

**15 Years after the “Collapse” of Soviet Socialism:
The Role of Elite Choices,
Class Conflict,
and a Critique of Modernization Theory**

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Abstract: In this paper, it is argued that the abandoning of the command administrative economy in the Soviet Union and its transformation into an ostensibly market capitalist system in post-Communist Russia was a reaction by the Soviet elite to emerging threats to their accumulated privileges and power presented from the campaign for ³socialist legality² launched by Andropov and later Gorbachev in the 1980s. Threatened by the prospect of being purged for corruption and of losing their entitlements, the Soviet elite responded to the campaign for socialist legality by transforming itself into an official bourgeoisie that could legally claim the power and property it already controlled. ³Capitalist legality² was embraced to protect this power and property from possible re-appropriation from below. The challenge of Andropov and Gorbachev to the Soviet ³New Class² was ultimately defeated when the elite pushed ahead with laws that destroyed the socialist economy. The alternative explanation for the transition put forward by the modernization theory is criticized in detail.

For a revolution to break out it is not enough for the “lower classes to refuse” to live in the old way; it is necessary also that the “upper classes should be unable” to live in the old way.

V. I. Lenin

The transformation of the Soviet command administrative economy into a market capitalist system in post-Communist Russia was a reaction by the Soviet elite to emerging threats to their accumulated privileges and power presented by the campaigns for “socialist legality” launched by Andropov and later Gorbachev in the 1980s. Threatened with the prospect of being purged for corruption and losing their entitlements, the Soviet elite responded by transforming itself into an official bourgeoisie that had title to the power and property it had controlled informally in the Soviet system. “Capitalist legality” was embraced to protect this power and property from possible re-appropriation from below. The transition to capitalism in the Soviet Union is thus best explained by “class analysis” in the Trotsky and Djilas tradition.

In this paper, I attempt to explain the Soviet Union’s transition from a command administrative economy to a new political economy based on private property. The driving forces behind this transition, I argue, were domestic interests and class conflict, broadly defined. Before elaborating on the nature and consequences of this class conflict, however, I first take up the most prevalent alternative approach to explaining the Soviet Union’s transition – modernization theory and rise of a new Soviet middle class.

Modernization Theory and the Crisis of Authoritarianism

It is ironic that modernization theory, which was largely discredited in the social sciences after the paradigmatic shifts brought about by world-systemic and neo-institutionalist approaches to political economy (Janos 1986), now constitutes the theoretical core of many explanations of the collapse of Soviet Communism (see, for example, Pye 1990).¹ Modernization theory can be traced to Talcott Parsons, whose interpretation of Weber's approach to social and economic organization resulted in an optimistic brand of thinking premised on rationalization, routinization, and bureaucratization as felicitous features of an inevitable process of modernization (Parsons 1977; Weber 1997). One could trace its genealogy even further by pointing to the "classical paradigm" put forward by Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham, and then adopted by political economists at large, including Marx and the Marxists, who "updated" Smith's four stage view of socio-economic evolution (hunting-gathering, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial) in history by adding the fifth and final stage of "communism" (Smith 1977; Marx 1978).

In effect, Parsonian theory applies the classical paradigm to the world at large, with a special focus on the so-called developing countries. Parsons' view of society, its components and their interrelations as they "transition" from pre-modern to the modern form, can be summarized in his famous five pattern variables (affectivity-affective neutrality; self-orientation-collectivity-orientation; universalism-particularism; ascription-achievement; specificity-diffuseness). Thus Parsonian theory celebrated what was viewed as an inevitable rationalization of socio-economic structures around the world, moving from pre-modern to modern forms of social and economic organization.

¹ Lucian Pye being the president of APSA, and considering the factional politics of this organization, it would be reasonable to assume that the modernization theory view of the Soviet transition had a significant following among APSA membership, which represents the American political science community.

Taking their theoretical orientation and optimism from Parsons, modernization theorists identified stages of development that all societies will inevitably pass through. Walt Rostow's *The Stages of Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cyril Black's *The Dynamics of Modernization*, Karl Deutsch's *Nationalism and Social Communication*, Neil Smelser and Seymour Lipset's (1966) edited volume on *Social Structure and Mobility in Economic Development*, also argued that economic development and increasing education levels would bring about democratization, an easing of socio-political tensions, and a peaceful resolution of conflicts (Rostow 1960; Black 1966; Deutsch 1953; Smelser 1996). The theory thus promised and anticipated an earthly liberal democratic paradise that would result from increasing wealth and education.

Consider Cyril Black's *The Dynamics of Modernization*, which is representative of the modernization theorists' optimism about a teleological progress. In it, Black considers Russia and China, by far the largest Marxist-Leninist socialist regimes, along with Japan, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Thailand, as representative of a "fifth pattern" (Black 1966). For Black, there are only three successive stages that countries go through during modernization: (1) consolidation of modernizing leadership; (2) economic and social transformation; and (3) integration of society. According to Black, countries in the fifth pattern have completed the consolidation of modernizing leadership (in Russia's case, this took place between 1861 and 1917) and entered the stage of "economic and social transformation" but not yet the stage of "integration of society." Only a select number of Western European countries, along with the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (countries of the "second pattern"), have entered this final stage.

What Black's account does in its sweeping generalizations is to assimilate the experiences of socialist regimes, such as in the Soviet Union and China, into a general narrative of modernization that is shared by countries such as Japan, Turkey, and Iran. Accordingly, modernization theory for Black suggested an essentially similar, and converging, future for both advanced industrial capitalist societies and the rapidly industrializing countries of communist Eastern Europe. Western liberal capitalism would appease and accommodate social democratic and culturally progressive demands, while communist societies would democratize and liberalize over time. The result would be a transformation of the entire industrialized north into a Swedish-Austrian form of social democracy.

Another version of modernization theory can be found in Alexander Gerschenkron's interpretation of the Soviet socialist experience as an alternative route to modernization. Gerschenkron characterized the Soviet experience as the concentration of capital and industrialization by different means (Gerschenkron 1962).

To many, developments in the advanced industrial-capitalist societies beginning in the early 1960s seemed to vindicate the broad outlines of modernization theory. Convergence in the political platforms of erstwhile opponents in domestic politics across Western Europe, North America, and Japan made it increasingly difficult to distinguish the socio-economic programs of political parties. According to Daniel Bell and Ralf Dahrendorf, these trends accounted for a transition to what they called "post-industrial societies" (Bell 1973; Dahrendorf 1975). Later, Terry Clark followed up with his notion of the "new political culture." In a book edited with Vincent Hoffmann-Martinot, Clark argued that increasing education and affluence accounted for inevitable transitions to

liberal democratic political economic systems (Clark 1998). A new political culture was reflected in the political platforms of Tony Blair, Gerhard Schroeder, Bill Clinton, William Kok, and other politicians from nominally social democratic or even socialist backgrounds but who nonetheless opted for fiscally conservative (i.e. economically “liberal”) policies. As Clark summarizes the trend: “Socially liberal, fiscally conservative.”

Modernization theorists’ expectations of political change in the communist societies were an extension of this thinking about the changes in Western Europe, North America, and Japan. The expectation was that the communist societies would converge to a liberal or social democratic pluralism sustained by mass consumption. As early as 1962, Rostow had claimed that the Soviet Union had already reached industrial “maturity,” which for him meant the last stage before “high mass-consumption society” (Rostow 1960). Alexander Gerschenkron, in his *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, focused on the differences in the industrializing experiences of Britain, France, and Germany. Observing a correlation between the “gradations of backwardness” and the “role of the state in industrial development,” he argued that Bolshevik communism was simply Russia’s path to industrialization and mass consumption (Gerschenkron 1962).

The emergence of a Soviet “middle class” from the bureaucratic managerial elite of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) after the death of Stalin seemed to vindicate the application of modernization theory to the Soviet case. What Trotsky called the “betrayal of the revolution,” and Djilas described as the formation of a “New Class” (Trotsky 1937; Djilas 1957), was interpreted by others as the emergence of a truly

“modern” society (Pye 1990). In this perspective, the emergent Soviet middle class was assuming the historical role of its Western counterparts to democratize the USSR’s authoritarian superstructure, transforming the Soviet Union into a pluralistic and democratic society, whether in its liberal or social democratic version. Ironically, modernization theory thus embraced an optimistic and capitalistic version of the Marxist base and superstructure schema (Janos 1986). This expectation constituted the essence of the so-called “convergence thesis” -- the prediction that all industrial societies, capitalist or socialist, were converging towards a pluralist mass consumption society ready for democracy.

In this Parsonian tradition, then, the Soviet Union was seen as moving inexorably towards rationalization and reform. The first major transformation came during the Khrushchev era with the aspirations of the Soviet elite for “co-existence” and “détente” with the West. Khrushchev had abandoned many of the excesses of Stalinism in an effort to “catch up” and “bury” the capitalist West by improving living standards for the Soviet people. The trend continued during the Brezhnev era when any remaining ideological pretensions were dropped. The Soviet Union, the argument went, was on its way to becoming a “normal” advanced industrial welfare state and society, akin to its counterparts in Europe.

Modernization theorists interpreted Gorbachev and launching of *perestroika* in the same light. A mature Soviet society was finally throwing off the yoke of arbitrary government, one-party rule, and the command administrative economy in favor of democracy and free market capitalism. Pye argued bluntly that the Soviet collapse was thus tantamount to a “vindication of modernization theory” (Pye 1990). Increasing social

and economic complexity, urbanization, education, communication, professionalization, and wealth had led to a crisis of authoritarianism across the Communist Bloc by the mid-1990s:

...Soviet society made the great transition from being a predominantly rural people to an overwhelmingly urbanized country... Even more significant has been the growth of what the Soviets call their “intelligentsia” or “specialists.” In 1941 these technically trained people numbered only 2.4 million. By 1960 they had grown to 8 million, and now they total 31.5 million, constituting some 40% of the urban population... A significant middle class has emerged, the members of which demand greater intellectual and cultural freedoms and are contemptuous of the poorly educated bureaucrats and party apparatchiks... (Pye 1990)

This short passage from Pye’s presidential address to the American Political Science Association in 1990 neatly summarizes the modernization theorists’ explanation of the Soviet collapse. The rise of the “New Class” a la Djilas and Trotsky had produced a struggle between a new reform-minded middle class and a conservative bureaucracy, and this struggle was in turn driving social and political change. Juxtaposing technology and politics, the transformed and modern industrial economic “base” was coming into conflict with an antiquated and anachronistic political “superstructure.” In short, the urban middle classes’ aspiration for change was driving political reform (Pye 1990).

A Critique of Modernization Theory as Applied to the Soviet Case

Modernization theory as applied to both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods has come under harsh scholarly criticism. Klaus Mueller, for example, has pointed out logical inconsistencies and the political dilemmas of the modernization approach with regards to post-Communist transformations (Mueller 1992). Stephen Cohen has emphasized the catastrophic results of the “modernization” project in post-Communist Russia, characterizing it as a “failed crusade that produced results that hardly conform to the felicitous expectations of the modernization theorists” (Cohen 2000). Stephen Holmes

has argued that even liberalism presupposes a strong enough state to enforce contracts and protect the individual's rights (Holmes 1997). Charles Fairbanks and Vadim Volkov have argued that private armies turned post-Communist Russia in the 1990s into a jungle of competing claims over the organization of the means of violence (Volkov 2002; Fairbanks 2002). And Mark Beissinger and Crawford Young have pointed to the similarities in "convergence to crisis" between post-independence state breakdown in Africa and post-Communist Eurasia (Beissinger 2002). If there was indeed "convergence," Beissinger and Young suggest that it was not between post-Communist Eurasia and Western Europe but between post-Communist Eurasia and Africa.

The single most important weakness of modernization theory as applied to the USSR, however, is its negligence of the economic hardships and calamities that befell the Soviet Union in the 1980s. During the disastrous final decade of Soviet history, the middle class did not grow and prosper, incomes did not increase and burgeon, social tensions were not softened, and social groups did not converge in their aspirations. Moreover, if modernization theory was right, we would expect the aspiring middle class to launch its "democratic, pluralist, liberal" revolution when it was strongest -- that is, in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, both the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods were substantially better than the post-Brezhnev period in terms of socio-economic indicators. Why did the "New Class" act upon its innate pluralist and even liberal aspirations only when it was heavily pressured and squeezed by economic decline, a collapse in hard currency earnings due to low prices for oil exports, growing external debt, rising military expenditures, and the challenge that "socialist legality" presented to the privileged position of the *nomenklatura*?

There are two other anomalies regarding the modernization thesis that warrant mentioning. First, there are many countries outside of the Communist Bloc that went through the same processes of increasing education, increasing income, rapid industrialization, and rapid urbanization, which nonetheless did not lead to a political transformation on the scale of the Soviet transition. Urbanization is a worldwide phenomenon that has created not a global democracy but a “planet of the slums,” according to Mike Davis (Davis 2004). At the least, there does not seem to be anything intrinsic to urbanization that produces liberalism or democracy. Most of the countries of North Africa and the Middle East are highly urbanized, but few are liberal and democratic. South Asia and Africa are immeasurably more urbanized today than fifty years ago, but we have yet to witness democratic revolutions in either region. Second, rising incomes do not bear a one-to-one correlation with political modernization. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf have gone through an extremely rapid increase in income per capita beginning in the late 1970s, yet authoritarianism has deepened rather than weakened in the region over this same period.

There have also been serious challenges to modernization theory in the social sciences in view of the dismal record of industrializing countries in the global south with regards to economic and political development. The Middle East is a case in point. Daniel Lerner predicted the passing of traditional society and the emergence of a modern society. Dankwart Rustow stressed Turkey’s transition to multiparty politics (Lerner 1963 [1958]; Rustow 1956, 1970). But Middle Eastern societies have not moved towards pluralism, democracy, and mass consumption based on new social formations even to this day, some fifty years after Lerner and Rustow were writing. In other parts of the world,

most notably Africa, economic and democratic advances were lost in the last quarter of the 20th century. As a whole, since the 1970s the global south has fallen further behind the advanced industrial countries in terms of economic development and democratic governance. Western Europe and Africa, two unequal land masses separated by the Mediterranean, have diverged, not converged.

Neo-Marxists have suggested that the underdevelopment of the Third World (periphery) is linked to the development of the First World (core), as Andre Gunder-Frank argued in *Development of Underdevelopment* (Gunder Frank 1969). Immanuel Wallerstein traced the development of the modern (capitalist) world-system and asserted it was based on a zero-sum logic, providing an alternative grand paradigm for global political and economic change (Wallerstein 1974). More recently, Giovanni Arrighi, Beverly Silver, and Benjamin Brewer have documented the discouraging trend of “industrialization without attending rise in per capita incomes” across the global south (Arrighi 2003).

To explain the global south’s failure, scholars began to emphasize not domestic/internal dynamics but world-systemic structures. Similarly, in asking “what went wrong in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,” Gunder Frank has interpreted the history of the Soviet Union from a world-systems and neo-Marxist paradigm (Gunder Frank 1994). Much like Gerschenkron, Jowitt, and others who viewed the Soviet Union as a developmental state, Gunder Frank argues that the socialist experiment in the Soviet Union represented an attempt to develop a modern industrial economy. The Soviet experiment was a seventy year development plan that eventually failed due to

“Kondratieff cycles” intrinsic to capitalism, notably post-1974 stagnation in the world economy.

The world economic crisis spelled the doom of the "socialist" economies, much more than their "socialist planning" "command economy," which is now almost universally blamed for the same. Not unlike the "Third World" economies of Latin America and Africa, the "second world" economies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were unable to bear the pace of accelerated competition in the world economy during this period of crisis (Gunder Frank 1994).

Gunder Frank does not, however, explain why the Soviet Union was more vulnerable to shocks from a world economic crisis than its capitalist competitors. Moreover, the Soviet economy was in fact helped by the rapid rise in oil prices after the 1973 oil embargo, which allowed for high spending and relative prosperity during the Brezhnev era.² The question of why the “great transformation” started in the mid-1980s while the collapse occurred in 1990/1991 also remains unanswered.

The weakness of Gunder Frank’s interpretation of the Soviet collapse, and of World-Systems theory in general, is that they attribute the USSR’s radical transformation to external structural factors at the expense of domestic actors, elites, and political choice. Although they recognize that the entire global south was under the same pressures, they fail to notice that it is rare, if ever, that a country witnesses such spectacular a political and economic reorientation as the Soviet Union. Why did the Soviet Union not cut military spending, abandon Eastern Europe, and abandon its geopolitical project at large if it was under economic pressure? As Dallin noted, many post-revolutionary countries (he mentions Mexico and Turkey) gradually moved towards less etatism over several decades (Dallin 1992). This is true of China as well, which shows that a “gradualist” course of change is possible. Most importantly, their structuralist obsession leads world-systems theorists to ignore the interplay of domestic interests and “human agency” in

² I thank Edward W. (Ned) Walker who suggested adding this comment.

Soviet history. They think of countries as monolithic wholes, and talk about the “Soviet Union” without distinguishing the many interest groups that competed over policy in the country. In a way, world-systems theorists look at the forest on fire and ignore the person who lit the fire. This is particularly surprising given that world-systems theorists profess to be Marxists -- domestic coalitions and class conflict are at the heart of Marxism.

Imperial Overstretch, Militarization, and Technology Transfers

Some scholars attribute the fall of the Soviet Union to the miscalculations or intrinsic failures in the military-strategic dimension of the Soviet policies. Clifford Gaddy, in his article “The Logic of a Hypermilitarized Economy,” maintains that

Few other nations in the twentieth century have been so dominated by wars—either fighting them or preparing to do so—as has Russia... From the time they seized power in 1917, the Bolshevik leaders had an explicit policy of gearing the economy to the needs of national defense. The fate of the new regime rested from the beginning on success in increasing military production... Yet other nations, if perhaps not as frequently involved in conflicts as the Soviet Union, have passed in and out of wars without their economies’ becoming so totally and lastingly dominated by the military sector as did the USSR. (Gaddy 1996)

Both Gaddy and Andrew Janos have used the distinction made by Herbert Spencer between “industrialist” and “militaristic” societies to argue that the Soviet Union was a “militaristic” society that ultimately could not compete with its capitalist “industrialist” challengers. Advanced weaponry is extremely expensive to produce or purchase, and trying to compete militarily with technologically more advanced countries has been extremely burdensome for underdeveloped great powers such as Tsarist Russia, China, and the Ottoman Empire. Such was the case with the USSR as well, where military competition with the capitalist powers meant that Moscow had to devote a large percentage of its smaller GDP to military expenditures than did the comparatively prosperous United States

This argument can be challenged, however, from the realist perspective in international relations theory. Realism stresses that the international system is “anarchic” and thus driven by intense competition for security. As a result, *all* states, but especially great powers, are “militaristic” because they are subject to the pressures of international security competition. Moreover, great powers privilege military-strategic considerations over economic calculations whenever the two conflict. It may be true that for underdeveloped states in the international system, military-strategic considerations conflict with economic-industrial logic more often than is the case for advanced industrial countries. But this variation alone does not allow us to clearly distinguish militaristic from industrial societies. It is also true that states do not always respond rationally to the pressures of their security environment. In those cases they are overrun by competitors and cease to exist as independent states unless they are saved by outside intervention. These cases are the exceptions that prove the rule.

The root of the illusionary dichotomy between militarism and industrialism lies in the view that the principle of economic maximization explains all political phenomena. However, as Theda Skocpol has argued, international security competition exists side by side with capitalism, and its characteristics are not reducible to economic arguments. In criticizing economic determinists, she maintains:

Some theorists of world capitalism, including most notably Immanuel Wallerstein, attempt to explain in economically reductionist terms the structure and dynamics of this (originally European and ultimately global) international system. . . . But a different perspective is adopted here, one which holds that nation-states are, more fundamentally, organizations geared to maintain control of home territories and populations and to undertake *actual or potential military competition* with other states in the international system. The international states system as a transnational structure of military competition was not originally created by capitalism (Skocpol 1979).

Even the United States, arguably the most “industrialist” of all great powers, subordinates economic interests to military-strategic considerations when necessary.

Roman Szporluk has a different argument based on geopolitics and nationalism, one that attributes the fall of the USSR to “imperial overextension”(Szporluk 1997).³

Szporluk argues:

Another major factor in the fall of both the Russian and the Soviet empires was their overextension. They established their hegemony over nations and territories that refused to recognize Russia and/or the USSR as a superior civilization, a higher form of economy and government—qualities which an empire must possess if its rule is not to be based on coercion alone. To maintain hegemony over them in the absence of such recognition required a disproportionate reliance on coercion, and this made Russian rule in “Europe” a heavy burden on the Russian people... practicing internationalism as Moscow understood it—or overextension—was the undoing of the Soviet Union just as overextension had been a major factor in the collapse of imperial Russia. The seeds of the eventual collapse of the USSR were planted at the time of its greatest military and political triumph—during and after World War II. (Szporluk 1997)

As Szporluk suggests, his argument can be extended to other “Eastern” empires of the past that exercised control over more Westernized and “civilized” people, including most notably the Ottoman Empire. In this respect, Szporluk’s argument has a tinge of Orientalism about it – he seems to view domination over “civilized, advanced, Western peoples” by “Eastern” powers as somehow unnatural. The implication is that domination by advanced, civilized, Western countries over backward, uncivilized, Eastern peoples is natural and acceptable. However, the history of European colonization and decolonization demonstrates that French rule over Algeria, British rule over India, or Dutch rule over Indonesia are met with as much, and perhaps even fiercer, resistance as, for example, Russian domination over Eastern Europe and the Baltics.

Moreover, Szporluk’s argument is mostly directed at explaining the “territorial dissolution” of the USSR, not the transformation from a socialist command economy to a capitalist economy, which is the concern of this essay. Szporluk can explain only the USSR’s withdrawal from Eastern Europe and the secession of the Baltic republics, not its abandonment of the continent-sized “backward” republics in Central Asia or the

³ Jack Snyder makes a similar claim about imperial overextension argument in his *Myths of Empire*, albeit from a realist perspective (Snyder 1993).

Caucasus. In addition, Szporluk, like all those who emphasize geopolitical and military-strategic factors, fails to address why the Soviet Union was unable to withdraw from Eastern Europe, relinquish its rule over “advanced, civilized, indomitable” European peoples, cut military spending, and abandon its grandiose geopolitical project of challenging the United States. Had it done so, it might well have been able to maintain its socialist political economy.

The *Nomenklatura* Thesis

In an article entitled “From Soviet *Nomenklatura* to Russian Elite,” Olga Kryshtanovskaya and Stephen White provide an invaluable analysis of the change that the Soviet Russian elite went through during the country’s transition from a command administrative system to a form of market capitalism (Kryshtanovskaya 1996). They begin their analysis by noting that revolutions are above all a matter of elite change, and they proceed to assess the level of change in the Soviet/Russian elite during the so-called “democratic revolution” of 1991. They point out that the distinctive feature of the Soviet political elite, the *nomenklatura*, was its claim to exclusive privileges:

The *nomenklatura* was served by a comprehensive and finely differentiated system of privileges. In Vozlensky’s words, it lived in ‘Nomenklaturia... another, entirely different, and special country’ from which ordinary citizens were ‘carefully isolated.’...Members of the *nomenklatura* were not rich in the conventional sense, but were removed by their position from the hardships of daily life and allowed to enjoy a better quality of life. Their money incomes were generally high, but their living standards were sustained more directly by a whole system of indirect payments and benefits. Prices in official restaurants, for example, were significantly below their real cost; places in recreation homes were heavily subsidized; and so forth. *Nomenklatura* members were also accorded flats and dachas in the most fashionable areas, for rentals that were symbolic... Apart from this, there was a well-developed distribution system that supported the special needs of *nomenklatura* members. At food-processing plants...there was always a workshop producing higher quality foodstuffs for the elite. Special construction companies looked after their housing requirements at a level far above those of ordinary citizens. There were special workshops, special shops, special polyclinics, and even (a laborer veteran complained) special graveyards. (Kryshtanovskaya 1996)

The reforms of the 1980s, Kryshtanovskaya and White argue, began to challenge the *nomenklatura*'s privileges. Moreover, "as political position became a less secure guarantee of those advantages, the emphasis shifted to private property—as Trotsky, many year earlier, had predicted" (Kryshtanovskaya 1996). In other words, political instability led to economic insecurity, which prompted the *nomenklatura* to support the shift to a private property based system. While they do not explain *why* the *nomenklatura*'s privileges became less secure, they nonetheless show that the Soviet elite's response to insecurity was to commercialize and legalize their once illegal privileges.

The evidence that the new post-Communist elite was drawn primarily from the Soviet-era *nomenklatura* is considerable. To cite but one example, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who at the time of his arrest in 2004 was the richest man in Russia, "graduated from a deputy Komsomol secretaryship at the Mendeleev chemistry institute to the chairmanship of Menatep Bank" (Kryshtanovskaya 1996). The Komsomol (the CPSU's youth wing), the joint enterprises that linked the *nomenklatura* to the outside world, and the people in the CPSU who handled foreign dealings, became conduits for newly emerging bourgeoisie (Kryshtanovskaya 1996). Kryshtanovskaya and White summarize the process by which the new elite was created as follows:

The outcome of all these changes was a substantial move towards the conversion of the power of the party-state *nomenklatura* into private property. The state, in effect, had privatized itself. Property, formerly, had been within the disposal of the *nomenklatura*, but not in its private ownership; now it had moved from public into private hands, typically those of the factory administration... [T]aken as a whole, it is clear that the process of economic reform took place under the control of the *nomenklatura* and to its direct material benefit. (Kryshtanovskaya 1996)

Then they proceed to expose elements of continuity and change among the post-Communist elite, documenting the resilience of the *nomenklatura* in both political and economic spheres (which in any case are particularly intertwined in Russia).

Steven Solnick also recognizes the importance of property rights in explaining the variance between transition in Soviet Union and in China. However, he argues that “in the Soviet case bureaucratic supervisors found their authority undermined, as subordinates utilized their control over information to mask the expropriation of organizational assets.” (Solnick 1996) Thus Solnick focuses more on the competition *within* the Soviet elite than Kryshtanovskaya and White.

Katherine Verdery’s account of the Soviet transition, “What Was Socialism and Why Did It Fail?” follows a similar line of argument:

[T]he more significant aspects of reform... were in the often-unauthorized behavior of bureaucrats who were busily creating new property forms of their own. Polish sociologist Staniszkis describes the growth of what she calls “political capitalism,” as bureaucrats spontaneously created their own profit-based companies. (Verdery 1993: 15)

She emphasizes the *nomenklatura*’s agency in the Soviet case. However, she also attempts to explain the “timing” of the transition, an endeavor that many scholars of the Soviet Union ignored, including Kryshtanovskaya and White, by emphasizing international structural factors:

The critical intersection occurred not in 1989 or 1987 but in the late 1960s and early ‘70s, when global capitalism entered the cyclical crisis from which it is still struggling to extricate itself. Among capitalists’ possible responses to the crisis (devaluation, structural reorganization, etc.), an early one was to lend abroad... Instead of reforming the system from within, most Party leaderships opted to meet their problems by greater articulation with the surrounding economy; importing western capital and using it to buy advanced technology... Borrowing, then, became a substitute for extensive internal reforms... (Verdery 1993)

Verdery points to a myriad of structural factors, including the post-Fordist character of global capitalism, the indebtedness of the Soviet Union, and the particular interface of

socialist economies with the outside world. Once again, however, domestic class conflict is overlooked in favor of global structural explanations.

In partial conclusion, even those scholars who focus on the *nomenklatura*'s role as the driving force of the USSR's transition to capitalism explain the timing of the transition by reference to factors external to the Soviet society. The reason for the general unwillingness to attribute the timing and the character of the transition to domestic factors, I suggest, may have to do with a strange assumption, namely, that the Soviet *nomenklatura* was the only class or actor in the domestic politics of this country. Even though they do not explicitly state it, all the theorists discussed above treat Soviet society as static, inactive, and unresponsive mass, devoid of agency. This tacit assumption is problematic in a purely theoretical form, but it is even more problematic when we consider it with an eye to late Soviet history.

The *Nomenklatura* and the Challenge of Socialist Legality

The transition from Stalin to Khrushchev marked a turning point in Soviet history.

Assessing the fall of Beria shortly after Stalin's death, Ronald Suny has argued:

The fall of Beria weakened Malenkov and boosted Khrushchev, but it also has much wider significance. With the help of the army, party leaders had reasserted their primacy over the police and eliminated the danger of any party leader using the police to rule over the party. The Soviet government would never again turn into an autocracy; it had become a bureaucratic oligarchy. In the absence of terror the new elite had to demonstrate its right to rule, its competence, even indispensability, and build up its authority... They agreed not to return to terror, to work instead to increase consumer satisfaction and provide greater material incentives for the working people... Leadership would be collective rather than centered on one person. Social and economic security and equality would be promoted, while privileges would remain for the elites. (Suny 1998)

A new social pact and a new intra-elite and elite-mass compromise was struck and remained until the post-Brezhnev era. It is important to note that the new intra-elite compromise and the social pact between the elite and the masses entailed *both* the

preservation and perpetuation of elite privileges *and* the promotion of social and economic security for society. The pact promised to provide benefits both to the Soviet elite and the masses, but was sustainable only under conditions of high or moderate economic growth. As long as the economy grew, as it did throughout the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods, the Soviet system could appease both elite and the masses.

Stalinism represented a messianic, chiliastic, autocracy of one man (Stalin). The elite was periodically purged and lived in constant danger, and as a result it lacked not only a sense of security but of entrenched privilege and an ethic of managerial professionalism. Only with Khrushchev would the communist party-elite emerge as a “New Class.” Khrushchev offered bread and butter, and his calls to “catch up” and “bury” the West economically responded to the aspirations of the new middle class.

With his “characteristic gusto,” Khrushchev said:

There will be no communism without an abundance of products. There will be no communism if our country has as much cement as you like but meat and grain are in short supply... And what is that very same communist society without sausage? [laughter] Really, comrades, in a communist society you will not tell people to go and eat a potato without butter... Surely a man living in a communist society will not ask for turnips in the grocery store, but will demand better foodstuffs... (Suny 1998)

The “bourgeois” aspirations of the new Soviet elite were reflected in the leadership’s wishful thinking in foreign policy. Under Khrushchev, “[m]any in the Soviet foreign policy establishment (but far from all) were genuinely interested in building political and *particularly economic* ties with the Great Powers of the West” (Suny 1998). The desire to be linked economically to the prosperous bourgeois societies of Western Europe was openly expressed in the doctrines of “peaceful coexistence” and (later) “détente,” even when mixed with the antagonistic rhetoric of “burying” capitalism (Suny 1998; Janos 1996).

While the Khrushchev era witnessed the emergence the *nomenklatura* as a New Class, the real consolidation of elite security and privilege took place under Brezhnev. This period of elite entrenchment and embourgeoisment, however, also witnessed the first signs of *nomenklatura* insecurity vis-à-vis the masses. In his memoirs, Khrushchev recalled: “*We* were scared—really scared. *We* were afraid that the thaw might unleash a flood, which *we* wouldn’t be able to control and which could drown *us*...” (Suny 1998).

In retrospect, the Soviet elite’s fear during the Khrushchev era may have been exaggerated. The Soviet Union was experiencing impressive economic growth and increasing prosperity during the late 1950s and 1960s. Soviet statistics indicate a growth rate of 10.3% per annum for the period 1951-60, while the CIA estimated a more modest, but still impressive, growth rate of 5.2% per annum for the same period. Even if the more modest CIA estimates are more accurate, as seems likely, growth rates for this period exceeded that of the United States (3.2%), United Kingdom (3.2%), Canada (4.6%), Australia (3.9%), Sweden (3.4%), and Norway (3.5%), and they equaled those of France (5.2%) and the OECD average (5.1%) for the same period (Schroeder 1995: 207).

Under conditions of high economic growth, increasing income, education, social welfare and security, the post-Stalinist “social pact” between the Soviet elite and the masses worked well. Elite and masses prospered, and as a result the privileges of the elite were less objectionable to society. By the end of Khrushchev period, the Soviet *nomenklatura* was relatively secure, while the masses were economically better off.

The Brezhnev era (1964-1982) was thus the *nomenklatura*’s golden age. Bureaucratization, professionalization, and embourgeoisment of the elite proceeded, and the *nomenklatura*’s privileged position was consolidated. During the first decade of

Brezhnev's tenure, the economy continued to grow, albeit at a decreasing pace, thanks in part to a quadrupling of oil prices following the 1974 Arab oil embargo. Soviet oil exports funneled a new stream of foreign exchange into the country. By the second half of the Brezhnev period, however, the severe "contradictions" of Soviet socialism became increasingly obvious. The economy was hard hit by a global economic recession, followed by a decline in the price of oil, increased military spending, and finally the invasion of Afghanistan. Brezhnev had presided over the apogee of the Soviet socialist economy, but he was now presiding first over its stagnation and then rapid decline.

The Brezhnevite elite consensus was thus a continuation of the *nomenklatura* entrenchment underway under Khrushchev. Brezhnev, however, also did away with the last remnants of the ideological pretensions of Soviet socialism, and he carried bureaucratization and elite security to unprecedented levels.

Based on their years together under Khrushchev, the Brezhnev team developed a consensus on domestic policy. There would be no more "voluntarism" or "subjectivism"; that is, no more decisions made impulsively or by the leader alone in the Khrushchev manner. Plans now would be guided by "objective economic calculations." Consumer needs would be met, but unrealistic expectations would no longer be raised by rhetoric about "reaching and surpassing America" or "building communism." (Suny 1998)

The consolidation of the *nomenklatura* "oligarchy" meant that power passed into the hands of a growing class of managerial bureaucrats concerned with "objective economic calculations" rather than "building communism." Its goal was to satisfy consumer needs and build a mass consumption society within the capabilities of the Soviet Union.

John Bushnell has described the New Soviet Man's turn to pessimism in the 1970s. He argues that "middle class optimism apparently peaked by the early 1960s...and then remained at a constantly high level into the second half of the decade" (Bushnell

2003). However, the pessimism that eventually overtook Soviet society was thus in many respects similar to the materialist bourgeois “boredom” in advanced capitalist societies.

Although increased military spending became the hallmark of the Brezhnev era, and although military spending diverted resources that could otherwise be used to strengthen the “social pact” between the elite and the masses, the pact was maintained for most of the Brezhnev era. Rising oil prices, and heavy borrowing from international financial markets eager to recycle post-1974 “petro dollars,” meant that living standards continued to improve despite decreasing rates of economic growth. Whereas from 1961 to 1970 the Soviet economy had grown at an average rate of 4.8 percent per annum, from 1971 to 1980, the growth rate then declined to 2.4 percent per annum according to the CIA (Schroeder 1995). Nonetheless, James Millar argued, “the Brezhnev regime did not repudiate consumerism as a principle goal, as increasingly heavy agricultural *imports* during the period testify.” (Millar 2003)

Brezhnev’s economic program was unsustainable in the long run, however, and it is apparent in retrospect that a spectacular structural adjustment was required after oil prices started to decline in the 1980s if living standards were to begin rising once again. At that point, the regime faced the most vexing of political economy questions: Who will pay the price when the inevitable and painful adjustment is made? This question exposes the impending class conflict that has been developing since the beginning of the entrenchment of the *nomenklatura* under Khrushchev. Would elite privileges be cut, or would the Soviet citizenry be made to pay the price? This conflict was not resolved until the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it provided the late Brezhnev and post-Brezhnev era

Soviet politics with its central socio-political-economic dynamic, even if the actors at the time were not fully conscious of it and hence would not describe it as such even today.

It is important to note that modernization theory fails most miserably when we consider the lack of democratization and liberalization during the Brezhnev era. In fact, this is the period when the Soviet “New Class” was the most prosperous and entrenched, and there is no evidence that it was demanding democratization or liberalization or an end to the “yoke of authoritarianism.” Rather, the *nomenklatura* was clinging to its privileges during this period – it was hardly fulfilling its “historic mission” of establishing bourgeois democracy, the mission that was attributed to it retroactively by modernization theorists such as Pye (Pye 1990). It was the collapse of oil prices, the arms race, technological breakthroughs in the West, and the post-Fordist transformation of the world economy that made an industrial model based on huge state-owned factories of the 1930s (e.g. iron and steel complex in Magnitogorsk) obsolete. As the economic decline intensified, the Soviet Union drifted to the periphery of the global economic hierarchy, taking on some of the characteristics of a raw material exporting Third World country, and domestic class “contradictions” deepened.

Class Conflict, Socialist Legality, and the Transition to Capitalist Legality

The impending conflict between the *nomenklatura* and the masses notwithstanding, “the Brezhnev era, particularly from 1965 to approximately 1976, will probably go down in history as the most successful period of Soviet international and domestic development” (Bialer 1981: 999, quoted in Walker 1992). Dosko Doder, a Washington Post reporter who spent many years in the Soviet Union, similarly asserted

that “[t]he seventies, in particular, were the best years the [Soviet Union] has ever known.” (Doder 1983: 30, quoted in Walker 1992). However, Bialer also pointed to an intensifying, and long anticipated, structural crisis:

...in the 1980s the Soviet Union may well pass through the worst period it has seen since the death of Stalin. Growth rates will be the lowest ever, factionalism and tensions will probably disrupt relations among the elites... (Bialer 1981: 1002, quoted in Walker 1992)

When Brezhnev died in November 1982, “having ruled the country for 18 years and presided over the most peaceful, stable, and prosperous period in Soviet history,” the reformist Andropov became general secretary of the CPSU (Walker 1992). The same year the Soviet Union recorded its lowest industrial growth rate since the Second World War, a mere 0.9%, according to CIA estimates (Walker 1992). The dire economic conditions provided fertile ground for a full-fledged clash of interests among elites and potentially, between the elites and the masses as well. As the economy deteriorated, the class conflict between the *nomenklatura* and the masses began to manifest in particular in growing public outcries against elite corruption and privilege. Under Andropov and then Gorbachev, the leadership responded by launching of anti-corruption campaigns in pursuit of “socialist legality.”

One would have expected Andropov’s crack-down on violations of “socialist legality,” though aimed at closing the gap between the officials and the society, to provoke an adverse reaction from the elites themselves, in whose eyes it may have revived the specter of Stalinist purges (Walker 1992). However, Andropov’s program was also aimed at what he saw as a lack of discipline among the masses, and he ordered the militia to arrest citizens who were standing in lines for their daily necessities when they were supposed to be at work (Walker 1992). He also embraced the motto of “better performance-better pay.”

After Andropov's death, there was a brief Brezhnevite backlash manifested during Chernenko's brief tenure. Gorbachev, who shared somewhat similar visions about reviving the "original Leninist" socialism as Andropov, came to power in early 1985. Gorbachev vowed to continue Andropov's anti-corruption campaign vigorously as part of a reformist agenda.

In the early Gorbachev years, developments in Eastern Europe, especially the Solidarity movement in Poland, began to have an impact on class conflict in the Soviet Union as they solidified the *nomenklatura*'s fear of the masses:

Zhores Medvedev reports that the Soviet elite's concern over corruption had been heightened by the revelations during the [Polish] Solidarity period about the corruption and elite privileges under Geierek, and Geierek's subsequent arrest in 1984 for malfeasance after the declaration of martial law. (Walker 1992)

The significance of the Polish Solidarity Movement for the Soviet elite's perceptions is also highlighted by Walker, who wrote that "the events in Poland caused enormous concern in Moscow, particularly because the anti-regime efforts were led not by the intelligentsia as in Czechoslovakia in 1968 but by the working class." (Walker 1992) According to Bialer, "One has the impression that the specter of the 'Polandization' of the Soviet working class is never far from the minds of the Soviet leadership and the elites." (Bialer 1981: 1009, quoted in Walker 1992)

Intra-elite "contradictions" vis-à-vis the masses and the prospects of reform and democratization appeared. Reformers advanced a vision of socialist "workplace democracy" and an end to elite privileges, albeit in a necessarily "muted" and implicit fashion:

[A] muted debate broke out among ideologists about the possibility of contradictions within socialism and whether state ownership and formal nationalization were truly socialist forms of ownership in the absence of workplace democracy. (Butenko 1982 in Walker 1992)

Walker calls this the “radical socialist critique of the command administrative system.” (Walker 1992) In stark contrast with the first tendency, a fiscally conservative, top down program of economic austerity also found strong advocates among segments of the elite. This latter tendency, of course, was more in keeping with the “objective” interests of the *nomenklatura* as they clashed with the growing anti-elitism of the masses:

[A]n article published in late 1980 by the economist Gavriil Popov (later the radical mayor of Moscow) called for a reduction in wages, planned unemployment, and a minimum wage of 80 rubles per month. (Walker 1992)

Episodes of rampant corruption engulfing the highest ranks of the government gave rise to a new anti-corruption and anti-*nomenklatura* discourse about the state of socialism in the Soviet Union. “The attack on unwarranted privilege was a major theme in the effort to discredit the *ancien regime*.” (Walker 1992: 260) Though there was no anti-regime mass mobilization at the time, the fear of it helped account for the support for some kind of break with the past.

Two years into Gorbachev’s term, the campaign against bureaucracy, official privilege, and corruption attained a new level of intensity. In February 1987, *Pravda* published an article castigating elite privileges and corruption that led to the “development of ‘an entrenched, inert, immovable bureaucratic party located between the leadership and the masses’.” (Walker 1992: 243) “By 1988, references to Djilas’ “new class” and attacks on the hidden and “anti-socialist” perquisites of the *nomenklatura* had become commonplace. In mid-1988, *Moscow News* published an article presenting the results of a poll that revealed the depth of resentment over the issue.” (Walker 1992: 260-1)

Some of Gorbachev’s reforms did not necessarily contradict, and even overlapped with, the aspirations and wishes of at least a sizable segment of the elite. Gorbachev’s

abandonment of the Soviet geopolitical project of challenging the United States, and the subsequent cut in military expenses, relieved some of the pressure on the Soviet budget. However, it also meant that some members of the military-industrial elite joined the opposition to Gorbachev's reforms.

The "collapse" of the command administrative socialist political economy, however, was the most important feature of the transition. Gorbachev did not intend this outcome. Rather, his goal was to save socialism by a measure of democratization and the introduction of "market socialism" (although the meaning of the term remained necessarily and extremely vague, probably even for Gorbachev himself). Market socialism, democratic accountability, the campaign against corruption, and similar measures were, however, anathema to most of the *nomenklatura*, the result of which was the failed coup of August 1991.

Nevertheless, Gorbachev had allies within the *nomenklatura* who supported his reforms. As Kryshtanovskaya and White have demonstrated, part of the *nomenklatura* rushed to convert its political power into legal property in the late 1980s (Kryshtanovskaya and White 1996). The specter of socialist legality and socialist democracy, the possibility of a wave of purges of the elite, and increasingly real challenge from below, mobilized the *nomenklatura* to support "capitalist legality" and a new order. Segments of the *nomenklatura* became a new bourgeoisie whose property was protected by the post-Communist Russian state. As a result, economic inequality in post-Communist Russia skyrocketed to the levels prevalent in Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa.

Conclusion

Post-Stalinist Soviet ‘socialism’ was sustained by a social pact among its constituent parts. The pact promised to preserve elite security and privilege while providing a minimum of welfare protections and consumer goods to the Soviet citizens. This pact was unilaterally broken by the *nomenklatura* towards the end of Gorbachev’s reforms. When challenged by the anti-corruption campaigns of Andropov and Gorbachev, as well as by the anti-elite sentiments of the masses, part of the *nomenklatura* came to embrace an alternative order to institutionalize its property claims. They did so, however, with little input from, and to the detriment of, the Soviet people, appropriating public resources and seeking refuge in a system—capitalism—that benefited the *nomenklatura* itself at the expense of the society.

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