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The Transformation of Identity in Comparative perspective

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The recent wave of political and economic liberalization spreading over much of the globe has unleashed a flood of scholarly speculation about the sources of successful democratic consolidation and economic development in societies that have broken from an illiberal past. In particular, the collapse of the GDR provides fertile ground for scholars to both test theories of political change developed in other regions and different time periods and to construct new approaches to political and social transformation. What kind of social, political, and economic order is emerging from the collapse of Leninism in the former GDR and in Eastern Europe as a whole? What are the dominant constraints and incentives that shape that new order?

For comparativists, the study of post-communist transformation is particularly intriguing, since much of the world has been swept into the ideological tide of economic and political liberalization at roughly the same time with few alternatives to guide their political and economic futures. But despite the fact that the "Leninist extinction" is an unprecedented historical event, this current transformation is not entirely unique. It can be compared with at least two previous historical attempts to transform society in a similar fashion: Reconstruction in the United States after the Civil War, and "Wiederaufbau" in Germany after World War II. The essential transformation required in each of these three periods was nothing less than the destruction of illiberal and "traditional" economic, political, and social practices, and the creation of "liberal" societies, politics, economics and culture. Were the architects of transformation equally

successful in these three cases? If not, why not? Are we able to discern similar responses in these three periods to the same liberalization stimulus, or have the responses been different, revealing the importance of distinct historical conditions that determine the direction of change? Under what conditions will the transformation of communist regimes resemble the transformation of fascist Germany and the American South after the Civil War?

The victors of war in the first two cases and the victors of war in the first two cases, and the victors of ideological and political conflict in the current period all attempted to create modern institutions of liberal capitalist democracy. If those institutions could be constructed, they believed, they would create liberal, tolerant, and open societies with the destruction of racist, patriarchal, fascist, and communist ideologies. Those traditional "illiberal" ideologies would be replaced with liberal principles and practices of universal citizenship, individualism, and equality. Capitalism, with its institutions of private property and, impersonal market relationships among individuals would replace the slave economy of the American South and the collectivistic economy of the GDR. And the political institution of democracy would create a "civil society" In the post-bellum United States and in post-wall Germany. Indeed, these institutions had already been created in the North and in the West. The victors of the Civil war and of the Cold War believed that they could simply be extended to the South and the East respectively. In post-war Germany, on the other hand, these institutions had to be created from scratch.

The two papers under consideration here are concerned only with an assessment of transformation of the South in the post-bellum United States and with the East in post-wall Germany. In both cases, two countries were united by a dominant regional liberal victor who saw as his task the destruction of the old system and way of life and the liberalization of the loser's society. Both papers argue that the creation of new institutions and new cultures was essential, but

that in neither case was the transformation a success. In Sonya Michel's paper we see the perpetuation of traditional cultures and traditional identities that maintain those traditional cultures; in Ulrike Skorsetz' paper, we see the failure of new institutions to bring about economic growth. It is perhaps too early to predict "failure" in this case, but at the very least, the hoped for transformation will be a long time in coming.

In the remainder of this comment, I shall assess the argument raised by both Michael and Skorsetz that liberal transformation in both cases was incomplete. The essence of that argument is that the new institutions were not strong enough to overcome past legacies, especially the cultural legacy of slavery in the 19th century American South and Leninist legacy in the former GDR. I discuss the social features and cultural identities that these new institutions were supposed to transform, and the conditions under which the transformation could have taken place. Both papers suggest that institutional transformation is important, but that it may not be enough. Embedded in liberal institutions are a set of contradictions that render them inherently weak. Their strength depends on economic growth and the willingness of the victor in the struggle for transformation to incorporate "losers" into new institutions and transformation strategies.

New Institutions and Past Legacies

The apparent failure of the transformation process in both cases raises the issue of the power of new institutions in their struggle with past cultural "legacies" to effect social and political change. It is fashionable now in the discipline of Political Science to view institutions as constitutive of social practices and ultimate cultural norms. Where, for an economist, "getting the prices right" is essential to a host of other economic changes, for the political scientist, "getting the institutions right" is essential to the future trajectory of social and cultural transformation. But from

an alternative cultural perspective, entrenched cultural practices cast a long shadow on the present, shape the identity of new institutions, and can ultimately undermine the liberalization process. In contrast, the institutional approach suggests that new institutions can be crafted that shut out the negative influences of the past. From this perspective, the heads of Slavery and of Leninism have been loped off, leaving space for the development of new forces to structure identities according to the more or less universal rules of liberal capitalist democracy. From the cultural perspective, however, those who focus on institutional change have simply averted their eyes in the face of continued racism in the United States; and they ignore the Leninist culture that continues to block the creation of a functioning civil society and market economy even after communism's collapse.

Illiberal and liberal identities

In order to assess the utility of these alternative approaches, it is necessary to describe both the illiberal features of the traditional societies that were in need of transformation, and the liberal vision of society in the minds of the transformers. Only when we know what which cultural features liberal institutions were supposed to erase and what was supposed to replace them, can we evaluate success or failure.

In both the ante-bellum American south and in the Leninist GDR, political and social identities were collective, exclusive, hierarchical, affective, and essential. Michael points out that in the American South, collective identities were those based on gender and race, essential ascriptive criteria that define who you are in the social hierarchy. Women, for example, were defined by their inherent physical weakness, and that fragility made them dependent on men. Needless to say, skin color defined who would be slave and who would be free. These collective, ascriptive identities were upheld by religion and "codes of conduct," external controls created to

perpetuate social hierarchy based on ascriptive criteria. For Michael, new forms of racism in the South after the war simply recreated traditional racial and gender hierarchies, and reinforced them.

Skorsetz focuses on collective identities as they were expressed in economic relationships. Collectivity also relied on external controls, but it also became entrenched because it provided security. The LPGs were self-sufficient rather than independent. They created a socio-economic division of labor in which the workplace doubled as the marketplace, and became the only focus of social life. This enforced social isolation on the part of the working population would work to prevent the creation of a civil society that depended on overlapping association and membership. Secondly, the economic structure created by the LPGs worked to prevent the emergence of a "market culture." Although the existence of the "second economy" structured the incentives of the participants to respond to supply and demand signals, its illegal and predatory nature also led to the "exploitation of monopolistic rents," bribery, and exploitation. These relationships, which had their correlates in the ante-bellum American South, provided security at the expense of productivity.

For transformation to be successful, collective, exclusive, ascriptive identities would have to become individual, inclusive, and impersonal. Achievement rather than ascription would define one's place in the social system. And achievement could only define identity if labor was free. Michael points out that the "North" symbolized this more liberal identity structure; masculinity was defined in individual terms; the liberal definition of manhood was embodied in the "right to vote" which was an expression of impersonal, associational relationships.

Individual, impersonal identities, however, bring on physical and psychological insecurity. Free labor means that you can lose your job. Elites in both the ante-bellum American South and the walled GDR saw that competitive agriculture in which self-sufficiency would be replaced by interdependence would create insecurity and unemployment. In the current transformation period

in East Germany--much like the situation in the post-bellum American South---liberalizing elites believe that this insecurity could be tempered somewhat by democracy, that is associational representation in which the farmers would have a rather strong lobby and be represented in the European Community. Liberals tolerate insecurity and inequality in private economic relations because they believe that the economic growth that should ensue from the efficient allocation of resources will make all better off than they would have been in the absence of individual competition. Economic inequality is offset by inclusive equality of citizenship and individual representation in the political process.

The Conditions for Transformation

What do these two cases tell us about the conditions necessary for the successful transformation of illiberal identities and economies into liberal forms of identity and economic organization? Both papers suggest that the necessary condition is a crisis: a war, a revolution, an economic collapse. Crisis makes society available for new identities, new social, political, and economic institutions. Crisis exposes the weakness of old traditional institutions and identities, and old hierarchical relationships.

In Michael's paper, we see that war exposed the lie of white men's ability to take care of women; it exposed flaws in gender ideology and weakened the hold of that ideology over white women. Indeed, the war exposed the inability of white men to take care of "their" women. Similarly, in the former GDR, the crisis of legitimacy of existing political institutions exposed the weakness of self-sufficient and exclusive collectivities.

But simply because the space is created for transformation, there is no assurance that it will really occur. Michael shows that women were not prepared to displace their traditional identities

and values with new liberal identities. They actually helped to restore the hierarchy of gender and race relations. Their collective hatred of the North created community; in their commemorative activities they reconstructed the war experience as a time of glory. The new community embodied rituals of female dependence and the return to essentialist identities. Similarly, in the former GDR, there is increased expression of nostalgia for the past and unwillingness to participate in the transformation of society.

Skorsetz suggests that there are two conditions that must be met before real transformation can occur: increasing economic prosperity and the creation of strong new institutions through hefty state intervention to both support those new institutions and help bring about the needed economic growth by creating and developing infrastructure and easing the painful consequences of transition. It is this institutional argument that forms the core of the debate between the two authors.

While Michael discounts the centrality of new institutions to bring about social transformation, Skorsetz underscores their importance. She points out that institutional choice set the trajectory for the future of slaves in the post-bellum American South. Two institutional choices were possible: land grants and labor contracts. Land grants would have been closer to the liberal ideal, creating private property and what we now think of as privatization in post-communist Eastern Europe. The Freedman's Bureau would have upheld this ideal, but a presidential directive replaced it with labor contracts, which then perpetuated hierarchical race relations. An explication of these hierarchical race relations in the post-bellum South forms the core of Michael's argument. For Skorsetz, these hierarchical relations would have broken down sooner if a different institutional choice had been made.

Michael, on the other hand, discounts the role of institutions. For example, she argues that equal protection clause of the Civil Rights Act of 1883 would not have eased the worsening

situation in race relations in the United States. She argues that it was never the neutral issue of constitutional rights but rather deeper cultural issues that were always at stake. But in fact, in the 20th century, the institutions of law and social policy were to become important instruments in the struggle for both race and gender equality in the United States. Indeed, I would argue that if there has been any progress at all in the creation of racial and gender equality in the United States, that progress has been dependent upon the creation and enforcement of those institutions.

Michael herself admits to the importance of an institution like the Freedman's bureau when she notes that once its authority had been removed, Southern whites could act with impunity. What her account here suggests is that institutions were weak, not that they were unimportant: due process and the legal system as a whole was a farce in the post-bellum South. Indeed, the shadow of the past was so stark that it erased the fledgling possibilities for gender and racial equality created by the war.

Explaining Institutional Weakness

If institutions do indeed matter to the successful transformation to a liberal society, then why, in these two cases, have they been so weak? The papers suggest five reasons. First, Skorsetz points to the contradictions within liberal institutions themselves. In post-wall East Germany, privatization was seen as the restoration of small farms and the breakup of the large LPGs. But these small farms have no place in an era of competitive global markets. In pure market competition, the LPGs might well have become competitive. But they would have threatened the market share of other agricultural interests in Germany and the rest of Europe. Thus the enthusiasm in the West for privatization: privatization in the East means fragmentation. That fragmentation further weakens the East's economic base and helps to assure that Eastern products will not threaten

the global competitiveness of West German farms.

A second cause of weak institutions can be found in the economic consequences of market liberalization. Liberalism creates economic uncertainty and insecurity. It breaks down community and thus inhibits the process of social cohesion. Institutions can only be strong when the societies in which they are embedded are unified. And social unity is difficult and even impossible to achieve in the face of extreme gaps between rich and poor. Former slaves experienced extreme economic insecurity and deprivation in the post-bellum American South; in East Germany today, farm shutdowns and unemployment are the norm. Social cohesion in both cases has been a failure.

A third source of institutional weakness can be found in the behavior of the liberal "winner" toward the traditional and illiberal "loser" in the aftermath of the struggle. In both cases, the Northern and Western winners executed policies designed to make the inhabitants of the South and East feel inferior. And in both cases, in a defensive reaction, the losers have struck back. In the American South, the Ku Klux Klan acted as a policy force; in Germany's Eastern states, skinhead violence is on the rise.

Finally, new and fragile institutions cannot thrive in the face of economic crisis. The American South suffered economic crisis and despair until the end of the century; the same economic despair is evident in Eastern Germany today. As Michael reminds us, "despair kept the old images alive."

We know more about the ways in which the shadow of the past darkened the potential of a liberal future in the American South than we do about this process in East Germany today.

Michael's paper details how the humiliation of defeat in the South led to a defensive reaction that signaled the restoration of slavery in a new form: the restoration of states' rights and abject poverty for former slaves. Southerners could blame the North for their problems and thus remain in the

traditional mode of behavior. They portrayed themselves as innocent victims of aggression and focused on their own wartime heroics and the military glories of the war. The "myth" of the Southern nation was perpetuated by states'rights that codified regional identities; The "superiority of hierarchy" was restored as a central aspect of Southern culture. If the same conditions exist in Eastern Germany today, we can expect similar outcomes.

Conclusions

Both papers clearly point to the conditions under which liberalism will fail. If liberalizes humiliate losers and if they do not bolster their institutions with strong state intervention to ease economic crises it is likely that the past will cast a long shadow on the present. Michael sees the continued reconstruction and adaptation of traditional gender roles in political debates over future trajectories of change and the reconstruction of hierarchical race relations, adapted to more "modern" conditions. Where once there was slavery, African-Americans now experience abject poverty. If the post-bellum South in the United States is a mirror of the East German future, we can expect the process of transformation to be long and torturous.

The establishment of a liberal culture is a difficult process. We have seen that Reconstruction in the American South and the Reunification of Post-Wall Germany have been failures on their own terms and in their own time. This failure can be contrasted with the "success" of post-war West Germany. Although neither of the papers treats this case, we can use their analysis to speculate on what was "different" in the post-war German situation that led to its success.

In the first place, while slavery had existed for centuries and while Leninism governed East Germany for forty years, German fascism was relatively brief: it had lasted only twelve years.

There was little "tradition" that would-be fascists could draw on. Second, unlike the political power of the Southern Planters, that was sustained after the Civil War, and the political power of the former "nomenklatura" that has been partially sustained in East Germany, the power of the Junkers, those who had upheld the "illiberal" culture in Germany before World War II, was removed. Without a strong opposing social class, new liberal institutions could more easily take root.

Finally, unlike the racially divided society in the United States after the war, West German society was relative homogeneous. Political Scientists have long noted that democratic institutions can thrive more easily in homogeneous societies. Germany today is a multiethnic society, and its liberal institutions are experiencing tremendous stress as a result. Their success is likely to depend on how well they can integrate a new multiethnic German society. Indeed the experience of the American South provides a powerful lesson in this regard, and overcoming racism will be perhaps the most difficult challenge for German liberalism in the 1990s. If institutions are at all important, the first step will be to change the German citizenship laws to create a more inclusive society.