Prediction and Prophecy in Communist Studies

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Abstract

Contrary to Popper’s classic paper with this title, it can be argued that the principal failure of Western analyses of communism was not the failure to predict the collapse of most of the communist regimes in and around 1989 but more a failure of prophecy, in the sense of a more speculative theory of the contradictions of those regimes and their unsustainability. The reasons can be found in the polarisation between overblown theories of totalitarianism and excessively bland comparative approaches couched in terms of the, then popular, theories of industrial society and, often, convergence. There were also methodological reasons arising from the positivist shibboleths of factual documentation, with the consequence that dubious statistics were considered better than none, and value-freedom.
This article is a partial response to the claim by Klaus von Beyme (1994:35; 1996:6) that the collapse of state socialism was a ‘black Friday’ for the social sciences and their methodology. ¹ Writing in the aftermath of the credit crunch, it is salutary to compare the failure to predict that catastrophe with the failure to predict the collapse of most of the communist regimes in and around 1989.² The British Queen’s question, “Why wasn’t one told?”, is also relevant to 1989. In both cases, however, the point is not (except for the speculators) to predict the precise

¹ Adam Przeworski (1991:1) wrote in similar terms of “a dismal failure of political science.” See also Tarrow, 1991. Since writing this paper we have been able to read a recent article by Antoni Sułek (2009) which complements our analysis from a Polish perspective; Poland was of course much better placed than most other parts of the bloc (Bafoil, 1991; Mespoulet, 2009). We take up here some of the themes of the first chapter of Outhwaite and Ray, 2004.

² The Guardian of 26 January 2009 lists just six commentators “who saw it [the credit crunch] coming,” including the economist Nouriel Roubini and the speculators Warren Buffett and George Soros; one could add a few journalists such as Will Hutton, but again a tiny minority.
moment of the collapse, but more a failure of something like what Karl Popper called prophecy, in the sense of a more analytical and at the same time speculative theory of the contradictions of those regimes and their unsustainability. Whereas Popper (1948) argued

Randall Collins claimed to have predicted the collapse in his book on Weberian sociology, but he does so in only quite general terms (Collins, 1986). There was also a timely special issue of Studies in Comparative Communism (1989), based on a conference held in 1987, on ‘Leadership Drift’ in the USSR, Yugoslavia, Poland and Hungary. Robert Hutchings (1989:9) closed his introduction to the papers with the prospect of power-sharing: “there is a way out of leadership drift, but the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe may not like it.” Valerie Bunce (1999: xii) aimed “to challenge the recent assumption that the knowledge accumulated about European socialism over the course of the cold war period was deficient, because specialists failed to anticipate the events of 1989 and afterwards.” We should also mention as an early futurological exercise by the Soviet dissident Andei Amalrik (1970): Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984? As von Beyme (1994:27) notes, Amalrik was only a year out in his prediction of the beginning of the end.

Katherine Verdery (1995:30) offered a retrospective hint at such an analysis, writing of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ division in state socialism: “To phrase it in Gramscian terms, the lived experience of people in socialism precluded its utopian discourse from
that the social sciences should eschew speculative prophecy and stick to testable predictions, we are inclined to suggest something more like the opposite in relation to the analysis of state socialism.

There is, of course, a long and ignoble history of euphoria and punch-pulling in Western accounts of communism, fed by an even longer history of Potemkin villages tarted up to impress visitors. As Žižek (2001:95) stated,

for Western Leftists, Eastern dissidents were all too naïve in their belief in democracy – in their rejection of Socialism, they unknowingly threw the baby out with the bathwater; in the eyes of the dissidents, the Western Left played patronizing games with them, disavowing the true harshness of the totalitarian regime.

The Webbs’ book is one of the most notorious scholarly examples in English; in France, with its extremely orthodox communist party, there were many more.⁵ Within serious academic studies of becoming hegemonic – precluded that is, the softening of coercion with consent.” For classic analyses of ‘them’, see Voslensky (1984) and Toranska (1987).

⁵ See, for example, the chapters by Auer and Rabinbach in Fleck et al 2009.
communism, however, the lines of division are much more nuanced, and methodological considerations as well as political concerns play a much larger part. It was not so much a matter of portraying communist societies in glowing colours as of relativising their obvious defects in the interests of comparative method, value-freedom, and so forth, accompanied by a desire not to be seen to line up in the ranks of the cold warriors. As we note below, Alfred Meyer (1991:136) blamed the failure to forecast 1989 on

cold-war hysteria, knee-jerk anti-anti-communism, and the blindness of dominant social science methodologies to non-Western cultures."

These three elements form in a sense the frame for this article.

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6 As von Beyme (1994:17) wrote (our translation), "There were undoubtedly fellow-travellers and apologists of actually existing socialism in the West. But their mistakes are relatively uninteresting. It is more important to investigate the reasons for misjudgements in the positivist mainstream."

7 See p.00 below.
In what follows we will focus on mainstream literature rather than that inspired by Maoist or Trotskyist approaches, even though these were often among the more substantial contributions – notably the massive studies by Isaac Deutscher and Charles Bettelheim or shorter discussions by, for example, Tony Cliff or Hillel Ticktin. The mainstream was sometimes influenced by Marxism or Weberianism (the latter, for example, in the influential work of Raymond Aron in France and Frank Parkin in the UK), but more usually by a diffuse functionalism or an empiricism which deliberately eschewed theoretical baggage.

Functionalism, we are often told, and with some reason, is intrinsically uncritical and prone to endorse any existing system. Alvin Gouldner (1971) pointed to the parallels between US functionalism and Soviet Marxism-Leninism as parallel programmes legitimating their respective societies. So far as US functionalists looked at all at the USSR and other communist societies, however, they tend to line up at the more critical end of the spectrum. Talcott Parsons, in terms which recur throughout this literature, stressed both that “the main forces of social change are making for convergence” between capitalist and socialist industrialism (Parsons 1964a:390) and that social differentiation in modern societies undermined central control
Thus communist societies, he predicted (in a sense rightly), would “either make adjustments in the direction of electoral democracy and a plural party system or 'regress' into generally less advanced and politically less effective forms of organization” (Parsons 1964b:356; cf. Lane 1996:146-7). Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, authors of one of the most influential texts of the early postwar period (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1966), were certainly not inclined to punch-pulling.

The same is true of communist studies or Sovietology more specifically. Merle Fainsod’s How Russia is Ruled (1953) was one of the leading examples of the totalitarianism model. The opening sentence declares that “The aim of this book is to analyze the physiology, as well as the anatomy, of Soviet totalitarianism” (ibid.:ix), and the book ends with the declaration that “The totalitarian regime does not shed its police-state characteristics; it dies when power is wrenched from its hands” (ibid.:500). Fainsod applied this analysis, enriched with a wealth of material on everyday life, in Smolensk Under Soviet Rule (1958; 1989). In this book, based on Party archives seized in the

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8 See also Lane (1996:146-7). The theme of differentiation plays a large part in the literature both before and after 1989/1991.

9 This archive was exceptionally valuable, since material of this sort was not available to researchers until nearly fifty
Nazi occupation, he concluded that the totalitarian machinery worked partly because if its “imperfections”. There was “widespread mass discontent,” and “there was little that went on in even the most obscure corner of Smolensk that the secret police did not know” (1989:449).

Paradoxically, it was the very inefficiency of the state machine which helped make it tolerable. Had the Smolensk proconsuls functioned as a perfect instrument of the center and been able always to exact the heavy tribute which Moscow demanded, the price in terms of suffering and the possible dangers to the regime in terms of stiffening resistance would have been far greater than they actually were. The failures of the local representatives of state power provided an escape valve which did much to ensure that mass indignation did not boil over. Thus the imperfections of the regional control system helped to alleviate tension. (1989:450)

years later, after the end of the Soviet Union. In the intervening period, there was considerable reliance on exile memoirs, such as that by the former apparatchik Viktor Kravchenko (1947) and on studies based on interviews with exiles. Exile studies were also of course hardly likely to convey a favourable impression of the regimes left behind, though they did reveal elements of nostalgia for the socialist collective and for the homeland more generally.
Fainsod went on to explain the relative stability of the regime in terms of two further elements: “the tradition of servility to authority inherited from the Russian past” and the opportunities for social advancement created by the Revolution: “it tapped fresh talent from the lower depths of society and harnessed it to the revolutionary chariot” (1989:451). Whatever one makes of this analysis fifty years on, it is clear that Fainsod was not naively accepting that Soviet totalitarian aspirations were being fulfilled: he concluded “that the totalitarian facade concealed a host of inner contradictions, that the yoke which Communism imposed left its legacy of smoldering grievances, and that the suppressed aspirations of yesterday may yet become the seedbed of tomorrow’s fierce debates” (ibid.:454). In a volume edited by Friedrich, one of the leading theorists of totalitarianism, Karl Deutsch (1954:332) explicitly addressed the issue of the decline

10 Daniel Brower, in his introduction to the 1989 edition, delicately deconstructs the totalitarian model. A posthumous revised edition of How Russia is Ruled, more blandly retitled How the Soviet Union is Governed and authored by Jerry Hough, apparently annoyed those who continued to uphold the totalitarian model (Gleason, 1995:265 n.66). Stephen Kotkin (1995:489 n.6) comments wryly on the debates over the acceptance of Stalinism: “It seems that no one likes to characterize admiration for dictatorship as a rational choice exercised by conscious individuals.”
of totalitarian systems. In what now seems one of the more perceptive predictions, he suggested that "we might well expect the 1970s or 1980s to bring...a diminution in 'classic' patterns of totalitarian behaviour."

In the 1960s, the 'totalitarian' model which, as we have seen, was more nuanced than it may appear at first sight, was confronted by, for example, work by Gordon Skilling on interest groups in the USSR and by Jerry Hough (1969) on the Soviet administrative system. Academic exchanges and field work became more common, and as Gleason (1995:131) suggests, "although a year in the Soviet Union usually had a devastating effect on leftist, 

11 Defenders of the totalitarian model, such as the Polish exile Leszek Kołakowski, could of course question this implication. Kołakowski wrote, in a contribution to a 1983 volume on totalitarianism, "Among arguments purporting to do away with the concept of 'totalitarianism', the most absurd says that the Soviet Union, for instance, is in fact a 'pluralist' system because there are always cliques or particular groups vying for power and influence in the establishment. If this is a symptom of pluralism, then the concept is useless and indeed quite meaningless, since all political regimes throughout all history have been 'pluralist' in this sense." (Kołakowski 2005:66).

12 One of us made his first visit to the Soviet Union on a school trip in 1966.
pro-Soviet opinions, it also undermined the totalitarian model.” An influential book, *The Red Executive* (Granick 1979), pointed up the parallels between West and East.

The concept of totalitarianism, with its emphasis on state terror, tended to become an ideal type from which later divergences were measured. Though few commentators were naive enough to believe that everything changed after Stalin’s death in 1953 or with Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ of 1956, there was a growing consensus in many Western countries that the term totalitarianism could no longer be applied in a strong sense, and that something else was needed to explain a ‘post-totalitarian’ reality - at which point the ideas of industrial society and convergence took up the strain. (As noted earlier in relation to Parsons, the two had already coexisted to a substantial degree.) Brzezinski, one of the leading theorists of totalitarianism in the USSR, had set it in a comparative perspective (Brzezinski and Huntington 1965). Three other major theorists of the USSR who were at the centre of a major refugee study, the Harvard Interview Project, Inkeles, Bauer and Kluckhohn (1956:26) conceptualised it as both totalitarian and an industrial society: “In many respects, the social organization of the Soviet Union resembles that of the large-scale industrial societies of the West.” As Mark Edele (2007:354) comments,
Within the basic categorial framework of Inkeles, Bauer and Kluckhohn, then, many of the later discussions of historians could have unfolded: totalitarians and revisionists simply focussed on different parts of the equation, the former stressing state attempts and the latter ‘Soviet complications’. Similarly, many of the post-revisionist debates – such as the polemic between ‘modernists’ and ‘neo-traditionalists’, or the return of the concept of ‘totalitarianism’ – look like an unfolding of the conceptual triangle of the ‘Soviet totalitarian-industrial society’.

Two typical examples of these controversies can be found in the Slavic Review (1961) and, a quarter of a century later and focussed on Stalinism, in the Russian Review (1986). In the first of these, Alfred Meyer made an early attempt to deflate Brzezinski’s totalitarian model with the aid of comparisons with Wright Mills’ analysis of the US. After 1989/1991, in an article quoted in our introductory remarks, Meyer (1991) reflected on

...why scholarship on Soviet politics and society had such a poor record of forecasting the most recent developments...one might conclude that I blame this seeming failure on the intrusion of political ideologies into our research: cold-war hysteria, knee-jerk anti-anti-communism, and the blindness of
dominant social science methodologies to non-Western cultures.¹³

Most important of all was however the comparative and contextualising imperative. Raymond Aron, on the moderate right in the French context, was unapologetic in using the term totalitarian to describe Soviet-type societies, which he saw as undergoing a process of routinisation (Aron 1965).¹⁴ He also stressed the context of industrial society stating “at a time when science is universal and means of production are similar in every industrial economy, it would be as unreasonable to deny all resemblance between the Soviet and Western types of societies as to claim...that industrialism will culminate both here and there in the same civilisation” (Aron 1967:2).

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¹³ He goes on to conclude that “politics and methodology inevitably are intertwined” and to argue for “methodological pluralism.” Thomas Remington (1995:180) similarly commented that “the common knowledge of Sovietology can be faulted for a theoretical bias in the direction of stability.”

¹⁴ He was one of the first to point to the tension between the imperatives of control and liberalisation: “…le régime de parti unique...est à la fois trop despotique pour ce qu’il veut avoir de libéral, trop libéral pour ce qu’il veut conserver de despotique” (Aron 1965:16).
As David Lane (2007:174) has written in a judicious retrospective,

The major fault in the totalitarian conception is that it reduces all social life to dependency on the political. It is similar in character to Marxist accounts, except that Marxist ones reduce phenomena to an economic base...In neither Marxism nor totalitarianism does civil society, set between individual and the state, play an important role. My own approach is to conceive of social differentiation as being part of urban industrial society, whether it be state socialist or capitalist.  

It was probably considerations of empirical sustainability which did most to blunt the edge of social scientific analysis of state socialism, dependent as they largely were on official statistics and other material. In the German case, the work of Peter Christian Lutz on the Party elite (1968) inspired a number of

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15 Lane points to the implications of this approach for contemporary research. “In this paradigm, rather than 'totalitarianism' leaving a vacuum in which civil society had to be constructed, on the contrary, post communist societies inherited embedded structures with which the imposition of a Western type of civil society had to contend.” (Lane 2007:195)
other studies. Again, the notion of ‘system comparison’ (Systemvergleich) could operate either as a vehicle of state propaganda, as it did in both German states, or as a principle of scholarly analysis – with the danger in the latter case that it tended to blur fundamental differences for the sake of making the comparison.  

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16 As Jarausch (1999:55) comments, however, “Unfortunately, much of this data is fundamentally flawed, since it is based more on official SED rhetoric than actual empirical evidence. Advocates of totalitarianism theory could therefore criticize this approach, particularly after 1989-90 and accuse those who sought to compare the FRG and GDR systems of overlooking fundamental differences between democracy and dictatorship, and abandoning the cause of unification.”

17 One of the best studies in English of the two German states, that by Jaroslav Krejci (1976), takes them as “exemplary forms of two fairly successful systems” (1976:212). Yet he also makes the point that “There are only two countries where the Marxist-Leninist brand of socialism can be considered as the successor to a genuine capitalist formation: East Germany and Czechoslovakia” (1976:10). This has implications for modernisation theories of socialism. The notion of a modernising dictatorship, which has considerable mileage in relation to the USSR and much of the bloc, is hardly relevant to the GDR (though it did form a substantial part of its self-image). For the GDR, it was clear from as early
Communism was also, of course, a moving target. The regime of the USSR was well established by the early 1950s, and for close observers the hysterical purges there and in the satellites were an alarming spectacle, but the Eastern European dictatorships had not been in power long before the death of Stalin in 1953 promised, and to some extent delivered, a thaw. Economic reforms then and in the 1960s and 1970s suggested that reform was always on the agenda, even it was often deferred or aborted. The same can be said perhaps for the attempts at political reform in 1953, 1956, 1968 and so on. These systems vacillated between 'plan' and 'market' and between relative liberalization and purges more or less from the 1920s onwards (Ray 1996:120-25). Each of these dates could be read either as pointing to the unrefrombability of the as the late 1950s that the best modernisation strategy for the country would have been to give up and hand over the keys to the Bundeskanzler. On the theme of modernization, see for example Pollack, 1999.

18 There is an interesting analysis in Gadourek, 1953.

19 Andrew Gyorgy (1954:381), in a comment at the end of Friedrich’s conference volume, described the Eastern European satellites as ‘partialitarian (semi-totalitarian)’. The contemporary satellite state reflects totalitarianism in its formative stages.”

20 For an analysis of this context, see Meuschel, 2000.
system or, alternatively, to the possibility that next time would be different and the reforms might succeed – whatever that might mean in practice for ‘feasible socialism’ (Nove 1991).  

The outcome of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in particular showed both the impossibility of a radical rupture and, in retrospect, the relatively benign face of Kadar’s goulash communism. Even the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, a propaganda own goal for communism if ever there was one, was accompanied by some careful and modest economic reforms (Kaiser 1999) and led to a degree of stabilisation and prosperity, especially in the early 1970s (Roesler 2007:219). There was also something of a cross-over effect, that as commentators from the left bemoaned the loss of idealism, the decline in social mobility and the technocratisation of the elites, more centrist observers saw these same trends as signs of normalisation and convergence

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21 As Sigrid Meuschel (1993:420) noted, the outcome in 1989 demonstrates that the search for endogenous tendencies in the direction of change was not mistaken in principle. See also Ettrich, 2005:100-101.

22 It was also used by Kadar himself and by others, such as Ulbricht in Germany, to motivate a crack-down. Alfred Kantorowicz, who later emigrated from East to West Germany, wrote in his diary that “Hungary was for Ulbricht what the Reichstag fire had been for Hitler” (cited in Torpey, 1995:46).
towards something resembling Western and increasingly global capitalism.

The 1980s saw something of a revival of totalitarianism as a model, partly in the neoconservative rhetoric of the Reagan administration but also, more interestingly, in the work of internal or recent exiles. The East German Rudolf Bahro (1978) was not yet in exile, nor yet in prison, when he wrote *The Alternative*. Two Hungarian dissidents, György Konrád and Ivan Szelényi (1979), developed a controversial analysis of communism as rule by an intellectual class. This was followed by their exiled compatriots Fehér, Heller and Márikus’ *Dictatorship Over Needs* (1983). These books, paralleled in France by Claude Lefort (1981), initiated a trend towards more critical and speculative theorizing about communism. In Poland, Jadwiga Staniszkis followed in 1984 with her book on Solidarity and, retrospectively, *The Ontology of Socialism* (1992). Among Western thinkers, the Hungarian American Andrew Arato (1982) brought Frankfurt critical theory to bear on state socialism and Jeffrey Goldfarb (1989) examined the ‘post-totalitarian mind’. *Dictatorship Over Needs* was probably the watershed in studies of state socialism, bringing a new critical and analytic approach to bear on a system whose prospects seemed still open. The authors declined to offer any predictions:
Of course, no one possesses prophetic capacities and the highly covert, fetishistic processes of life in Eastern European societies make even normally predictive assessments very difficult. The possibility of a revolution...can never be totally excluded, but precisely because of the mysterious character of gestation of any revolution, it is anybody’s guess and not a matter of sociological consideration whether it will come or not. (ibid.:297)

Completing their book in the aftermath of the repression of Solidarity in Poland, the authors suggest that this kind of opposition and the regimes’ authoritarian responses will probably “be the way of life of most Eastern European countries in the next decade, with the possible upshot that all this could contribute to the inner erosion of the Soviet centre of domination itself” (ibid.:297).

Meanwhile Gorbachev was initiating the changes which destabilized the whole system. It is this as much as anything which explains and largely excuses the failure of commentators to predict the collapse, since nothing guaranteed that he would become General Secretary or behave as he did.23 Without this, the

23 As Peter Reddaway (1991, section 3) wrote, in a review of recent literature, “The dominant approach within Western Sovietology, especially during the last five years, tended to assume that the Soviet system was moving toward a humane form of
communist order might well have survived for another decade or more. It is this fundamental ambiguity, what Sigrid Meuschel (1992) “the paradox of stability and revolution\(^{24}\),” which

socialism which would involve a market for socialist enterprise. Until very recently, many Western Sovietologists did not even contemplate the possibility that the Communist party might be so unpopular that its rule would soon be threatened, or that ethnic nationalism might become a potent, let alone an uncontainable force. They often held that an implicit 'social contract' had evolved between the Party and a partner called 'the Soviet people', a contract that provided a firm basis for evolution toward a better socialist future. When Gorbachev appeared with an explicit program of this sort, such Sovietologists made clear their belief that the West must support him in every possible way. The writings in which they did so did not usually help us to prepare for the upheavals of last year.”

\(^{24}\) Meuschel was writing specifically about Germany, but with reference to the broader context of “the disastrous effects of socialism of the Soviet type in general” (Meuschel, 1992:7). Her model which, like that of Arato (1982), drew on Habermas’s model of legitimation, is also relevant to the other socialist countries. Habermas himself, in a comment on Arato’s analysis, neatly captured a crucial way in which state socialism differed from capitalism: "...in place of the reification of communicative relations [through money and administrative power (RWO and LR)],
bedevilled not just prediction but, more fundamentally, contemporary and subsequent analysis of communist systems.

Current controversies, despite hindsight, vastly improved access to sources and so on, are still shaped by many of the same conceptual dilemmas as in the forty inglorious years dominated by the export model of Soviet socialism. Detlef Pollack (1999:28) brings this out in relation to Germany:

The GDR should neither be primarily defined as a society of work (which it also was), nor as a community of values, e.g. as a socialist experiment or a culture with long-term ideological objectives, but as a deeply divided and fissured society, essentially conflicted and contradictory. This term is meant to express the fact that the specific tensions running through GDR society were just as destructive as they were unavoidable and therefore need to be treated as contradictions or paradoxes. As long as these cleavages could be kept invisible – and this was possible as long as GDR society was closed and there was no independent public – the GDR created the impression of being a stable state.

we have the _shamming_ of communicative relations in bureaucratically dessicated, coercively harmonised domains of pseudo-democratic will-formation.” (Habermas, 1982:283)
Alexei Yavchuk was himself, before emigrating to the US in 1989, part of the last Soviet generation which he investigates in his superb book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*. He concludes (Yavchuk 2006:282):

…the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union was completely unexpected by most Soviet people and yet, as soon as people realised that something unexpected was taking place, most of them also immediately realized that they had actually been prepared for that unexpected change… This complex succession of the unexpected and the unsurprising revealed a peculiar paradox at the core of the Soviet system. For years that system managed to inhabit incommensurable positions: it was everlasting and steadily declining, full of vigor and bleakness, dedicated to high ideals and devoid of them. None of these positions was a mask. They were each real and...mutually constitutive. Understanding this peculiar dynamic is crucial for our understanding of the nature of state socialism.

Faced with this paradoxical situation, it is not surprising that commentators failed to predict the collapse. But the two examples just cited hold a clue to the failure. The Soviet Union was the
heart of the Empire, the GDR one of its most stable partners.\textsuperscript{25}

Closer attention to East Central Europe, where there was either a substantial reform movement underway as seen in Hungary and Poland or, as seen in Czechoslovakia, a more visceral if substantially still underground rejection of the regime, might have shown the international instability of the system which eventually brought it down. Once the European empire was gone, it was surely clear that the Soviet Union was not long for this world. And yet one of us, at least, was expecting a similar development in China.\textsuperscript{26}

For the Soviet Union, the imperial and international dimension was crucial: the intersection between changes initiated at the centre of the empire and those at the Western periphery. If the Soviet Union had simply withdrawn from the European satellites, as it did from Afghanistan, this might in the end have provoked another version of the 1989 revolutions, but the ideological undermining of the old model in states like the GDR and Czechoslovakia which remained wedded to it was surely important too. As von Beyme (1994:61) writes, there was a long-term and gradual delegitimation of the system, but it was "the international context – in

\textsuperscript{25} An East German academic said to one of us in the 1980s that his was probably the country where Soviet colleagues felt most at home.

\textsuperscript{26} For a brilliant analysis of the differences between China and the Soviet Union and the way they worked out in the transition to capitalism in the two societies, see Tucker 2009.
particular the hesitation of the Soviet Union - which alone could explain the timing of the regimes’ collapse”.

And the two processes interacted with one another: the GDR’s last slogan, ‘socialism in the colours of the GDR’, is revealing of this dogged yet contradictory persistence of a regime which had always claimed that “learning from the Soviet Union means learning to win” (cf. Meuschel 1992:21).

The more substantial failure, however, was one of analysis rather than prediction, and returns us to fundamental issues on the methodology of social science. This was also the focus of von Beyme’s charge. A brief comparison of two books published at more or less the same time may illustrate what was at stake. David Lane and Felicity O’Dell’s *The Soviet Industrial Worker* (1978) explicitly based itself on published Soviet data. The authors noted that “Soviet researchers do not highlight conflict in their society, and often seek to reinforce their society’s ‘legitimacy’, but also that ‘the uncritical acceptance of émigré and journalistic impressions about the Soviet Union has had an undue influence on the selection and framing of our knowledge about, and attitudes to, that country” (Ibid.:1-2). Two years later, one of the doyens of Russian Studies, Leonard Schapiro, published (with Joseph Godson) an edited volume, *The Soviet Worker* (1981) made up substantially of the kind of work deplored by Lane and O’Dell.
Whereas Lane and O’Dell merely mentioned in passing (ibid.:32) the call by Vladimir Klebanov for an independent trade union, Schapiro and Godson dedicated their book to him and to Andrei Sakharov, ‘fighters for freedom and free institutions’. The titles of three of the chapters suggest the flavour of much of the book: “The End of an Illusion” (Schapiro), “Eye-Witness to Failure” (Murray Seeger, formerly of the Moscow office of the Los Angeles Times and trade union officer) and “Society Without a Present” (Fyodor Turovsky, emigrant jurist and trade unionist).

The scholarly community, at least in the UK, seems to have responded more favourably to the second book. Mervyn Matthews (1979, 1982), who reviewed both, certainly took this view, commenting of Lane and O’Dell “how strange it is that, six decades after the Revolution, writers should still be so ready to ignore profound failures of 'state socialism'. “ (1979:457) Vladimir

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Paul Hollander (1983), writing in the US Information Agency’s tendentiously titled Problems of Communism, was particularly enthusiastic about the Schapiro and Godson collection and in particular the contributions of Seeger and Turovsky. Alec Nove (1981) confined himself to some qualifications to the general line of critique deployed in the book. W. Teckenberg (1980) by contrast provided one of the more sympathetic reviews of Lane and O’Dell.
Andrle (1979) was even more acerbic in his reaction to the authors’ notion of the ‘incorporated’ Soviet worker.

This brief comparison suggests that the image of Western scholars accepting Soviet claims and assuming the long-term viability of the Soviet model is at best a half-truth. There is, if anything, an interesting contrast between the generally anticommunist tenor of most Western work on the Soviet bloc and the more sympathetic treatment of Chinese communist rule, which of course turned out to survive up to the present in a modified form and to preside over China’s recent transition to capitalism. In this case too, we would not venture to predict the likely outcome, nor to trace the fate of the predictions made for postcommunist societies in the 1990s. We have been concerned here merely to show that von Beyme’s ‘Black Friday’ for the social sciences was more a middling shade of grey.

**Conclusion**

We have argued, then, that the failure to predict the 1989 revolutions was not due to naïve Schwärmerei of the Webb kind. Western specialists on the Soviet and Union and the communist area were notably more anti-regime than Sinologists – no doubt partly because the cold war was with the USSR rather than China. This

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28 Gleason’s study of the concept of totalitarianism notes that it was little used by sinologists (Gleason, 1995:107).
fact however also generated a counter-tendency among scholars who did not wish to line up too loyally as ‘cold warriors’ behind the military priorities of the states in which they worked. Something similar can be said for the theoretical and methodological approaches which dominated mainstream sovietology, or at least its sociological strand. Functionalism may have reinforced sociologists’ complacency about their own societies, but it did not make them complacent about communist societies; it tended to be combined with theories of totalitarianism. Totalitarian theory however came to seem overstated, especially with the partial reform of communist systems in the mid-1950s. Theories of industrial society which often, though not always, went along with functionalism, reinforced a comparative approach which looked for similarities rather than stark contrasts. Finally, the ideals of value-free scholarship, rigour and the need for empirical data encouraged a charitable attitude to locally generated statistics and interpretations. Better suspect figures than none at all.

Most important, however, was the fact that these societies did function after a fashion, carefully presenting their best face to the outside world and discouraging whistle-blowing. Like the Tay Bridge in Dundee, they worked until they fell down. The failure was not so much a failure to predict the moment of collapse but to offer a more critical diagnosis of their unviability – one which required more speculative forms of social theory.
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Biographies

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