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Review: Tackling the Transition: Still Dancing on the Volcano?

Reviewed Work(s): Russia and the Post-Soviet Scene: A Geographical Perspective by James H. Bater: Can Democracy Take Root in Post-Soviet Russia? Explorations in State-Society Relations by Harry Eckstein, Frederic J. Fleron,, Erik P. Hoffmann and William M. Reissinger: The State against Society: Political Crises and Their Aftermath in East Central Europe by Grzegorz Ekiert: Post-Communist Politics: An Introduction by Karen Henderson and Robinson Neil: Post-Communism: An Introduction by Leslie Holmes:
Fin de Siècle and Other Essays on America and Europe
by Walter Laqueur: The Roles of the United States, Russia and China in the New World Order by Hafeez Malik: Post-Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe by Patrick H. O'Neil

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Source: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Oct., 1998, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Oct., 1998), pp. 703-713

Published by: the Modern Humanities Research Association and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies

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SEER, Vol. 76, No. 4, October 1998

Review Article

Tackling the Transition: Still Dancing on the Volcano?

RICHARD SAKWA

Bater, James H. *Russia and the Post-Soviet Scene: A Geographical Perspective.* Arnold, London, 1996. xiii + 354 pp. Index. £45.00; £18.99.

Eckstein, Harry; Fleron Jr., Frederic J.; Hoffmann, Erik P. and Reissinger, William M. *Can Democracy Take Root in Post-Soviet Russia? Explorations in State-Society Relations.* Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 1998. xi + 420 pp. Bibliography. Index. Price unknown.

Ekiert, Grzegorz. *The State Against Society: Political Crises and their Aftermath in East Central Europe.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1996. xvi + 435 pp. Bibliography. Index. £50.00; £15.95: $59.50; $19.95.

Henderson, Karen and Neil Robinson. *Post-Communist Politics: An Introduction.* Prentice Hall, London, 1997. xxiii + 424 pp. References. Index. £14.95 (paperback).

Holmes, Leslie. *Post-Communism: An Introduction.* Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997. xiv + 384 pp. Bibliography. Index. £45.00; £14.95.

Laqueur, Walter. *Fin de Siècle and Other Essays on America and Europe.* Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1997. vii + 280 pp. Index. $34.95.

Malik, Hafeez (ed.). *The Roles of the United States, Russia and China in the New World Order.* Macmillan, Basingstoke and London, 1997. xix + 333 pp. Index. £47.50.

O'Neil, Patrick H. (ed.). *Post-Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe.* Frank Cass, London, 1997. 144 pp. £27.50; £13.50.

POSTCOMMUNIST studies has come of age. With the publication of these books, representing some of the best analyses of the phenomenon, the sub-discipline now has a substantial body of work around which debate can be structured, courses taught and research pursued. While the methodological debate thunders on, above all between those who insist that area studies provides a unique environment in which history, politics, language and cultural studies can be combined to provide *depth* of analysis, and those who insist that the transitological approach, honed in the study of the Latin America and Southern Europe transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, can be equally fruitfully applied to postcommunist Eastern Europe to provide

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breadth — most of the authors discussed in this review have finessed the problem in distinctive ways. This is not the place to rehearse the debate except to say that it appears that the combination of area studies expertise with the insights afforded by comparative politics appears to be the most fruitful; but that if faced with a choice, an area studies approach is usually better informed than the simple extension of approaches developed in a totally different context to the postcommunist world. The differences are both quantitative and qualitative. If the postcommunist changes are distinguished by anything, it is their totality: political, economic, international orientation, social welfare systems, and (far from least) the scale of cultural values. The qualitative aspects above all focus on questions of political theory, a sub-discipline that as yet has contributed little to our overall understanding of the dynamics of postcommunist change.

These are total transformations on a scale and intensity that usually follow wars. In the modern era of European history there have been five of these periods of crisis and war followed by the inauguration of more or less durable new orders: the Thirty Years War and the establishment of the Westphalian system of states after 1648; the collapse of the Napoleonic empire and the establishment of an uncomfortable dual system of empires and nations that spawned the age of nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century; World War I and the emergence of independent states out of the detritus of empire in Eastern Europe; World War II gave rise to a divided continent and the immersion of the East European states in what in most cases (although usually for very different reasons) was an alien and uncomfortable relationship with a hegemonic power; and once again after 1989 when the Soviet 'empire' collapsed and its ideological challenge to the West disappeared.

It is with the fourth period that Ekiert is concerned. His aim is a genuine macrohistorical comparative approach focusing on the three great moments of crisis of Soviet-type systems: the Hungarian crisis and Soviet intervention of 1956; Czechoslovakia's 'interrupted revolution' of 1968; and Poland's long revolt against communism that peaked with the emergence of Solidarity in 1980. Because of the global constraints imposed by the Soviet presence, these crises were like contained nuclear reactions in a containment vessel: the energy was mostly directed inwards and left the societies permanently traumatized, while registering relatively little direct impact on the course of European history and world politics as a whole. Or so it seemed at the time: the contribution of these crises to the long-term delegitimation of the Soviet model of socialism, and with it the geopolitical system sustained by the challenge that it represented to the capitalist democracies, cannot be under-estimated.

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Ekiert provides a profound comparative analysis of these crises. Too often ostensible comparative analysis is nothing of the sort, providing simply parallel accounts of discrete phenomena. Ekiert avoids this by cutting out all the incidental detail to focus on the fundamental issue of cross-national differences in the cases being discussed, despite formally similar institution structures. Like most other authors discussed in this review, he insists that 'we cannot adequately grasp the meaning and patterns of the massive changes occurring in the region today without re-examining past developments and their legacies' (p. xi). The different 'modes of extrication' (p. xiii) from communism were determined by the past crises and their legacies, above all the attempts by the authorities to demobilize the collective actors who had emerged during the crisis, a struggle that in the Polish case met with little success. The complexity and sophistication of Ekiert's study of state-society relations in periods of crisis and the re-configuration of power relations that took place in the aftermath can barely be hinted at here; the book will surely become central to all future analyses of East European communist development.

The question posed by Ekiert is one that faces all students of postcommunism: 'Do the knowledge, research, and theoretical approaches developed over four decades of the existence of state-socialist regimes have any lasting values?' (p. xi). The question is answered thumpingly in the affirmative by the two books that explicitly focus on postcommunist politics. Neither the book by Holmes nor the jointly-authored Henderson and Robinson volume could have been written to such a high standard if the authors had not absorbed through long study a thorough knowledge of what had gone before. One could go further, and argue that without a detailed knowledge of the previous period it is impossible to understand the subtleties of postcommunist developments.

This is most evident in Holmes's book, in effect a sequel to his excellent *Politics in the Communist World* of 1986. As in his earlier works, Holmes favours a total approach, combining history, philosophy and politics. He has used this approach to good effect in his study of postcommunism, providing by far the best single-authored overview of the phenomenon. I have reviewed the book elsewhere (*Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 8 [1997], pp. 1533–34) so will limit my comments to a few salient points. It is a veritable cornucopia of useful information tied together by a strong analytical agenda focused on his notion of the 'double-rejective revolution' (of communist power and, for East Europeans, of Soviet power as well). Thus for Holmes postcommunism is above all a negative process, transcending the distortions imposed by the epoch that came before, above all the deleterious affects of state socialism on advanced economic modernization and political

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legitimation. There is no doubt that this is the case, but the emphasis on the negative features of postcommunism risks occluding the more positive or normative features of the revolt against communism — a revolt, it must be stressed, that ultimately was as strong in Moscow as it was in Prague and Warsaw. It is here that political philosophy has been at its weakest, parroting glibly François Furet's and Claus Offe's view that no new ideas came out of the Eastern European anti-communist 'anti-revolutions' (as I have described them elsewhere). Nevertheless, for an overview of the trajectory of communism and its fall, analysis of the main regions (Eastern Europe, the USSR, and 'the survivors' — China and Cuba), and the institutional politics, processes and international relations of the postcommunist world, there is no more sure guide than Holmes.

Henderson and Robinson are both more and less ambitious than Holmes. While Holmes provides a synoptic and theoretical overview of communism and its attempted transcendence, Henderson and Robinson focus more narrowly on Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Their greater ambition, however, is revealed both in their greater attention to detail, including the careful periodization of the phases of early postcommunism and the extensive presentation of the secondary literature, and in their explicit application of comparative approaches to the events they describe. It is the creative tension between the broad scope of the book and the detailed vignettes and country studies (including very useful, if rather twee, 'factboxes') that sustains the whole endeavour. The authors have succeeded admirably in their aim of 'providing clarity in the explanation of events which so often appear complex and confusing' (p. xxi), and thus makes the book particularly suited for teaching purposes. They demonstrate that 'textbooks' do not have to be simplistic or need to pander to populist simplifications but can present complex ideas and a mountain of research and experience in accessible ways.

Henderson and Robinson's analysis of the breakdown of the Soviet-type system and approaches to describe the collapse — revolutions or transitions — is masterful. They plump for the uncomfortable notion of 'negotiated revolutions', lying somewhere between revolution and transition while recognizing the limitations of the term, and then apply it to the various relevant countries. While the approach is broadly speaking chronological, the material is organized around four broad phases: the decline of the old system and the revolutions of 1989; the first elections and the establishment of democratic systems in 1990–91; the reform agendas of 1992–93 when issues of constitutional reform, national identities and economic reform came to the fore; and, finally, an analysis of the new political systems as they appeared in 1994–96. As if to reflect the continuing nature of the changes, there is no

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conclusion. Some tying up of the threads and a broad overview of what had been discussed might well have been useful. Above all, as so often, Russia and the other former Soviet states appear in a different historical time to Eastern Europe, particularly in the early period between 1989 and 1991.

The very organization of the material is political, with the three Baltic republics lumped in with Russia and the so-called newly independent states, whereas some authors have made the conscious decision to include them with Eastern Europe. At the same time, the South (Trans?) Caucasian and Central (Middle?) Asian republics are excluded entirely from the account. The attentive reader no doubt by now will have noticed that my own use of Eastern Europe in the few paragraphs above has veered between including only the non-Soviet East European states to encompassing the whole of the area between the Urals and the Oder-Neisse line. The sensible approach of Henderson and Robinson of applying the label 'Eastern Europe' to all the states that were not formerly part of the Soviet Union will not hold. The notion of a 'new Eastern Europe', a region (like Poland a generation earlier) on wheels, but this time shifting to the East to include the lands lying between Russia and the 'old' Eastern Europe, might be a useful innovation, while the countries of the old Eastern Europe can battle it out amongst themselves about who is Central European and who is not. By any geographical standard, moreover, the exclusion of Russia as an Eastern European country is perverse.

The interrelationship of politics and geography is at the heart of James Bater's analysis of post-Soviet developments. The book is a radical reworking and development of his earlier volume *The Soviet Scene* (1989) and provides a concise and accessible introduction to the geography of the region. The author points out two themes in the book which he does indeed pursue throughout the text. The first is the stress on the need for a historical perspective. It is indeed impossible to understand contemporary dilemmas of Russian development without understanding the economic geography of the Soviet modernization process or the values and attitudes that underlay it. The second theme is that of decision-making, tracing not only the institutional actors involved but also the ideological and cultural contexts in which policy evolved. Thus this is not a traditional regional geography that focuses on the major peoples and their lands, but instead it undertakes the more ambitious task of understanding the morphology of human interaction with nature and the environment in the heartland of the Eurasian land mass.

Bater provides a distinctive slant on Soviet and Russian history, dealing with the transition from the planned economy to the market, population trends, the impact of privatization on urban development

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and governance, the management of natural resources, the legacy of Soviet agriculture and the first moves towards transforming the peasant into a proprietor, and ends with questions of energy exploitation, industrial restructuring and the quality of life in the postcommunist era. The coverage is focused on Russia but includes good studies of the other former Soviet states as well. Throughout, the approach is based on a rich blend of fact and analysis and this makes his overall implied judgement on the Soviet period all the more devastating. He reveals the degree to which the Soviet model of development, alongside its achievements (which he is at pains to stress), was in fact a type of 'mismodernization' (although he does not use this term). Examples include the under-development of the chemical industry, the extensive development of oil reserves that typically involved extraction of the easiest resources and then moving on to new reserves, the lack of modernization in new plants in favour of capital investment in new sites that left great swathes of Soviet industry on the verge of technological and physical exhaustion even before the system collapsed, the exceptionally large role played by coal and peat in the Soviet Union's energy balance, and the lack of co-ordination of the various interests involved in the development of hydroelectric projects, leading to the vast and unnecessary loss of agricultural land. Instead of facilitating co-ordination, the Soviet system appeared often to exacerbate capitalism's typically fragmented approach to development — known as 'departmentalism' in Soviet jargon. Bater also demonstrates the importance that security concerns played in Stalinist development, in particular in the development of the Urals-Kuznetsk Combine, absorbing one-third of the total investment capital available during the First Five Year Plan.

Bater has demonstrated, like most of the other volumes under review, that 1989–91 was not such a break as sometimes thought. Structural constraints inherited from the past not only throw a long shadow over postcommunist developments but are an intrinsic part of these developments. This is most in evidence when the discussion turns to particular issues of democratization. For the volume edited by O'Neil the focus is on changes in the media in postcommunist Eastern Europe. Formerly published as a special issue of *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* (Vol. 12, 1996, No. 4), chapters deal with developments in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Two introductory chapters outline the problems faced by a media itself undergoing rapid changes at a time of reform and democratization. O'Neil notes how the fall of the old regime was accompanied by the exuberant flourishing of the press, considered an integral part of any serious democratization process, yet the emergence of a genuinely free press was soon subverted by a range

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of forces, including the public, politicians and journalists themselves. Andrew Milton's cross-national comparison of media reform takes this argument further, arguing that communist (and even pre-communist) approaches to the collection, presentation and dissemination of news have persisted. The authorities still expect a servile press, while the media itself relies excessively on 'official' sources. The printed media have undergone the greatest changes, often under the impact of foreign proprietors who have established a significant presence in most postcommunist societies, while institutional continuity remains the greatest in the broadcasting media.

The dilemmas are succinctly stated by Tomasz Goban-Klas in his chapter on Polish developments, raising fundamental philosophical issues in the postcommunist period: 'The media debates in post-communist countries today are fierce and passionate, but the arguments are weak. There are no Eastern European Miltons or Mills to whom they can refer; nor is there a tradition of using European political philosophy as a basis for the defence of freedom of speech and of the press' (p. 37).

The media remains committed to its advocacy role rather than becoming truly independent. As in Italy and to various degrees in other capitalist democracies, four fundamental problems are identified: state control over the media; mass media partisanship; the integration of media and political élites; and the poor development of a shared professional ethos among media professionals themselves (p. 40). One might add that problems of ownership, financing and proprietorial intervention are equally important issues. It is tempting to say 'Welcome to the real world' to the postcommunist countries at this point, except that their reality is all the harsher, and indeed that 'the real world' is not simply a given but the subject of contestation and the public reformulation of policy agendas and programmes. In this the postcommunist world, narrowly defined to those who had previously been communist, and broadly defined to include the rest of the world that is no longer challenged by the existence of an alternative form of social organization, are equally perplexed by apparent weakness of postcommunist politics writ large to sustain a genuinely innovative and vibrant public sphere.

These are not issues discussed by the Eckstein *et al.* volume. Instead we have a number of America's leading comparative political scientists discussing primarily methodological issues in the study of Russian democratization. The focus is on state-society relations, and in particular on Harry Eckstein's 'congruence theory', first elaborated over three decades ago. In the opening chapter Eckstein provides a new exposition of the theory that he summarizes in two hypotheses. The first concerns the viability and performance of a political system

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and is stated as follows: 'Governments perform well to the extent that their authority patterns are congruent with the authority patterns of other units of society' (p. 4). The second focuses more narrowly on the viability and performance of democratic governments: 'Democratic governments perform well only if their authority patterns exhibit "balanced disparities" — that is, combinations of democratic and nondemocratic traits' (p. 4). This is an important corrective in the postcommunist context, where too often there has been excessive emphasis on abstract principles and processes of 'democratization' at the expense of framing constitutional orders appropriate to distinctive national conditions (pp. 26–29). There has been considerable discussion over what precisely 'authority patterns' are and how they can be measured, yet the view that a stable political order requires a basic correspondence and interaction between the authority relations of government and governed is undoubtedly important. If the authority patterns in state and society diverge too sharply, there will obviously be dysfunctional consequences, yet Eckstein never claims that isomorphism (sameness of form) can be absolute, and indeed, on the evidence of this book, it is the ambivalencies and ambiguities in state-society relations (what Eckstein calls 'balanced disparities') that are as fruitful of investigation as the correspondences. It is these ambiguities that are exposed and explored by Frederic Fleron in an article that tests the applicability of congruence theory in the context of postcommunist Russian democratization. In an impressive *tour de horizon* of the various approaches available in the study of postcommunist societies, Fleron assesses the cogency of Eckstein's key variables and concludes with a reserved approbation.

The tension between state-centred (endogenous) approaches and society-centred (exogenous) ones is explored in a series of contrasting expositions. Philip Roeder advances an unabashed 'new institutionalist' view, insisting that the dependent variably helping to explain the diverging paths of development between the fifteen post-Soviet states is the constitution (broadly defined) of each regime. The search is then on to identify the independent variables that prompted the adoption of particular constitutions. Although this approach is a necessary corrective to some sociologically over-determined explanations, it is nevertheless somewhat mechanistic. What is required, as Erik Hoffmann argues in three closely argued pieces, is a dynamic model of state – society relations that can encompass the porousness of both: in the postcommunist Russian context it is not clear where the state ends and society begins. A more direct rebuttal of Roeder's thesis in favour of more 'society-centred' approaches is developed by William Reisinger in three fact-packed yet analytically sophisticated chapters, although his argument moves far beyond a simple response to Roeder to assess the

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main findings and problems with recent survey research of attitudes and opinions in Russia.

This book is the first of a projected quatrain edited by the same four main authors, with the second focusing on authority patterns in Russia, the third on comparative democratization in postcommunist countries, and the fourth focusing on building postcommunist democracies and state-society relations. If the first volume is any judge, we are in for a treat. Yet a few small niggles remain. Although all the contributors are profound area specialists as well as being outstanding comparative political scientists, the combination appears to add up to less than the parts. We lack any detailed sustained analysis of any institution or process, and the overall interpretative framework is resolutely 'middle order'. After a time the American-centredness of the perspective does begin to weigh rather heavily. There is little sustained analysis of Russia's own debates by Russians, the East European debates are bypassed entirely, while the West European contribution seems to be categorically excluded (although its works are cited). While this is American political science at its very best, there appears on occasion to be a hermetic quality to the debate that undermines its very important contribution to our understanding of postcommunist Russian developments.

We now broaden our perspective to international relations. The volume edited by Hafeez Malik is the result of the collaboration of thirteen scholars who examine what is alleged to be a three-way power struggle between the United States, Russia and China. The approach is resolutely realist, insisting that the clash is provoked by primordial national interests and a 'preordained' struggle for power inherent in the international state system. Although they do not go so far as to say that war in some combination or other is inevitable, the argument certainly tends in this direction. For them, Russia's present eclipse is probably temporary, while America's dominance of the nascent 'new world order' is implicitly challenged by China's rise and Russia's prospective revenge for its current humiliation. The overall conceptual framework is rather thin, focusing on a vague notion of Russian neo-containment. The Preface by Hafeez Malik does not beat about the bush: 'The strategic objective of the United States' foreign policy should be, negatively stated, not to let Russia become a superpower like the Soviet Union, but to remain a regional power, like Brazil' (p. xi). The view is excessively Pakistan-centred, colouring too many of the articles with a distinctive perspective that on occasion undermines the academic credibility of the work as a whole, a fault that is compounded by the overall lack of focus, some unnecessary repetitions and a few mistakes (for example, V. Tishkov was never a minister, p. 219).

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Having stated some reservations of the *caveat emptor* sort, there is nevertheless much of interest in this volume. Henry Trofimenko presents the Russian perspective on the 'New World Order' and Russian-American relations, allowing the wounded tone to surface rather too obviously. Discussing the Aldrich Ames case and American demands that Russia unilaterally expose any other spies, Trofimenko expostulates: 'Evidently some people in the United States establishment are now confusing Russia with Puerto Rico' (p. 56). There are interesting chapters on the Japanese role in the above-mentioned *ménage à trois* (William Nester), on Indo-Russia relations in the post-Cold War era (Maya Chadda), on Russian domestic politics and military power (Robert Barylski), Russia and its Central Asian 'near abroad' (which includes a considered exposition of the so-called Russian Monroe Doctrine) (Mohiaddin Mesbahi), and a number of articles focused on China, including its relations with Tibet (Tom Grunfeld), with Southeast, South and Central Asia (Ross Munro) and an evaluation of its economic reforms (Jan S. Prybyla). Once again, as so often with collaborative volumes, there is no conclusion.

This review ends, most appropriately, with a series of essays on Europe and America by Walter Laqueur, brought together under the general rubric of *Fin de Siécle*. Some of the essays have been published before, while others are produced here for the first time. Ranging broadly over the political and cultural issues of our time, they focus (as does so much of his work) on threats to the 'centre' from the radical left and right. Laqueur's last major book, *Black Hundred* (Harper Collins, 1993) dealt with the threat of the extreme right in Russia, and in one of the essays reproduced here he notes the danger posed by the authoritarianism that remains ingrained in the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. He also broadens his purview to describe the rise of the extreme right in many West European countries, in particular in France, Italy and Austria. The essays range wide and freely, and while at their best they are remarkably perceptive and erudite, at times they fall below the standards we expect from the author and become rather reminiscent of the brilliant George Steiner at his most curmudgeonly. In the latter category falls his rather gauche attempt to dispose of 'postmodernism and poststructuralism which includes deconstruction, postcolonial studies, American studies, the new historicism, cultural studies, and gender studies' (p. 25). Although his brush is broad, he does make some telling criticisms of aspects of these movements. Another of his favourite targets are the Cold War revisionists, and in particular John Gaddis. At times an unwelcome and unwarranted anti-academic edge creeps into his writing. It should also be mentioned that the copy editing is extremely sloppy.

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Yet all these are minor blemishes. Even at the worst moments of bathos, Laqueur's tone is always magisterial and measured. At his best Laqueur is a great essayist and, indeed, polemicist, as in his demolition of Nolte in his essay 'Post-Fascism, Post-Communism'. He is elegaic about 'all that has gone wrong in Russia in recent years' (p. 222), and quite rightly notes that 'only the most inveterate optimist would have assumed in 1987 that the transition to a free and civilized society would be quick and smooth' (p. 222). He does not go deeply into why things went wrong, if indeed they have, but his argument is a healthy corrective to transitological optimism. In his analysis of 'Berlin and Moscow, 1914', he richly conjures back to life Russia's Silver Age, the literary salons, the theatres, the art collectors and above all the poets, but all of this was also the famous 'dance on the volcano', with premonitions of disaster that came to pass in the most gruesome war possible, a war whose legacy was only finally expunged in 1989–91. But are we, too, in this Fin de siècle, again 'dancing on the volcano' with glib talk of democratization and the universal panacea of the market? These studies, all deeply rooted in history, may well help us to avoid its repetition.

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