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Journal of Eurasian Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/euras

The Soviet collapse: Contradictions and neo-modernisation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 June 2011

Accepted 31 July 2012

ABSTRACT

Over two decades have passed since the dissolution of the communist system and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 yet there is still no consensus over the causes and consequences of these epochal (and distinct) events. As for the causes, it is easy to assume that the fall was 'over-determined', with an endless array of factors. It behoves the scholar to try to establish a hierarchy of causality, which is itself a methodological exercise in heuristics. However, the arbitrary prioritisation of one factor over another is equally a hermeneutic trap that needs to be avoided. Following an examination of the various 'why' factors, we focus on 'what' exactly happened at the end of the Soviet period. We examine the issue through the prism of reformulated theories of modernisation. The Soviet system was a *sui generis* approach to modernisation, but the great paradox was that the system did not apply this ideology to itself. By attempting to stand outside the processes which it unleashed, both society and system entered a cycle of stagnation. The idea of neo-modernisation, above all the idea that societies are challenged to come to terms with the 'civilisation of modernity', each in their own way, provides a key to developments. In the end the Soviet approach to this challenge failed, and the reasons for this need to be examined, but the challenge overall remains for post-communist Russia.

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Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the debate over the causes and consequences is far from over. The nature of the phenomenon is itself contested. What exactly ended in 1991? We know that the Communist order was formally dissolved, with the banning of the Communist Party in Russia on 22 August 1991, in the tumultuous days following the failed coup of 18–21 August. Yet the dissolution of Communist power had begun much earlier, and in effect the reforms conducted under the

moniker of perestroika by Mikhail Gorbachev since 1985 had achieved an astonishing self-transcendence of the earlier political system. In other words, by 1991 the traditional Soviet-style communist system had already given way to something else. The organisational power of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had been destroyed by the abolition of the traditional branches of the Secretariat in September 1988, in the wake of the various reforms launched by the Nineteenth Party Conference in June–July 1988. Equally, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 had already been presaged by a qualitative change in the nature of the country, reflected in continuing debates over changing the name of the new entity to something along the lines of a Union of Sovereign States. The 'what collapsed' question could be indefinitely extended to include, *inter alia*, long-term processes such as the collapse of empire in Russia and the exhaustion of the communist ideal in the world at large.

Peer-review under responsibility of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University



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In examining the Soviet collapse there is a permanent search for an interpretative framework. While there is no doubt that the Soviet Union collapsed as a result of its own contradictions, the nature of these contradictions needs to be explored, something that I will explore later. The contradictions that led to '1989' (taken as the symbolic date for the collapse of the Soviet 'empire' in Eastern Europe), moreover, were different from those that precipitated 1991 (the combined dissolution of the communist system and the disintegration of the Soviet state). It is now clear that the 'meaning' of 1989 is very different from that of '1991'. The 'revolutions' in 1989 in Eastern Europe shrugged off Soviet power and influence (even though by then the Soviet Union was reforming itself out of existence), the structures of communist rule, and reoriented the countries to the path of Western integration. The 'return to Europe' represented a powerful ideal, but it was a spatial rather than a philosophical programme (Judt, 2007). The meaning of 1991 is far less clear. The former Soviet republics could not share the spatial (geopolitical) orientation of 1989, except for the Baltic republics and possibly Moldova, and it was precisely the attempt of some other countries to shift from the problematic of 1991 to that of 1989 that in the end provoked conflict, notably the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. Russia always considered itself to be a distinct geopolitical pole of its own and later perpetuated '1991' as a separate project, while the countries in the 'new Eastern Europe' along the Soviet Union's western borders remain trapped between 1989 and 1991.

The fundamental contradiction that precipitated the Soviet fall was that between the attempt to create a 'modern' society, defined as one characterised by industrialisation, secularisation, urbanisation and rationalisation, and the simultaneous attempt to create an alternative modernity. The central features of this alternative modernity included the abolition of the free market, the attempt to achieve the direct expression of popular sovereignty as represented in the party-state, the inversion of typically modern forms of class hierarchy (which in the event allowed a bureaucratic class to predominate), and a permanently revisionist stance in international affairs, defined as the aspiration to revise the existing international order, even though in practice the Soviet Union became in effect a status quo power. The contradiction in international affairs, as in all other aspects, was never resolved. In the next section I briefly examine some of the immediate factors precipitating the fall, and then I turn to some of the broader questions associated with modernisation, democratisation and the larger phenomenon of the communist collapse.

The 'why' question

At the heart of debates over 1991 is the 'why' question. Why did a system that had defeated the world's most powerful military force in 1941–1945, that had launched the world's first artificial satellite (Sputnik 1) into earth's orbit on 4 October 1957, achieved the first circumlocution of the globe by Yuri Gagarin on 12 April 1961, gained strategic parity with the United States in the mid-1970s, and attained standards of living typical of a mid-level

developed country, collapse so precipitously? The answers can typically be categorised into short, medium and long-term factors, but at all levels the various factors are contested. Let us look at some of the immediate factors.

- a) There is no simple answer to the question about the economic viability of the Soviet order. Although by the late 1980s there were clear signs of economic strain, with a long-term decline in economic growth rates and stagnating standards of living, accompanied by declines in economic competitiveness, productivity and rates of investment and innovation. Very few sectors or industries were internationally competitive. Nevertheless up to 1989 growth continued at some 3 per cent. This may well have represented a fall from what had been achieved earlier, but in part the decline reflected a maturing of the economy. The sharp fall in the price of oil, from \$66 a barrel in 1980 to \$20 a barrel in 1986 (in 2000 prices), as Saudi Arabia released a surplus onto a saturated market, provoked a severe budgetary crisis. Yegor Gaidar in his *End of Empire* stresses the distorted nature of the Soviet economy, and in particular the catastrophically high proportion of resources devoted to serve the needs of the military-industrial complex (Gaidar 2006). The economy had become 'structurally militarised', with at least 18 per cent of GDP devoted to servicing its needs. However, Michael Ellmann and Vladimir Kontorovich take a more sanguine view, arguing that although under strain there was no terminal crisis of the Soviet economy (Ellman & Kontorovich, 1998).

Others refuse to contrast the Soviet and Western systems as two discrete orders. The status of the Soviet Union as an alternative was increasingly eroded. Immanuel Wallerstein notes that Western radicals after 1968 'attacked the role of the Soviet Union, which they saw as a collusive participant in US hegemony, a feeling that had been growing everywhere, since at least 1956' (Wallerstein, 2011: 76). Wallerstein and others argue that it was precisely Soviet, and even more Eastern European participation in the world economic system, that provoked their collapse (Gunder Frank, 1992). This would lead to the region becoming 'third worldised', which Frank intimated was the purpose of Western 'assistance'.

A different type of structural perspective argues that the Soviet system was unable to make the transition from a Fordist-Keynesian industrial system of mass production and mass consumption to what David Harvey calls a 'flexible accumulation regime', no longer dominated in the West by the old triad of big state, labour and capital or in the East by the monolithic planning system (Harvey, 1990; Verdery, 1996). In other words, the Soviet collapse was in part precipitated by the challenge of globalisation, although this could well be to confuse cause and effect: it was only after the fall of communism that globalisation theory became the dominant paradigm of our age (for a critique, see Rosenberg, 2001, 2005). Indeed, the removal of the European communist challenge allowed a triumphal capitalism to emerge, that was in the end beset by its own contradictions once bereft of the disciplining and constraining effect of the Soviet experiment.

b) The same division of views applies when it comes to political factors. The fundamental contradiction in the political sphere was the attempt to implement elements of 'commune democracy': the fusion of executive and legislative functions in the soviets, and the absence of the separation of powers (despite constant carping against *podmena*, the excessive intervention of party structures in state organs). Commune democracy assumes that the interests of the principal (in this case, the sovereign people) and the agent (communist political structures) were one and the same, thus denying any space for political pluralism or even socialist forms of contestation. The Tsarist claim to embody the deepest interests of the people was perpetuated in new forms by the CPSU, and thus this archaic form of governance was reproduced by the Soviet counter-modernity, and thus it became, in this respect at least, anti-modern. The pseudo-constitutionalism of the late Tsarist era gave way to the sham constitutionalism of the Soviet epoch (Sakwa, 2009). Gorbachev's initial attempts to revive commune democracy during perestroika only exacerbated the problems rather than resolving them (Sakwa, 1989).

Political reform had long been urged on the Soviet leaders, but although long-delayed, when it came it was in a tumultuous rush that refuted the arguments of those who argued that the Soviet Union was incapable of political reform. Since at least the late 1950s a generation of more critical and open-minded individuals worked in the system itself, notably those advanced by Yuri Andropov when he was head of the CC's International Department under Nikita Khrushchev such as Alexander Bovin, Yuri Shakhnazarov, Georgy Arbatov and Nikolai Shishlin. A range of critical *institutshchiki* appeared based in the Soviet Academy of Sciences, notably in IMEMO (Pithey, 2009). The problem was that that the reform tsunami was too much, too late; overwhelming the system's ability to absorb innovation and rupturing existing political ties and systems of governance. Stephen Cohen is certainly right to stress that there had always been historical alternatives within the Soviet order, not from the perspective of counterfactual history but 'alternative possibilities that actually existed at turning points in Soviet history' (Cohen, 2009: x). From the very first days of the Bolshevik revolution there had been alternative political currents to the one represented by the Leninist leadership. Cohen (1975) makes a powerful case for the Bukharinist alternative, but at various points there were others, notably the Democratic Centralists in the early days who fought for a more participatory form of commune democracy. The alternatives, however, after the 'ban on factions' in 1921 could never take institutionally articulated forms, and thus inevitably appeared as *démarches* when launched from above, and 'oppositions' and 'deviations' when arising from below. In other words, there appeared to be no evolutionary mechanism for intra-systemic political change, and instead change came in the form of shocks and ruptures. The programme of 'reform communism' advanced during the Prague Spring in 1968 represented a qualitative change whose radicalism lay precisely in opening up a historical space for communist evolutionism, but the invasion by Warsaw Pact forces on 21 August of that year

closed off this option for the communist counter-modern project.

c) Change in ideological perspectives and public politics is one thing, but the destruction of communist governance mechanisms is another. The main charge that may be laid against Gorbachev as leader is that he lacked an effective strategy of *statecraft*: the mobilisation of resources to make a country more self-confident, more powerful, more respected and more prosperous. Instead, Gorbachev frittered away the governmental capital accumulated by the Soviet regime, and in the end was unable to save the country which he had attempted to reform. This is the fundamental difference with the Chinese reformers since the death of Mao Zedong, who have been masters at the art of managing the Chinese state while nurturing its prestige and strength. From the perspective of statecraft, as Machiavelli long ago taught us, democracy is dispensable; whereas for Gorbachev by the end it became an end in itself, even if it came to be seen by his opponents as sacrificing the state.

The institutional destabilisation prompted by Gorbachev's reforms is undoubtedly one of the central factors provoking the collapse. The attack on the *nomenklatura* as a class provoked a mass defection, compounded by cack-handed economic reforms that opened the door to opportunistic entrepreneurs while stifling the opportunities for the development of legitimate businesses. The destruction of Party management, notably in the September 1988 reforms to the Secretariat, cut the managerial spine of the whole system, provoking what Steven Solnick (1998) calls an extended bank run, in which the state was 'stolen'. Governance swiftly disintegrated, with executive decrees left unfulfilled as the country became increasingly ungovernable. This decay of governance has still not been entirely reversed.

d) The exhaustion of communist ideology is often suggested to be one of the key elements in the Soviet collapse. Put simply, people no longer believed in the ideal of building communism, and were no longer willing to endure sacrifices to support Soviet 'internationalist' ambitions abroad. Already Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1974) had urged the Soviet leaders to give up what he claimed to be their erroneous and exhausted ideology, and devote themselves to the national good. In other words, he called on them to retain power by giving up their ideology. Andrei Sakharov (1968) gave this argument a new inflection, and a whole generation of 'dissidents' sought to live by 'conscience' rather than by what were perceived to be the increasingly irrelevant nostrums of the regime (Boobbyer, 2005; Horvath, 2005). If the Soviet leaders had taken these ideas on board as a fresh analysis of facts rather than a challenge to their power, history would no doubt have taken a very different turn and the Soviet Union could well be in existence today. The modernist challenge of rationalisation in the Soviet form of counter-modernity took the form of technocracy and managerialism, and failed to sustain a systemic process of public reasoning. In other words,

the system could have saved itself if it had been able to absorb critique to adapt its own governing mechanisms.

Instead, the Soviet leadership under Leonid Brezhnev appeared to do everything possible to undermine the internal sources of renewal, a process watched over by Mikhail Suslov, the Vladislav Surkov of his day. Indeed, Suslov's unremitting war against theoretical innovation and his dogmatic interpretation of ideology renders him the prime candidate to the title of 'gravedigger of the revolution'. Even the development of the innovation centre in Akademgorodok in Novosibirsk, which appeared to offer the prospect of the renewal of Soviet science accompanied by greater openness, gradually succumbed to the stifling of initiative and relative pluralism that was taking place elsewhere (Spufford, 2010). Given the remarkable ability of the capitalist system not only to survive but also mightily to prosper in the post-war years, and the USSR's rather grubby reality of increasing social stagnation, it appeared to many that the revolutionary socialist challenge to market democracies had failed. Belief in the inherent superiority of the socialist system to deliver public and commodity goods in greater abundance and quality once the contradictions of capitalism had been overcome was no longer credible.

The reappraisal of the ideological foundations of the regime had begun even before Gorbachev came to power, notably with the December 1984 'ideological conference' convened by Gorbachev, accompanied by the paper on the 'living creativity of the people' (Gorbachev, 2008). Gorbachev began by espousing the principles of 'reform communism' but this soon evolved into an even more contradictory programme for the 'reform of communism': a project that sought to combine reform communism with the transcendence of communism itself, a hopelessly utopian project (in the worst sense of the term) that failed to enthuse the masses while alienating loyal communists. Reform communism is predicated on the maintenance of the communist alternative modernity, whereas the reform of communism is a syncretic project seeking to combine the Soviet experience with elements of liberalism, democracy and – ultimately – the free market. Gorbachev hoped to create a 'humane, democratic socialism' (*K gumannomu, demokraticeskomu sotsializmu*, 1990a, b) but he was unable to provide a coherent rationale or discussion of how communism was to be both reformed and transcended.

At the heart of perestroika was the attempt to shift from a legitimation based on the rhetoric of building some sort of socialism, accompanied by notions of socialist democracy, to one based on incorporating a more liberal and pluralistic view of democracy into the project of renewing socialism (Robinson, 1995). As Pierre Hassner (1990: 5) notes, 'Communism was dying from its lack of legitimacy, but its death came when it attempted to acquire democratic legitimacy. As soon as it submitted itself to free elections, it was repudiated almost everywhere'. During perestroika a distinctive subaltern form of democracy took shape, still subject to an extrinsic purpose (the achievement of a humane, democratic socialism within the *nomos* of reform communism), and not one in which democracy is removed from a teleological perspective entirely, which is the characteristic feature of liberal democracies.

Thus, the contradiction between reform communism and a communism of reform created an abyss into which perestroika fell. Gorbachev by the end appeared to be completely lost, and even earlier he seemed to lack the political experience to anticipate the results of his actions. It is for this reason that some speak of the 'suicide' of the Soviet system (Fairbanks & Charles, 1990). The decay of belief in the Soviet future and political mismanagement has carried over into the post-communist era. Russia still does not have a viable model of its own future, caught in a perestroika-like contradiction of achieving liberal democracy on the western model and some sort of Russian-visaged democratic liberalism.

- e) Ethnic and federal problems are often adduced as central factors that condemned the Soviet mode of state construction to failure. This is certainly a highly contested argument, and as Henry Hale (2004, 2008) stresses, very special circumstances have to come into play to precipitate a breakdown of the system. In conditions of democratisation where a number of republics were as wealthy or even wealthier than Russia, and with a rich arsenal of potent symbolic and actual grievances, the shift from coercion to consent in the management of federal relations proved too wide a chasm to be bridged by the methods of perestroika. The ethno-federal structure in all three communist federations (USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) provided the catalyst for disintegration, with the splits following the lines of republican division (Bunce, 1999). The Soviet Union had in effect been confederal, with the unitary CPSU acting as the integrative factor. Valerie Bunce stresses that the structures provided the fracture lines of disintegration, but these had been present for decades: it took a particular set of political circumstances set in train by the specific form of Gorbachev's liberalisation to provoke the global disintegration of the system. As Mark Beissinger (2002) has demonstrated, it took a peculiar set of circumstances for the 'impossible to become the inevitable'. This raises the question about the precise point that disintegrative processes became irreversible.

Hale stresses that Gorbachev came remarkably close to pulling off the renewal of the Soviet Union, and that there was nothing inevitable about the disintegration until the August 1991 coup. As late as 1 August 1991, in his infamous speech in Kiev, President George H. Bush had warned the Ukrainians against 'suicidal nationalism' and warned of the risks of independence. Gorbachev himself now argues that he should have begun the reform of federal relations earlier, since by the time he sought to give more power to the 15 republics, the three Baltic states had already declared independence (Steele, 2011). However, a strong case could be made that the tipping point was the Soviet Union's first (and last) referendum held on 17 March 1991. The question itself was posed in a complex way: 'Do you consider necessary the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics, in which the rights and freedoms of persons of all nationalities would be fully guaranteed'. Although over 70 per cent of those who participated voted in favour, six of the fifteen republics refused to participate

(the Baltic republics plus Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova). Five republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Armenia and Georgia), moreover, held their own referendums in which the people voted overwhelmingly for independence. Elsewhere the question was subtly changed, as in Kazakhstan where the people were asked 'Do you think it is necessary to retain the USSR as a union of equal sovereign states', and in other places a supplementary question was added. In Russia a motion to create a separate Russian presidency was overwhelmingly carried, and it was clear that anyone elected to become chief executive of a quasi-sovereign Russia would come into conflict with the Soviet state. In Ukraine the people were also asked: 'Do you think Ukraine should be part of the union of soviet sovereign states on the basis of the declaration of state sovereignty of Ukraine?'. The crisis of the USSR was above all a crisis of federalism, and by this time sovereignty had effectively become a synonym for independence. The referendum process demonstrated that the federation was over, and the USSR would continue at best as a confederation, a particularly unstable form of territorial governance.

f) Leadership is obviously a central factor in the fall. Even before coming to power Gorbachev demonstrated a propensity for Faustian bargains that would later shape his period in office. An early indication of the compromises to come occurred even before he became leader. In October 1984, at the height of the miners' strike in the UK, Soviet miners donated over a million dollars from their wages to support their British comrades in the National Union of Miners (NUM). Soviet officials tried to channel the money into the NUM's bank account in Zurich but for some reason the money bounced back. Margaret Thatcher, who at the time was committed to the destruction of the miners' union, was furious. Gorbachev was intent on improving relations with western powers and thus hoped to put an end to the 'second cold war'. Three days before his planned visit to the UK in December she applied enormous diplomatic pressure on the Soviet authorities, demanding to know whether they had sanctioned the transfer of funds to Zurich. During his visit Thatcher confronted Gorbachev, insisting that the funds represented interference in British domestic matters and that they would help prolong the strike. Gorbachev stonewalled and claimed to know nothing about the matter, even though a month earlier he had personally signed the papers authorising the transaction. In the end Gorbachev decided that cultivating the British government, in anticipation of later reforms in the Soviet Union, was a price worth paying, even if it meant sacrificing solidarity with British workers (Evans & Hencke, 2010).¹

¹ Material clandestinely obtained by the young Russian historian Pavel Stroiilov from the Gorbachev Foundation is purported to show other instances of what could be interpreted as Gorbachev's duplicity, including his knowledge of and involvement in the killing of unarmed civilians on the night of 8–9 April 1989 in Georgia, and then in the Baltic republics on 13 January 1991. See Christian Neef, 'The Gorbachev Files: Secret Papers Reveal Truth behind Soviet Collapse', *Der Spiegel*, 11 August 2011; in *Johnson's Russia List*, Issue 145, Item 30, 2011.

Much has been made of the disastrous consequences of the personal conflict between Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Archie Brown (1996, 2007) and Cohen suggest that without Yeltsin Gorbachev would have gained a historically significant breathing space to have pursued his reforms to the point at which a new political equilibrium could have been established. This is denied by Leon Aron (2012), who suggests that the Gorbachev reforms were doomed to fail by their very nature. The Russian leadership around Yeltsin recognised this failure as inevitable, and from this perspective, that was their major achievement. The key was Ukraine, since once that country prepared to defect from the Soviet Union, then Yeltsin realised that the Soviet national project would no longer be viable. The leadership factor is clearly crucial, focussing in particular on evaluations on Gorbachev's qualities as a leader. He was certainly a 'magnificent failure', but he was also a 'tragic success'. His unstable mix of reform communism and communism of reform failed to achieve the aspirations of either, while his statecraft was unable to keep the country together; but he presided over the internal transcendence of the Bolshevik system that avoided civil war, oversaw the disintegration of the country without inter-state war, and achieved the end of the Cold War without international conflict.

g) This brings us on to the role of the August coup as precipitating the disintegration. Gorbachev had clearly shown poor judgement in selecting his final team, picking a group who in the end almost entirely betrayed him: Gennady Yanaev as vice-president, his former university friend Anatoly Lukyanov, and the new prime minister, Valentin Pavlov. Even before the coup his former associates, notably Eduard Shevardnadze and Alexander Yakovlev, had been marginalised. In that context it would probably be an exaggeration to argue no coup, no disintegration. Yet, to balance this, if the new Union Treaty had been signed as planned on 20 August (admittedly, by only 8 out of 15 republics), then the prospects for the continuance of some sort of union would have immeasurably increased. As Gennady Burbulis (president Yeltsin's state secretary) argues 'The failure of the August coup was both ironic and tragic. In taking the extraordinary measures they believed were necessary to hold the union together, the putschists ensured its destruction. Without the coup, the union would likely have endured, albeit in a form that might eventually resembled the European Union more than the old Soviet Union. But the three-day stand-off in Moscow exploded that possibility' (Burbulis & Berdy, 2011).

h) The role of the West is no less contested. The argument up to now is that the demise of the USSR was largely a result of endogenous factors, yet there is a view that exogenous pressures provided the final push over the edge. In America there is a triumphalist discourse which suggests that the Soviet demise was a deliberate act plotted and executed by president Ronald Reagan, notably through engineering lower oil prices and then by launching the Star Wars initiative, accompanied by the arming of the mujahadeen in Afghanistan with Stinger rockets and by forcefully pressing ahead with an

irreconcilable human rights agenda. In West Berlin in 1987 Reagan was uncompromising: 'Tear down this wall, Mr. Gorbachev'. A contrary view, adumbrated by Stephen Cohen (2000), Raymond Garthoff (1994a, b), holds that the role of the West in the collapse was minimal. When Gorbachev in July 1989 made it clear that he would no longer defend the Eastern European communist regimes, their fate was sealed (Garthoff, 1994b: 400). Indeed, President George H. Bush sought to keep the Soviet Union together, although he was not forthcoming with the massive economic assistance that could have provided a short-term lifeline to keep the Soviet enterprise afloat.

- i) Internal decay was accompanied by an increasing proportion of resources devoted to the military-industrial complex, with little benefit for the rest of the economy. As David Reynolds (2010: 399) notes, '... the "iron curtain" between its [the USSR's] military system, on the one hand, and its civilian economy and society, on the other, was a significant factor in the Soviet collapse'. No less important was the increasingly bold initiatives undertaken by the this complex, as the Soviet leadership became increasingly geriatric, in intervening militarily, initially indirectly, in Angola and the Horn of Africa, and then finally in the most direct manner possible in the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The American withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 gave an impression of exaggerated American weakness, which raised expectations in Moscow that the West was on the retreat and that the perceived advantage should be pressed home. This provoked 'imperial overstretch' on a grand scale (Kennedy, 1989).

The paradox still remains: how could a major world power, with a full armoury of conventional and strategic weapons and with pretensions to act as an alternative civilisation to that practised in the West and the second pole in a bipolar world order, collapse so swiftly and conclusively. In his study of the role of ideology and foreign policy, Nick Bisley (2004) argues that the Cold War gave meaning and purpose to the Soviet state, and when the country retreated from confrontation with the West, the rationale for its continued existence was removed. According to Bisley, the various stages and manifestations of the Cold War had become internalised into the institutional-structural fabric of the Soviet system. Gorbachev during perestroika tried to remove the Cold War fighting aspects of the Soviet system to leave what he believed would be a truer form of socialism and a more effective and dynamic society and economic system. Instead, he removed what turned out to be the essential core of the system, leaving it vulnerable to collapse.

Bisley repudiates what he considers the rather simplistic arguments of authors such as Mary Kaldor or Noam Chomsky, who suggest that the Soviet leaders used the Cold War as a way of exercising control over its population. Things were far more complicated than that. He does not suggest that removal of the Cold War prop on its own caused the collapse, but he does argue that this was an important part of the story. In essence, during perestroika

the Soviet Union could no longer perpetuate itself as a system of values or institutional structures. However attenuated the class war aspect of Soviet power may have become, the structure of values that it represented, including the prohibition on private ownership of the means of production, was essential for the normal functioning of the communist system. Take that away (through the communism of reform), and all that was left was a power system, naked and greedy. With its system of legitimation gone, its demise would only be a matter of time. Under the three-fold blows of elite fragmentation, economic crisis and nationalism the system disintegrated. Bisley seeks to transcend the typical stark contrast between domestic and international by redefining the characteristics of both.

- j) The role of popular mobilisation, reflecting according to some the maturation of a Soviet civil society, is also a key factor. The role of the labour movement was crucial at decisive turning points (Connor, 1996). The mobilisation against the coup, moreover, was impressive, given the speed with which the attempted putsch unravelled. Harley Balzer takes issue with those who suggest that the coup was met with widespread passivity, except for some limited resistance in Moscow and St Petersburg, and examines the politics of memory which has distorted the true scale of resistance. He places this in the context of the potential for collective action, and concludes that 'Russians mobilized to resist in August 1991 in greater numbers and with more positive effect than populations in Europe and Latin America who were faced with military coups' (Balzer, 2005: 214). By the end an astonishing 200,000 people had gathered to defend the Russian White House against the putschists.
- k) Ultimately, the system may have been retrievable if Gorbachev had been willing to use extensive coercion. The Soviet Union had multiple layers of security forces, ranging from various KGB specialist forces, a whole MVD army as well as a newly-established specialist riot police, the OMON, and several layers within the Soviet Army itself. Given these forces at its disposal, it is astonishing that the political leadership simply gave up without a fight. The absence of sustained coercion in part derived from Gorbachev's fundamental refusal to operate within the framework of Petr Stolypin's well-known injunction that 'in Russia liberal reforms can only be possible if the regime first clamps down, because for a Russian any relaxation in the system represents weakness'. This, however, is an injunction which Vladimir Putin appears to have taken to heart.
- l) The lack of will to fight emerged from what has often been described as the total corruption of the elite, accompanied by their total incompetence. The system, from this perspective, was so corroded from within that it lacked the capacity to resist. The *nomenklatura* system had become a corrupt, piratical, privileged and corrupt elite (Voslensky, 1984), incapable of evolving into an active middle class, let alone an entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. The collective ownership of the means of production, Milovan Djilas argued, had spawned a 'new

class', and although industrialisation and other modernist projects could be achieved under its aegis, the fundamental features of the counter-modern programme could not. As Djilas (1957: 30–31) puts it, 'The Communist revolution cannot attain a single one of the ideals named as its motivating force'. This was accompanied by popular disillusionment after several years of the corrosive effect of the glasnost' revelations about the crimes of the past and the incompetence of the present. These came to a head over the initial attempts to suppress news about the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power station on 26 April 1986, with the May Day marches proceeding as normal in nearby Kiev a few days later as if nothing had happened.

- m) Perestroika generated a range of social movements and proto-parties, described at the time as the rebirth of civil society. However, a notable feature of oppositional movements at the time is what we may call their 'terminal discourse', the belief in the irremedial nature of the Soviet project and its inevitable collapse (for example, Tsipko, 1990). The inability to adapt and incorporate elements of 'Soviet anti-communism' into an evolutionary form of reform communism, introduced terminality into the practices of the communism of reform (for example, Kutuyev, 1991). In other words, the fall was prefigured in the behavioural patterns of the political process. It was balanced, of course, by the obdurate belief in the system's survivability by a rump of the old elite.²

It is clear from the above that no single condition can be identified in precipitating the fall, and that numerous factors came together in an unpredictable combination to create the 'perfect storm' that swept the Soviet Union away. The most sustained attempt to give institutional form on a national scale to aspirations to achieve a counter-modern society went with it, leaving a 'ground zero' in social consciousness.

Modernisation, modernity and the fall

Having examined the 'why' issue, we will now look at the 'what' question, which extends our temporal horizon to long-term factors.³ Standard accounts of the transitions from authoritarianism to democracy examine the preconditions necessary for the emergence of a stable social order. The central problem is the dynamics of social and economic change, processes that can be summed up as modernisation (and the obstacles to it), however ambivalent and questionable the term might have become. There has long been a debate over whether development is a prerequisite for democracy, and by the same token, whether democracy

is a precondition for development. This debate is part of the larger literature examining problems of 'transition', a term which is at best no more than a code word for the processes shaping accelerated and conscious transformation of a society from one type of social order to another, and can thus be contrasted with normal evolutionary development. The politics associated with a 'transitional' period will by definition contain elements of the extraordinary and the emergency, even when the transition is intended to create a liberal democratic order in which these features are sublimated into the operative codes of the order itself. In the transition to communism, by contrast, the extraordinary measures remained extrinsic to the norms of the desired society and thus were visible and exposed, and hence vulnerable to the special type of terminal critique practiced in the Soviet regime's declining years and during perestroika.

Modernisation and development

The fundamental premise of modernisation theory is that there is some essential link between economic development and political change, yet the nature of this link remains contested. In the Soviet case, Isaac Deutscher and others had long argued that Stalinism was its own gravedigger, in that it was creating a modernised society that would ultimately throw off the archaic forms of rule represented by the Communist dictatorship, yet few were able to predict the timing and dynamics of the fall (Cox, 1998).

Well before signs of the fall, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1969, chap. 1) observed that 'the effort to maintain a doctrinaire dictatorship over an increasingly modern society has already contributed to a reopening of the gap that existed in pre-revolutionary Russian society between the political system and the society, thereby posing the threat of the degeneration of the Soviet system; ... transformation of the bureaucratic communist dictatorship into a more pluralistic political system – even though a system of one-party rule – seems essential if its degeneration is to be averted'. Lucian Pye (1990) argued with equal conviction that authoritarian regimes were undermined by modernisation processes. As a recent study notes,

Modernization is a syndrome of social changes linked to industrialization. Once set in motion, it tends to penetrate all aspects of life, bringing occupational specialization, urbanisation, rising educational levels, rising life expectancy, and rapid economic growth. These create a self-reinforcing process that transforms social life and political institutions, bringing rising mass participation in politics and – in the long run – making the establishment of democratic political institutions increasingly likely (Inglehart & Welzel, 2009: 34).

Thus the Soviet case only added to the long debate about the various modes of causality and appropriate methodologies. In the West there had been a general turn away from modernisation theory, on the assumption that ultimately the whole model was grounded on hieratic westernising logos. Instead, for some three decades the field of comparative democratisation overshadowed

² On the eve of the collapse a large-scale survey of views within the CPSU argued that the party had a great future since its members had adapted to 'general civilisational values of freedom of conscience, civil society, and the market economy', Vladimir Boikov, 'Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya: Partiya', *Dialog*, No. 6, April 1991, p. 3.

³ This section draws on Sakwa (2012).

modernisation as the dominant paradigm through which the process of accelerated change has been examined. The Soviet collapse forces us once again to 'bring back' modernisation theory, but as we shall see below, no longer in the old form.

The comparative democratisation approach focuses attention on the mechanics of political transition, the actors and agents involved, and the broad process of the creation of new democracies, accompanied by analysis of the reasons for 'failed transitions'. The central issue of the political economy of transforming societies, however, was too often subsumed into the notion of civil society as the determinative variable (Lewin, 1988), or into glib applications of 'globalisation theory'. Out of the debris of classical modernisation theory and its successors a new focus on political economy, the power relations of transforming societies, and the possibility of alternatives *within* the transition to democracy, have emerged. While linear versions of modernisation theory have been discredited, the creation of capitalist democracies on the western model has encountered resistance in both Russia and China. This 'resistance' is both particularistic (appealing to the distinctive traditions and world role of the two countries), and universalistic, in that the shift to sublimated coercion and neoliberal forms of governmentality encounter civilisational obstacles in societies where the exercise of state power has traditionally been extrinsic to the operative norms of the society itself, generating in Russia a whole literature on the historical gulf between state and society (Tucker, 1972).

Although there are many different aspects to modernisation theory, there is one fundamental feature that occurs throughout in its many manifestations, namely that in one way or another there is a causal link between economic and political development. Jeffrey Alexander (1995) identifies four stages in the trajectory of modernisation theory. The first is the classical period, from the 1940s to the 1960s, which suggested a staged process of development (cf. Rostow, 1960), the 'evolutionary universals' of Talcott Parsons, accompanied by a strong relationship between economic modernisation and political democratisation. In numerous studies Seymour Martin Lipset analysed the relationship between the level of economic development and the emergence of democracy, concluding that there remains a positive (but not deterministic) correlation (1959, 1963, 1993, 1999). In a later re-evaluation of his first statement of the question he made a point of direct relevance to the Russian experience: 'In many countries during the 1980s and early 1990s, political democratization occurred at the same time as a profound economic crisis', complicating any correlation between economics and politics (Lipset, 1994: 1). These arguments have now been incorporated, often in an uncritical manner, into the core postulates of democratisation theory (examined by Hadenius, 1992; Karl & Schmitter, 1991; Rustow, 1970). Another implicit feature of modernisation theory has also seeped into comparative democratisation studies, namely the contrast between some sort of negatively-characterised traditional society and more positively charged modern (or democratic) society. The fact that the key features of a modern society are almost entirely drawn from the

repertoire of actually-existing modernity in the western world (particularly America) was a key criticism of classical modernisation theory; yet when the same trope re-emerged in the guise of comparative democratisation, it has been subject to less comment. At the heart of both is a concept of modernity defined in terms of individualism, secularism, science, incremental progress, all tending to some sort of universal model and convergence on a single model of industrial society.

From the late 1960s the classical model was challenged by a range of radical theories, focussing in particular on the relationship between the core and periphery of the world capitalist system. While classical theory assumed linearity in development that precluded the need for radical disjuncture, radical theories once again restated the centrality of the concept of revolution as a mode of social progress. The classical model was inverted, and capitalist modernity was condemned as exploitative and in peripheral settings as de-developmental. Under-development could only be overcome by a radical break that would instate some form of social control over the means of production. The Soviet Union was both a model and a warning, hence the emphasis in much of this literature on a more humane and democratic form of socialism. As we have seen, notable challenges to the classical model came from André Gunder Frank (1969a, b) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974 and subsequent volumes). Many of these were rooted in a neo-Marxist structural materialism that was susceptible to empirical challenge, as well as lacking a multiple dimension that could incorporate agency and ideology.

It is for this reason that a challenge to modernisation theory was launched from another flank, often allied to radical theories but refusing to be limited by its rather limited structuralist intellectual imagination. These are dubbed post-modern theories by Alexander, and they remain influential to this day. Instead of the emphasis on formally organised systems, post-modernism emphasises the contingent and the fluid in a representation of reality that is fragmented, privatised and commodified. The exhaustion of the old model of industrial society and the development of consumer capitalism, the decline of traditional forms of collective representation is accompanied by a shift from government (of the old statist sort) to governance, which operates according to new forms of governmentality in which the citizen effectively becomes the subject of self-disciplining. The onset of more liberal social policies, and greater acceptance of social and personal diversity represents a model of late capitalism that in its social forms is very different from the rigidities of the capitalism analysed by Marx and Engels. As Terry Eagleton (1995) argued, late capitalism appeared to have negated all opposition to itself: the citizen was rendered a consumer, and greater social and personal freedoms were accompanied by the marginalisation of the political in its entirety. By contrast, Alexander argues that in fact postmodernism is little more than another version of classical modernisation's emphasis 'on the private, the personal, and the local'. Both deflated grand narratives of critique and collective empowerment: 'The resemblances to radical antimodernism, then, are superficial and misleading. In fact, there is

a much more significant connection between post-modernism and the period that preceded radicalism, that is, modernization theory itself (Alexander, 1995: 82).

Neo-modernisation theory

This brings us to the fourth stage of modernisation theory, which Alexander and others dub as neo-modernisation theories. In response to fragmentation and the amorphous circularity of post-modern theory the paradigm of neo-modernisation, dubbed 'Modernisation II' by Edward Tiryakian, took shape (1991: 171). The paradigm took issue with the emphasis on exogenous factors stressed by dependency and world system theories by focussing once again on endogenous factors as well as the scope for agency ('the voluntaristic basis of action theory' as Tiryakian (1991: 172) puts it), but in contrast with earlier theories of modernisation argues that 'It seems patent that "modernisation" in the world today means more than upgrading the conditions of economic production, although it means that also. It also means upgrading the conditions of the life space of individuals and collectivities which have been circumscribed by political arrangements of the state that are viewed as illegitimate'. The main charge against earlier versions of modernisation was that they lacked at their core a developed notion of 'modernity', to be distinguished from mere contemporaneity (Tiryakian, 1991: 174). They also lacked reflexivity and an embedded notion of critique.

Further, as Tiryakian states in a rebuke to those who succumbed to post-communist triumphalism, 'Part of the delusion of Westernisation is that there should be a model of development exportable, applicable everywhere, and superior morally and technically to all other forms of societal development'. He goes on to take aim at Parsonian structuralists and partisans of the 'end of history': 'What makes the delusion pernicious is when this model of modernity is equated with a contemporary empirical society, viewed as the culminating point, the *summum bonum*, of societal evolution, and imposed by coercive means (military or economic) on other societies' (Tiryakian, 1991: 173). Rather than the fall of the communist systems denoting an end stage of modernity, the modernisation perspective was itself modernised to treat 'personality, society and culture as interactive dimensions of societal change. ... eschewing presuppositions of a single model of development or the primacy of any sector' (Tiryakian, 1994: 142). Neo-modernisation contains a dimension of immanent critique lacking in standard theories of comparative democratisation.

Marxist historicism, the view that the revolutionary communist movement had somehow unlocked the key to history and all that revolutionaries had to do was help events along, in the post-communist era was replaced by a powerful liberal historicism, in which the real subjects of change were represented as walk-on actors in a play written by others. This was indeed a type of 'inverted Marxism' in which Francis Fukuyama and others practiced an 'idealist version of historical materialism' (Callinicos, 1995: 17, 18). Instead of active subjects being engaged as agents in the making of their own history, historicism

irreducibly reduces a people and political agents into little more than subjects of a historical process whose inner workings are understood by no more than a select few. In his critique Karl Popper (1961: vi) 'refutes the possibility of predicting historical developments to the extent to which they may be influenced by the growth of our knowledge'.⁴ As the post-communist 'transitions' began, the sentiment was repeated by Ralf Dahrendorf (1990; see also his 1997), who advocated a piecemeal and incremental process of change based on open-ended negotiations between civic associations and governments. This is neo-modernisation at its best.

There are two versions of neo-modernisation theory. The first, which in this paper will be dubbed 'critical neo-modernisation', arose in response to the perceived inadequacies of classical theories; while the second, which in this paper will be called 'civilisational neo-modernisation', deals with issues that transcend narrow interpretations of both modernisation theory and the concerns of much of the comparative democratisation literature. Critical neo-modernisation seeks to overcome the shortcomings of classical theories of modernisation, with its linearity and assumed convergence on a western-type model. The second, civilisational neo-modernisation, takes a much broader view of the modernisation process to place it in the long-term context of cultural adaptation of civilisational complexes to the challenges of modernity.

Critical neo-modernisation theory reasserts the grand narratives and the logic of causality of classical modernisation theory, although in a more reflexive form. This was given a major boost by the collapse of communism in 1989–1991, which appeared to confirm that the western form of modernity was, after all, the only viable one, and thus gave rise, as we have seen, to the liberal historicism of the 'end of history' type (Fukuyama, 1989, 1992).⁵ The three key sub-systems of western modernity became the subject of endless theorising in the democratisation literature, all of which confirmed their centrality: the market economy, the liberal democratic polity, and a Tocquevillean representation of civil society. At the heart of this neo-modernising model, which shaped the intellectual foundations of the whole field of comparative democratisation, was the notion that the market could act as an instrument of emancipation through privatisation, competition, individualism and contract; all beliefs reinforced by the failure of Soviet-style collectivism and solidarity. Globalisation theory then emerged as a way of generalising these principles on a universal scale. Globalisation theory restored a linear trajectory for the modernisation of markets and

⁴ Popper's central argument is that 'the belief in historical destiny is sheer superstition, and that there can be no prediction of the course of human history by scientific or any other rational methods...', *ibid.*, p. iv. It is for this reason that Popper, together with Friedrich von Hayek, supported 'piecemeal social engineering' against 'utopian engineering', *ibid.*, pp. 58, 64–70.

⁵ The paradox is that just at the point that Marxian materialist historicism hit the buffers of history, it was replaced by a powerful liberal form of materialist historicism (typically taking the form of globalisation theory).

societies based on convergence with the model devised in the advanced centres of global modernity.

A second key aspect of critical neo-modernisation theory reformulated earlier debates about the need for the appropriate 'civic culture' to sustain democracy in terms of the notion of 'social capital' as the intervening cultural variable between path dependent and continuous economic modernisation and democratisation (cf. Putnam, 1993; also Putnam, 2002). The debates of the 1960s about the role of civic culture and popular orientations to politics had never gone away (Almond & Verba, 1965, 1989) and indeed, Harry Eckstein devoted his academic life to the study of the question. (For a collective review of his ideas from a Russian perspective, see Eckstein, Fleron, Hoffmann, & Reissinger, 1998). However, during the 'third wave' era of comparative democratisation these debates assumed a peculiar inflection, focussing on the idea of 'social capital' and related issues of trust. The notion of social capital purported to explain why societies at similar levels of development, and even with similar institutional arrangements, can have such diverse democratic and performance outcomes. Terms such as patrimonialism, clientelism and corruption have been enlisted to explain the persistent personalisation of power and deinstitutionalisation, the absence of generalised trust, and the lack of differentiation between the public and private spheres. A vast literature developed discussing the supposed cultural basis for Chinese economic success, and indeed, the role of Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia's development (Berger, 1986: p. 166 and *passim*). Thus, critical neo-modernisation reasserted the tangibility and relevance of the modernisation project; that is, a theory of neo-modernity, together with elements of linearity and the isomorphism of social forms on a convergent trajectory.

This time, however, in contrast to earlier modernisation theory, it was the democratic revolution itself that was exalted, as a form of social renewal as much as a developmental model. This was accompanied by the moral drama of the fall of communism in 1989–1991, the struggle on Tiananmen Square in 1989, all the way through to the North African and Middle Eastern revolutions in 2011. Thus the sacred goal of neo-modernism is no longer represented as 'modernisation' but 'democratisation', which is now the form in which universal goals can be couched in particularistic forms (Alexander, 1995: 93). Contradictions however remain, since it has been precisely Russia's demand that the hegemonic powers in the international system apply their universal principles in a genuinely general manner that has rendered it something of an outsider (for a general discussion, see Geuss, 2008); accompanied by Russia's own selective and partial incorporation of the fundamental norms underlying its engagement with European and international society (Sakwa, 2011). By the same token, engagement with the agenda of universalism renders Russia part of the neo-modern project.

Neo-modernisation restored the primacy of the civilisational complex that had been devised in the West and which had thereafter transformed the rest of the world. The narrowness and linearity of the original modernisation paradigm, however, gave way to a broader appreciation of

the contradictions of western modernity while reinstating the centrality of its key features such as openness and uncertainty. It is precisely these issues that are at the heart of civilisational neo-modernisation, an approach that tempers the particularistic limitations of the critical version. The concept of 'civilisation' in this context is contrasted to other 'social formations as political regimes, different forms of political economy or collectivities like "tribes", ethnic groups or nations, or else religions or cultural traditions', and instead represents 'the combination of ontological or cosmological visions (visions of transmundane and mundane reality), with the definition, construction, and regulation of the major arenas of social life and interaction' (Eisenstadt, 2000a: 2).

At the heart of civilisational neo-modernisation is the idea of multiple modernities; or put another way, countries can be modern in different ways, and thus the equivalence between westernisation and modernisation is challenged. Shmuel Eisenstadt described the emergence of a 'civilisation of modernity' that was devised in the West, but which from the first was beset by contradictions and antinomies. As he notes, 'This gave rise to continual critical discourse and political contestations which focused on the relations, tensions and contradictions between its premises and the institutional developments in modern societies' (Eisenstadt, 2001: 325). These tensions, combined with international pressures, in his view gave rise to 'multiple modernities', and by implication, multiple routes to modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000b). For him, Japan 'crystallized the first successful non-western modernity' (Eisenstadt, 2001: 328). Japan ultimately was able to create a hyper-modern society cast in traditional forms. Although for modernising societies 'the original Western model of development represented the crucial (and usually ambivalent) reference point', the various life worlds of modernity (ranging from the family, urbanisation, economic organisation, political structures, media spheres and individual orientations) were defined and organised in many different ways. Thus the idea of 'multiple modernities' is best seen 'as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs' (Eisenstadt, 2000b: 2).

It is this combination that eluded the Soviet Union and which contemporary Russia is now looking for. The Tsarist regime failed to incorporate economic modernisation into the procrustean bed of the autocracy, and when faced by the pressure of world war, the system collapsed in 1917. Despite its internationalist revolutionary origins, Soviet communism under Stalin sought to fulfil certain Russian national goals; but unlike China (or Japan), the Russian subject was embedded in a larger Soviet ideal. This precluded the evolutionary adaptation of the revolutionary socialist ideal to a narrow nation-centred modernisation project. As I argued above, the Soviet developmental experiment represented an attempt to create an alternative modernity, but in the end failed to sustain itself as a coherent alternative social order (cf. Arnason, 1993). Arnason (2000: 61) dismisses those who argue that the communist episode represented 'a failed revolt against modernity', and instead argues that the Soviet system was 'a distinctive but ultimately self-destructive version of modernity, rather than a sustained deviation from the

modernizing mainstream'. It was thus not anti-modern but mismodernised.

Soviet-style communism represented a signal case of mismodernisation, not because of any essentialist view that there is one correct way of achieving modernisation, but simply because this form of modernity was ultimately unsustainable (Sakwa, 2010: pp. 15–16, 94–99, and *passim*). Soviet adaptation to the challenges of modernity, while responding to some of its contradictions, failed to develop a coherent model to cope with the whole ensemble of challenges represented by modernity. The Soviet system was founded on the notion of emulation of the western form of modernity while claiming to resolve its defects, but ultimately was unable to find a way of achieving similar goals by different methods. Piotr Sztompka (1998: 89) calls the result 'false modernity', containing a large element of pre-modernity. Soviet Russia failed to pull off the Japanese trick of achieving an evolutionary form of neo-modernisation that could adapt 'the civilisation of modernity' with Russian particularistic traditions, let alone the universalistic concerns of Soviet-style socialism. The Soviet system was thus a failed model of modernity because of its limited adaptive potential; yet this is not to deny its substantial modernising achievements, albeit at great cost.

The Eisenstadt version of civilisational neo-modernisation rejects the isomorphism that underlies classical and in a more attenuated form in critical neo-modernisation and democratisation theories. Instead, his work sought to give valence to diversity of experiences and differences in cultural forms. Already historical sociologists like Theda Skocpol had restored the framework for diverse paths to modernity, while re-examining the basis of what it means to be 'social' (Skocpol, 1984). The fall of communism, of course, re-asserted a liberal form of historicism, but the simplifications of this approach could not long endure the diverse and harsh realities of the post-communist world. In a rather different way Samuel Huntington (1993, 1996) made an analogous case when he talked about the 'clash of civilisations', although his work remained firmly at the level of superficial cultural analysis, with no discussion whatsoever of the socio-economic or ideational foundations of diversity. The 'varieties of capitalism' paradigm, which had long been at the heart of discussions of 'embedded capitalism' and the state-led modernisation paths devised by Germany and Japan, was now applied to the post-communist world to analyse the very different types of capitalism that have emerged from a similar starting point (Lane & Myant, 2007).

Conclusion: 1991 and neo-modernisation

The debate over what really happened in 1991, and what it signifies, is far from over. The focus in this question shifts to the long-term. In certain respects the Soviet disintegration is not over, with the emergence of Abkhazia as an independent state, and possibly South Ossetia as well. Equally, the dissolution of the communist order in the Soviet Union does not betoken the end of the communist ideal, as Alain Badiou (2010), Costas Douzinas & Slavoj Žižek (2010), and many others now argue. Contrary to the arguments of the liberal historicists, the dissolution of the

communist project is not over, and neither is the communist challenge. The fate of communism after communism has become more relevant with the passage of time since the problem of the radical critique of the market and liberal democracy is far from over. While the comparative democratisation literature analyses how to create and consolidate democracy in specific countries, the fundamental question may be how to ensure the fundamentals of justice in new combinations – the core of the original communist challenge to western modernity.

While the Soviet collapse may have been inevitable, it was no less unpredictable. The old debate about the failure of Sovietologists to predict the systemic collapse is misleading. From the very beginning of Soviet power there had been voices proclaiming the system's inherent lack of viability; but to anticipate the system's collapse is not the same thing as to be able to predict the precise timing of the end of a particular order. Andrei Amalrik (1970) and Emmanuel Todd (1990) are considered the most prescient in this respect, but they too failed to identify the fundamental dynamics of the collapse. In the end Beissinger's impossible becoming the inevitable took place in the blink of historical time. Or, as Alexei Yurchak (2005) puts it, 'Everything was forever, until it was no more'.⁶ The debate on the alleged failure of Soviet experts has clear ideological resonance, since it is alleged that 'revisionist' scholars 'tended to exaggerate the Soviet system's stability and legitimacy' (Aron, 2011). The political resonance of this historiographical debate is far from over.

This applies equally to the modernisation debate. The civilisational neo-modernisation debate about the viability of alternative socio-economic systems has been revived in connection with the 'rise of China', and in general with the emergence of what has been called the model of 'authoritarian capitalism' (Gat, 2007). However, the view that the spread of capitalism can be accompanied by profound political incompatibilities has been challenged on the grounds that 'the classic indictment of illiberal government is essentially correct', giving rise to unchecked corruption and other pathologies (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2009: 84). In a ringing endorsement of modernisation theory, Deudney and Ikenberry (2009: 86) argue that 'Looking at the overall situations in Russia and China, there is little evidence for the emergence of a stable equilibrium between capitalism and autocracy such that this combination could be dignified as a new model of modernity'. The argument is reinforced by Inglehart and Welzel (2009: 34), who reprise the classical modernisation case that 'the conditions conducive to democracy can and do emerge – and the process of "modernization", according to abundant empirical evidence, advances them'. They concede that 'modernization does not automatically lead to democracy', but they insist that 'in the long run [it] brings social and cultural changes that make

⁶ The same strictures of course apply to a possible collapse of the USA. For example, Ted Rall in his *The Anti-American Manifesto* (New York, Seven Stories Press, 2010) argues 'But we're not here to talk about the vague possibility of collapse at some point in the future. We are here – in this book and within this historical moment – because the collapse feels as though it is currently in progress'; excerpted on www.alternet.org/story/148796, posted 16 November 2010.

democratization increasingly probable' (2009: 38). Thus, while classical modernisation theory was more concerned with the problem of 'backwardness' and how to achieve development, neo-modernisation shifts the emphasis to the consequences, above all in opening up the potential for democracy. It also makes possible different appreciations of how that democracy can be achieved and the different forms of social order in which it can be instantiated.

Gorbachev sought to 'derevolutionise' the system, just as Deng Xiaoping had done; but whereas in China this opened up the potential for massive economic growth and the country's 'quiet rise', in the Soviet Union it had the opposite effect. The long-term effects of the Soviet fall remain debated. The West had long lived in the shadow of a communist 'other', which in part shaped the West itself. The development of social welfare systems and inclusive labour processes in the post-war era can in part be ascribed to the existence of the Soviet Union, and the Cold War threat posed by a powerful protagonist. With the Soviet demise a new quality of historical time has been introduced. Already in 1934 Andrei Platonov (2011: 32) had written, 'A world without the USSR would undoubtedly destroy itself of its own accord within the course of the next century'. The Soviet collapse betokens a broader challenge to the modernity to which it had posed itself as the alternative.

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