POST-COMMUNISM FROM WITHIN

Social Justice, Mobilization, and Hegemony

EDITED BY JAN KUBIK AND AMY LINCH
Postcommunism from Within

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My goal in this chapter is to outline an approach to postcommunism that I label contextual holism. Its elements are evident but usually underarticulated and unsystemized in the best literature on the subject. Its full articulation is as yet premature, but its theoretical contours are already clear enough to venture a preliminary outline. Practitioners of this approach emphasize the complexity and multidimensionality of the postcommunist transformations, showing renewed interest in culture, institutions, and history. There are other approaches. As in most areas of social science, some scholars of postcommunism move in the direction of increased parsimony and formalization, by and large inspired by the game-theoretic revolution spreading out of microeconomics. But it is only the former approach that I focus on here. The trip begins in comparative politics and mostly stays in its territory, but its logic eventually forces me to visit at least the edges of sociology and, particularly, anthropology. By coining the term “contextual holism” I want to emphasize two basic assumptions of the approach I am beginning to synthesize: (1) the systemic (holistic) quality of the sociopolitical phenomena under discussion; and (2) their dependence on the contexts within which they emerge, develop, or collapse (Chen and Sil 2007). “Systemism” or “relationism” would be perhaps more adequate terms, but they are cumbersome. “Holism” is more elegant, but the emphasis on “wholes” I advocate here does not mean contemplating them as indivisible entities or assuming that the only legitimate objects in the study of social action are such “wholes” as classes or nations. It is rather a call to treat each phenomenon as a part of a field of relations with
other phenomena, as an element interconnected with others within a specific configuration. “Contextualism” means that each “whole,” that is, a specific configuration of elements, is articulated differently in different contexts. The five elements of contextual holism are discussed in section III.4

Postcommunism, like any other social phenomenon, can and has been studied from many different theoretical angles. Positivistically oriented scholars, always keen on pursuing large-N panoramas, discovered twenty-seven fascinating cases that can be mined for all kinds of variables, ranging from indicators of macroeconomic performance to crime rates and rising gender inequalities. Small-N comparativists found fertile terrain to inspect new social and political configurations. Case-study scholars finally had an opportunity to get to the bottom of many puzzling phenomena, previously concealed behind the Iron Curtain. Interpretivists jumped on a chance to peruse mysterious cultural landscapes, reconstruct their meanings, and deconstruct the rules of their construction. Critical scholars acquired yet another terrain to probe the assumptions of “normal” social science. Everybody had a chance to study a massive social experiment *in statu nascendi*, but scholars approached the task equipped with disciplinary lenses reflecting the assumptions, language, and methods of their particular school of thought. As a result, studying postcommunism has become an exercise resembling gazing at inkblots of the Rorschach test.

The initially dominant approach to postcommunism (which remained influential in many policy circles for years) focused predominantly on the relationship between economic and political reforms. In their work on postcommunist successes and failures, the proponents of this approach often presume two conditions that are relatively uncontested in “mainstream” comparative political science: the elective affinity between a free market and effective democratic institutions5 and a positive correlation between economic development and a free market.6 Moreover, implicit in many analyses of democratization is the idea that the market drives political and cultural development, by promoting social formations that are conducive to democracy, such as civil society. Thus some early analysts and many influential policy advisers (“practical transitologists”) assume, more or less explicitly, that the goals of postauthoritarian transformations are a Western-style democracy and market economy, and that the method of achieving these goals has to be modeled on a specific distillation of “Western experiences” (Gans-Morse 2004, 334).8 According to “practical transitologists,” moving in the direction of these two institutional
arrangements is construed as a desired outcome, while moving away from them or stagnating is seen as problematic if not perilous. The telos of democracy and markets, though insufficiently examined, is rather uncontroversial among scholars. Much more problematic are two more specific assumptions: (1) that the putative points of arrival, namely, the “West”/Europe (Böröcz 2001, 7) and “democracy” (O’Donnell 2001), are sufficiently homogenous to constitute stable and clear-cut referents; and (2) that there is a relatively standardized set of procedures (policy measures) that—if scrupulously followed—constitute the only viable method of realizing these twin goals.

This combination of goals (democracy and market economy) and specific means of attaining them produces a powerful model of socioeconomic and political development whose normative yardstick is clearly derived from the history of the “West” and thus indebted to modernization theory (Gans-Morse 2004, 321). The interesting debate about what should come first, a prior normative predilection for “progress” à la “West” or an analysis of the alleged “inevitability” (and, thus, normative superiority) of the “Western” model is usually sidestepped. It is clear, however, that the norm and the analysis reinforce each other and generate a specific professional culture. The keystone of this culture, the universalistic neoliberal philosophy of development (“the Washington consensus”), has assumed a strong, if not hegemonic, position in the world of policymakers. It influenced—initially without much challenge—the design of economic reforms in all countries belonging to the Huntingtonian third wave of democratization. This transition culture (Kennedy 2002), which is produced and shared by most foreign experts and domestic policy analysts, “draws on examples from across Eastern Europe, and across the capitalist world, to provide instruction regarding how transition should be designed” (Kennedy 2002, 13). Moreover, it “tends to draw more on capitalist experiences from across the world than it does on any nation’s socialist past. Socialism is something to be escaped, repressed, destroyed” (Kennedy 2002, 13). Following the assumptions of modernization theory, participants in this culture regard the post-1989 transitions as a “return to Europe” following “socialism’s systemic exhaustion” (Kennedy 2002, 14). Characteristically, such scholars and policymakers locate the source of agency in social change with “those who are building a global capitalism, not with those who emancipated themselves from communist dictatorship” (Kennedy 2002, 14). Nor do they consider the people who need to solve problems generated by postcommunist transformations in their daily lives.
There are two influential challenges to this dominant political science paradigm, one from within this discipline, another from without. First, most political scientists who by and large work within the “normal” paradigm are also consummate experts on specific regions and, therefore, able to produce insightful studies that mix high-level theorizing with deep, contextual knowledge of specific societies, cultures, and politics. Second, there are scholars who postulate a radical departure from the “normal” paradigm of political science; they usually come from anthropology, geography, cultural and gender studies, and sociology. They often rail against transitology as they formulate alternative ways of looking at postcommunism (for recent reviews, see Pickles 2010; Rogers 2010). Both groups of scholars adhere to at least some principles of contextual holism. I do not intend to offer here a detailed analysis of their respective contributions to the development of this new paradigm; I merely trace its gradual emergence in the two bodies of scholarship and attempt a preliminary articulation of its basic premises.

This chapter will unfold as follows. Section II outlines the basic premises of the research program dominant during the early years of postcommunist transformations, transitology. Section III provides examples of works that have moved away from transitology in various theoretical directions and offered alternative ways of looking at postcommunism. In these works I find the seeds of the research program I call contextual holism. An attempt to systematize the basic assumptions of this program follows in the same section. In the Conclusion section, I link this chapter with the rest of the volume.

I. Assumptions of “Classical” Transitology and Transitional Culture

The intellectual foundations underlying transition analysis were developed by scholars who often had negligible experience in the region. Many were economists or political scientists working on economic or political transitions in other parts of the world. Their efforts produced relatively abstract, simple analyses and advocacy of institutional engineering, which were by and large dismissive of the significance of social, cultural, or historical contexts. They presumed and encouraged the perspective that the route to an advanced capitalist economy “is the same road, regardless of the starting point, whether that be Sao Paulo, Singapore, or Slovenia” (Stark and Bruszt 1998, 5). This type of scholarship clashed with the work of regional experts who emphasized history, culture, and context, without however abandoning theorizing...
Bunce, an early challenger of its universalist assumptions, argued that the postcommunist countries constitute a relatively heterogeneous set of cases. She observed that the postcommunist transformations produced “too much variance—in the independent and dependent variables—to narrow the field of explanation to a reasonable number of plausible factors” (1995b, 980). Consequently, she suggested, the logic of different systems design that would allow us to compare the postcommunist transformations with transformations in other parts of the world is inoperative because the condition of similar outcomes (necessary for this logic to operate) is not met. Eventually, the attractions of institutional design scholarship dissipated, but its legacy survives, particularly in popular, journalistic accounts of the transformations.

In addition to relying on modernization theory (Gans-Morse 2004), six basic assumptions underlie transitology (as a system of ideas behind some theoretical work and much of early policy advising in the region): (1) compartmentalization; (2) emphasis on agency (antistructuralism); (3) presentism; (4) naturalism; (5) focus on formal institutions; and (6) focus on (whole) states as units of analysis. These points are discussed in more detail later in the chapter, where I compare them to the assumptions that underpin the anti-transitological literature. Here I briefly characterize each point and indicate its consequences for postcommunist analysis.

Compartmentalization means privileging economic logic over the social or cultural embeddedness of economic processes; it is associated with the concept of disembedded economy (Bonker, Muller, and Pickel 2002, 11). It was reflected, for example, in the advocacy of what might be called decontextualized privatization. As Kornai observes, “The vast majority of the profession [economists—JK] accepted and popularized the strategy of rapid privatization, often using quite aggressive arguments to do so” (2008, 67). Yet the analytical emphasis on the agentic power of the reformers proved excessive, as all sorts of constraints complicated or derailed the course of the reforms. Presentism took the form of instant institutional engineering based on rather inflexible thinking in terms of “imperatives of liberalization” (Crawford and Lijphart 1995, 172–73). The resulting designer capitalism (Stark and Bruszt 1998, 5; Bunce 1994a, 116) uncritically accepted the premise that “the faster the reform, the faster the growth will be” (Kornai 2008, 154). This quickly proved a false generalization as it worked relatively well only in a few countries, such as Poland, Hungary, or Slovakia. Naturalism (an assumption that
the social world works and can be studied like the natural world) prevented many social scientists from paying sufficient attention to the way the “natives” subjected to this enormous social and political experiment framed their own experiences and how these framings influenced their actions. Narrow focus on formal institutions and disregard for the enduring significance of informal networks in the region (Borocz 2000) led to an erroneous understanding of postcommunist reality. Finally, the focus on states (and nations) as units of analysis resulted in a relative neglect of the tremendously important diversification of postcommunist dynamics within each country (Petro 2004, 18). Research on local and regional developments has largely remained on the periphery of postcommunist scholarship.

The debate between proponents of “transitological” and “contextual” approaches to postcommunism commenced almost immediately after the fall of the old system. Schmitter and Karl suggested a sharp distinction between generalists/comparativists who “focus on generic/structural” properties and “area specialists” who “focus on particular/cultural or ideational properties,” which they often treat as “unique” (1994, 178–79). Bunce objected to the sharpness of this dichotomy, arguing that the assertion that “places matter and that scholars need expertise to understand what is going on in these places” (1995, 983) does not amount to a thesis of their “uniqueness” and the inherent incomparability of those places with other places (such as Latin America or Southern Europe). She presented evidence that the best work in the field was done by people who were simultaneously well-trained comparativists and expert area specialists. This chapter presents several works that epitomize this fruitful marriage.

II. Problems with Transitology

Studies and policy recommendations based on the theoretical logic of “transitology” attracted either praise or critical scorn (see Gans-Morse 2004 for a detailed review). This polarized reaction is easy to understand given the sparseness and simplicity of the model and the brashness (often seen as recklessness) of policy recommendations derived from it. But the best work in the field of postcommunist studies, much of it focused on the specific issues and areas reviewed below, can hardly be characterized as “transitologist.” A systematic review of the literature indicates the need for more nuanced judgment. Since 1989, many scholars have produced studies whose theoretical
savvy and attention to detail do not resemble the straw man of “transitology,” a caricature often invoked by critics of political science analyses. Very few serious political scientists would model postcommunist transformations as a straightforward, uniform, linear, and easily generalizable “progress” from totalitarianism to democracy and from command economy to market economy. Bunce’s view that there is “no single road to democracy” (2008, 25) is also rarely contested. Recognition of the region’s plurality, as Sztompka argues, is fundamental to quality scholarship:

Only in the myopic perspective of distant outsiders was the so-called “socialist bloc” an undifferentiated entity, a kind of uniformly gray (and sad) area in Europe. We insiders knew better. Bulgaria was different from Czechoslovakia, Romania from Poland, Hungary from the GDR, Albania from Yugoslavia, and all were different from the imperial center, the Soviet Union. These differences have become even more salient and deeper after the collapse of communism and the dismantling of the Soviet empire. Eastern and Central Europe today presents a colorful mosaic of countries different in economic standards, political arrangements, cultural values, lifestyles, mentalities, etc.13

It is now well established that postcommunism is very diverse, politically, economically, and culturally (Pickles 2010). At least three major types of regimes have emerged after twenty years of transformations: consolidated democracies, consolidated authoritarianisms, and semiauthoritarian hybrids (Ekiert, Kubik, and Vachudova 2007).14 While some countries, particularly the Baltic and Central European states, enjoy relatively high quality democratic institutions,15 others, particularly former Soviet republics in Central Asia, suffer under authoritarian regimes of various hues. A partial reason for this may be that while in some countries these goals have been taken seriously by significant sectors of the elites and the larger populace, in others, strategically placed politicians have paid lip service to the twin ideal, while the actual transformations have proceeded erratically, tending toward increasingly non- or semidemocratic regimes.16 For example, despite the paroxysm of “colored revolutions”—an attempt to renew the commitment to democracy in some postcommunist countries—the prevailing tendency in the states that emerged from the Soviet Union is toward “competitive authoritarianism.”17 The post-communist space produced both the leaders of what McFaul dubbed the fourth wave of regime transformations and its worst failures (authoritarian...
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The former include today’s members of the European Union, the latter the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia and Belarus.

The three groups of countries seem to be on path dependent trajectories. In East Central Europe, there is a striking convergence among the new members of the EU and official candidate countries. They have introduced comprehensive reforms overhauling their states, economies, and welfare systems; they are wealthier with faster-growing economies and lower levels of income disparity; and they benefit from liberal democratic standards safeguarded by a consolidated democratic system. By contrast, the majority of former Soviet republics, including Russia, are poorer, more unequal, plagued by economic difficulties, choked by massive corruption, and increasingly authoritarian. Some countries in this group have ended up as “consolidated autocracies,” in Freedom House’s terminology, while others muddle through as semireformed democratic-autocratic hybrids (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). Countries such as Russia, Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine, to name a few, tend to oscillate between semidemocratic and semiauthoritarian systems and show partial or stalled economic reforms. The poor performance of their economies is a consequence of being stuck in a “partial reform trap” (Coricelli 2007, 83–86; Hellman 1998; Bunce 1999a, 786), in which the lack of incentives for policymakers to continue reforms, popular opposition to reforms that exact initial costs with respect to living standards, and enforcement of the status quo by winners of the early stages of the reform process prevent further changes that would redress the uneven distribution of wealth and obstacles to political accountability and development. Voters are complicit in maintaining a cycle that enriches the ruling elites at their expense.

How might we account theoretically for these three (at least) trajectories? Quite a few political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists—particularly those who study specific issue areas (party systems, legal institutions, economic changes in specific firms, and so on) or such problems as gender inequality or messy property relations—have been actively looking for fresh theoretical approaches to solve this puzzle. They often opt to abandon cavalier applications of large-N methodology and offer instead theories built around thoroughly examined case studies and carefully crafted small-N comparisons. In short, they accept the complexity of the region and focus on developing innovative ways of thinking about it, assuming that only detailed case studies, often based on “ethnographically” textured and/or historically
grounded analyses, can produce theoretically satisfactory answers and viable policy recommendations.

Some scholars who take seriously the diversity of postcommunist contexts, however, seem to have made a hobby out of complaining about the simple-mindedness and wrong-headedness of “transitology,” an approach that seems to have had more critics than practitioners, at least among serious scholars.20 While some criticisms have been right on target,21 the tendency to equate much, if not all, work done on postcommunism in political science with transitology is wrong-headed. True, much of early “economic” transitology—mostly practiced by policy advisers—was uselessly simplistic and quite a few parachutists—as political scientists who became students of postcommunism overnight were called in the region and among area experts—knew so little about the region they studied that their “discoveries” were rather vacuous (Bernhard 2000; Greskovits 2002, 242).22 But my review of the extant literature has revealed that very few political scientists who made major and lasting contributions to the first wave of studies on postcommunism were “pure” transitologists or operated with transitology’s basic theoretical positions, summarized in the first column of Table 1.1. Most of them “flirted” at least with some of the “antitransitologist” positions (summarized in column 3 of the table); their work has often been sufficiently nuanced and “contextualized” to produce compelling analyses, which have passed the test of time better than most sparse models of generalizing parachutists.

So, how might we account for the divergence of postcommunist paths, assuming that we need to pay attention to various “contexts” in which those paths unfold? The job of contextualization begins with assuming that “history matters” and trying to specify what this phrase means. It is thus useful to begin the analysis of postcommunist transformations by outlining the basic features of state socialism.

Let me begin by proposing a simple model of what I call democratic architecture.23 Schematically, this architecture can be presented in the following Figure 1.1. The model has five domains: (1) state; (2) economy; (3) political society; (4) civil society; and (5) domestic society (family and kinship networks).24 I elaborate their interrelationship elsewhere (Aronoff and Kubik 2012, 205–8), relying heavily on the pathbreaking work of Linz and Stepan (1996). For this discussion, suffice it to note that each domain needs to be fully articulated and independent, but for a democracy to function properly
all domains need to work together both as a system of checks and balances (producing *accountability*) and as a mutually reinforcing system of democratic governance (generating *effectiveness*). The institutional revolution known as Soviet-style communism produced a simpler, hierarchical system: the state “swallowed” both the economy (result: command economy) and the party system (result: party-state). Autonomous civil society was by and large eliminated (see Figure 1.2).

The distinction between totalitarian and posttotalitarian regime types (Linz and Stepan 1996) is helpful for analyzing the uneven dynamics of state socialism. Although this distinction is necessary for both analytical and historical reasons, it is crucial to remember that the switch from one to another did not change the basic institutional architecture of the communist system. “The thaw,” following Stalin’s death in 1953 and Khrushchev’s “secret speech” in 1956, did not lead to: (1) the separation of the state and the economic system; (2) the reinstatement of the multiparty system;
and (3) the restoration of autonomous civil society. The thaw certainly amounted to the “humanization” of the system. As a result, state socialism became more livable and “humane,” but to call the changes liberalization (in the strict meaning of the term) is imprecise. However, after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (February 1956), the party undertook a gradual—albeit arbitrary and uneven (in time and space)—reconstruction of the system. Three component processes can be distinguished:

1. **Selective “humanization.”** The state and political society did not liberalize (party-state institutions were not abolished or decisively reformed): they became more “humane.” But the “humanization” was unevenly distributed: more advanced in Poland or Hungary, less so in the GDR, Romania, Czechoslovakia, or the Soviet Union. As a result, Poles “recovered” (in a limited manner) some prerogatives of citizenship (for example, a rationed right to travel outside of the Bloc), which were denied or severely restricted in other countries.
2. Arbitrary and limited liberalization facilitated the emergence of dissident (oppositional) civil society (Bernhard 1993; Ekiert 1996; Ekiert and Kubik 1999). In some countries (Poland, most prominently) certain civic associations were allowed to function, albeit under close monitoring. The Catholic Church (and to a degree other churches) enjoyed considerable autonomy despite continued state scrutiny. Eventually, Polish dissident civil society (the most active in the region) grew into the massive Solidarity movement (1980–81 and 1988–89).

3. Development of massive second (shadow) economies. Society-wide participation in second economies allowed people to deal with the systemic shortages generated by the official economy. A less recognized consequence of this phenomenon is the creation of a complex informal system of mutual dependencies and patron-and-client networks that resulted in the de facto empowerment of some categories of citizens, particularly strategically placed party officials.\textsuperscript{28}
The posttotalitarian architecture is schematically represented in Figure 1.3. Juxtaposition of these three models helps to realize two important issues. First, the dual model of postcommunist transformations (democratization and marketization), the mainstay of transitology, is too sparse. The quintuple model of democratic architecture signals that not two, but five, processes need to be studied. They include: (1) reconstitution of the state; (2) formation of party systems; (3) creation of autonomous civil society; (4) restoration/creation of the market economy independent of the state; and (5) transformations of domestic society.

Second, the point of departure for pioneers in dismantling state socialism—Poland and Hungary—was not a totalitarian polity equipped only with a command economy, but a complex hybrid of selectively humanized politics (with islands of autonomous civil society and independent culture) and a multilayered economic system, with a huge informal sector.

This underappreciated complexity of both the points of departure and the transformation processes themselves constitutes a powerful reason for
developing a contextually sensitive and holistic approach to postcommunist transformations (Chen and Sil 2007). Scholars, including political scientists, have proposed many elements of such an approach. Some focused their studies on the examination of the interplay of six major factors critical for the extrication from the nondemocratic regimes and for democratic consolidation. These factors include: (1) historical legacies of both state socialism and the precommunist periods; (2) the geographical proximity to the West; (3) social and economic conditions in the country, particularly during the waning years of state socialism; (4) types of democratic breakthroughs; (5) choice of political institutions and the dominant features of domestic political competition during and after the breakthrough; and (6) the influence of powerful international actors, such as the United States, the European Union, or the World Trade Organization. Let’s examine each factor in some detail.

(1) It is clear by now that the accumulated effects of specific national/historical trajectories matter both at the moment of regime change and later during consolidation of the new system (Bernhard and Nordstrom 2010; Bunce 1999a, 790; Kitchelt 2003; Kopstein 2003; Pop-Eleches 2007a, 2007b; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, forthcoming), although the postcommunist states do not seem to be burdened by their pasts more than other third-wave democracies (Bernhard and Nordstrom 2010, 29). While the explanation of the postcommunist political diversity clearly needs to be multifactoral and there may not be a single cluster of causes that explains all outcomes, I am persuaded that historical legacies are the most powerful causes (Bunce 1999a, 790; and Bernhard and Karakoc 2007).

Pop-Eleches argues:

The patterns underlying this wide variety of outcomes were shaped to a remarkable degree by the past. History matters not only because some countries had a democratic head start, but because countries with different legacies experienced divergent trajectories over the course of the post-communist transition. In other words, historical legacies seem to matter more rather than less as the post-communist transformation takes its course / . . . / alternatives—such as institutional choice, initial election outcomes, and European integration—have played a much more modest role and need to be analyzed in the context of these legacy differences. (2007b, 924)
Among “historical” factors, the presence of strong dissident movements with cross class alliances, a somewhat liberalized official political culture (selectively accepting the discourse on civil rights), and less oppressive communist rule (including relative openness to the West) are arguably the most important (Ekiert 1996; Fish 1998; Bunce 1999a, 787–90; Bunce 1999b, 784; 2003, 172; Kennedy 2002, 27; Ekiert and Hanson 2003; Bernhard and Nordstrom 2010). In the language of the model of posttotalitarian architecture introduced earlier, the most successful postcommunist countries had the (a) most humanized state socialist regimes, (b) most robust “dissident” civil societies, and (c) expansive second economies with considerable elements of (proto)capitalism. Inherited social and economic inequalities, cleavages, and conflicts also play a significant, albeit negative, role in shaping opportunities for a successful transition. Independent statehood (current or historical) and previous experiences with democracy and a market economy have a positive influence on political and economic reforms. Finally, ethnic and religious cleavages, especially when reinforced by territorial and economic divisions, create significant problems for democratizing countries and can be exploited by antidemocratic elites (Bunce 2003). Their effect is particularly pronounced during the “early transition period” (Pop-Eleches 2007, 914).

(2) The significance of the geographical location of the country, that is, the country’s proximity to developed democratic countries and a less peripheral position in the global economic system, is debated. Kopstein and Reilly argue “that geographical proximity to the West has exercised a positive influence on the transformation of communist states and that geographical isolation in the East has hindered this transformation” (2003, 148). But Pop-Eleches reaches a different conclusion: “The effect of geographic distance from the West and the country’s international openness are statistically and substantively negligible once other legacies are taken into account” (2007b, 923). He agrees, however, that under some specifications of his statistical model, the proximity to democratic states has a positive albeit small effect on the strengthening of democracy in a given country.

(3) Few analysts doubt that the historically evolved social and economic conditions influence the course of post-1989 transformations, but whether structural endowments shaped by history or today’s decisions are more important remains somewhat contested. Both views have their champions, but
most students of the postcommunist transformations would agree that “the socialist past, not proximate choices, is critical (though inflation rates, and, hence, macroeconomic stabilization policies, are helpful)” (Bunce 1999a, 762). Bernhard and Nordstrom find that “transition at higher levels of GDP per capita in comparison to other Third Wave democracies is a substantial advantage” (2010, 28). Contributing to the literature on the relationship between economic factors and democratization,37 Bunce, following Popov, cites initial conditions such as “distortions in industrial structure and trade patterns” and “the collapse of institutions during the transition (or, for example, a sharp decline in the revenue base of the government)” (1999, 771) as the most important factors influencing postcommunist economic development. However, the significance of economic legacies (measured, for example, as GDP per capita in 1989) diminishes over time (Pop-Eleches 2007b, 913).

(4) **The mode of power transfer also matters.** Huntington (1991) distinguishes three types of power transfer: transformation (existing elites take “the lead in bringing about democracy”), replacement (counterelites lead the overthrow of the nondemocratic elites and bring about democracy), and transplacement (democratization results “largely from joint action by government and opposition groups”) (1991, 114). It turns out that transformation (particularly during the first postcommunist elections) that occurs when counterelites are nonexistent or weak tends to be followed by de-democratization far more often than replacement or transplacement (Grzymała-Busse and Luong 2002, 544–47).

(5) While history and culture powerfully influence regime transformations and consolidation, their causal impact should not be seen in a crudely deterministic fashion (Pop-Eleches 2007b); **institutional choices made by political leaders in new democracies also matter** (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski 1991). The choice of constitutional and electoral systems is particularly important (Bernhard 2005, 1–25). Adopting a parliamentary system of government with proportional representation fosters the emergence of more diverse and balanced political forces and establishes the habits of moderation and coalition building. In contrast, a presidential system facilitates the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of less accountable elites and makes reversal toward authoritarianism more likely (Fish 2001, 94–95; Pop-Eleches 2007b, 921). Similarly, establishing independent constitutional
courts, central banks or currency boards, and other independent bodies endowed with regulatory functions increases transparency and accountability, constrains political leaders, and removes opportunities for corruption and illegitimate gains (Rose-Ackerman 2005). In the postcommunist context, the countries that adopted a parliamentary system and proportional representation and that delegated significant authority to the local level and to independent regulatory institutions have been more successful in consolidating democracy. In general, research on postcommunism confirms that institutions promoting dispersion of political and economic power and inclusion of various actors in the policy-making process are the most conducive to facilitating democratic consolidation.

There is strong evidence that the involvement of international actors ranging from multilateral organizations and individual nation-states to NGOs to private actors is crucial to successful political and economic transformations (Way and Levitsky 2007; Vachudova 2005; Pop-Eleches 2007b, 922–23). In general, countries that had more linkages to the West and those that established multiple linkages earlier in the transition process were more successful in establishing and consolidating democracy. Even in the absence of further EU expansion, which may be politically difficult, increased contact between the West and post-Soviet states does a great deal to promote democratization in the region—albeit at a slower pace. Weak social, economic, media, and intergovernmental ties to the EU and the United States have undermined democratic development in the former Soviet Union in important ways. Weak linkage has reduced constraints on autocratic behavior and undermined the development of a powerful domestic constituency for democracy and good relations with the West. The obvious correlation between EU membership and effective reform suggests EU conditionality as a likely causal factor. However, its impact in consistently pro-Western reform-oriented countries such as Poland and Hungary is difficult to detect. It seems to have at most reinforced an existing trajectory of reform and contributed to policy formation. Scholars (Vachudova 2005; Sissenich 2007; Schimmelfennig 2005; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005) generally agree that EU conditionality had a discernible effect in countries where there were both pro- and antireform parties, as it helped to tip the balance in favor of liberal democratic standards and comprehensive economic reforms. These countries include Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania,
Croatia, and potentially Macedonia and Serbia-Montenegro. In countries dominated by nationalist and authoritarian political forces such as Belarus, the EU had little impact.\textsuperscript{38}

The works reviewed in this section represent the best of what the mainstream approach, mostly in comparative politics, has to offer. By and large, most of them do not stray too much from the paradigmatic strictures of “normal” social science. Their normative assumptions are solidly “Western,” the dominant methodology tends to be positivistic, they are \textit{etic} rather than \textit{emic} (that is, they do not usually take into account actors’ own conceptualizations of reality), and they tend to be focused on theory-confirmation/falsification rather than theory generation. But they offer analyses whose spirit and at least some assumptions presage contextual holism, which I present in the next section. They signal and sometimes demonstrate that institutional architecture (of markets and political democracy), while necessary for successful democratization, is not sufficient. Even in the countries that have most effectively established market economies, electoral accountability, and representative institutions, the lack of vibrancy of civic life, widespread distrust of political institutions and elites, highly politicized media, and the seemingly interminable attraction of populist and illiberal rhetoric weaken the quality of democracy. Ethnocentrism and xenophobia are powerful forces in politics and become easily exploited by cynical politicians who suggest “easy” solutions to problems of unemployment or slow economic growth (Mudde 2007; Ost 2005; Roeder 2003). Habits of associating state regulatory powers with undesired and excessive control over the economy render even the most “routine” market institutions vulnerable to ideological attacks in the face of market-generated problems: populist politicians sometimes challenge their legitimacy as “alien” implants. Many scholars of the region cite the lack of “virtues” of democratic citizenship, that is, tolerance, moderation, and compromise, as a major impediment to the development of a culture of trust in formal state institutions (Sztompka 2004). Several studies show that low levels of trust and passivity of postcommunist societies derail attempts to launch collective action (Howard 2003; Letki and Evans 2005; Rothstein 2000).

While the study of such “problems” and their politicization is necessary to produce more realistic diagnoses of the postcommunist condition than those offered by rather sterile transitological modes of thinking, the approach I am outlining here is based on the assumption that the very concept of “problem”
needs to be problematized. Researchers need to investigate whether “problems” are identified as such by the actors themselves, how they are articulated within (locally) available interpretive frameworks (ideologies), and whether and how they are used as foci of mobilization. For example, what a “Western” expert may perceive as an irrational rejection of market institutions, troubling passivity of “civil society,” or explosion of xenophobia could prove to be quite different phenomena when carefully reconstructed from the bottom up. They might be strategic responses to specific “local” problems whose meanings from the “natives’ point of view” is likely to be different from the frame imposed by the researcher.39 This way of looking at postcommunist reality has been present in many works, but usually only fragmentarily and haphazardly. In section III I offer a preliminary systematization of the approaches that place local perspectives, native (vernacular) framing, and other contexts of politics at the center of analysis. Such approaches are easier to find in anthropology, geography, cultural and gender studies, and sociology than in political science. They constitute a more radical departure from transitology than the works discussed so far.

III. Toward Contextual Holism (in Five Steps)

Studies of postcommunism that have proved to have lasting value are products of careful empirical analyses of specific problems or areas. They also adopt relatively complex theories of the sociopolitical reality. Over time the trend toward complexity has intensified and a growing number of scholars have begun producing works whose emerging philosophy I call contextual holism (summarized in Table 1.1, column 3). I outline the overall theoretical tenor of contextual holism and briefly examine its five basic elements. Scholars who work under the broad umbrella of this ontological stance do not necessarily accept all positions, but most of them defend at least a few. Contextual holism embraces the following principles: (1) relationism (“weak” structuralism); (2) historicizing; (3) constructivism; (4) focus on informality (formal-informal hybrids); and (5) localism. In Table 1.1, I list the theoretical positions of early transitology (column 1), their radical opposites (column 2), and synthetic (syncretic, hybridlike) theoretical solutions of contextual holism (column 3).40 The radical alternatives to transitology are rarely employed in research practice, but their articulation allows for a better specification of the logical space within which I am working.
Before I discuss each of the five components of contextual holism, I offer a brief characterization of its general theoretical “flavor.”

Students of economic systems, including economists, have long challenged both the materialism of standard economic explanations (Mitchell 2008) and the compartmentalization of the economy (analysis of the economic sphere in isolation from other spheres) (Hann and Hart 2009). Sahlins, who spent much of his professional life clarifying the thorny relationship between practical activity and cultural representations, reminds us that materialism, which came to underpin much of “Western” economic analysis, was “invented” and is traceable to Thucydides (2004). Sahlins shows that materialism is not a neutral, default analytical position but rather a “culturally specific formation.” Consequently, two different modes of analysis are possible. One builds on the assumption of “the economic determination of history,” another—consonant with contextualism as I formulate it—assumes “the historical determination of economism” (2004, 43).

In turn, the compartmentalization of economic analysis is seminally challenged by Karl Polanyi in his Great Transformation. He introduced the distinction between real (substantivist) and formalist definitions of economic activity in the opening paragraphs of his famed essay, “The Economy as Instituted Process”:

The two root meanings of “economic,” the substantive and the formal, have nothing in common. The latter derives from logic, the former from fact. The formal meaning implies a set of rules referring to choice between alternative uses of insufficient means. The substantive meaning implies neither choice nor insufficiency of means; man’s livelihood may or may not involve the necessity of choice and, if choice there be, it need not be induced by the limiting effect of “scarcity” of the means. (1957, 243)

The formal understanding of the “economic” came to dominate the “compartmentalized” analyses of economic activity in the discipline of economics, while the substantive approaches have always been dominant in sociology and anthropology, where economic activity is usually analyzed as “embedded” (Granovetter 1985) in various “contexts.” In Polanyi’s formulation human economy “is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and noneconomic. The inclusion of the noneconomic is vital. For religion or government may be as important for the structure and functioning of the economy
as monetary institutions or the availability of tools and machines themselves that lighten the toil of labor” (1957, 250).

The authors of Transforming Post-Communist Political Economies (Nelson, Tilly, and Walker 1997) articulated cogent criticism of the compartmentalization and formalism that underpin many transitologist studies of postcommunist economic transformations. Katherine Verdery, an influential anthropologist, struck a critical tone, but less expectedly the “substantivist” tenor of the volume was set by Nobel Prize-winning economic historian Douglass C. North. He sketched an outline of a holistic approach by emphasizing both the complexity of the task facing the architects of post-communist transformations and, in particular, the significance of informality. For North, economic reforms need to be constructed with the help of a political “scaffold”

that specifies the way we develop and aggregate political choices; the property rights structure that defines the formal incentives in the economy; and the informal constraints of norms, conventions, and internally held beliefs [emphasis added—JK]. They have evolved over many generations, reflecting, as Hayek (1960) has reminded us, the trial-and-error process that has sorted out those behavioral patterns that have worked from those that have failed. Because the experience of every society has been unique, the scaffolds erected will differ for each economy. (1997, 16)

North warns that economic reforms narrowly focused on “formally” instituted policies alone are insufficient. Such policies

consist of alterations in the formal rules only, when in fact the performance of an economy is an admixture of the formal rules, the informal norms, and their enforcement characteristics. Changing merely the formal rules will produce the desired results only when the informal norms are complementary to that rule change, and enforcement is either perfect or at least consistent with the expectations of those altering the rules. (1997, 16)

Janos Kornai offers an equally powerful argument on behalf of the more holistic approach to economic transformation. Already in his seminal The Communist System (1992), Kornai provided a holistic, complex, contextualized analysis of economy. In a collection of his most influential essays on postcommunism, Kornai writes:
The transition from socialism to capitalism has to be an organic development. It cannot be done otherwise. It is a curious amalgam of revolution and evolution. It is a trial and error process, which retains or liquidates old institutions, and tries out, accepts or rejects new ones. Each element in the process might be very rapid, fairly rapid or slow. Each has its own appropriate speed. (2008, 80)

Holism, organicism (Kornai 2008), contextualism (Goodin and Tilly 2006), and embeddedness (Hann and Hart 2009) are labels that indicate various tones of disappointment with reductionism and compartmentalization predominant in today’s political science and economics, particularly in simplistic transitology. Its failure to offer sufficiently context-sensitive policy recommendations resulted in ineffective reforms. “Organicism” does not, however, result in the termination of analysis; “organic” context needs to be taken apart to identify concrete “causes” (Collier and Mazzuca 2006, 474–75). They need to be approached, however, interactively, within some form of systemic analysis to counteract the practice of studying phenomena parsimoniously in the relative isolation of mono-theoretical or mono-disciplinary conceptualizations:

Cutting-edge research focuses on the interactions between political, economic, sociostructural, and cultural change. Earlier controversies, such as shock therapy versus gradualism, have dissolved as transformation is conceived as societal evolution that takes place on many levels and includes processes occurring at different speeds. (Bönker, Müller, and Pickel 2002, 24)

Burawoy and Verdery echo this view: “There can be no pure economy, only a political and cultural economy” (1999, 14).

The concept of recombination is one of the most powerful tools for focusing on holistic analysis. Stark and Bruszt see postcommunist transformations as complex processes in which innovation and tradition, “new” and “old” elements, are incessantly recombined in a creative manner:

In contrast to the transition problematic . . . we see social change not as transition from one order to another but as transformation—rearrangements, reconfigurations, and recombinations that yield new interweavings of the multiple social logics that are a modern society. In struggling to cope
with the extraordinary uncertainties of transforming economy, actors discover and reorganize resources. (1998, 7)

The emerging research tradition (contextual holism), whose basic ideas are outlined above, is promising for studying actors whose lives are turned upside down by far-reaching social, economic, and political transformations. In particular, it is designed to reconstruct coping strategies developed by specific groups of people whose actions are built on cultural scenarios derived from specific sociocultural contexts that are meaningful to the actors themselves. The approach is also sensitive to constraints and (enabling) resources provided by such contexts.

In the next subsections, I present five building blocks of contextual holism; the elaboration of its logic is the task not attempted here. Each section provides some illustrations drawn from two sources: the general literature in comparative politics or other branches of social science and more specific examples from the studies on postcommunism.

**Relationism, or the Return of (Weak) Structuralism**

The first component of contextual holism is relationism. Relationism is an approach to sociopolitical reality that avoids the extremes of individualism and holism or agency and structure. The oscillation between these two positions is clearly visible in the studies on regime change in general and democratization in particular. Prominent studies differ with respect to their relative emphasis on the role of structure (structural preconditions) and agency (actors, usually the elites). In the 1970s and 1980s, the structuralist tradition of grand macrohistorical studies (Lipset 1959; Moore 1964) was replaced by agency-driven explanations (Rustow 1970; and most influentially O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Game theory may appear to strengthen this actor-centric orientation, yet in one of the most influential recent works within this tradition, the authors insist that “there is no dichotomy at all between structural and strategic approaches—they are one and the same” (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, 86). Acemoglu and Robinson offer a parsimonious model in which the “structure” or “context” within which actors strategize during democratization is composed of seven elements: (1) civil society; (2) shocks and crises; (3) sources of income and composition of wealth; (4) political institutions; (5) intergroup inequality; (6) middle class; and (7) globalization (2006, 31–42). Thus, the
scholarship on regime change, including the transformations from state socialism to postcommunism, progressed through three phases. Initially, the center of explanation rested on strong structural foundations (clearly indebted to Marx). Then, the theory shifted from emphasizing strong structure to privileging abstract agency (as in game theory). Finally, there is a return to structure, but construed less deterministically than in earlier theories.

The approach I advocate here emphasizes not just political or economic factors but also the social and cultural elements of different contexts. Nonetheless, I share the general idea of returning to a more systematic investigation of the relationship between “structure” and “agency,” particularly in postcommunist studies, where there are many examples of a complex interrelationship between human creativity and the constraining influences of various legacies. In the most recent literature, McFaul strikes a note of disappointment with the overemphasis on agency. He observes that while “actor-centric, cooperative approaches to democratization offer a useful starting point for explaining post communist regime transformations” (2010, 9), they focus excessively on elites and their deals (2010, 12), and, for example, downplay the role of popular mobilization. Other authors argue that such approaches do not provide sufficient tools to account for the various contexts within which political transformations transpire (Bönker, Müller, and Pickel 2002, 24). These theoretical developments seem to lead toward a new, middle-of-the-road position that can be labeled weak structuralism and is clearly akin to relational realism.48

Schmitter and Karl suggest that the significance of actors’ agency varies, depending on the phases of transformation. They see a heightened role of agency during the transition to the new system, but structural factors become more significant during consolidation. As they put it, during transition the role of “courageous individuals” and contingency are dominant (Schmitter and Karl 1994, 175–76), but a student of consolidation must shift attention to structural factors such as “capitalist class conflicts, long-standing cultural and ethnic cleavages, persistent status conflicts and international antagonisms” (1994, 176). In brief, researchers must retool as they move from studying transition, which is underdetermined to studying consolidation, which is overdetermined (1994, 176). They need to expand their focus from strategic elite actors in highly unpredictable situations to encompass nonelite actors responding to new situations. The
parameters of such situations need to be carefully reconstructed because they constitute powerful, albeit evolving, constraints on collective action. Consider North’s contextualism, Kornai’s organicism, or Bönker, Müller, and Pickel’s (2002, 24) interactive effects introduced earlier. The next theoretical move, I suggest, must merge this weak structuralism with a contextualized study of agency. For example, empirical lenses need to be focused on concrete, localized, networks of actors who devise and implement strategies of “coping” within specific sets of constraints including not just economic obstacles/opportunities but also cultural contexts and political arrangements.49

Return to History/Return of History
The second building block of contextual holism, historicism, is not uniform as there are at least four separate ways to introduce history to the study of politics.50 All of them play a significant role in postcommunist studies. The first is to debate the relative causal significance of “historical” and “contemporary” factors in the explanation of “today’s” politics; I reviewed some of the relevant literature earlier in this essay and concluded that indeed “history matters.” But “bringing history back” is related to at least three additional concerns: establishing sufficiently deep causal chains in explaining postcommunist transformations; properly historicizing the studied phenomena; and reconstructing the formation of historical memory as well as studying its role in postcommunist political battles.

In the field of postcommunist studies, the debate on the role of historical factors in the “politological” explanation of postcommunist developments commenced with the seminal exchange between Valerie Bunce, on the one hand, and Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl, on the other. In a special issue of Comparative Political Studies (July 1995), its editors, Crawford and Lijphart, offered a useful summary of the debate between what they call the “legacies of the past” approach and the “imperatives of liberalization.” According to the former view:

The past casts a long shadow on the present, shapes the environment in which the battle to define and defend new institutions takes place, and ultimately undermines the liberalization process. An alternative approach emphasizes the “imperatives of liberalization.” It suggests that new institutions can be crafted and new international pressures
can be brought to bear to shut out the negative influences of the past. From this perspective, the head of Leninism has been lopped off, leaving space for the development of new forces to structure incentives according to the more or less universal rules of liberal democracy. (1995, 172–73)

Crawford and Lijphart emphasize that they begin with “stylized” portrayals of the ideal types of each approach and that “no single scholar characterizes his or her approach in the stylized way we suggest here” (1995, 173). This indicates that already in 1995 the leading scholars in the field of postcommunist studies, perhaps with the exception of economists, rarely practiced bare bones transitology and some of them were incorporating “history” into their analyses.51

The second historical theme—the proper depth of historical analyses—is thoroughly discussed in a volume edited by Ekiert and Hanson (2003) and carefully analyzed statistically by Pop-Eleches (2007a, 2007b) and Bernhard and Nordstrom (2010). The Ekiert/Hanson volume includes several studies designed to investigate the conceptualization of “legacies,” offer a theory of “deep” historical causation (Kitschelt 2003), and examine the impact of legacies on postcommunist political and economic transformations. The editors suggest that analysis of these transformations should be conducted on three interdependent levels of “path dependency”: (1) interactional time (“the necessarily contextualized study of innovation and policy outcomes”); (2) institutional time (“the study of more general ‘institutional legacies’ that shape a wide range of policy domains”); and (3) structural time (“the persistent influence of historical and cultural legacies inherited from the more distant past”) (2003, 19). The level of “interactional time” is particularly relevant for the approach I advocate here, as it refers directly to the local level of the studied phenomena (a topic discussed below).

The concern with proper historicization of democratization—the third important historical theme—animates the work on earlier European democratizations by Capoccia and Ziblatt and their collaborators (2010). They advocate focusing on microprocesses, reconstructing actual sequences of historical interactions, disaggregating democratizations, and observing the evolution and intertwining of their components up close. This means “reading history forward” (focusing on the often messy process leading up to the emergence
of new institutions and observing it in its proper temporal context); analyzing “a protracted and punctuated ‘one institution at a time’ process, in which the institutional building blocks of democracy emerged *asynchronously*”; paying attention to “multiple lines of conflict” (for example, religious, ethnic); focusing on “episodes of institutional change”; and treating democratization as “a *chain of big and small events* not always moving unidirectionally toward full democracy” (2010, 939–41). Moreover, the authors posit that their research strategy allows an accurate reconstruction of “what actors were actually fighting about” (2010, 943). Capoccia and Ziblatt’s work is the best example in the most recent literature on regime transformations and democratization of an approach that is truly microhistorical, that is, focused both on the sequence and the detail of actual historical processes. In the field of postcommunist studies, such an approach is practiced by a few political scientists, for example, Selený (2006) on the politics of economic reforms, Grzymała-Busse (2002) on the fate of former communist parties, Inglot (2008) on the historical trajectories of Central European welfare states, Haggard and Kaufman on welfare reforms (2008), and Allina-Pisano (2009) on the evolution of property-rights regimes. It is more common in sociology (Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley 1998; Brubaker et al. 2006) and anthropology (Verdery 2003; Humphrey 1998).

In addition to the literatures on the significance of legacies, the causal depth of historical explanations, and microhistorical mechanisms of democratization, the fourth body of literature that takes “history” seriously deals with the politics of historical memory. In several postcommunist states, the battle over the “proper” way to remember communism, particularly its crimes, has moved to the forefront of politics (Borneman 1997; Verdery 1999 on Romania; Kubik and Linch 2007 and Nalepa 2010 on Poland; Petro 2004 on Novgorod, Russia; Rossi 2010 on Serbia). The next logical stage in the development of this literature, which has already commenced, is the systematic investigation of intrastate, regional variations of “memory regimes” and their differential impact on other phenomena, such as the quality of democracy or democratic consolidation (Kubik and Bernhard 2013), formation of social capital (Kubik and Linch 2010), patterns of voting (Wittenberg 2006; Zarycki 2002) or economic development (Petro 2001; Zarycki 2007). In brief, the approach I am advocating would focus on: (1) establishing sufficiently long causal chains, at the three levels identified by Ekiert and

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Hanson (for example, examining long-term consequences of specific interactions, such as negotiations, contentious episodes, and so on); (2) exploiting the significance of temporal *asynchrony* of changes (some areas may be changing faster than others); and (3) analysis of political and social correlates of historical memory (who remembers what, how, and why), the *coexistence of various memory regimes*, and the competition for hegemony among them.

*Constructivism: Culture and the Native’s Point of View*

Constructivism, the third building block of contextual holism, assumes that the manner in which people conceptualize, model, or envision the world around them matters for what they do politically, how, and why. The ontology of constructivism is antinaturalist (the social world is different from the natural world); thus the methodology consistent with this position requires interpretation. Scholars who agree with an (antinaturalist) assumption that the *signifying* process through which people build models of the world, particularly of the social and political world, has political relevance, proceed to study how such models are constructed, transmitted, maintained, and received, and how this whole machinery of cultural construction influences, and is influenced by, political and economic transformations. While the utility of interpretivist approaches is taken for granted in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, or feminism, it is far from obvious to many practitioners of political science. The reasons for this may be complex, but they seem to be rooted in the predominantly naturalistic tenor of the discipline.

In postcommunist studies, constructivist or cultural approaches are employed by anthropologists and sociologists, but they are rarely utilized in political science. As a result, outside of plentiful “survey data” the perspectives of the “natives” are rarely heard, let alone systematically reconstructed and thoroughly interpreted. Many critics of the dominant “naturalist” approaches to democratization and “transitology” call for more attention to history and culture. All too often, however, the call is only half-heartedly heeded or reduced to studying _political culture_ understood as a syndrome of attitudes concerning such issues as the support for new regimes, democracy, and/or markets; trust in institutions and politicians; interest in politics; or declarations of participation in various organizations (Ulram and Plasser 2003). Works often include a ritualistic invocation of the need to study cultural contexts or to emphasize the significance of history, but they rarely
provide analyses of the emergence of postcommunist cultures (semiotic practices in Wedeen’s [2002] formulation), mechanisms of their maintenance, and their complex relationship with political and economic changes. Few scholars seem to accept the premise that “the cultural landscape matters in the construction of communism’s successor, and that the formation of ideologies and identities is more complicated than most discourses of transition or revolution allow” (Kennedy 1994, 1).

Indeed, the complexity involved in the formation of the new cultural landscapes Kennedy talks about has been astounding. After decades of living under a system that attempted to control all forms of cultural expression through the unique mechanism of preventive censorship, thus forcing its subjects to “do their cultures” in private or in often dangerous and unstable semiofficial spaces, people responded to the abolition of censorship with a veritable flood of cultural expression. After 1989, people immediately engaged in vigorous debates and performances, generating new discourses (conceptualizations and representations) around topics long relegated from public discussion. Such issues as gender identity and relations, national and ethnic identity, the nature of power, scenarios of citizenship, “cultures” of democracy, the ethic of work under capitalism, social justice, cultural models of associationism, and so on that had been crudely framed within the monotonous official discourse and debated only intermittently in whispers had to be “invented,” “rediscovered,” or simply “refreshed.” Such concerns are vital to the quality of democratic performance and often drive politics, yet they have not been systematically analyzed by scholars of postcommunism. To do so, one needs to take culture seriously and this calls for an ontological commitment to constructivism.

The intellectual gain from such a commitment is clear is several studies. For example, Hopf (2002) masterfully analyzes Soviet and Russian foreign policy making within a robust constructivist approach that takes seriously the complex interplay of politics and semiotics in the construction of Russian national identity. Baxandall (2004) shows that various “constructions” of unemployment, for example different in the “East” and the “West,” have quite distinct social and political impacts. Herrera (2005) investigates the rapid emergence of post-Soviet regionalism in Russia that was not driven exclusively by economic interests, but to a large degree by the manner in which regional elites “imagined” regional interests and identities. Anderson (2001) develops a discursive theory of democratization to show how the redefinition of both elite and popular identity influenced the course of political reforms in post-1991 Russia.
Nicolai Petro’s *Crafting Democracy* (2004) is explicitly focused on both reconstructing the emergence of a specific culture and demonstrating the impact of this culture on political and economic phenomena. The initial puzzle of his studies is why during the 1990s Novgorod the Great achieved political and economic success in Russia where the overall performance in both areas was far from exemplary. Petro deems the standard political and economic explanations incomplete and proposes an approach that builds on advances in the study of the cultural mechanisms that influence (or accompany) political changes and economic development (for a useful review, see Rao and Walton 2004). Petro enters an important debate on the conditions conducive to successful economic reforms by positing the centrality of social capital and—most importantly for my argument here—the cultural factors that facilitate the formation of this capital.58 As he puts it:

> Ideas and symbols matter very much, for they have a direct impact on the creation of social capital. The key to the creation of social capital, the missing link that explains the speed with which new democratic values and structures have emerged in Novgorod, lies in grasping the political significance of culture and historical myth. (2001, 242)

History is seen here not as a constraint but primarily as a valuable resource, a reservoir of “usable pasts” that can be transformed into discourses skillful political/cultural entrepreneurs may employ to mobilize people for political and economic action:

> Novgorod has succeeded where other regions have failed because the regional elite and the regional government reached a consensus on how to address the problem of cultural discontinuity. By defining ‘reform’ as a restoration of the values of a more prosperous Russian past, rather than as something imported from the West, they were able to ease the anxieties that inevitably accompany radical change. (2001, 241–42)

A crucial component of Petro’s argument is that usable building blocks of cultural capitals, such as historical narratives, are often found at the subnational level, in regions or localities. It is, of course, a matter of empirical determination whether locality, region, or nation-state is the site where cultures and histories engage people most powerfully by resonating with their self-identification (Brubaker et al. 2006) and thus become the most proximate cultural context of social mobilization and action. All three levels
of social organization are relevant to the construction of the cultural meanings that shape perception and action, despite a common assumption that the nation-state is the only pertinent unit for understanding cultural causality. As Petro’s analysis of Novgorod indicates, it is often at the regional or local level that people feel *culturally comfortable* to organize, mobilize, and concoct strategies of action. The effectiveness of many initiatives depends on people’s intimate knowledge of social and cultural parameters of political or economic activity. It is easier to mobilize people and overcome the collective action dilemma if the organizer possesses deep knowledge of the social and cultural context and/or the ability to actively shape this context. In the case Petro so penetratingly inspects, this was exactly what happened.59

Constructivists heed Kennedy’s admonition that both gaining insight into existing cultural frames and monitoring how they are changing will be crucial for understanding the transformation process, but they do not always pay attention to the enormous richness of cultures that emerged after 1989 in postcommunist Eurasia. It is obvious that the *transition culture* identified by Kennedy as the hegemonic way of thinking within and about postcommunist transformations is not the only cultural formation that has emerged in postcommunist countries. It may be hegemonic in the most influential political salons of capital cities and dominant think tanks, but it is incessantly challenged by other cultures that have emerged out of the ruins of state socialism. Consider cultures of distrust much pronounced in many localities and regions, cultures of regionalism that often spur economic development, or counterhegemonic cultures of “dissent” cultivated by left-leaning intellectuals. Yet, at least in political science, there is a paucity of studies of such counterhegemonic or a-hegemonic cultures. Petro’s studies are a perfect example of how such cultures emerge and how they work. He shows that efficient solutions to problems are often based on actors’ vernacular knowledge of specific historical trajectories and the cultural “climates” of given regions. The combination of constructivism and localism (discussed below) calls for focusing on vernacular knowledge as a hallmark of contextual holism and as one of the methodological principles animating this volume.

*Formal/Informal Hybrids*

According to the fourth premise of contextual holism much action in the postcommunist world transpires in the territory delineated by both official
structures and informal networks. This means that in order to understand what is going on we need investigate the context-specific mix (hybrid) of formal and informal mechanisms (Guha-Khasnobis et al. 2007).

State-socialism may not have survived as long as it did had it not been for extensive informal economic networks that also included party officials and massive informal (unofficial) cultures. Such networks often developed into complex social worlds that made “surviving communism” possible. Informality provided a crutch that sustained the state socialist economy, but—paradoxically—it also contributed to the system’s demise by nourishing antiregime movements (Evans and Letki 2005, 518). At least in the “pioneering” countries, such as Poland and Hungary, postcommunism emerged not out of the totalitarian barren land of suppressed society, but rather from a beehive of activity in a posttotalitarian system, where people organized in semiofficial and unofficial sectors of the economy, clandestine political spaces, and/or private networks. Not surprisingly, the legacy of informality is extensive and deeply rooted in many areas of life. For some observers, this “unwanted” and “damaging” legacy of state socialism is a burden that prevents postcommunist societies from joining the ranks of “normal” countries (Miller et al. 2001), but for others it is rather a blessing in disguise as it helps people navigate the uncertain “postcommunist” reality. It seems to be both.

Postcommunism is also permeated by complex interactions between formal and informal mechanisms. Some of the most original studies in the field focus on such interactions. For example, several scholars argue for treating the postcommunist countries that have gotten stuck in the trap of partial reforms as a regime type sui generis (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010) and offer creative conceptualizations and careful analyses of the role of informality in such a regime (Levitsky and Way 2010, 27–28). Woodruff shows that during the 1990s Russia was not faced with the problems of market reform (including the calibration of its “cash register,” development of viable mechanisms for raising revenue, privatizing state enterprises, and so on), but with a much more fundamental predicament. It needed to set up a whole state apparatus to procure what Woodruff calls “monetary consolidation.” To accomplish this, the government needed to acquire “the sovereign powers, dominance over money among them, that underpin a market economy of national scope” (1999, 7). The Russian government failed in this fundamental task and as a result much of economic activity transpired informally outside of the monetized, thus legible to the state, economy.50
Three points regarding informality are central to my argument for contextual holism. First, considerable analytical leverage can be gained from thinking about informality not as an unwelcome legacy of the communist system or an undesired by-product of the new capitalist/democratic system, but rather as an inescapable albeit “functional” component of the transitory process. Second, it is important to remember that in most postcommunist states the areas of formality and informality are intricately intertwined, to a large degree as a legacy of the posttotalitarian phase of state socialism. Formal-informal institutional hybrids resemble neither the clear-cut blueprints of institutional reformers nor the concealed informal networks sometimes blamed for all the ills of postcommunism by conspiracy theorists. Those half-visible, half-hidden networks of influence have often been overlooked by scholars relying on “imported” analytical categories of transitology and the “normal” categories of social science. When they are noticed and studied, the operation of such networks is usually reduced to “corruption,” an unwanted and “unhealthy” legacy of communism, or the underdevelopment of precommunist societies. However, it may be more productive to study them as specific institutional arrangements of the semireformed, and in many cases semiauthoritarian, states (Helmke and Levitsky 2006). Third, the dual nature of formal-informal hybrids must be incorporated into the analysis of two levels of the transformations: elite and popular. Formal/informal networks function not only as a mechanism of empowerment for ex-communist cadres colluding with the new elites (Staniszkis 1999; Gadowska 2002), but also as a massive institutional coping mechanism that has enabled people to organize their lives during an extremely volatile period of radical regime transformations and economic “reforms” (see Ledeneva’s chapter in this volume).

At the elite level, complex recombinations of the newly acquired formal prerogatives and long-standing informal connections inherited from the old regime have often functioned not as mechanisms of transition from “plan to market” (Stark and Bruszt 1998), but rather as a shrewd strategy of moving from “plan to clan” allowing many ex-communist functionaries to retain much of their power, at least behind the scenes (Staniszkis 1999). Some elites responsible for the reinstatement of private property rights successfully mixed formal and informal strategies to achieve political control over their communities and reap considerable economic benefits for themselves. Verdery (2003) offers a nuanced analysis of this process in her study of post-1989 property transformations in Romania. Perhaps the most important
conclusion of her work is that “the proverbial bundle-of-rights conception of property common to economists and lawyers, a conception they brought into their advisory work in Eastern Europe” is completely inadequate for the task of reconstructing what actually transpired during postcommunist privatization. “Property is not just about bundles [of rights—JK] but about the entire process of bringing a good into use. If so, then creating ownership meant bundling not only rights but the prerequisites for their successful exercise” (2003, 355). Through her detailed ethnographic work, Verdery shows how (mostly ex-communist) local elites derailed the formation of the institutional and cultural requisites of a rights-based system of property ownership. Consequently, de jure mass privatization gave de facto control over property to local elites.

Allina-Pisano’s (2008) ethnographic study of the privatization of state and collective farms in western Russia and eastern Ukraine discovered an even more spectacular disjunction between the de jure and de facto property rights regimes. While in Verdery’s Romania the interplay between these two types of regimes produced formal-informal hybrids (de jure and de facto mechanisms reinforced each other), in Allina-Pisano’s Russia and Ukraine the de jure became totally divorced from the de facto. The officially pronounced privatization served merely as a Potemkin village behind which effective control over property remained virtually unchanged: it stayed in the hands of (now former) party bosses.

However, formal-informal hybrids are not only the tools and/or effects of shrewd elite manipulations. Many ordinary people, who temporarily lost their footing when the familiar institutional ground suddenly shifted, developed creative strategies to negotiate the highly volatile and changing situation. Rose shows that many Russians developed complex portfolios of formal and informal strategies to cope with the dramatic downturn of the official economy in the early 1990s. He challenges the narrow focus on individual demand and purchasing power of mainstream economic analysis on the grounds that it erroneously emphasizes “official” incomes. He shows that households rather than individuals are the proper unit of analysis and the sources of income are a complex mix of streams of cash, resources, and services that travel through both official and unofficial channels.

The human impulse to form, cultivate, and rely on informal social capital if the predictability of formal institutions is low is not only “traditional,” but also eminently rational. Such practices were often developed long before
communism, perfected under it, and have remained highly usable under the unpredictable conditions generated by the noxious combination of botched neoliberal reforms and (semi) authoritarian political systems. Not surprisingly, given the region’s legacy of instability, the uncertainty of semi-authoritarian regimes or the lack of effective formal institutionalization, informality has become a fixture of postcommunism (Böröcz 2000). Given the weakness of formal institutions, informal networks have again become the locus of social trust. As Letki and Evans observe, social trust formed in informal networks “is more important as a resource in the absence of formal rules and rule-makers’ accountability, such as was the case under Communist rule, than in more predictable and regulated liberal democratic systems” (2005, 518).

**Locality (Situated Agency)**

The final building block of contextual holism, localism, is in tune with the recent methodological admonition to pay attention to micro mechanisms of social and political processes. State socialism was perhaps the most powerful standardizing and homogenizing machine in history (Scott 1998; Darden 2009). Yet regional differences and local specificities did not disappear completely; actually some carefully monitored cultivation of subnational traditions was officially tolerated and not infrequently financed by the party-state (Bunce 1999c). After the fall of state socialism, regionalism and localism exploded as cultural phenomena and the renaissance of subnational politics, often spurred by the devolution of power and decentralizing administrative reforms, commenced.

Several influential recent studies in comparative politics (and historical sociology) focus on demonstrating how people who have to deal collectively with their problems organize within trust networks that are usually local (Tilly 2005). For example, local communities (of trust) are shown to be the most effective sites of resistance (Scott 1990), rebellion against foreign occupation (Petersen 2001), ethnic mobilization (Varshney 2002), as well as the locations where most fighting and violence in civil wars occurs (Wood 2009; Kalyvas 2003, 2006, 38–48). They are also principal sites of political socialization, thus scholars of political preferences often study regions or localities as contexts of political behavior.

Moreover, after the “cultural turn” scholars rediscovered the idea that people who search for solutions to their problems tend to rely on *vernacular*
knowledge: knowledge that comes from their closest social groupings—local or regional communities. Localness, as an analytical category, needs to be applied with caution, however, and it is useful to distinguish *locality* and *location*.68 The former refers to the physical site where people live and tend to engage in economic, political, or cultural activity, the latter to the relatively small fragment of cultural (often virtual) space that interacting individuals recognize as “theirs.” This space differs according to the degree of “wholeness” or “boundedness” of the cultural constructs that define it (such as their collective identity). *Locality* is usually a relatively self-contained village or settlement, but particularly in the rapidly globalizing world it may also be a worldwide virtual network of antiglobalization activists, who frequent the same website so people may inhabit multiple localities at the same time: they may be part of a virtual community “meeting” in an online “chat room” and live in an urban center at the same time. *Location* (localized culture area or simply a vernacular culture) can be tightly defined according to the rules of single cultural logic, but it may be also a syncretic, hybridized, loosely bound mosaic that nonetheless constitutes “the socially most significant context” for actors engaging in any kind of collective action (Chabal and Daloz 2006, 124).69 The concept of (traditional) community thus is best reserved only for situations when the location and locality tightly overlap.70 Both localities and locations are increasingly becoming nodal points where various flows of social and political life intersect, itinerant individuals pause, sometimes just for a moment, attracted by the memory of the once shared proximity of living or cultural commonality.71

The study of postcommunist locations and localities and their relations to macro processes of political and economic change is urgent for at least two reasons. First, the fall of state socialism resulted in a speedy and powerful revival of autonomous cultural, economic, and political activity at the level of “traditional” communities (regions, subregions, municipalities, and so on). In some cases, the reinvention of tightly formed locations/localities—as Petro’s work illustrates—has become a very powerful engine of political change and economic growth. Second, massive labor migrations, particularly pronounced in such postcommunist countries as Moldova or Lithuania, while severing people’s ties with their localities, lead to the formation of transnational locations, gradually emerging as important loci of cultural identification, political mobilization, and economic networking for the increasingly mobile populations.

The revival of regionalism in postcommunist countries (and its association with federalism) has attracted several scholars in political science.72
Sociologists and anthropologists have offered many detailed studies of revived or freshly formed transnational localities and locations. Yet not much work has been done on the local microfoundations of postcommunist political and economic macro processes or on the a-synchrony between state- and subnational speed and direction of change (Verdery 2003; Humphrey 1998; Allina-Pisano 2009). Among a few exceptions is a collection of ethnographies of postcommunist transformations, edited and introduced by Burawoy and Verdery, who write:

Our view of the relation between macro structures and everyday practices is that the collapse of party states and administered economies broke down macro structures, thereby creating space for micro worlds to produce autonomous effects that may have unexpected influence over the structures that have been emerging. . . . It is precisely the sudden importance of micro processes lodged in moments of transformation that privileges an ethnographic approach. (1999, 3)

Importantly, they do not merely signal the existence of different rhythms in macro and micro changes; they claim that micro processes that tend to be overlooked by analysts and are often unintended by actors may influence, derail, or even halt macro changes.73

The program of contextual holism not only focuses on the macro-micro dynamic, but privileges the local dimension of the postcommunist transformations and attempts to generate analyses of the macro phenomena (for example, nationalism or state administration) through the study of multilevel governance (Stubbs 2005), mechanisms of reaggregation of local and regional levels into the national one, and linkages between various levels.

IV. Ethnographic Sensibility to the Rescue

To execute the research program of contextual holism researchers need to rely on several methods. Among them, ethnography or at minimum a broader perspective informed by an ethnographic sensibility is central.

Few people would disagree that the post-1989 political and economic transformations have been uneven, often slow, and certainly costly. As signaled at the beginning, the major point of scholarly concern is why in some places these transformations have stalled or careened onto a path of authoritarian reversal (Central Asia), and in other “got stuck” in a new regime type:
competitive authoritarianism (Armenia, Russia, Ukraine) (Levitsky and Way 2010). Why, furthermore, do even the most successful countries experience persistent “problems,” including, for example, underperforming sectors of the economy, unstable party systems, and weak civil societies. Experts offer a variety of theories, yet in much of what they have argued, particularly during the early years of transformations, two broad descriptive and explanatory logics can be detected: social adjustment and institutional adjustment. Both logics are founded on the central premise of transitology that if properly designed and applied, social and institutional engineering should solve all or most problems. Proponents of each logic offer diagnoses (what is wrong?) and policy prescriptions (what is to be done?), but while the champions of social adjustment tend to locate the source of troubles in the postcommunist societies, the advocates of institutional adjustment see the principal source of problems in the reform programs, in their design or implementation, or both. Accordingly, while the former seek to formulate programs of social renewal that are aimed at changing the people (Homo Sovieticus) so they can “fit” the indispensable new institutions, the latter would rather redesign the incoming institutions so they can “fit” the people. In short, the program of social adjustment needs to focus on generating new cultural (and human) capital among the populace, while the program of institutional adjustment privileges designing better, more fitting institutions. A clear articulation of the philosophy of social adjustment comes from the Polish neoliberal economist, Jan Winiecki, who offers a succinct characterization of Homo Sovieticus: “The problem of Poland is the Poles themselves who wait for a manna from heaven and think that they deserve everything without work and commitment. It is the passive part of society that is at fault. These people are demoralized by the previous system and by those they vote for” (quoted in Buchowski 2006).

Is there any empirical evidence to support Winiecki’s bold assertion? Piotr Sztompka, an internationally renowned Polish sociologist, advanced an elaborate analysis of mechanisms that contribute to the formation of cultural capital that turns people into passive robots “who wait for a manna from heaven.” He proposed (1993) a model of a specific culture, developed under state socialism that has been responsible, at least partially, for turning (some) members of Homo Sapiens into Homo Sovieticus. Representatives of this subspecies have difficulties with becoming “proper” participants in a system based on democracy and market economy because they are held down by civilizational incompetence. This cultural syndrome is characterized by
seven attributes that need to be overcome—suggests Sztompka—if the East Europeans want to catch up with the Western part of the continent. He argues that getting rid of the syndrome “is prerequisite, a necessary condition for attaining true modernity [original emphasis—JK]: authentic democracy, functioning market and open society (1993, 91).

Sztompka’s argument is so clearly articulated that it is falsifiable. I designed an ethnographic test to determine if a cultural syndrome he labeled “civilizational incompetence” exists in two regions of Poland I and others have studied using participant observation. Sztompka did not specify where (geographically and sociologically) civilizational incompetence is located; thus, it is fair to assume that it should be found in any region. I interrogated ethnographic data to determine whether, how, and to what degree his seven features of civilizational incompetence show up in local/regional (sub) cultures (Aronoff and Kubik 2012). The study is essentially a comparative analysis of two types of vernacular cultural capital that shape people’s coping and engagement with postcommunist transformations (for example, their visions of the political or the normative bases of their trust in authorities). In both cases, the portrayals of regional/local cultures were formed after extensive ethnographic studies (including my own ten-month work in one of the regions). The conclusions from the test are pretty straightforward: (1) there is no evidence of the syndrome of civilizational incompetence in the two regions; (2) some individual features of the syndrome can be detected, but they are embedded in region-specific cultural “wholes” (however weakly integrated) that have little or no resemblance to the hypothesized “culture of civilizational incompetence”; (3) regional (or local) reservoirs of cultural scripts provide people with resources that they competently utilize in developing strategies of coping with externally imposed cultural, economic, and institutional designs.

The point of my analysis is not to deny that “uncivil economy” or, more broadly, uncivil areas of social life (Rose 1994; Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998, 196) exist in postcommunist Europe. Rather, I posit that we need to be very careful in locating the pockets where such forms of behavior exist, avoid overgeneralization or false attribution to larger classes of people, and provide nuanced, contextualized and holistic (in the manner explicated here) explanations of the emergence of such behavioral patterns. I conclude, then, that ethnographic studies are needed to identify and ameliorate the shortcomings
of the two broad approaches to postcommunism I label institutional and social adjustment. Ethnographers and other “ethnographically minded” researchers are guided by the methodological principle of observing actors up close and a theoretical directive of providing a reconstruction of human agency that accounts for its embeddedness in various “systems,” however weakly structured. If in the view of social adjustors people (often in general) are seen as the “material” that needs to be fixed and while institutional adjustors call for fixing reform programs and their implementation, in the “ethnographic” research program people are seen as agents who are capable of fixing themselves and who, in fact, are almost always doing so while acting from within of their (often localized) social worlds that are constructed according to specifiable rules. The proponents of this view emphasize agents’ ability to adjust their strategies (we might call their theory: strategy adjustment) in order to cope with the changing environment. Such adjustments are not random. Rather, the available scenarios of action (including norms of social justice) the actors learn and practice in their historically evolved social and cultural environments provide templates for their behavior and thus introduce an element of predictability to the seemingly contingent situations. The point is to remember that many such templates are formed and re-formed in institutions that are often informal-formal hybrids and as such are best investigated through case studies designed to generate richly textured knowledge. Ethnographic participant observation is particularly suited to this task. This method—or at least a research program based on what might be called an ethnographic sensibility—allows us to see how cultures are reproduced, sometimes strategically, by the specific actions of concrete actors. More generally, researchers guided by an ethnographic sensibility are positioned to observe how ensembles of discourses coalesce, how climates of opinion solidify, and how patterns of choices emerge. They can study how patterns—detected ex post facto by public opinion or exit polls—are created, reproduced, and changed within specifically located trust networks and informal power constellations.

In general, research projects informed by an ethnographic sensibility make it possible to observe and reconstruct actors’ strategic creativity and thus serve as a welcome corrective to approaches that treat postcommunist transformations as phenomena of the macroscale, driven exclusively or mainly by mechanisms external to actual actors living in specific locations or communities.
Conclusion

The chief goal of the review presented in this chapter was to find a common denominator for the “best practices” in the field of postcommunist studies, both as a broad base for the rest of the volume and for further investigations of social justice in societies undergoing regime transformations. I started the review convinced that the main enemy of any evenhanded analysis of postcommunism was transitology. But I discovered that the stereotype of the simple-minded political scientist enamored with the misguided parsimony of transitology was inaccurate. True, transitological simplifications have heavily influenced both policy recommendations and some journalistic accounts (what I called “practical transitology”). However, the best work in comparative politics has displayed at least some degree of what I call ethnographic sensibility. This sensibility underpins the work of quite a few important researchers who contribute to the formulation of the research approach called here contextual holism with its five principles of relationism, historicism, constructivism, informal/formal hybridization, and localism/regionalism. The merits of this approach are demonstrated in this volume, although its systematic articulation and theoretical elaboration is still in the future.

Notes

The project would not be possible without many productive exchanges with the authors of this book’s chapters and the participants of the two SSRC conferences that Amy Linch and I coorganized. My collaborations with Amy and Mike Aronoff (Aronoff and Kubik 2012) have been central to the development of many arguments. Alina Vamanu’s and Amy’s marvelously incisive comments and questions pushed me to the brink of despair—I may hide my next manuscript from them. Bob Kaufman has been, as always, a supportive yet demanding reader. I also owe a great intellectual debt to the organizers and participants of the seminar on “Vernacular Epistemologies,” which I had the good fortune to participate in from September 2008 to May 2010 at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis. My debt to Indrani Chatterjee and Julie Livingston, the project leaders, is immense. Earlier versions were presented as talks at several institutions where I received marvelous comments. I cannot list them all here, but many thanks for both the intellectual input and organizational work to Michael Bernhard, Arista Circrutas, Grzegorz Ekiert, Stephen E. Hanson, Teresa Kulawik, Joanna Kurczewska, Jacek Kurczewski, Radek Markowski, Lech Mróz, Antoni Sulek, Jacek Wasilewski, and Glennys Young.
1. I use the concept “approach” because I want to avoid the more grandiose “paradigm.” It is close to what Larry Laudan calls “research tradition” (1977, 1996). For a crisp exposition of Laudan’s ideas, see Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 413.

2. For the arguably most eloquent exposition of systemism in today’s philosophy of science, see Bunge 2010.

3. Publication of the massive reader edited by Goodin and Tilly (2006) demonstrates the renewed interest in contextual and analysis in political science. There is also a renewed interest in systemic analysis. For example, in the field of international relations, Braumoeller (2008) analyzes “systemic politics” while Jackson (2006) writes about “configurationism.” For Tilly, “Not only do all political processes occur in history and therefore call for knowledge of their historical contexts, but also where and when political processes occur influence how [original emphasis—JK] they occur” (2006, 420). Elsewhere Tilly argues, “Systemic explanations, strictly speaking, consist of specifying a place for some event, structure, or process within a larger self-maintaining set of interdependent elements and showing how the event, structure, or process in question serves and/or results from interactions among the larger set of elements” (2001, 23).

4. In the field of postcommunist studies the seminal debate on (de)merits of contextual analysis took place between Bunce (1995a, 1995b) and Schmitter and Karl (1994) and Karl and Schmitter (1995).

5. Berman and Offe both make a case for the a-historical nature of this claim. According to Berman, the history of the West is the story of not just democracy following ever-expanding economic “freedom,” but also popular mobilization against the exigencies wrought by markets. European social democracies are based on the idea that the proper use of political power is to direct economic forces in the service of the collective good (Berman 2006, 213). Offe shows us that the equation of capitalism, democracy, and social stability was by no means self-evident in pre-WWII Europe. Liberals thought democracy “would lead by necessity to tyranny and expropriation by the poor and uneducated” (1983, 225–26).

6. There is no room here to summarize the truly interesting debate on this issue. See Przeworski et al. 2000; Boix and Stokes 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006.

7. Gans-Morse (2004) introduces a useful distinction between two meanings of the term “transitology.” The first meaning refers to “a body of literature developed through the study of democratizing regimes in Southern Europe and Latin America” (322). In the second meaning transitions are construed as processes that have a clearly defined telos: modern liberal democracy and market economy. I use the term here following the second meaning.
8. It is, however, easy to show that some prescriptions foisted on the region have not actually been followed in the “West” itself. See, for example, Böröcz and Kovacs 2001; Vachudova 2005, 120–23.

9. “The literature on new democracies shares two basic assumptions: the existence of a sufficiently clear and consistent corpus of democratic theory, and the possibility of using this corpus, with only marginal modifications, as an adequate conceptual tool for the study of emerging democracies. Unfortunately, the first assumption—that there is a clear and consistent corpus of democratic theory—is wrong. By implication, the second, that existing democratic theory ‘travels’ well, is impracticable” (2001, 7).

10. The set of standard economic reform measures amounting to what is usually described as macroeconomic stabilization and/or liberalization is summarized in Islam and Mandelbaum 1993. The desired sequence of the necessary, albeit minimal, political reforms constituting democratization has been recently summarized in Acemoglu and Robinson 2006.

11. For a thorough analysis of the mechanisms leading up to the acceptance/rejection of neoliberalism in the postcommunist world, see Aligica and Evans 2009.

12. Gans-Morse argues that his systematic study of the literature published between 1991 and 2003 challenges “the notion that transitology has been the dominant approach to the study of post-communist transitions, at least if transitology is defined as the literature on democratization that developed out of the study of transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America. A review of the literature instead uncovers a welter of diverse and innovative approaches to the study of regime change in post-communism” (2004, 323). He also shows that much of the work on postcommunism effectively avoids falling into the trap of teleology (2004, 336).


15. Note their high positions in the ranking produced by such institutions as the Bertelsmann Foundation or the Freedom House.

16. Reviews of these divergent paths and their explanations are provided in Bunce 1999a, 2003; Ekiert and Hanson 2003; Fish 1998; Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss 2010; McFaul 2002.

General Approaches to Postcommunism

18. McFaul’s conceptualization (2002, 2010) is superior to Huntington’s “third wave.” It takes into account the fact that many postcommunist countries did not transform to regime forms resembling modern democracies.


20. “In many academic studies as well as popular portrayals, this ‘great transformation’ has been described in a discourse of capitalist ‘triumphalism’ that entails a certain linear, teleological thinking in relation to the direction of change; from socialism or dictatorship to liberal democracy, from a plan to a market economy” (Berdahl 2000, 1).

21. “Transition’ is itself a hotly contested term. Economic and political planners (both academic and non-academic) have used ‘transition’ to highlight what, to them, is the most significant common condition of postsocialist societies: a status of being ‘in between’ a socialist past, a system from which ‘transition societies’ are moving away, and the capitalist future these societies are moving towards, even if there might be ‘setbacks’. Anthropologists, in contrast, have generally rejected the concept of transition as ideological. One critique here is that the models of transition planners and theorists, fixated on realizing a pre-determined future, analyse the present from the vantage point of this imaginary, ideal future” (Brandtstadter 2007, 131).

22. My favorite example is the debate between Krzysztof Jasiewicz and the “parachutists” in the area of postcommunist electoral studies. While the latter arrived in the region to confirm a theory that electoral choices are primarily driven by economic motivations and actually kept confirming it, Jasiewicz has been consistently demonstrating that the main driver of electoral choices, particularly in Poland, have been cultural factors, notably the intensity and type of religiosity. No serious scholar knowing the region has serious disagreements with Jasiewicz’s analysis. See Jasiewicz 2003, 2009; and Bernhard 2000.

23. The idea of this model is indebted to the seminal work on regime transformations by Linz and Stepán (1996, 3–65). Wolfgang Merkel offers a different model, but some of his solutions are similar to mine (2004). His ideas of embedded democracy and partial regimes strongly influenced my thinking. Elster, Offe, and Preuss formulate a similar thought when they talk about “horizontal” differentiation of institutional domains. The form of “institutional pluralism” they advocate is “a rich diversity of domains, each of them ‘staffed’ with competent actors that are capable of performing the specific function assigned to them without being under the dictate of, corrupted by, or otherwise subject to binding premises set by the agents within other sectors or domains” (1998, 32). The main difference between my model and those offered by other scholars is the inclusion of “domestic society.” I need it
to stay focused on the complex and shifting boundary between the “private” and “public” and the significance of informality.

24. The symmetry around the center should not be taken to mean that the relationships between civil society and the other three domains are always direct. For instance, political society often mediates between state and civil society (Michael Bernhard asked for this important clarification).

25. Earlier, other scholars promoted a different conceptual pair: totalitarianism and state socialism (Bunce 1995a, 985).

26. The switch from the totalitarian to the posttotalitarian phase of state socialism illustrates recent theorizing on evolutionary, gradual institutional change remarkably well (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). It is an example of what they call “institutional conversion” that occurs when “rules remain formally the same but are interpreted and enacted in new ways” (2010, 17).

27. The humanization of the system manifested itself in the emergence of massive shadow economies, limited intraparty democratization, and “illegal” civil society (dissident movements). Such changes were, however, uneven: more advanced in some countries than others and fluctuating over time (periods of “thaw” followed by “the tightening of the screw”).

28. Kornai 1992, 85–86; Seleny 2006, 20–32; Grossman 1977; Solnick 1998. Feige writes, “Analysis of noncompliance under the Soviet regime suggests that the circumvention of price and production controls contributed to a more efficient system and served to buffer some of the most costly consequences of allocation by administrative control. The buffer function may have extended the lifetime of the Soviet regime by ameliorating some of the costs of misallocation. But, as discussed below, the pervasiveness of noncompliance under the Soviet regime has had a pernicious effect on subsequent economic reforms” (1997, 27). According to Seleny, “more often than not, Western political scientists and economist missed the full significance of both informal institutions and economic reforms under state socialism” (2006, 29).

29. While rejecting simple models of state socialism and democratization, researchers describe, analyze, and try to explain complex patterns of change, characterized by the variance in: (1) the points of departure (Linz and Stepan 1994; Ekiert 1996; Bunce 1999); (2) modes of power transfer (Przeworski 1991; Elster 1996; Bozoki 2002); and (3) such characteristics of the new, emerging polities, as, for example: (1) the basic features of their institutional design (Bunce 2003; Ekiert and Hanson 2003; Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998; Stark and Bruszt 1998); (2) party systems (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Bielasiak 2005; Lewis 2006; Pop-Eleches 2010); (3) economic
and social policies (Haggard and Kaufman 1995, 2008; Frye 2010; Greskovits 1998); (4) the architecture of the state (Ganev 2007; Grzymala-Busse 2007; Grzymala-Busse and Luong 2003; O’Dwyer 2006; Sissenich 2007); and (5) civil society (Howard 2003; Bernhard and Karakoc 2007; Ekiert and Kubik 1999).

This list could be extended by at least three more processes: (1) the development of the rule of law that regulates the emergent architecture captured by the model; (2) formation of the new (democratic?) political culture; and (3) formation of mechanisms determining the forms of (re)engagement with the world that is the process of globalization.

30. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) offer a seminal typology of regime types (five) and investigate how each type influences democratization. They conclude that dismantling a nondemocratic regime is easier and the consolidation of democracy faster and more durable if the ancient regime is authoritarian or posttotalitarian rather than totalitarian or sultanistic.

31. Chen and Sil (2007) provide a systematic argument for the contextual approach.

32. Pop-Eleches argues, “The prospects for democratization and democratic deepening were significantly better in countries with favorable legacies (such as the relatively developed, ethnically homogenous countries of East Central Europe with their longer histories of statehood, democracy, and bureaucratic competence) than in many of the fledgling new states emerging from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia” (2007, 909).

33. In Bunce’s memorable words: “Distal causes—in the postsocialist experience at least—have masqueraded as contingent causes” (1999b, 790).

34. In his comprehensive, statistically driven review of the impact various legacies have on democratization in postcommunist countries, Pop-Eleches does not discuss this legacy, so it is not clear yet how it stakes out against other legacies in statistical analyses. There is no room here to discuss the troubling theoretical issues related to the high correlation (leading to multicollinearity) among indicators of various legacies (for a careful analysis of this problem, see Pop-Eleches 2007b).

35. Capitalism in second economies had two basic forms: (1) “commercial” capitalism built by semiofficial petty traders (arguably most developed in Poland); and (2) “manufacturing” capitalism created by official and semiofficial entrepreneurs (most developed in Hungary; Szelenyi 1988).

36. See, for example, Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Przeworski et al. 2000; Boix and Stokes 2003.

37. This part of the analysis comes mostly from Milada Vachudova, a coauthor of Ekiert, Kubik, and Vachudova 2005. For the full argument, see Vachudova 2005.
39. A persuasive case for the necessity of understanding “local framing” is offered by Ross (2010).

40. I choose this term to signal my intention to ground my exposition in a strong ontological commitment. An epistemological stance that is clearly founded on similar intellectual choices is analytic eclecticism, recently proposed by Sil and Katzenstein (2010).

41. The second column merely lists radical opposites of the principles listed on column 1. Its elements do not amount to a coherent research program. By contrast, I claim that a research program based on the principles listed in column 3 is feasible and indeed desired.

42. Mitchell (2008) develops a related argument that the invention of “economics” is coterminous with the constitution of “economy” as a separate domain of human activity. Margaret Levi, a prominent representative of game theory in comparative politics, has recently reminded her discipline that Adam Smith wrote not only *The Wealth of the Nations* but also *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* “in which he states that values may trump interests” (2009, 117).

43. With the explosion of various institutionalisms in political science (Hall and Tylor 1996) and economics (North 1990), the theme of extraeconomic drivers and constraints of economic activity moved to the center of many analyses, but as Gudeman (2009) argues most institutionalists downplay or ignore the autotelic character of many human interactions and communities that they tend to reduce to parameters influencing economic transactions among calculating/strategizing individuals.

44. A volume edited by Hann and Hart (2009) offers a set of critical readings of Polanyi. Its authors propose several innovative conceptual tools designed to further advance the analysis of embeddedness. Constrained by the size of this essay, I am, however, unable to take full advantage of their work.

45. One source of inspiration is the work of Elinor Ostrom and her team. See Poteete, Janssen, and Ostrom 2010.

46. Schmitter and Karl suggest that transitology has a patron saint, Machiavelli, who argued that because during the moments of upheaval “actors behaved capriciously, immorally and without benefit of shred rules, only 50 percent of political events are understandable. The other half was due to unpredictable events of fortuna” (1994, 174).

47. Efforts to overcome the structure-agency dichotomy are vigorous in many areas of social science, particularly in various versions of new institutionalism (Mahoney and Thelen 2010).
“It is the doctrine that transactions, interactions, social ties, and conversations constitute the central stuff of social life” (Tilly and Goodin 2006, 11). See Tilly and Goodin 2006, for a useful explication of this ontological position and its contrast to other ontologies of the social.

Additionally, the concept of agency needs to be carefully reconsidered because people’s ability to affect the world varies and depends on the whole set of factors. As Mahmood argues, “If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes ‘change’ and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori” (2001, 212).

The field of historically oriented analyses of politics is booming quite impressively in comparative politics (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003; Pierson 2004; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). However, the new historical institutionalism, as the new approach is known, is different from the macrohistorical approaches of such classics of comparative politics as Barrington Moore or Theda Skocpol. Its arguments are more sharply fleshed-out as their goal is the specification of mechanisms at the mezzo- and microlevels (Tilly 2001).

Among the best works representing this tradition in postcommunist studies are studies on the role of communist institutions in the downfall of the system (Bunce 2003), the historically shaped patterns of “redeeming” of communist parties (Grzymała-Busse 2002), the impact of historical trajectories on the postcommunist reforms of welfare states (Inglot 2008), or the staying power of political cleavages at the local level (Wittenberg 2006). Bernhard thoroughly reviews the main arguments of the opposite tradition that emphasizes “crafting of democracy” and/or “institutional choice” (2005, 1–25).

Not just class conflict (emphasized in Acemoglu and Robinson 2006).

Ziblatt and Capoccia: “History does not always move smoothly from period to period but instead moves via crises, or sharply punctuated episodes of change that have lasting consequences” (2010, 6).

Among the phenomena routinely studied with the help of interpretive approaches are, for example: (1) legitimacy (as its standards vary from society to society and depend on contextualized, culture-specific criteria) (Aronoff 1989; Kubik 1994); (2) mechanisms of compliance, quiescence, and everyday resistance (as they involve the manipulation of cultural understandings of reality) (Wedeen 1999); and (3) generation, reproduction, and dismantling of collective identities (as such processes involve the use of “cultural materials”) (Ross 2007; Fernandes 2006; Davis 2005). Interpretive approaches also provide fresh and valuable insights into a number of problem areas usually studied
through naturalistic modes of inquiry. Ample evidence of the fruitfulness of interpretation can be found in the study of non-Western political systems in comparative politics (Chabal and Daloz 2006; Green 2002), constructivist work in international relations (Katzenstein 1996; Klotz and Lynch 2007), “culturalist” analyses in political economy (Blyth 2002), and even economics (Rao and Walton 2004).

55. For an alternative perspective, see Chabal and Daloz 2006; Shapiro, Smith, and Masoud 2004; and Aronoff and Kubik 2012. For a solid philosophical argument aimed at establishing viable antinaturalist ontology of the political, see Bevir 2008.

56. “Rebuilding national identity, in the sense of ethnic and cultural identity, was an important part of rebuilding political identity” (Priban 2004, 416).

57. “There may be multiple local interpretations of economic conditions, which do indeed affect sovereignty movements, but the multiplicity of meanings muddles the effect of particular structural variables on sovereignty movements across all regions” (2005, 9).

58. “Lumping social capital together with all other forms of capital tends to obscure the fact that norms of reciprocity and trust are more properly the purview of culture (Foley & Edwards, 1998b, p. 135)” (Petro 2001, 240).

59. “By systematically contrasting Novgorod’s heritage as a medieval center and cradle of Russian democracy to Moscow’s heritage of political and economic centralization, they [the Novgorod elite—JK] redefined reform as a return to the values of a better and more prosperous Russian past. Embracing a positive myth rooted in Russia’s past eased the shock of cultural discontinuity, broadened the social constituency in favor of reforms, and contributed to much higher levels of confidence in local government. The result is the remarkable level of economic and democratic development the region displays today” (2004, 3).

60. See Scott 1998 on legibility as a prerequisite for the effective functioning of the state.

61. For a useful typology of relationships between formal and informal institutions (based on the Latin American examples), see Helmke and Levitsky 2006, 14.

62. Some observers point to the existence of powerful informal relations even in the negotiating and disbursement of foreign assistance (Wedel 2001).

63. “It is a gross ecological fallacy to infer the conditions of individual Russians from aggregate data about the Russian economy. Empirical research shows that nearly every Russian household is seeking to get by through a strategy of ‘defensive demodernization,’ relying upon a multiplicity of economies, official and unofficial, monetized and nonmonetized, legal, ‘legal,’ or uncivil. This strategy was developed of necessity in the old command economy and will remain important until Russia nears its economic destination” (1994, 47).
“Sociologists and urban anthropologists have come some distance from theory that leaves no room for agency, for messy contradictions, for internal moral debates, or for self-determination. Most especially, the ethnographic craft contributes critical perspectives on complex subjective realities that matter if our understanding of poverty is going to do anything more than recount the structural forces that impose from without” (Newman 2002, 1598).

“The result of this methodically imposed project in social and political engineering was that by 1991, whether one lived in Tashkent or Tula, one was governed by identical political institutions, participated in the same centrally planned economy, and studied similar types of texts in similar schools. As famously dramatized in The Irony of Fate, a Brezhnev-era comedy, one even walked streets with the same layout and the same names, lived in the same apartments, sat on the same furniture, and ate off the same dishes. In short, by 1991, both the formal structures of the state and the informal organization of everyday life had become standardized throughout Soviet territory in a way that is historically unprecedented” (Darden 2009, 3).

See, for example, Stoner-Weiss 1997 and Petro 2004 on Russia; Zarycki 2002, 2007; Gorzelak 2004; Bartkowski 2003; Kurczewska 2008 on Poland; Lewicka 2007 on Poland and Ukraine.

Kalyvas writes, for example, “It is the convergence of local motives and supralocal imperatives that endows civil war with its particular character and leads to joint violence that straddles the divide between the political and the private, the collective and the individual” (2003, 487).

This analysis is inspired by Trouillot 2003, but my definitions of location and locality are different from his.

Moreover, the concept of community “in the classic sense of shared values, shared identity, and thus shared culture” (Marcus 1998, 62) needs to be counterbalanced with the concept of “multi-locale, dispersed identity” (1998, 63) constructed, often simultaneously, by often mutually independent flows of cultural materials, complex political dependencies, and economic relations. “It is the burden of the modernist ethnography to capture distinctive identity formations in all their migrations and dispersions” (1998, 63).

For Anthony P. Cohen community does not need to be based on face-to-face interactions: “Our argument has been, then, that whether or not its structural boundaries remain intact, the reality of community lies in its members’ perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and referent of their identity” (1985, 118).
71. It is important to recognize that such flows are often incongruous with each other, an idea expressed, for example, in Appadurai’s influential conceptualization of several types of scapes. “Because of the disjunctive and unstable interplay of commerce, media, national policies, and consumer fantasies, ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality (however large), has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders” (1990, 19).


73. Capoccia and Ziblatt formulate a similar thought in a different context. They propose to see “democratization as an inherently long-run chain of linked episodes of struggles and negotiations over institutional change. It is often in these ex post, less visible moments that the political institutions of democracy are created and reshaped” (2010, 20).

74. Other scholars offer similar conceptualizations. Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley write about evolutionary and involutionary theories. The former rests on an assumption that “if you create the proper institutions, they will shape the individuals who occupy them so that individual behavior will conform to institutional constraints and imperatives. In the context of the post-communist transformation, this is the idea of capitalism-by-design.” The involutionary theory is a theory of path-dependent transformations. Individuals in this theory learn as they cope with the changing world. Importantly “they collectively [emphasis added—JK] reinterpret the roles they have to play, and in so doing they draw on shared experiences, ways of knowing, and common understandings” (1998, 9). Stark and Bruszt compare the logic of imitation (that characterizes the work of instant institutional revolutionaries who believe in “designer capitalism”) and the logic of involution (interpreted more deterministically than in Eyal et al.) preferred by those who emphasize the almost insurmountable “weight of the past.” Against both the optimism of “designers” and pessimism of “determinists” they articulate their own position that is based on such concepts as “recombination,” “innovation,” “bricolage,” but also path dependence (1998, 4–8).

75. The syndrome of civilizational incompetence includes: (1) engaging in private rather than public (official) institutions; (2) emphasizing looking back, toward the past, rather than searching for forward-looking solutions; (3) accepting a fatalistic outlook and having minimal faith in human agency; (4) privileging negative freedom (freedom form) over positive freedom (freedom to); (5) practicing mythological thinking rather than realism; (6) glorifying “the West” and distrusting “the East”; and (7) being opportunistic by preferring usefulness to “truth, faithfulness, straightforwardness” (1993, 91).
76. As in Sztompka’s work, the focus of these studies is not on actual actions/behavior but rather cultural scenarios that serve as models of or for actions/behavior (Geertz 1973, 93). Sztompka sees his task as “the search for underlying patterns for thinking and doing, commonly shared among the members of society, and therefore external and constraining with respect to each individual member” (1993, 87; original emphasis).

77. There are gripping similarities between the fate of impoverished groups displaying “uncivil” behavior in the postcommunist countries and the situation of the American underclass and its “culture of poverty.” Much can be learned from the sociological discussions of these issues, also methodologically, as ethnography has become one of the key tools of research (see, for example, Newman 1999, 2002; Wacquant 2002; Wilson and Chaddha 2009).


79. This approach is similar to the one taken by Stark and Bruszt (1998). The main difference is my emphasis on the significance of culture and the need to study people’s strategic agency (and their ability to “recombine” various resources or capitals) in “actual” localities and locations.

80. As Peter Hall observes, “Institutions are instruments the actors use to negotiate the complexity of the world. Far from dictating particular actions, institutions are seen as enabling structures within which actors exercise a robust agency” (2010, 217).

References


From Transitology to Contextual Holism


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