

Laszlo Bruszt

Hungarian Regime Change



Born in Budapest on April 6, 1953. Graduated from Eötvös Lorand University (Budapest) 1981; PhD. in Sociology, 1986, Budapest. Lectured at the University of Notre Dame, Cornell, New School for Social Research and the Special College at the Budapest University of Economics. Current position: research fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences and recurring visiting professor at the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame. Editor of the periodical *Medvetanc* of the Budapest University and member of the editorial committee of *Politikatudomány*, the journal of the Hungarian Association of Political Science. Publications include *The Silenced Society* (together with Janos Simon), and numerous articles on corporatism, political regime change in Hungary and the development of public opinion during the regime change in Hungary and Eastern Europe. — Address: Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Uri u. 49, H— 1014 Budapest.

The original project for my year at the Kolleg was research and work on a book on the Hungarian regime change in comparative perspective, a work I am co-authoring with David Stark (Cornell University). During my stay in Berlin, which was interrupted by a four-month teaching stint at the University of Notre Dame, I managed to make great progress in the framing of the book and modest progress in writing the book itself. In addition, I finished two papers on the different aspects of the development of political orientations during and after the regime change in Hungary.

By the time of my arrival at the Kolleg, we had collected, together with David Stark, a large amount of documents and data on the details of the political regime change. We had all the minutes of the roundtable negotiations between the opposition and the ruling party, the minutes of the strategic meetings of the leaders of the opposition, several dozen interviews with the key actors of the negotiations, including interviews with Politburo members and leaders of the oppositional parties. We also had at our disposal a large amount of data for the analysis of the change in public opinion during the transition, including surveys made with the different

political and economic élite groups in 1989. In addition, we had collected similar documents from the Polish regime change, including interviews with the major negotiators on the side of the Solidarity movement.

In some of our earlier papers we outlined the basic elements of the conceptual framework for the analysis of our data. In these papers we undertook to locate the political changes in Hungary among the other Eastern European cases and offer a conceptual framework for the analysis of the interactions among the actors of the regime change, and for the understanding of the constitution of democratic institutions as a process of contingent choices and compromises. Similarly, we have started to work on the conceptual framework for the understanding of the lasting impacts of the contingent choices and compromises made during the creation of the new institutions of democracy.

Based on these works the major focus during my stay at the Kolleg was to connect the contingencies of the political regime change to the peculiarities of the social, economic and political regime before the transition, and to refine the comparative framework by analysing the context in which parts of political élites in Hungary and Poland, led partly by their fear of economic collapse, partly by their fear of their societies, decided to open up their regimes and entered into negotiations with the organized forces of the opposition.

Like any co-authored book, this involves several difficulties, which were also aggravated by the fact that we had to work together despite having offices in two different continents. The generous support of the Kolleg helped us to overcome at least part of these problems by twice allowing a several-days-stay for David Stark in Berlin. In developing our ideas on the problems of institution-building and constitution-making we were also able to consult with other fellows of the Kolleg who are leading experts in this field. The possibility of informal conversations with Bruce Ackerman, Stephen Holmes, Claus Offe, Larissa Lomnitz, fellows of the Kolleg at the time of my stay in Berlin, was an enormous help in refining several elements of the conceptual framework of our book.

As regards the issues mentioned above, one of the most challenging problems of "transitology" is to connect the past characteristics of these regimes with their multiple potential futures and to understand to what extent and in what ways the different paths these countries took during the last decades shaped and constrained the modes they transited from state socialism, and the lasting impacts of the different modes of transition from the old regimes on the chances of successful democratic consolidation and economic transformation. The path-dependency approach, that we use, lies between "teleological determinism", which sees the regime changes in Eastern Europe as a kind of final victory of liberal democratic values and

principles of market economy on the one hand, and the similarly deterministic approach according to which it suffices to know the past characteristics of these regimes, the legacies of state socialism in structures, institutions and cultures, in order to understand the futures facing these countries.

According to the path-dependency approach, the above-mentioned characteristics of the East and Central European regimes shape and constrain the range of possibilities but they do not determine outcomes. The understanding of the political dynamics of transition also presupposes the reconstruction of the strategic interactions of the major actors of the regime-changes. While the game-theoretical approach can help in identifying the potential range of types of strategic interactions, the actual range of strategies is just partly related to the potential benefits of the different types. They are again shaped and constrained by such factors as the different pre-histories, identities, values of the actors, their capacity to learn from earlier strategic interactions or from developments in other countries, etc.

What all this implies is that it is too early to speak about the end of history and similarly, there is room for manoeuvre left for social and political actors trying to overcome the legacies of the past regimes.