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THE DECAY AND BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNIST ONE-PARTY SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

The failure to anticipate the collapse of communist one-party systems stands in striking contrast to the determinism of retrospective accounts. This essay reviews accounts of the decay and breakdown of one-party systems in order to uncover the causes behind political science's inability to both anticipate these developments and provide satisfactory explanations. These causes include the deterministic character of most accounts, the absence of a theory of single-party rule, the absence or misspecification of causal links between the major building blocks of the arguments put forth, and the analytic conflation of decay and breakdown. Understanding the decay and breakdown of one-party systems requires a methodologically conscious distinction between these two processes and a specification of their links (and the links between the variables affecting each process), grounded in a theory of single-party rule.

INTRODUCTION

The breakdown of communist one-party regimes took everyone by surprise, participants and observers alike (Kuran 1991:7, Bermeo 1992:1). Indeed, experts expected "just the opposite of what happened" (Lipset & Bence 1994:175). Their surprise was provoked not only by the breakdown itself but also by its characteristics: speed, smoothness, and nonviolence, all of which

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stand in stark contrast to the seeming durability and immutability of single-party rule in earlier decades. Most ruling parties fell without resistance: They abdicated, "willingly gave up power," and "melted away" (Tismaneanu 1992: xi, Janos 1992:110). Thus, besides being a crucial political development, the breakdown of these one-party regimes is a "dismal failure of political science" (Przeworski 1991:1).

Even though a few observers had mentioned the possibility of the breakdown of one-party systems (e.g. Amalrik 1969, Brzezinski 1989), their "prediction" was spurious. Hence, theories of breakdown are retrospective. However, Elster et al (1998:2) remind us that even in retrospect we are far from a proven explanation of this amazing turn of history. This essay reviews retrospective accounts in order to pinpoint some of the causes behind political science's inability to both anticipate these events and provide satisfactory retrospective explanations. As it turns out, the shortcomings of retrospective accounts and the failure to anticipate the breakdown share common causes: the absence of a theory of one-party systems (or single-party rule), the absence or misspecification of links between the major building blocks of the arguments put forth, and the analytic conflation of decay and breakdown.

In the first section, I address the absence of a theory of one-party systems, survey past efforts to build such a theory, and account for their failure; in the second section, I review the main accounts of one-party system decay and breakdown. I argue that the central problem of these accounts lies in their determinism, which in turn is caused by the analytic conflation of decay and breakdown. I review the attempts to overcome this problem and point to the necessity of developing a theoretical understanding of single-party rule. The empirical focus of this essay is primarily on the communist one-party systems of Central and Eastern Europe because they were regarded as the most enduring and stable one-party systems. As a result, the great majority of social science efforts to understand and explain these processes have focused on these cases.

THE ABSENCE OF A THEORY OF SINGLE-PARTY RULE

In order to understand how the end came as such a surprise, it is necessary to understand how order was maintained for so long by ruling parties, whose fate is intertwined with that of one-party systems (Hosking et al 1992:205). However, single-party rule has been (and continues to be) studied in a nontheoretical and noncomparative way. The absence of a theory of single-party rule is striking—particularly when compared with the theoretical development of the research on political parties. This absence, I argue, can be traced to (*a*) political scientists' misdirected efforts during the 1960s and 1970s to integrate the study of political parties in both competitive and noncompetitive regimes into

a single framework, (*b*) the emphasis on the production of typologies, and (*c*) the deleterious effects of functionalism, modernization theory, and "old institutionalism." The resulting failure left a theoretical void, which has yet to be filled.

Political science during the 1960s and 1970s tended to equate theory building with generating typologies. Most efforts (and related debates) focused on the construction and elaboration of such typologies, which served, in fact, as a substitute for what had to be explained. The most authoritative typology of party systems, which emerged after years of debate and remains in use, posits seven types of party systems: one-party (or single-party), hegemonic party, predominant party (or one-party dominant), two-party, limited pluralism, extreme pluralism, and atomized (Sartori 1976:125). Unfortunately, this typology confuses party systems and political regimes. Indeed, all types of party systems except the one-party (and perhaps the ambiguous hegemonic party) presuppose a competitive political regime. The "one-party system," on the other hand, is a misnomer for a noncompetitive political regime, i.e. one-party dictatorship. The problematic nature of this typology becomes obvious when one juxtaposes two almost adjacent types, the predominant party and the one-party systems. Their conceptual proximity should be expected to imply cognate properties; however, the opposite is the case. Governing parties in predominant party systems tend to be extremely competitive; they succeed in governing (on their own or as the primary and ongoing partners in coalitions) without interruption for substantial periods of time (often for three to five decades, dominating ten or more successive governments), despite open electoral competition, open information systems, respect for civil liberties, and the right of free political association (Pempel 1990:1–2). In contrast, governing parties in one-party systems do not compete; in the exceptional cases where they must, their performance is usually dismal, leading to the end of the one-party system. Predictably, this typology has been the source of considerable ambiguity and confusion, as Sartori himself recognized (1976:220). (To avoid more confusion, I use here the term "one-party system" in a generic way.) Yet the conceptual category of the one-party system survived and remains in use. Why did the effort to theorize single-party rule fail?

The phenomenon to be explained was new and important. Although authoritarian polities had existed throughout history, one-party systems were the principal form of authoritarian politics in the modern world—just as plural party systems were the principal manifestation of democracies and no-party regimes had been the main premodern form of authoritarianism (Huntington & Moore 1970a:509). Indeed, Duverger (1969:255) argued that the single party could be considered "the great political innovation of the twentieth century." Interest in one-party regimes was further fueled by their emergence and proliferation in the newly independent nations (particularly in Africa, where, at the

beginning of 1964, two thirds of the continent's states could be described as one-party systems), their progressive political connotation (one-party systems were presented as essential for nation building and modernization), and the complex reality concealed behind the cloak of monolithic political unity (Finer 1967, Janos 1970, Wallerstein 1966:202–3).

The transformation by political scientists of one-party regimes into one-party systems and their inclusion in the party system typology was a deleterious effect of the dominant paradigms of the 1960s: modernization theory, functionalism, and old institutionalism. In the context of modernization theory, political parties were both a manifestation and a condition of the "thrust to modernity." They were expected to emerge wherever the activities of a political system reached a certain degree of complexity; just as bureaucracy emerged when public administration could no longer be adequately handled in the prince's household, the political party materialized when the tasks of recruiting political leadership and making public policy could no longer be handled by a small coterie of men unconcerned with public sentiments (LaPalombara & Weiner 1966a:3). This perspective was reinforced by functionalism (parties being expected to perform the same functions regardless of the regime in which they operated) and old institutionalism (which focused solely on the formal aspect of institutions). For instance, Duverger (1969:256) argued that "there is no fundamental difference in structure between single parties and the parties of democratic regimes." Although Epstein (1975: 232–33) was aware of the problematic nature of including "those entities, operating under the name of parties, that exist in noncompetitive electoral systems" within the party system typology, he nevertheless decided to include them because some of their activities "are plainly the counterpart of those performed elsewhere by competing parties, such as presenting candidates for elective public office and recruiting prospects for nonelective public office." For many years, a number of sovietologists argued that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) aggregated interests in much the same way that parties did in the West and had, therefore, evolved into a genuine party performing functions associated with parties in competitive regimes (Hill & Frank 1981). After all, elections in one-party regimes were seriously seen as "evidence of the regime's increasing ability to mobilize the population and to integrate them into the political system" (White 1979:87). One still encounters similar arguments. For example, Ware (1996:127) argues that "even though for most of their existence Baath parties [ruling parties in Iraq and Syria] have not had to devote resources to electoral mobilization, they resemble liberal democratic parties in that they involve the pooling of individual resources for exercising power over a state."

Thinking of one-party regimes as one-party systems was made easier by the booming research on parties and party systems. Although the foundations of

party theory were laid by the pioneering works of Ostrogorski (1902) and Michels (1915), the theoretically informed study of political parties and party systems really took off in the 1960s and 1970s, following Duverger's (1969), Rokkan's (1970), and Sartori's (1976) pathbreaking contributions. Enthusiasm about the study of parties and its potential led to an overt effort to be as comprehensive as possible by extending the reach of the party system typology. As Sartori (1976:237–38) pointed out, "According to a broad estimate, a majority of the countries and nearly two-thirds of the world population are governed today by single parties. A framework that allows for two major types and five subtypes is hardly redundant vis-à-vis such an order of magnitude." Moreover, because the primary criterion of the party system typology was numerical, one-party regimes could neatly fit in, in a way that was as intuitively attractive as it was analytically flawed.

The inherent ambiguity of the one-party category prevented its theoretical development and failed to add any substantial analytical value. "To call a polity a one-party system does not really tell us very much apart from that" (Huntington 1970:6). Indeed, while the theoretically informed study of parties took off, the study of one-party systems stagnated, remaining descriptive, noncomparative, and atheoretical. Even the proponents of the party system typology seemed aware of its limitations. Sartori (1976:222) acknowledged that "when the study of parties came to the fore, it did not add much to what had already been discussed in terms of totalitarian or authoritarian dictatorships" (see Aron 1967 for a similar point). Years later, students of authoritarian regimes confirmed this failure by noting that the party systems typology had proved an "unsatisfactory" framework "because our approach to political parties has been overwhelmingly shaped by the liberal democratic experience within which the discipline of political science developed. As a result, the concepts used to understand parties are well adapted to those parties which operate in such systems, but have less immediate relevance to those bodies which call themselves parties and which operate in non-liberal-democratic systems" (Gill 1995:1). In addition, area specialists refused to accept a typology that crowded a vast array of one-party regimes across the world into a single category (Gill 1995:1, Bienen 1970:100). More detailed typologies, such as those distinguishing between "one-party totalitarian" and "one-party authoritarian" or "exclusionary" and "revolutionary" systems (Ware 1996:128–31, Clapham 1993:663, Sartori 1976:222, Huntington 1970, LaPalombara & Weiner 1966a: 37–41), remained without effect because they sacrificed generality without providing analytical gain. In short, the concept of the one-party system remained in use but was devoid of any theoretical content.

The only renewed attempt to develop a theory of one-party systems was Huntington's in 1970. It was grounded in modernization theory; the origins of single-party systems were to be found in highly polarized societies where

modernization led to the breakdown of traditional society structures and the subsequent mobilization of new groups. In such contexts, Huntington (1970) argued, one-party systems represented the efforts of leaders of "more modern" social forces to suppress "more backward" social forces on the way to modernity. Huntington called for a focus on such key variables as the role of the ruling party in the political system, the strength of the party relative to other institutions, and the societal actors who interact with the single party. He linked the evolution of one-party systems to the shifting roles of competing actors vying with ruling parties for supremacy in the system. Huntington's approach suffered from a structuralist bias, inherited from modernization theory, which led him to posit incremental political reform "in the spirit of one-soul-at-a-time" as the only way out of single-party rule (1988:9). Still, it is unfortunate that Huntington's effort was not pursued further. The lack of a theory of single-party rule has unquestionably hurt political science's understanding of the decay and breakdown of one-party systems. However, the death of the most prominent one-party systems should not deter the development of such a theory. A theory of single-party rule should analytically and comparatively address such issues as the internal dynamics of one-party systems, their origins and growth, and their connection to the patterns and sequences of underlying societal cleavages and to the strategic choices of political actors. Such a theory could benefit from recent developments in party theory, particularly party formation (Kalyvas 1996, Aldrich 1995). The theoretical understanding of single-party rule holds more than mere historical interest, even in the hypothetical case of the total and definite disappearance of one-party systems. Such an understanding is also necessary for the study of post–single-party rule.

ACCOUNTS OF DECAY AND BREAKDOWN: BUILDING BLOCKS AND LINKS

Although the relaxation of geopolitical constraints by the Soviet Union (known as the Gorbachev effect) was an important factor in the breakdown of Eastern European one-party systems, there is widespread agreement that it did not cause it. Domestic factors prevailed over external ones; the impetus was internal (Hough 1997, Szelenyi & Szelenyi 1994, Tismaneanu 1992, Jowitt 1991, Przeworski 1991). A careful reading of the Hungarian and Polish "thaws" in 1989 suggests a process of interaction, whereby reforms were brought about by domestic developments and gained momentum because of the Gorbachev effect, which they in turn reinforced, thus contributing to the chain reaction in neighboring countries (Kaminski 1999). The same can be said about the pressures from the West, both direct ones (e.g. the cost of imperial overstretching and military build-up—including the effects of the "Star Wars" program of the Reagan administration) and indirect ones (e.g. the "dem-

onstration effect" of western media-disseminated images and realities of prosperity, freedom, and democracy) (Arnason 1993).

Most retrospective accounts of the breakdown of communist one-party systems are built around the following core: One-party systems experienced a long economic decay due to massive economic inefficiency; this decay undermined their ideological legitimation. To respond, they undertook political and economic reforms. However, these reforms failed, and the regimes collapsed. The main building blocks of these accounts are economic decay, ideological delegitimation, and reforms.

Economic Decay

The fundamental role of economic decay is almost universally stressed. Socialist economics turned out to be a dismal failure. Growth rates began to decline in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By the 1980s, socialist economies were in serious trouble and growth rates had declined to near zero. The consequences were devastating. "The darkened streets of late communism, the empty shops and frustrated careers, the potholes and tawdry buildings, the general coarseness of social life, and the pervasive dishonesty of the ubiquitous bureaucracy degraded all that it came into contact with" (Sakwa 1993:28).

How did regimes with a transformational mission produce such stagnation (Roeder 1993)? Several analyses have focused on the key flaws of socialist economics (e.g. Brus 1975, Kornai 1980) or illustrated its basic problems (Maier 1997:73–97), but there is widespread disagreement about the exact causes of the dismal economic performance of the 1970s and 1980s (Szelenyi & Szelenyi 1994:214). Was economic failure induced mainly by international factors, including rapid technological change? Was it the exclusive outcome of the internal logic of command economies—the "unfeasibility of socialism" (Przeworski 1991)? Was it the result of a particular path of modernization, "thoroughly ambivalent, modern and traditional at the same time, giving rise to a distinctive alternative modernity" (Sakwa 1993:28–29), which transformed societies in a way that transcended their economic system (Hough 1997, Hosking 1991, Lewin 1988)? Was economic failure political in origin—did the reluctance of ruling parties to adopt measures that would undermine their control over society cause their inability to cope with the demands of the world market (Stokes 1993)? Was it part of a general systemic failure, interweaving the regime's functional failure to coordinate demand and supply, polity and economy, civilian and military sector (Arnason 1993)?

The debate is open; weakest is the modernization argument, which tends to confuse the process of industrialization with its effects (Fish 1995:19). Furthermore, the direction of causality remains unclear; economic failure affected politics and society, but it may also have resulted from political and societal factors, such as the regimes' lack of political legitimacy (Szelenyi & Szelenyi

1994:218). Finally, arguments that point exclusively to economic factors fail to specify the links between economic decline and the actual processes of decay and breakdown. In short, it would be overly reductionist to explain the dynamics of breakdown exclusively in economic terms (Szelenyi & Szelenyi 1994). Exactly how an economic system that proved hugely successful in industrializing and modernizing backward societies decayed after achieving its initial objective (rates of growth during the 1950s were excellent, as were many indicators of development, such as life expectancy rates) (Szelenyi & Szelenyi 1994, Therborn 1992) remains an open issue.

Ideological Delegitimation

A plausible link between economic failure and the decay of one-party systems is the erosion of political legitimacy (Mason 1992). In the absence of material benefits, the implicit social pact of socialist societies, whereby elites offered the prospect of material welfare in exchange for silence, could not be sustained (Przeworski 1991:2). In other words, political dynamics are generally seen as the mechanism that translated, so to speak, economic failure into decay and breakdown. It was the changing moral and political climate of Eastern Europe that eventually destroyed communism; the Marxist myth had exhausted its galvanizing power and was replaced by widespread cynicism (Tismaneanu 1992: 281, Chirot 1991:9). The decay of legitimacy and the erosion of commitment to the official ideology were tantamount to the destruction of the moral base of communism. This caused loss of elite confidence and the "rise and ripening" of a civil society, eventually leading to breakdown (Chirot 1991). One version of this argument goes as far as to deemphasize economic dynamics, viewing them as mere "accelerators" of fundamentally autonomous political processes (Tismaneanu 1992).

Authors pointing to the importance of ideological delegitimation (e.g. Fish 1995, Chirot 1991) criticize the sovietological literature for having focused too much on elites and too little on societal developments. However, their argument suffers from problems as well. Theoretically, we know that widespread disapproval of a government is not sufficient to mobilize large numbers of people for antigovernmental collective action (Kuran 1991:21). Empirically, we know that the mobilization of social forces played only a limited role in the breakdown of one-party systems, and only in the last stage of the crisis; in most cases, the emergence of civil society was part and parcel of the breakdown process, rather than its cause (Walder 1994:313). Public opinion data indicate that support for socialism in East Germany and Poland was not negligible and remained relatively stable until the mid-1980s (Kaminski 1999, Kuran 1991: 31). In most cases, the opposition consisted of "a set of weak, diverse, and fragmented organizations" (Bruszt & Stark 1992:30). Outside of Poland, there

was an absence of revolutionary counterelites, ideologies, blueprints, and reasonably unified political agents rooted in socioeconomic cleavages and conflicts; the stultifying and demeaning communicative and associative conditions fostered by authoritarian rule produced widespread "semantic incompetence," "cognitive confusion," and "self-doubt" that hampered any formation of agency and made most people, most of the time, actually cooperate in their own repression (Elster et al 1998:13). Although today it may seem obvious that most people in Eastern Europe were profoundly hostile to communist rule, it is a fact that in Poland and Hungary (where political reforms were first launched), leaders of both the regime and the opposition grossly overestimated the popular appeal and electoral chances of communism (Kaminski 1999, Szakolczai & Horváth 1991:488). Likewise, when protests began in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, "neither dissidents nor regimes expected that they would produce fundamental political change within a few short weeks" (Karklins & Petersen 1993:588). All in all, there were few outward signs of active discontent until the very end, and many reasons to believe that 40 years of communist rule had socialized most people into a passive acceptance of the system (Arnason 1993:18). Moreover, popular action was least important to the process of breakdown where the discourse of civil society was most developed (Poland and Hungary), whereas revolutionary upheavals took place where civil society was weaker (East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania) (Arnason 1993:188, Ekiert 1991:307). In short, the people experienced the process of breakdown with the same degree of surprise and amazement as did outside observers (Elster et al 1998:25).

Reforms

The erosion of legitimacy appears, therefore, to be a correlate of decay rather than a causal link between economic failure and breakdown. This link can be sought more fruitfully in the failure of economic and political reforms. Economic failure and the erosion of legitimation did not necessarily doom the regimes; the problem was rather that these regimes could not adapt to changing conditions (Elster et al 1998:53). This point raises many questions. What was the initial scope of reforms? Why did initially limited reforms turn into revolutions? Could reforms have succeeded or were they doomed from the outset? If they were doomed, why? More generally, how did a remarkable long-term stability give way to almost instant breakdown?

In retrospect, most accounts insist on the inevitability of the failure of reforms: Communism was unreformable; it was doomed to collapse (e.g. Roeder 1993, Sakwa 1990). Various arguments have been put forward. "Closed systems" are fundamentally incapable of adaptation and self-transformation and can only produce a vicious circle of decline, inexorably leading to the exhaustion of resources and the reinforcement of blockages (Kaminski 1991); com-

munist institutions are ultimately incapable of accommodating the explosion of participatory demands that follow the liberalization of political rights (Remington 1992:125); the institutional design of socialist regimes had replaced accountability to the people with a system of bureaucratic reciprocal accountability, which gave the Soviet political system vast resources to transform society but destroyed its ability to adapt to the changes it set in motion (Roeder 1993); instead of reinvigorating existing institutions through adaptation, reforms sapped their vitality, reduced their power, and corrupted their integrity, thus accelerating their decay (Pei 1994:205); one-party regimes became the victims of their alleged strength—the omniscience of the party and the omnipotence of the state deprived them of the capacity to learn how to adapt to social change (Elster et al 1998).

Yet, most experts assessing the situation during the implementation of the reforms thought that these reforms did not threaten the regimes. For instance, Colton (1984:219) stated that "the Soviet system, though it has no more prospect of eternal life than any other human construct, is at the present time stable in its fundamentals. The USSR is not Poland—its homegrown regime is far older, stronger, and ornerier, and the average citizen is more stoically acceptive of its continuance. There is no revolutionary crisis in the Soviet Union today." Huntington (1988:8) argued that although Mikhail Gorbachev might be a reformer, he clearly had no intention of abandoning the Communist Party's monopoly on power. Even when the breakdown in Eastern Europe was under way in November 1989, many observers were too caught up in the excitement and confusion of events to draw this conclusion with much confidence (Arnason 1993:18–19). Hence, one remains skeptical about arguments that posit the inevitability of breakdown; if the fate of reforms had indeed been sealed from their very inception, surely the experts would have noticed. As Kuran (1991: 12) points out, "if the revolution was inevitable, why was it not foreseen?" This problem brings to the fore the issue of retrospective determinism.

RETROSPECTIVE DETERMINISM

Most available retrospective examinations are deterministic. The breakdown was "inescapable" (Brown 1991:2), "inevitable" (Lohmann 1994:43), "decades in the making" (Hough 1997:495), "rooted in the vanguard regime created by the Bolsheviks after taking power in 1917" (Roeder 1993:246). Przeworski (1991:1) notes that "any retrospective examination of the fall of communism must not only account for the historical developments but also identify the theoretical assumptions that prevented us from anticipating these developments. For if we are wise now, why were we not equally sage before?"

It may well be true, as Kuran has argued (1991), that revolutions are inherently unpredictable because private preferences and individual thresholds of

collective action are unknown and prone to tipping effects, thus bringing a society to the brink of a revolution without anyone knowing it. Even if this is the case, retrospective accounts are useful and necessary, but they need not be deterministic. There are good reasons to think that the breakdown was not inevitable. Kaminski (1999) demonstrates that the adoption of a different electoral law in the crucial 1989 elections in Poland would have translated the actual distribution of votes into an electoral outcome favorable to the regime. The particular social, economic, and political conditions, he argues, were not sufficient to predict the fate of communism, since a different electoral law was feasible for the Polish communists, and such a law could have affected deeply the course of events and possibly delayed or restrained the fall of communism in Poland and the rest of the Soviet Bloc altogether. As Arnason (1993:18–19) puts it, "Who knows how close the GDR [German Democratic Republic] or Czechoslovak regimes may have been to imposition of a 'Chinese solution'? When future historians examine the archives, they may find that there are possible worlds, close to ours, in which the GDR politburo orders the police to shoot on the demonstrators in Leipzig."

However, nondeterministic accounts remain the exception. Only a few authors have been willing to argue that the breakdown was only one among many possible outcomes (e.g. Kaminski 1999, Szelenyi & Szelenyi 1994, Arnason 1993, McAuley 1992). I argue that the proliferation of deterministic accounts is an indicator of the analytic conflation of decay (stagnation or crisis) and breakdown (or collapse). Although the self-destructive dynamics that so suddenly became visible had been undermining one-party systems for quite a long time before their demise, these dynamics did not cause their breakdown directly. Though decaying, the Soviet regime did not collapse until the abortive coup of August 1991. The one-party systems of China, Cuba, Vietnam, and North Korea are caught in a process of protracted decay which, so far, has not resulted in breakdown. The distinction between decay and breakdown entails a distinction between underlying causes and precipitating conditions. Przeworski (1991:1) uses a medical metaphor: "[M]ost terminal cancer patients die of pneumonia. And social science is not very good at sorting out underlying causes and precipitating conditions." Indeed, the inability to distinguish between decay and breakdown is widespread (e.g. Roeder 1993:20, Pipes 1990:16). In some cases, breakdown is altogether dismissed as merely the automatic and inevitable manifestation of decay (Gill 1995:178).

Decay

The decay of communist regimes was highly visible. Every specialist and many casual observers knew well what was wrong in Eastern Europe. More than 30 years ago, Brzezinski (1966) argued that the Soviet system faced a

choice between degeneration and fundamental transformation. Yet, almost no one guessed that what had been a slowly developing situation for several decades might take such a sudden turn for the worse. None of them could answer the question, "Why 1989?" (Chirot 1991:12). Macrosocietal factors, now the cornerstone of retrospective accounts, were only recently treated as evidence of the remarkable collective stability of communist regimes throughout the world in the last half-century; indeed, arguments stressing systemic exhaustion can predict both self-perpetuation and self-destruction (Walder 1994:297, Arnason 1993:184). "While today we look back upon an inexorable cumulative crisis," Walder (1994:297) points out, "a few years ago one could just as easily be struck by how little all of these deeply-rooted problems seemed to shake these stable and stagnant regimes." The fact that observers could identify decay but not predict breakdown underlines the simple but widely overlooked fact that "the historical life-span of the Soviet model was not predetermined by its structural logic" (Arnason 1993:181). Distinguishing between decay and breakdown allows the formulation of key questions. When does decay give way to breakdown? Are particular modes of decay related to particular modes of breakdown? What modes of decay and breakdown are associated with democratic outcomes? I review some of these issues below.

Decay can linger on indefinitely. "The slowing economy was certainly creating problems," observes McAuley (1992:89) about Gorbachev's USSR, "but there is no reason to suppose that the administrative-command system under Communist Party rule could not have retained its essential features for ten, or perhaps twenty years." Garton Ash (1989:252–55), arguably one of the most astute observers of Eastern Europe, described a possible scenario involving a long and slow decay of the center and a gradual loss of control over the periphery, which he dubbed "Ottomanization of the Soviet Empire." In addition, decay is not an inexorable and cumulative process of change inevitably leading to democracy (Ekiert 1991:286); it can lead to a different kind of authoritarian system, such as a no-party system or some kind of corporatist order (Chirot 1980). Lewin (1988:133) expected that one-party systems would survive a protracted political crisis because "the party is the main stabilizer of the political system" and is "the only institution that can preside over the overhaul of the system without endangering the polity itself in the process." Huntington & Moore (1970a:517) argued that the most likely response to a crisis of legitimacy in a one-party system was institutionalization in an authoritarian rather than a democratic direction and the concomitant appeal to a corporatist rather than a competitive tradition. In China, the process of decay associated with the Cultural Revolution involved a reassertion rather than a relaxation of party authority (Townsend 1970:306). The decay of one-party systems in Africa in the 1960s suggested a return to more traditional, militaristic, or personalistic forms of authoritarianism (Huntington 1970:4).

Decay could also result in war. Bialer (1986) argued that the "Soviet paradox" was based on the connection between internal decline and external expansion. Luttwak (1983) thought that the growing awareness of decline was likely to prompt the Soviet leaders to make full use of their military advantages before it was too late. Finally, even if the eventual outcome is a democratic transition, it can be slow, gradual, and limited. In an article insightfully titled "Is Mexico the Future of East Europe?" Croan (1970) argued that post-totalitarianism would reject the totalitarian heritage only selectively and gradually.

Breakdown

Distinguishing between decay and breakdown carries important methodological consequences. First, it is a way to avoid the determinist trap; it makes it possible to theorize about contingency. Breakdown is a process full of highly contingent and subjective factors, wherein beliefs cause events and events change beliefs (Arnason 1993:19). Key developments, such as a decision to participate in a demonstration (or to shoot at demonstrators), are often shaped by perceptions. Perceptions matter because predictions about how others will act are at the core of decision making (Karklins & Petersen 1993). Second, this distinction makes it possible to treat the structural macro-factors accounting for decay as constraints that define a set of possibilities but do not determine the outcome. Because most theories of rebellion and revolution are of limited help in explaining what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989 (Karklins & Petersen 1993, Chirot 1991:17), the study of breakdown calls for a shift in focus—away from the association of macrostructural variables with outcomes and toward microanalytical approaches that seek to identify links, processes, and mechanisms.

Olson (1990) is among the first authors to have looked at the breakdown of one-party systems from a microanalytical perspective. He argues that the logic of collective action could keep unpopular dictators in power but could also be the source of tremendous instability because perceptions are the key mechanism at work. Where the repressive apparatus believe they will be rewarded if they carry out the leadership's orders and punished if they fail, an autocracy is secure. But perceptions can change in the blink of an eye if the regime is even once observed to be weak; then, future expectations will lead to coordination in an antiregime position. Kuran (1991) pushes this argument further by elaborating on the tipping logic of the breakdown process. He argues that individual choices to participate or not participate in antiregime collective action are contingent on the participation of a certain minimal proportion of fellow citizens, which constitutes the individual "revolutionary" threshold. Slight shifts in individual thresholds can produce revolutionary bandwagons, i.e. an explosive growth in public opposition leading to breakdown. In a similar vein, Lohmann

(1994) analyzes the demonstrations that took place in East Germany as "informational cascades" that made public some previously hidden information about the regime's popularity, thus undermining it. Likewise, Hirschman (1993) has applied to the East German case his theory of exit, voice, and loyalty, which identifies several ways that popular disaffection with a regime can induce political change. Karklins & Petersen (1993) extend Hirschman's insights by contextualizing them in a comparative framework and seeking to explain variation in patterns of breakdown. The focus is on the microfoundations of the mass protests of 1989. The authors examine two distinct but interactive dynamics: the dynamics of increasingly large and frequent mass demonstrations and the simultaneous process of fragmentation, defection, and loss of confidence within the regime. The originality of this paper lies in the recognition of the heterogeneity of both the masses and the regime, which are treated as sets comprising different groups.

Microanalytical perspectives represent one of the most promising areas of research; they contain numerous insights waiting to be elaborated, tested, and extended. What is particularly needed is work on preference formation and on the elaboration of links between micro-dynamics and macro-constraints. Such links can be provided by a theory of single-party rule.

SINGLE-PARTY RULE AND DECAY

Party decay and regime decay are related processes. First, the inability of ruling parties to respond to challenges is seen as a major cause of regime decay and breakdown (Gill 1995:178). This process can be traced back to the 1960s, when the ruling parties of Central and Eastern Europe entered a period of protracted ideological decay. "Party bureaucrats were no longer able to spend their nights at meetings, to wear working-class uniforms, to march and shout slogans, to abstain from ostentatious consumption" (Przeworski 1991:2). A process of depoliticization took place when party leaders ceased to be political leaders and became bureaucrats (Lewin 1995:292). Second, where single-party rule overlaps with an economic environment in which the party exercises de facto property rights and controls or monopolizes decisions regarding production, investment, income, and careers (Walder 1994:298–99), we need a clear understanding of the links between economics and politics.

The connection between micro-processes and macro-structures requires a theoretical understanding of single-party rule. As I pointed out in the first section, such an understanding is missing. Single-party rule is treated in the literature in a casual and atheoretical way, almost always in a case-study context. Yet, implicit references to possible causal links are present in many accounts. Party decay and regime decay are connected through (*a*) the effects of political

reforms, (*b*) the introduction of political competition, and (*c*) the interaction of political and economic reforms.

The Effects of Political Reforms

Single parties (the CPSU in particular) failed to adapt to the political and economic reforms they themselves initiated (Gill 1995, Jowitt 1991). Political reforms were apparently undertaken in order to spur economic change, but they inadvertently undermined the parties' leading role (Tompson 1993:105, McAuley 1992:95). The goal was to reform ruling parties by introducing some accountability and competition to elected bodies, reducing party functions in the society, allowing greater freedom of discussion (and the expression of contrary views) within the party, and opening up the sphere of politics to the public. Still, ruling parties were to remain firmly in control.

The case of the Soviet Union is illuminating. Reforms were introduced in the 19th Party Conference (held in 1988) and included such measures as the creation of the Congress of People's Deputies, which was to elect a smaller body from among its members to serve as a Supreme Soviet and act as a legislature. Two thirds of the seats in the Congress would be open to competition on the basis of universal suffrage. The reforms had three main effects. First, they enabled nonparty forces to intervene in party disputes and radicalize them. The publication of party disputes projected the image of a party continually at odds with itself; the televised critique of the government by the Congress of People's Deputies, in 1990, was a terrible blow to the regime. As a result, the intense struggle within the party elite opened new political spaces, creating an opportunity for the development of an opposition (Szelenyi & Szelenyi 1994: 227), while the sense of disillusionment and demoralization at lower party levels increased rapidly (Gill 1995:180). Second, the ruling parties' basic task—direct administrative supervision—was gradually removed, eroding the very grounds of their power. Ruling parties found themselves deprived of a role that fitted their organizational structures and culture (Gill 1995:184). The elimination of members' privileges (which were many, owing to the party's unprecedented degree of control over individual incomes and career opportunities) alienated party cadres and narrowed the gap between party and society (Szakolczai & Horváth 1991). Third, the introduction of competition into the political system irremediably hurt parties that had never faced competition in the past. This point brings up the effects of reforms on the central feature of one-party systems: the absence of political competition.

The Introduction of Political Competition

As a result of political reforms, single parties had to transform themselves into real parties that could appeal successfully for popular support. They failed;

their performance in the first semi-free elections (i.e. where a degree of competition was introduced, as in Poland and the Soviet Union) was dismal. In the Soviet Union, the March 1989 elections for two thirds of the seats of the Congress of People's deputies showed that unexpectedly many voters used their new rights to punish party candidates. Even where they ran unopposed, as in Leningrad, prominent party candidates lost. It had never occurred to them that they could lose; when the results came out there was stunned silence (McAuley 1992:98). These elections were a terrible blow to the parties' assumption of unqualified support.

Why did ruling parties fare so badly in these key elections? The obvious answer is that they lacked popular support. However, such an answer overlooks a number of other factors. Ruling communist parties had no understanding of electoral rules and committed gross miscalculations during electoral bargains (Kaminski 1999). The party apparatus did not know how to fight an election campaign (Colton 1990). The jobs of party officials were related to administration, not to political competition; for example, party activists complained that they could not answer impromptu questions during electoral campaigns because they had not had time to check back with party headquarters. Party discipline began to collapse; in the Soviet Union, most candidates who stood against the party were party members. The 1990 elections provided new opportunities to opponents, in a context where associative life began to boom (White 1991:406, Fish 1995). By the spring of 1991, the CPSU was dead as a political organization (McAuley 1992:110). In short, single-party rule had destroyed the ability of ruling parties to compete, even in a semi-free environment. As Kaminski (1999) points out, "The communists lost power when they began to experiment with the classical devices of democracy: polls, electoral laws, and electoral campaigns. By playing with these devices without necessary skills, they produced a series of mistakes. Lenin's prophecy that capitalists would sell communists a rope to hang themselves on reached an ironic finale."

The Interaction of Political and Economic Reforms

Finally, the interaction between economic and political reforms contributed in important ways to the decay of single-party rule. Market reforms eroded the bureaucratic coordination of ruling parties, launching a process that intertwined (internal) demoralization with (external) alternative options. This process led to the decay of communist parties (but not necessarily to the breakdown of the regimes) because, once reforms were undertaken, the penetration of market institutions increased the incentives for opportunism while political reforms weakened the monitoring and enforcement capacity of the party. The result was the massive exit of members and officials. Once reforms got under

way, communist parties began losing members in a quasi-exponential way, until they eventually imploded (Gill 1995). This process began in ancillary organizations and later affected the core of the parties. The Soviet Communist Youth organization (Komsomol) lost some 12 million members in just five years (1985–1990); CPSU membership stagnated in 1989 and began declining in 1990; about a quarter of the party's members left it between January and July 1991. Even in countries where no regime breakdown occurred, party decay is pronounced. A study of 1358 Chinese Communist Party village branches in 1989 reported that only 32.4% of the party branches "could fully play their role," 59.5% were "mediocre," and 7.95% were "basically defunct"; in Vietnam, the Communist Party managed to attract 36,000 new members in 1991 compared with 100,000 in 1987 (Pei 1994, Gill 1995, Sakwa 1990). The key mechanism of decay was, therefore, the desertion of party officials because of a shift in the sources of their revenue and income (and consequently their interests and orientations), rather than the emergence of civil society and the resistance of ordinary citizens to the state (Nee & Lian 1994, Walder 1994).

The introduction of market elements caused a decline of state-controlled resources and a shift in the balance of power from state to society. Market reforms expanded the originally limited options of party bureaucrats. Departures from central planning (which included tolerance for the "second economy" or "informal sector") opened alternatives to rewards and careers formerly controlled by the party and weakened the incentives and capacity of local officials to monitor and sanction member and citizen behavior. As a separate and lucrative private sector emerged, officials found that it offered important new sources of revenue and personal income. They therefore turned away from former allegiances to bureaucratic superiors in favor of new business ventures with long-term colleagues from the ministries in their localities (Walder 1994). Most party grassroots organizations became redundant. Alternative options often amounted to corruption, since the boundaries between public and private sector remained blurred. McAuley (1992:111) provides many examples of local and regional party organizations simply turning into private businesses. In Perm, a city in the Urals, the party committee set up a firm that paid its shareholders dividends; the firm began to rent out party property, including the party hotel (still supplied by the state wholesale network), and based a lucrative taxi service for foreign businessmen on its car pool, using state fuel. Between 1982 and 1991, government prosecutors and disciplinary committees in the Chinese Communist Party investigated and prosecuted 1.78 million cases of corruption involving members of the party. Among 41,000 criminals implicated in major corruption cases in 1991, more than 50% had held positions in party organizations, government agencies, and state-owned enterprises. In short, by creating opportunities for quick self-enrichment that many

government and party officials found irresistible, economic reforms facilitated the illicit conversion of political power into economic gains, causing a breakdown of the state's institutional discipline and fueling an exodus from the party (Cheng & Gong 1997, Pei 1995, Gill 1995). At the same time, an increasing number of party members, especially of the younger generation, became convinced that their party could never be reformed and would have to be destroyed or split from within (Hosking et al 1992:205). On the one hand, the key institutions of the communist party-state were especially vulnerable to accelerated decay because of their high level of interconnectedness and interdependence. The decaying of one institution infected another, degraded its integrity, and reduced its chances for self-renewal (Pei 1995). On the other hand, demoralization generated tipping effects; the waning of commitment was contagious, a consequence of both institutions and perceptions (Nee & Lian 1994, Walder 1994).

The distinction between decay and breakdown is crucial. Some ruling parties have been able to maintain their hold on power despite their decay, while others failed. This variation seems to be related to the modalities of reform, and in particular to the content, timing, and interaction of political and economic reforms. For instance, economic reforms in the absence of political reforms produced a situation wherein the illicit conversion of political power into economic gains led to the decay of the ruling party but did not diminish its ability to maintain control, since control was precisely the precondition for economic gains.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that explaining the decay and breakdown of one-party systems is a formidable task; the complexity of the issue is colossal and the size of the sample is small. This combination favors ad hoc explanations (Kaminski 1999).

However, it is realistic to expect progress in understanding aspects of this process. Advances in the field will have to be based on a careful distinction between decay and breakdown. They will combine microanalytical studies of breakdown (using approaches such as tipping models, models of informational cascades, etc) with a theoretically and empirically grounded understanding of single-party rule and decay (its social basis, institutional dynamics, content of reforms, structure of rewards and sanctions, etc).

They will specify explicitly the causal links between developments at the macro level (e.g. structural change, international factors) and processes at the micro level (e.g. individual decisions to defect from the party), as well as the links between processes and variables operating within each level of analysis (e.g. economic decay and ideological decay, political and economic reforms). They will be sensitive to context and grounded in comparative empirical re-

search (formulating, deriving, and testing falsifiable hypotheses); finally, their substantive scope will extend beyond communist regimes to eventually include the universe of one-party regimes.

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