

Konrád and Szelényi cannot be faulted for not anticipating the political failure of economic reforms from the vantage point of 1973–1974. Still, the rejection of the reform moment they capture in the work not only prevented the consolidation of intellectual class rule, but also helps to explain why Soviet-type systems collapsed so quickly. When the political elite rejected the reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, they not only failed to address the crisis of intensive growth in the economy, but also lost the political support of a substantial portion of the intellectual class. By the 1980s, intellectuals had very little to lose by abandoning the system, even second-tier party leaders (who today curiously seem to make up a good part of the club of postcommunist prime ministers in the region). Ironically, in the absence of substantial private property, their social capital, connections (both domestic and international), and educational advantages positioned intellectuals to do well economically and politically under a liberal-democratic market system. In “succeeding,” however, they have converted their social power under one system into new forms of power under yet another. Thus, while intellectuals have generally done well both as a group and as individuals since 1989, they seem to have abandoned the project of intellectual class rule altogether. This too is an irony not anticipated by Konrád and Szelényi, but one that I am sure they appreciate.

**Irony and continuity in East European history: Thoughts on
*Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power***

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Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power can be read on at least two levels. Both involve strong ironies. On one level, the one on which I first read it, it is a contribution to a Marxist analysis of East European communism, which pointed to a familiar theme of emancipatory intentions and universalist ideologies ultimately being tools of domination and particular interests. Konrád and Szelényi framed their book as an alternative to the narrative of totalitarianism, a narrative that identified the core features of communism as political dictatorship and bureaucratic economy. Theirs was an immanent critique of the system that permitted direct cross-systemic comparison with the West and was supplemented with a sort of negative cunning of history in which the tools and ideologies of emancipation were ultimately turned against the objects of liberation, the working class, and for the particular benefit of the people who thought they were doing the emancipating, the intellectuals.

At a second, deeper, level, however, this book is also a study in the irony of historical continuity that is particular to the region of East-Central Europe. It is on this second irony that I would like to focus my attention in this short essay. In contrast to what many historians and political scientists were still teaching their students in the 1970s and 1980s, that 1945 represented a radical break with the past in Eastern Europe, Konrád and Szelényi put forth in their book an intriguing thesis of continuity between the pattern of modernization in Eastern Europe after the Napoleonic Wars until 1945 and what occurred under communist rule. This pattern Konrád and Szelényi termed “rational redistribution.” The “rational” here referred not to “optimal” but rather to the intention of the late modernizers to use the enlightenment tools of state and statecraft to catch up with the more economically and militarily advanced West.

The result was the familiar pattern of state-led modernization that contrasted with the market-led western pattern, and rendered class formation, the legitimate scope of state authority, dominant ideas about what constitutes “the good life,” and just about everything else that matters for political development different from what occurred in the West. For example, in the East entrepreneurial functions were disproportionately taken over by ethnically foreign elements, thus tainting the entire enterprise of modernization as something somehow foreign. Most importantly for Konrád and Szelényi, rational redistribution recast the role of intellectuals, who were disproportionately made up of the sons of the declining native noble and middle classes and who sought refuge from the market in state employment, into a sort of service intelligentsia of the state rather than an independent stratum of people who shaped the background culture of the societies in which they lived. This particularly toxic brew, a fusion between educated elites and an overweening state apparatus, created the groundwork, even before 1945, for what Konrád and Szelényi maintained was a gradual transformation of the educated classes of Eastern Europe into the potentially dominant class in the communist period.

Helping us to situate the communist period within the broader framework of East European economic and political development and posing the question of how it should be situated will, I believe, be the lasting contribution of this book. Much more so than the answers it provides, this book is important for the questions it poses. Time and again, one is drawn to the question of continuity and change. Rereading *Intellectuals*

on the Road, one is tempted to look upon the communist era as one where the basics of the “Eastern pattern” did not really change at all. Today it still trails the West in economic development and is playing “catch-up.” The countries of the region are once again bit players in the game of international capitalism, competing against each other for investment and trade opportunities. Its political elites are once again trying to integrate themselves into the broader economic and security structures of external powers. And, from the standpoint of Konrád and Szelényi’s book, as well as Szelényi’s more recent work, the educated classes in Eastern Europe have been busy trying to convert their intellectual capital into financial and economic capital, even though these intellectuals squabble with each other a bit too much, I think, to be thought of as a “class” and they sloughed off the communist system a bit too easily for me to think of them as having been the emerging dominant players within it.

Even so, rereading this book does force one to ask, what has changed? Did communism matter at all? Did the “eastern pattern” simply continue under different ideological form? Is history then in some important way doomed to repeat itself? The student of East-Central Europe in 1990, looking back on the year 1919, could easily have been excused for believing just that, that history *was* about to repeat itself. In both eras, inexperienced political elites confronted relatively backward economies, collapsed trading blocs, polarized politics, and intractable ethnic conflicts. After 1919, these problems quickly led to the collapse of democracy in the region (with the notable exception of Czechoslovakia). What was to keep these democracies from collapsing again? To be sure, there has been significant democratic backsliding in the region, especially in the non-Baltic republics of the former Soviet Union. Yet in the decade after 1989 there were encouraging signs of progress toward democratic stability in many postcommunist Europe countries that were in previous eras anything but stable. How did this progress come about?

Poland’s interwar democracy collapsed in 1926 with Marshal Pilsudski’s *coup d’etat* amid economic disorder, street demonstrations, and decreasing confidence in political parties and parliamentary institutions. Postcommunist Poland, by contrast, despite initial economic conditions that were at least as unfavorable as its interwar counterpart (parties and parliamentary institutions that were widely regarded as self-serving and ineffective, and a level of protest that far exceeded

anything in the interwar era), was widely regarded by the end of the 1990s as the most dynamic democracy in the region and a pretty good model for successful economic transformation. Similar observations could be made for Estonia and Slovenia. And who would have thought that Hungary, a country that did not have a single free and fair election in the interwar period, would become the darling of the European Union and its leading candidate for accession during the decade after 1989?

These observations, as stylized as they are, suggest that not only was communism a period of continuities but also one of change. What changed in Eastern Europe in the half century after 1939 that could have helped alter the age-old “eastern pattern” Konrád and Szelényi so compactly describe? Did communism have anything to do with this? If so, one would be forced to rethink what it was about the communist version of rational redistributionism that set the region down a new path.

Several important changes did occur between the interwar and the post-communist era. First on this list is the economic modernization that occurred during the communist period. Most of the countries of the region became more urban, less agrarian, and more educated than in the interwar period. Przeworski and Limongi’s recent work indicates the importance of having a GDP per capita of more than \$6000 (in 1993 dollars) for sustaining democracy.³⁰ It is noteworthy that many of the countries of East-Central Europe passed through this threshold during or just after the communist period. Even so, it is difficult to give the communist governments of the region much credit for their economic performance. Some growth may have occurred under virtually any social order. The income disparities already present between East and West before 1945 remained unchanged or grew between 1945 and 1989.³¹ In fact, communism in Eastern Europe was rejected in part because of its dismal economic performance compared to Western Europe.

A second important change that occurred in the half-century between 1939 and 1989 also had little to do with rational redistribution per se, namely the huge demographic changes that occurred during and after World War II throughout the region. I refer here primarily to the destruction of East European Jewry. As a result of the Holocaust, ethnic entrepreneurship is no longer nearly the same kind of issue that it was before 1945. Konrád and Szelényi explain anti-Semitism in modern

Eastern Europe as an early reaction against rational redistribution. Yet today, capitalist modernization is no longer viewed as being led by completely alien elements, except by politically marginal and extremist groups, for the simple reason that the aliens are no longer present. Of course, this change was also not primarily the work of the communists. It was the work of the Nazis, which makes it all the more painful and ironic. Societies such as interwar Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia that were deeply multicultural in a genuine, as opposed to simulated western, sense, are now basically mono-cultural and thus basically safe for western style multiculturalism.³² The scapegoats of rational redistribution, in particular the Jews, are simply no longer present. The same can be said for the German minorities throughout the region whose expulsion *was* the work of the communist authorities.

As important as both modernization and ethnic cleansing are in explaining the relative success of post-communist democracy, I would like to turn our attention to one further feature of the communist version of rational redistribution. My own field, political science, has now spent more than a decade analyzing the negative legacies of communist rule and theorized about how the “Leninist legacies” can be overcome.³³ Fewer scholars, however, have discussed the *positive* legacies of the Leninist version of rational redistribution and how these legacies may have helped pave the way for successful democracy and capitalist development in the post-communist era. Yet as Konrád and Szelényi’s book reminds us over and over again, one need not be an adherent of Marxism-Leninism to appreciate the ironies of history. Thirty-five years ago, Ralf Dahrendorf, in his classic *Society and Democracy in Germany*, argued that Nazism destroyed the social basis for authoritarianism in Germany. Dahrendorf’s book and many others like it illustrate how difficult it was for Germany to break with a closed, status-based society. Brutal as it may have been, “the break with tradition and thus the strong push toward modernity was the substantive characteristic of the social revolution of National Socialism.”³⁴ Among the many tragedies of the Nazi dictatorship, Dahrendorf found one more painful. If the resistance to Nazism, which was largely aristocratic in composition and which he refers to as “counterrevolutionary,” had succeeded in assassinating Hitler and taking power, Germany’s chances for democracy in the postwar period would have been far less certain. “While the social revolution of National Socialism was an instrument in the establishment of totalitarian forms, by the same token it had to create the basis of liberal modernity; the counterrevolution on the other

hand can be understood only as a revolt of tradition, and thus of illiberalism and of the authoritarianism of a surviving past.” Although Nazi ideology was in many respects traditionalistic, the practice of Nazi rule broke down the traditional loyalties on which German authoritarianism depended.

So, too, one can argue for communist rule. As romantically as they were sometimes viewed in the West during the Communist era and continue to be even today, the societies of interwar Eastern Europe, with the exception of the Czechlands, did not provide fertile soil for democracy. Poland and Hungary, for example, were societies of deep inequalities in which social distinctions could not easily be bridged. In this regard, it is worth recalling Tocqueville’s comments on the United States, where he argued that what distinguished the United States was that differences in material wealth were not overlaid with stark distinctions in status. This characteristic made for an essential equality of condition and created the climate for healthy democracy. The opposite applies to most states of interwar Eastern Europe. Not only were inequalities material, but, perhaps more importantly, they involved status, the kind of inequality that money does not easily overcome. The elites of these societies were distinctly “clubbish” in their behavior and attitudes, and they did not easily admit outsiders.

Could it not be true that part of the Leninist legacy in places like Poland and Hungary was to create a rough and ready material and status equality and, therefore, the basis for democracy of the sort that could not have possibly existed in the interwar societies? Of course, the privileges of the nomenklatura contradicted the official egalitarian ideal and provided much grist for books such as *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*. Once the party bosses could be pushed aside, however, the social reality that remained, even though it was one that was marked by inequalities and the potential for growth in inequalities that Szelenyi has documented in his recent work, was in terms both of social status and material condition, much more favorable to healthy liberal democracy than it had ever been. Communism still did a great deal of damage in other respects, both human and “developmental.” In the Czech lands, for example, Communism yielded a decayed and backward industrial base and not much else (it was, then, in this sense “unnecessary”). Still, it is difficult to deny that there is a greater affinity between democracy and Polish and Hungarian society today than seventy years ago.

Of course, it would be absurd to maintain that had the Hungarian revolutionaries in 1956 managed to overthrow the regime, institute democracy, and successfully declare Austrian-style neutrality that the country would still have been better off remaining communist for thirty-three more years – just as absurd as cheering for Hitler’s body guards in July 1944. As social scientists we do not need to go that far. It may simply be enough to note that one cumulative result of four decades of communist rule has been, in some respects and in some countries, to prepare the way for successful capitalist and democratic development of the Western as opposed to Eastern sort.

The final important difference from the interwar era is the geopolitical landscape. The international context that helped create rational redistributionism and intensified its “perfection” under communism after 1945, namely the unequal and enduring economic development and military capacities of East and West, is arguably much different today. Whereas great power politics conspired before and after 1945 to keep the pattern of development in Eastern Europe different from that in the West, since 1989 we have witnessed a concerted effort to integrate the states of Eastern Europe into the economic and security structures of the West. A further irony of communism, then, is how the four decades of forced isolation from the West created a deep and abiding longing to return to a cooperative Europe that had never actually existed before 1945. Furthermore, it was *communism* (or, more precisely, the threat of communism) that provided the crucial impetus for overcoming the historical divide between France and Germany, thus paving the way for the uniting of Europe. It is worth recalling that, although the revolutions of 1989 were made in the name of liberal democracy, this regime type had been instituted successfully almost nowhere in Eastern Europe. Much more important for liberalism’s attractiveness was the relentless cultural cold war waged by the West against the East over a forty-year period that held up Western Europe as a model that could be emulated in the East, if only it were not for Communism. After 1989, the promise of joining the West and especially the prospect of joining the European Union, combined with the absence of viable ideological and institutional alternatives (like Communism), was so strong that even countries that had little in the way of democratic traditions, well developed capitalist middle classes, bourgeois virtues, or the economic “prerequisites” of democracy have consistently emulated western modes of political conduct and discourse in the hope of securing a place among the elect. To the extent that the new Europe

of cooperative rather than conflictual development is extended to the East, the international foundations of rational redistribution may no longer exist.

There are then perhaps even deeper ironies to rational redistribution than Konrád and Szelényi could see when they wrote this book in the 1970s. For although rational redistribution appeared to them as the “perfection” of the Eastern pattern of modernization, it may also have helped foster both the domestic and international conditions for shattering the pattern of continuity in East-Central Europe. In addition to the legacies of the past half century that had nothing to do with communism itself, the impact of both communism’s rough and ready egalitarianism and the new Europe made attractive by the predations of communism, may have decisively altered the confining conditions in which the post-communist democracies of East-Central Europe find themselves today. Of course, to the degree that these societies are unable to sustain a basic egalitarian ethos and to the extent that the promise of joining the “West” is not kept by the West itself, or is enlarged to a select few societies, the conditions that gave rise to and sustained rational redistribution three centuries ago may not be gone for good.

The irony of *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*

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One of the most intriguing things about Konrád and Szelényi’s book, returning to it after twenty-five years, is how pleasing it is (surprising would not be the right word) to find what a good piece of work it is. A great many of its ideas have entered into the conventional wisdom as appropriate templates for the historical development of Eastern Europe and the text is logically and often convincingly argued. The book’s analytic weakness, however, remains the same as when it first came out, namely, the confusion surrounding the standing of the various subsets of the intellectual class in what the authors call the second stage of socialism, the stage in which they were actually writing. Even though the authors clearly recognize that it is not the intellectual class as a whole but the ruling or governing elite that actually fulfills the functions of central redistribution,³⁵ the latter portions of the book exhibit considerable confusion between the intelligentsia as an entire class and its subsets, primarily the technocracy and the elites. The authors frame