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Review of "Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy" by John C. Torpey

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essays complement each other well, as broad, trenchant essays considering the dynamics of socialist society and the contours of postsocialism are juxtaposed to close and careful analyses of the local politics of decollectivization in a Transylvanian village and the clever means by which county politicians wrest control of revenues and pave their way into the new "bourgeoisocracy."

The wealth of ideas in this book exceeds the space I have, so let me highlight one particularly important set of concerns. What is the shape of the societies emerging from socialism? Verdery numbers herself among the skeptics who seriously question the notion that capitalism is being established in Eastern Europe. Indeed, in her closing essay, "A Transition from Socialism to Feudalism: Thoughts on the Postsocialist State," she prefers to consider a number of factors in the current context that would bear far greater similarity to feudalism than to capitalism as we understand it in the West today. This is a provocation, and all the more interesting for that.

Verdery is not alone in identifying important similarities to earlier historical periods. A number of sociologists are making a turn to history, for two reasons. The first is the need to counter the teleology of much economic thinking, which presumes that capitalism is the only and necessary result of these transformations. The second reason is the clear evidence from empirical studies that economic transitions are far more gradual than was initially anticipated; moreover, the character of the transition is seriously constrained by previous social practices. Nonetheless, a move to jettison simple teleologies or consider path dependency has not substantially altered the conceptual repertoire deployed by sociologists working in the region. Verdery, on the other hand, wishes to bring the debate to another level of introspection and analysis. She argues that the analytic framework we have been using to understand the transition has not served us well. Indeed, Verdery hopes that the puzzles we confront in the transition in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union may prompt us to rethink much of our conceptual arsenal, an opportunity that is only more pressing as the character of the global economy undergoes serious transformation. The question of property rights, though crucial in Eastern Europe, is not confined to struggles there; nor is the eschatological thinking revealed in people's rush to pyramid schemes in Romania limited to that one place. Nor can we circumscribe in certain geographical regions the problems of social inequality, the concerns of nationalists, battles over citizenship and individual rights, and the curious inviability of borders, political and economic. One of the virtues of this book is its attention to forces beyond the confines of Eastern Europe, breaking down the wall that has sheltered studies of this region from the wide world to which it now properly belongs. If we heed Verdery's call to enliven our conceptual categories while incorporating Eastern Europe into studies of global processes, we will all benefit.


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Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent provides readers with a vivid account of the East German opposition from the time of the Soviet occupation and military administration after the end of the Nazi regime to the formal creation of the German Democratic Republic and to its collapse and unification with the Federal Republic. It also discusses the early transition years after unification, through 1992. The book is based on German and Western literature on intellectuals and the role of culture in the GDR and on interviews conducted by the author with members of the East German intellectual community. Many of them believed in the possibility of reforming socialism in the former German Democratic Republic and creating a more humane society.

After the defeat of Nazism, the new regime growing out of the Soviet military administration gave unprecedented educational opportunities to the children of workers. This new "socialist intelligentsia," though varied in its position and critique and though changing in
its self-understanding over the years, also maintained a consciousness of its indebtedness to the regime for the possibilities it had provided them. In addition, until the construction of the Wall, there was the option of "exit." Torpey rightly notes that by the end of the 1950s, many of the "better-educated" residents of the GDR "with antipathies towards the regime" (p. 20) had left for the West.

He highlights the major confrontations between intellectuals and the regime throughout the '60s and '70s and discusses the delicate problems raised by the emigration (forced and voluntary) of intellectuals and artists to western Germany (where they could work in the same language). This emigration had complex consequences for the opposition in the GDR and for human rights. Torpey focuses on the expatriation of Wolf Biermann, on Rudolph Bahro, and on the efforts of Robert Havemann to intervene with the regime.

Torpey's chapter on the intelligentsia and the development of opposition in the GDR during the 1980s would have benefited from more attention to the changes within a number of social, work, and political organizations in the German Democratic Republic and the fights about leadership and policy that took place on a number of levels. These went far beyond the role of the church despite its importance as an umbrella organization for environmental, peace, and other groups developing their constituencies in the GDR, beyond the actions of a number of important GDR intellectuals, and beyond the production and distribution of dissident literature. Torpey does refer to a conversation with Manfred Loetsch (a sociologist at the Academy of Sciences in the former GDR and a participant in the talks between the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party that took place in the '80s) about conflicts within the party's intellectual and power elites. But conflicts took place on a variety of levels and in different places, including intellectual and artistic associations. Though the results of conflicts in these associations—for example, changes in leadership—were slow and incomplete, they did exist. In the GDR, conflicts often revolved around concrete aspects of intellectual, literary, and artistic production. That is not the focus of Torpey's analysis. His strength is his attention to the broader context of human rights and the role of intellectuals with respect to these. Without an understanding of both of these aspects of GDR society, it is difficult to grasp the events that took place before and after unification, to understand how they shaped politics in the united Germany and to assess a number of ongoing tensions between intellectuals in eastern and western Germany.

The chapters on the end of the GDR and the period after unification are summaries of the main events that took place in 1989 and 1990. The author notes the preference of voters for the "practical professions" in the first elected legislature in 1989 and points out that the voter base of Alliance 90 and the Greens at that time and in 1990 was essentially confined to the new middle classes. The less educated did not tend to see their concerns reflected in the activities of those involved with civil rights. Yet Torpey reminds readers that civil rights activists were strongly involved in the intense discussions about the past regime as well as in constitutional plans for the future.

This book offers a detailed account of intellectuals and oppositional groups in the GDR, and it offers valuable interpretations. A more comprehensive understanding of consent and dissent among the intelligentsia of the GDR and of reforms and reform tendencies remains a task for the future.


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Within the short span of 14 years, from 1979 to 1993, Nicaraguans experienced two periods of profound social transformation, the first marked by the revolutionary transition of power from dictatorship to socialist-oriented Sandinista rule; the second by the election of a right-of-center–dominated coalition aimed at reintegrating the country into the world capitalist economy. During each, both the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the National Opposition Union (UNO) used education as a tool to consolidate two contrasting visions of society: one

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