social sciences in transformation theory will be discussed in Section 4 of this article. The preceding sections will explore some of the links between cognitive and practical problems in post-communist transformation. It is the nature of these links that will help to determine what one might and what one should not expect from the social sciences.

Who produces and who needs transformation theory?

If the broader conception of transformation theory proposed above is accepted for the purposes of this analysis, then we can ask: Who produces transformation theory, and who needs it? The lines between original producers, propagators, and ‘mere’ consumers are not easy to draw. In our context, one might say that an international scientific-governmental-corporate complex plays the key role in producing and propagating transformation theory. This complex includes academic institutions and research institutes, governments, international organizations, the media, as well as political networks within and among these institutional actors.

The need for transformation theory derives from the practical concerns of these various actors. Scientifically trained personnel and decision makers in public institutions and private organizations generate, adapt, or simply consume transformation theory in the context of their specific political or economic agendas. These needs are in part cognitive, but knowledge is in the service of superordinate practical objectives. Transformation theory in this sense is ‘consumed’ by a variety of other actors, from individuals trying to get their bearings in a rapidly changing environment to collective actors deciding on their institutional strategy to shape or react to transformation processes. Evidently, not all consumers are equal, which explains why so much transformation theory is produced by or for large and powerful institutions—international organizations, especially the World Bank, the EBRD and the IMF; the European Union; national governments of large and wealthy states; multinational corporations; and non-governmental organizations. Institutions and actors whose mission is above all cognitive—universities and scientific research institutes—are involved as both consumers and producers of transformation theory. As consumers they are in one way or another related to the larger political project of transformation, if only as interested observers, or in some cases directly by working with or for one of the above political organizations. As producers they generate, refine and elaborate theoretical and empirical knowledge about or related to the political project of transformation. To the extent that it is scientific knowledge, it is value-free in the Weberian sense, i.e. detached from rather than subservient to the commitments inherent in any particular political project. As such it may or may not prove useful to various economic and political interests and agendas. But social science has no direct interest in transformation theory other than as an object of study—mapping dominant transformation theories in our broad sense, examining their origins, testing their claims, tracing out their political and moral implications, and exposing their cognitive weaknesses. Individual social scientists and entire academic institutes, to be sure, have attempted to make substantive contributions to transformation theory as a political

project, championing one or the other reform program, social technology, or approach to systemic change, and acting as appointed or self-appointed policy advisors. But social scientists from various disciplines who take a scientific or scholarly interest in post-communist change processes do not need, nor are they usually particularly interested in, a general transformation theory.

My basic point is that transformation has been above all a political project in which social science can only play an instrumental or ancillary role. What this role has been and might be in the future will be the subject of a later section. In sum, the most integrated and influential theory of transformation is not and cannot be a scientific theory. At best, it is a progressive and sophisticated political theory in the traditional sense; at worst it is a morally reprehensible and cognitively simple-minded doctrine. It is the project character of transformation and its dominant projections that have also defined the nature and object of transformation, as we will see in Section 3.

What is being transformed, by whom, and to what end?

Especially in the initial years of the transformation debate, the question of what is being transformed and to what end was answered, ironically, in terms of a classic Marxist concept, i.e. that of the *transition* from one economic and political order to another. It was an important early contribution by critical social science to have called into question this teleological conception of post-communist transformation as transition (e.g. Stark, 1992). In fact, in social science discourse the term transformation, denoting an open-ended process of change, has become accepted as a substitute for transition. However, the impact of this piece of social scientific, critical knowledge on the larger transformation debate can easily be exaggerated. Transition, in the sense of transition to ‘the Western model’, continues to be politically the much more influential idea. At the same time, other politically influential distinctions have emerged as well. The first of these applies mostly to the former Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe. It is the distinction between those countries that are believed to be capable of making the transition, and others that are indeed in an open-ended transformation process. Here some social science knowledge operating with finer distinctions may have been put in the service of an exclusionary regional politics. Historically rooted civilizational, religious, and cultural differences—such as those widely held to be at the root of the violent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia—are said to make the Western model less universally applicable than initially assumed. This political redefinition of the transformation project has certainly drawn on social science theory, somewhat ironically, however, on the work of those authors who questioned the initial universalism on cognitive rather than political grounds.¹

The second distinction applies to the Asian communist countries, especially China

¹ The most influential recent work in political theory (as opposed to social scientific theory) along these lines is perhaps Huntington (1996).

and Vietnam, who are widely believed to be undergoing transitions to capitalism, though importantly not to ‘Western capitalism’ but to ‘Asian capitalism’. Politically, this distinction has made it possible to treat the Chinese model as a transition to the market *sui generis*, the comparative success of which therefore does not have theoretical implications for the neoliberal project. This view also implies that China follows a different transformation theory since it has so flagrantly and successfully flouted the neoliberal model. Cuba, despite undergoing profound social transformations of its own, is nevertheless widely considered not to be a transition country yet, above all because the regime loudly and consistently rejects the neoliberal transformation project. Stripped of their political packaging, the underlying facts strongly suggest that successful systemic change can occur by gradually and partially liberalizing the economic system only; that some regions can and should follow their own transformation paths; and that a large number of countries may have too limited societal resources for successful transition along the lines of the neoliberal project. This implies that there can be no generally applicable transformation theory in the political sense, i.e. different cases may need fundamentally different reform approaches and programmes.²

Any transformation theory needs to identify the major agents of change. Transformation theory in the political sense has to do so in order to mobilize and empower certain groups and individuals. For social science, on the other hand, the question of major agents of change calls for an explanation rather than an endorsement. Thus liberal reformers and enlightened technocrats, supported by a rising middle class at home and like-minded political and economic elites globally, are the champions of transition according to neoliberal transformation theory. The realities of systemic change in the past decade as mapped out by social science strongly suggest, however, that this political programme ignores many of the real agents and sources of change. In several countries, including Russia, Kyrgystan, Mongolia and Moldova, liberal reformers in power enjoying the support of international financial organizations failed miserably in their reform projects. More conservative and nationalist-minded elites, as in Slovenia and Slovakia, by contrast, achieved relative success. An alliance of illiberal reformers and enlightened technocrats has guided China through a long period of capitalist growth. Global economic and political elites have actively demonstrated their commitment to the political project of neoliberal transition rather selectively in cases chosen largely for their geographical proximity to major markets, as in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia, or for their geopolitical significance, as in the case of Russia. The general point is that social science findings show up the weaknesses of neoliberal transition theory—without, it is true, necessarily adding up to an alternative scientific theory of the major agents of change.

Finally, as the already discussed distinction between transition and transformation makes clear, where a political theory of transformation envisions a concrete systemic

² This has been recognized in some World Bank circles and was articulated by the Bank’s former Chief Economist, Joseph Stiglitz, though not without causing major controversy. Further on this, see Naim (1999) and Bönker et al. (2002).

model for the future, social science tends to stress the open-ended character of large-scale processes of social change. Once again, this does not amount to a scientific transformation theory, but rather illustrates why yet another element of transformation theory is beyond the reach of social science. Social science has not provided a clear definition of what is being transformed, nor identified a universal group of change agents or predicted the shape of the new system. Instead, by establishing that the questions of what, by whom, and to what end require complex answers, social science has shown that available transformation theories are in important respects based on untenable assumptions. Does this mean that the contribution of social science to transformation theory can only be a kind of ideology critique?

What role for social science?

The role social scientists have played in post-communist transformation in the past decade supports my earlier contention that transformation has been above all a political project in which social science can only play an instrumental or subordinate role. Some social scientists have participated in the political project of transformation as advisors or critics, while others have stayed aloof, not considering the events particularly relevant to their field of study. Interestingly, neoclassical economists have been strongly represented in both groups. The activists, following Marx's call to change rather than reinterpret the world, charged ahead dispensing policy advice of one sort or another. The aloof failed to see how post-communist changes could possibly affect, let alone challenge, economic theory (Csaba, 2002). From the perspective on transformation theory developed in this essay, it is possible to see some merit in both positions. In support of the activists, one could say that the political project of transformation might greatly benefit from the best and most relevant scientific knowledge available. In support of the aloof, on the other hand, it must be admitted that just because there are urgent political needs for relevant knowledge, these practical problems are not necessarily relevant for social science theorizing. Both positions, however, have serious shortcomings.

Some activists neither question the validity and relevance of their specific scientific knowledge, nor do they always show sufficient recognition of the fact that social science has no authoritative or privileged answers to the political and other normative questions that practical problems of policy making pose. Thus in the cloak of the scientist, ideologues and dogmatists use their scientific credentials to pronounce on issues that are beyond the scope of science in general or beyond the scope of their disciplinary knowledge.³ This widespread, though dishonest use of science for the legitimization of political claims and normative positions is one way in which social science ought not to be instrumentalized in political debate. Should it be instrumentalized at all? The detached social scientist might well be skeptical, distrustful of

³ Not all influential academics-cum-policy advisors would deny this. See, for example, Aslund (1995, p. 5): "The choice of economic system is profoundly ideological."

the pernicious implications of so-called ‘socially relevant’ theorizing for the ideals of value-free scientific knowledge. Yet for a social scientist to be uninterested in whether and to what extent the cognitive needs of social actors and the cognitive contributions of scientific theory are related amounts to the view that scientific knowledge has no instrumental value for non-scientific, i.e. practical concerns, and vice versa.

Between claiming too much and offering too little, a third position is possible. It is based on the view that in the realm of politics and social technology, social science can only play an instrumental role. As such, scientific institutions, actors, and practices are embedded in a larger political and institutional context that generates competing projects and agendas, ideologies and political theories. In this context social science knowledge can be brought to bear in a constructive or in a critical fashion. But it is an area where the role of the social scientist becomes unavoidably political. Obvious examples are the economist who advises a reform government on the right transition policies to adopt, or the political scientist who proposes institutional packages for a liberal political order, as well as critical social scientists with a political commitment to undermining dominant approaches and policies. Shock therapists and gradualists, the two major contending camps in the early transition debate, constructed political theories of transformation containing philosophical, normative and scientific elements. Most important, they also helped define what should be considered the fundamental problems of transformation.

Let me emphasize again that the role of social science (as opposed to individual social scientists as political actors) is not the conception, elaboration, and propagation of a—necessarily political—theory of transformation. The search for a scientific theory of transformation would, therefore, be misconceived and possibly counterproductive. Social scientific knowledge concerns the cognitive assumptions contained in political theories, ideologies, and programs of change such as post-communist transformation. It has both constructive and critical functions and implications. Post-communist transformations pose a variety of profound and challenging scientific problems, depending on disciplinary problematics and the individual social scientist’s interest and ingenuity. Identifying scientific problems that at the same time have significant relevance for the political project of transformation is the area towards which the third position on the role of social science gravitates.

In the quotation at the beginning of the paper, Popper stresses the centrality of problems for science. Selecting relevant scientific and practical problems—and, I would add, keeping the distinction between the two clear—is a crucial part of the scientific process. Post-communist transformation is a—variously definable—set of practical problems. A transformation theory that can suggest comprehensive answers to these problems cannot be a scientific theory but must be a political theory. One of the remarkable characteristics of the early transformation debate was that an almost universal consensus quickly emerged that the central problem was the practical problem of transition from the Communist system to the liberal capitalist system. It was widely assumed, moreover, that solving this practical problem did not pose any serious problems for social science since the relevant scientific knowledge was presumed to be available. The crucial expertise was held by economists, i.e. those trained in

modern economics, the discipline with claims to the deepest knowledge of how a market system works. Political science, in turn, could provide some knowledge relevant for reconstructing the political system. Precisely because the normative goal of transition was so widely perceived to be uncontroversial and because the stock of relevant scientific knowledge was considered adequate, many economists and some political scientists felt well-equipped to advise on economic and political reform.

In contrast, sociologists, geographers and other social scientists, not to mention historians and philosophers, were perceived as not possessing knowledge particularly relevant to the practical problems of transformation, which is why they did not play a role as advisors and have entered the scholarly debate more recently. The political definition of post-communist change as a particular type of practical problem thus has strongly shaped the role social science has played in transformation. However, the outcomes of a decade of post-communist change and a by now very strong scholarly interest of the social sciences in these developments have led to a gradual redefinition of the problems of transformation. First, the definition of the sets of practical problems to be dealt with have become more numerous and much broader in light of the setbacks, failures, and unanticipated changes in the transition. Secondly, a number of fundamental scientific problems have been recognized as emerging from or being relevant to post-communist transformation. Let us briefly look at some of the scientific problems.

One set of scientific problems was itself partly rooted in the politics of social science. Specifically, with the collapse of Communist regimes the traditional academic division of labour between area specialists in Soviet-type states, societies and economies, on the one hand, and more theoretically oriented comparativists and theorists in various social science disciplines, on the other, became controversial. The influx of non-area specialists was initiated by a first wave of economists with no training in and little knowledge of post-communist studies. The second incursion into the field by non-area specialists was mounted by political scientists, in particular so-called transitologists who were eager to extend their expertise on transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe to the Eastern European context.⁴ This sparked a serious and generally fruitful debate between the two positions and their approaches to conceptualization and explanation (Bunce, 1995; Karl and Schmitter, 1995). In mainstream economics, by contrast, post-communist changes have not been seen as of particular scientific relevance (Csaba, 2002). The situation is different once again in the case of political economy, which has produced a burgeoning literature on various aspects of post-communist change (Nelson et al., 1997). Other social science disciplines, especially geography and sociology, have shown a steadily growing interest in the area (Pickles and Smith, 1998).

The resulting increased theoretical sophistication and general appreciation of the complexity of the change processes under way has underscored that the fundamental problems of post-communist transformation require concerted efforts by the social sciences to bring together and further develop various strands of scientific knowl-

⁴ For one of the most impressive works in this context, see Stepan and Linz (1996).

edge.⁵ In my view, one of the most interesting and challenging areas of work for this kind of cross-disciplinary work lies at the intersection of social science and social technology, in particular the problem of ‘systemic change by design’. This is precisely the area that in the past decade has been dominated by neoliberal and nationalist theories of change—political theories that focus systemic change efforts on appropriate designs for marketization and national emancipation.

A political theory of transformation that seeks to combine normative, philosophical, and scientific elements depends in part on the social sciences for knowledge relevant to the task. For the social sciences, this has several implications. First, in its critical function social science can map out the most important political theories of transformation held by social actors and assess them in terms of problem formulation and basic conceptualization (what is transformed, by whom, and to what end). Secondly, in its constructive function social science can offer alternative problem formulations and conceptualizations relevant for political theories of transformation. Thirdly, in its applied function social science can examine the various social technologies of transformation, from economic reform policies to instruments of political legitimation. At this juncture of social science and social technology no one discipline will be sufficient on its own (Pickel, 2001). This calls for new cross-disciplinary approaches that attempt to combine and transcend traditional disciplinary problematics (Bönker et al., 2002). So the question is not just, what can social science do for/in transformation, but also: what can transformation do for social science.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the search for a scientific theory of transformation is ill-conceived. Post-communist transformation is not a scientific project but a political project. It, therefore, requires a political theory rather than a scientific theory of transformation. The distinction is important because social scientists as political actors have played a significant role in the transformation process. Several examples were provided to illustrate the relationship between social science and transformation. In political theories of transformation, social science knowledge is subordinated and instrumental. This does not reduce the significance of social science, but rather reconceptualizes it. The legitimate functions of social science in transformation theory have critical, constructive, and applied dimensions. While crucially important, they will never amount to a scientific theory of transformation. Nor should they.

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⁵ This is, of course, a challenge for the social sciences in general. See e.g. Bunge, 1998; Wallerstein, 1999.

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