Review
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Reviews

Richard Sakwa, *Postcommunism*. Buckingham and Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1999, vi + 153 pp., £37.50 h/b, £10.99 p/b.

WHILE IT INCLUDES HISTORICAL and more descriptive sections, Sakwa's latest book is primarily a theoretical analysis of post-communism. The latter is seen as one of the defining concepts of our age. Sakwa sensibly argues that post-communism has at least two meanings: the more common one refers to the situation in countries that used to be under communist rule, while the broader one can be used as a shorthand term for the world beyond the Cold War, extremist ideologies and metanarratives more generally. There is in fact a third meaning, popular among many Central and East Europeans, which refers to periods since 1989–90 in which communist successor parties are in power; although Sakwa does not really explore this meaning, he does consider the implications of 'post-communists' coming to office in Poland, Hungary and elsewhere. Most of his book concentrates more on aspects of the first definition, but the emphasis in several parts is on the second.

This slim but dense volume is divided into seven chapters. The first considers definitional aspects of post-communism. Sakwa argues that one of the salient features of post-communism, primarily in the first sense outlined above, is coming to terms with the communist past. He draws a number of interesting comparisons with other 'post-' societies and systems, including post-imperialism, post-colonialism, post-fascism and post-war situations. Having drawn comparisons, he then produces a 13-point summary of the defining characteristics of post-communism. Not all of these are unique to post-communist societies, but the particular combination is. However, Sakwa sensibly argues that the list he has identified cannot capture the profound complexity and ambiguities of the phenomenon—and much of the rest of the book is devoted to highlighting these.

Chapter 2 provides a sophisticated if brief analysis of the history of communist ideas, including immanent critiques of the classical Marxist position from what Sakwa refers to as the 'revolutionary revisionist' perspective. The following chapter focuses on the communist experience, and includes a section on what are called the 'transcending' revolutions of 1989–91. An attractive aspect of this chapter is that Sakwa looks far beyond just the CEE countries, considering also the Asian, African and Latin American communist states. Chapter 4 is concerned primarily with the political, economic, social, international and identity aspects of the 'total transition'. One interesting argument is that we should distinguish between nationalism and 'nationism'—the latter meaning 'the creation of a supraethnic national identity that might be recognisably Russian, Ukrainian or whatever, but not drawn from one ethnic group alone' (p. 61)—in deciding whether a particular regime is being nationalistic, 'nationalising' or not. While this distinction is not unproblematical, it is a useful starting point for identifying important differences between what governments have been doing in Serbia (or Slovakia until 1998) on the one hand, and Ukraine on the other.

The fifth chapter focuses on the ways in which post-communism seeks to come to terms with its own communist past, and includes sections on lustration (decommunisation) and the legitimate coming to power in some countries of 'post-communist communists'. Chapter 6 is in many ways the most interesting and thought-provoking in the book. Under the title

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'Paradoxes and Paradigms' Sakwa highlights the many profound ambiguities and implications of post-communism. Perhaps the most interesting hypothesis here is that the 'anti-revolutionary revolutions' of 1989–91 have undermined the very notion of emancipatory and modernising revolution, thus rendering redundant a key concept of the Enlightenment project. As Sakwa summarises it, 'post-communism is post-revolutionism' (p. 90).

In the concluding chapter, the author provides an overwhelmingly depressing picture of post-communism as 'fundamental choicelessness', and emphasises the gap between formal and substantive democracy. Although he tries to finish on an upbeat note, this final chapter provides little hope for an improved situation in the new century—not only in the post-communist countries themselves but also in the post-communist world in the broader sense.

Given the sheer range of topics covered and theorists invoked, it is inevitable that readers will disagree, often strongly, with parts of the analysis. While this reviewer delighted in Sakwa's condemnation of both communist practice and neo-liberal triumphalism, those with a proclivity towards simple binary oppositions and essentially linear modernisation theories will take exception to his argument. The book's coverage also means that some topics are not explored in as much depth as one would have preferred. Occasionally, the extent of abbreviation leads to a glossing over of significant problems—not everyone will accept that 'the end point' of transition is 'relatively easy to identify' (p. 37), for instance—despite Sakwa's attempts to spell these out (notably on pp. 51–52 and 121–122). And the distinction between 'postcommunism' and 'post-Communism' towards the end of the book is largely implied rather than explicitly addressed.

Yet these apparent 'criticisms' are for the most part not really criticisms. The point about brevity is really a plea for Sakwa to develop some of his ideas at greater length because they are significant; he is brilliant at whetting appetites!

This is a serious, polemical, passionate and disquieting book. While written in deceptively straightforward language given the complexity of the arguments, it is highly sophisticated, and Sakwa sometimes takes it for granted that references to people and events will be obvious to the reader—which will not invariably be the case. In this sense, it is probably better suited to advanced students (broadly understood) than to newcomers. But it is also a book for serious general readers and for political theorists at least as much as for specialists on Central and Eastern Europe.

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Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia. A Study of Practices*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, xii + 406 pp., $50.00 (£40.00).

ONE OF THE STEREOTYPES about the Soviet Union is what 'the system' did to 'the people': after 'sincere' attempts to create a literate, responsible and collectivist constructor of socialism, this 'new man' degraded into an anxious, irresponsible and faceless *homo sovieticus*, while the more ambitious part of the population turned cynical and materialistic, ready to become today's 'new Russians'. Such stereotypes contain elements of truth, but are not really helpful in understanding Soviet and post-Soviet human reality. The book under review is a more serious contribution to this discussion, and points a way to further research, aiming to 'move the debate on differences between respective cultures beyond overused and tired comparisons of collectivist Russia *vis-à-vis* the individualist West' (p. 362).

Kharkhordin aims to 'examine a set of practices that made it possible for people to be known objectively and to know themselves as individuals in Soviet Russia and compare this local background with the one Foucault found in the West' (p. 34). While he discharges the