

The Theory of Civil Society and the East German Revolution: Movements, Protest, and the Process of Political Change¹

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Introduction: Re-Examining the Process of Political Change in East Germany

Although lately reduced to a "political turn" (*die Wende*), the revolution in the former German Democratic Republic deserves a more forceful presentation. East Germany is perhaps the most dramatic case in the collapse of Communism in East Central Europe. Its peaceful revolution in 1989 inaugurated one of the most dramatic transformations in the twentieth century. Not only was the Communist regime swept away, but the GDR itself ceased to exist as reform gave way to what Jarausch (1994) has called a "rush to German unity." Responding as much to popular pressure for unification with the Federal Republic as to the political and economic collapse of the GDR, German (re)unification was complete only a year after the "Leipzig Autumn" had brought down the government of Erich Honecker. During the year that led to unification, East German politics were shaped by economic and institutional crises and popular protest which doomed the efforts of the civic opposition and the reform communists to rescue separate GDR. In the first free national elections in March 1990, a coalition of parties calling for unification won a decisive victory that paved the way for a merger of the two Germanies. Did this revolution represent the triumph of "civil society" over Communism? Has civil society shaped the politics of post-Communism?

In thinking about the civil society thesis

we should remember that revolution in the GDR was practically unimaginable just a decade ago. Indeed, the history of East Germany since 1989 has continually defied expectations. To begin with, few could foresee the protests that led to the collapse of GDR Communism, which had been considered an economic powerhouse of the Soviet bloc and the image of repressive political stability (Kuran, 1991, 1995; Goldstone, 1994; Lipset and Bence, 1994). After unification, many expected eastern Germany to rapidly approach the western economic niveau but instead economic transformation and social integration have been slower and more difficult than was expected. The "blossoming landscapes" in the East envisioned by Helmut Kohl have been slow to develop in the wake of market reform. The high cost of economic reconstruction has contributed to disappointment and resentment on both sides of the older border. The East German case is further complicated by the "national turn" in the revolution; while other countries in the region experienced division in the wake of Communism's decline (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia), the GDR united with its larger and more prosperous Western relation. Did the relations of civil society complicate reform? Was national unity the byproduct of the freeing of civil society?

Electoral predictions have proven no more reliable. Most observers expected the Social Democrats to regain their pre-war Eastern bastion (see Walter, Dürr and Schmidtke, 1993), but instead the SPD has emerged as the second party behind the Christian Democrats. The civic movement expected to play the role of a specifically Eastern protest party after unification,

but that role has been taken by the reformed communist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). Eastern Germany now exhibits a sharply divided electorate in which the Social Democrats run a weak second to the Christian Democrats, and perhaps most surprisingly, the PDS is the third most popular party with about a fifth of the vote. The Alliance 90 party, the heir to the democratic opposition, enjoys considerably less support than does the PDS, heir to party they had helped to overthrow. The Eastern political landscape points to very different sources of interest and identity in united Germany.

Does civil society help social scientists to understand post-Communist politics in East Germany? This question becomes all the more important as we struggle to define what the rebellions against Communism and their consequences mean. Jarausch and Gransow note of the confusion:

The notion of 'post-Communism' seems to imply everything from 'democracy' to 'capitalism' to 'civil war', 'ethnic strife', 'nationalism' and even 'fascism'. Even less clear are the consequences for the future (1994: xxiv).

As is true throughout the region, the East German "transition" cannot be seen as a single, mechanical transition from authoritarian socialism to liberal market democracy, but rather as a series of interrelated social, political, and economic changes which might be regarded as a process of transformation. A political sociology of transformation would insist on examining the sources of social power, contentious politics, and institutional changes which shape post-Communist society. If the post-Communist development of East Germany has tended to frustrate expectations and predictions, this can be explained, in large part, by the implicit and explicit models which influence the analysis of political pundits and social scientists alike. While many transition theories may posit a relatively straightforward path to market reforms and political liberalization, evidence from East Central Europe suggests a more complex picture.

One of the most influential theories in recent years to account for the collapse of communism and the rebirth of democracy relies on the concept of civil society, to which I will turn

in greater detail. Briefly stated, civil society typically refers to diverse social institutions, economic organizations, and the public sphere. The concept of civil society attempts to capture the importance of mediating forces between state and society. In reference to transitions in Eastern Europe, the theory maintains that democratic transformation is rooted in the development of a sphere of social interaction located between the state and the private sphere from which solidarity, association, and political action can emerge. The political theory of civil society argues that democracy can only thrive where groups and associations are balanced with a political society anchored by legal equality, plural and limited institutions, and open political parties and movements. Consensus and cooperation are important to democracy, but without a lively democratic debate democratic institutions are unlikely to thrive. Democracy thus represents both the capacity for social self-organization in civil society along with political contest, participation, and protest in political society. Even when democratic institutions such as parliaments, parties, and a public sphere are in place, without internal processes of democratic leadership selection and decision-making a creeping formalism and an entrenched political class are likely to take shape. This tendency was well recognized by Eastern Europe's dissidents and democratic activists, who often offered a radical democratic perspective beyond traditional liberalism. Their idea was to use the "reenergized networks of protesters or politicized religious constituencies" in an effort to bridge the public and private, the political and the personal (Maier, 1997:186-7). This democratic vision relied on an active citizenship, one that entails both rights and participation.

It is clear in light of post-Communist transformations that the theory of civil society needs to be reexamined in such a way as to privilege neither the understanding of civil society embraced by market-oriented liberals, nor the idealized visions of disappointed activists. What is becoming clear in East Central Europe is that democratic societies cannot be simply legislated into existence, nor should they be reduced to the much smaller notion of the free-market. The question of democracy's relationship to civil society thus remains an important one. Civil

society theory must be understood in relation to social movements and mobilizing structures in a political theory of civil society and applied to the actual economic and institutional changes underway in post-Communist societies.

Beyond the Study of Transitions

Analyzing political change in East Germany allows us to explore the impact of movement politics on processes of social and political change in post-communist society. In so doing, I wish to reclaim an account of social action from mechanistic and deterministic understandings of social and political change. In the last two decades a considerable literature has developed on the successive waves of democratic and market transitions in Latin America and Eastern Europe (Schöpflin, 1993; O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, 1991; Przeworski, 1991; Chiot, 1991; Nee, 1989; Nee and Stark, 1989; Welsh, 1994; Weil, Hoffman and Gautier, 1995; Domanski and Heyns, 1995). While this literature is too vast to survey here, its key features can be readily summarized. Despite important contributions, an overemphasis on state and market actors has obscured the role of popular mobilization and cultural factors in the process of transformation. The importance of external causes (e.g. in the Soviet Union) of the revolution of 1989 possibly has led some to dismiss the role of popular protest in the end of communism. I am among those who contend that such views are seriously misled especially in light of the East German case.² Focusing squarely on social movements and an emergent civil society is a necessary corrective to research dominated by formal models, macro-level comparisons, and structural explanations. What has been too often missing has been an account of transformation as a historical process applied to specific cases.

Kennedy (1994) recently warned social scientists to avoid falling into the discourse of "transitology": terminology and analytical strategies of transition, hallowed by their application to previous transformations and by their explicit liberalism, which have become so standard as to obscure a more complicated historical picture with tautological reasoning. "Transition" is not a set category, but a metaphor which

often eludes historical detail. Revolutions and revolts are by and large the story of collective action, which may produce epochal historical events (such as the revolutions of 1989) that drive the process by which social and political structures are transformed (Sewell, 1996). The process of revolution and reform in East Germany was and is contested and contingent. Collective actors respond to opportunities and constraints while they transform social relations and collective identities in the process. Research on change in Eastern Europe must be able to capture this process in some way if we are to have accounts that really make sense of change.

In short, positing a transition from "Communism" to "civil society" or "democracy" may not be the correct strategy at all, particularly when we are still unclear as to what those terms mean in historical practice (Verdery, 1996). Certainly the fall of Communism by itself is not a "democratic transition." Indeed, the collapse of the old regime marks the point after which the democratization of society must be realized. Regimes which surrender to the call for elections do not automatically become democratic; we only need to look at the successor states of Yugoslavia to realize this fact. Politics may remain a mixture of old and new forms. The same is true for the economy. Mixed economic and institutional forms are the norm in post-communist societies, rather than a deviation (as is clear in Yugoslavia) from some ideal type development. If we fail to connect the related processes of revolution, regime change and post-Communist politics, then we risk overlooking the difficult process by which a democratic civil society might be constructed through both institutional reform and collective action.

The Theory of Civil Society and post-Communism

One of the central themes that emerged in the study of Eastern Europe in the 1980's was the idea of civil society. Imagined as a space for freedom and self-organization independent of the state, this concept achieved special resonance in the context of democratic opposition to totalitarian party-states. In the opposition movements of East Central Europe, civil society

assumed "analytic relevance, normative significance and political potential," particularly where the opposition understood itself as "civil society against the state" (Keane, 1988; Havel, 1986). If the concept was employed both normatively and analytically in opposing the Communist state, can it still have relevance after the fall of Communism? The, answer, I will argue, is that the concept remains important, but only if a theory of civil society is understood in relation to concrete forms of social organization and collective action. While the theory of civil society needs to be more general, it must be applied more carefully to particular cases. In short, a *general theory* of civil society must be confronted with concrete historical cases if it is to be useful sociologically.

In examining the process of transformation it becomes important to consider what is meant by a democratic civil society, who its key actors are, and finally, if there is evidence of the formation a civil society in which collective actors organize in pursuit of interests, recognition or social justice. Recently there have been some very important challenges to civil society theory. Hall, for example, argues that the civil society concept is not of much use in understanding the revolt against Communism:

Communism did not fall, as many expected and some still believe, because of pressure from below, that is from the forces of civil society; nor does that complete collapse ensure that the society that will emerge will be civil (Hall, 1995: 1).

But Hall's observation seems oddly mistaken, in large part because of his failure to make an analytical distinction between civil society and protest on the one hand, and the divergences in the various national revolutions on the other. Not only does Hall seem to repeat the error of seeing Eastern Europe as an undifferentiated bloc, but he is seduced by a deterministic understanding of the crisis of that bloc such that revolution somehow occurs without popular mobilization. This conflation does not make sense of the East European revolutions, the various oppositions, or the very different post-Communist paths taken by different countries. The divergences in these cases stem in part by different patterns of protest and different regime responses. Not every form of col-

lective protest can meaningfully be said to mobilize the institutions of civil society, but that is not to say that there was no popular mobilization.

Hall is right, however, in noting that there is no guarantee that post-Communist society will be civil, but he errs if he thinks that there is no connection between the nature of the revolution (e.g. the role played by democratic opposition groups) and the contours of post-Communist society. Hall also points to the "fuzziness" of the civil society concept and its "weak or incomplete sociological moorings" and further that "...its establishment everywhere is by no means inevitable" (1995:3). In both regards, Hall is right: the civil society concept has suffered from a lack of theoretical clarity and its establishment is always historically, and perhaps to some extent culturally, contingent. Rather than abandoning the concept, however, rethinking civil society theory means specifying its sociological dimensions and the conditions of its construction. While the normative dimension of the concept is an important part of civil society discourse, the mere projection of civil society as a democratic "good" would be insufficient for the analysis of post-Communist society or in the project of its reform. Civil society should also not be employed as a concept whose very fuzziness permits the analyst to wipe up unexplained phenomena, nor one which allows us to make easy contrasts between the democratic West and the authoritarian "rest", as has become all too common in public discussions of post-Communist societies.

Feminist critics have also raised important criticisms of civil society, particularly in regards to the gendered assumptions that have historically shaped the concept. For example, by combining the household, the market and associational life under the rubric of civil society, important distinctions between men's and women's roles have been sacrificed. By conceiving of civil society as the "realm of freedom," actual conditions of women's subordination became obscured, and in many respects normalized. Women's historical seclusion from political society and the "public sphere" of civil society became a foundation of bourgeois liberalism (Fraser, 1989, 1991; Dietz, 1992; Weintraub, 1997). In part because the concept

of civil society rested on a public/private distinction that excluded the household from the public and shielded the domestic from the political, and in part because of liberalism's failure to eradicate sexism, many feminists have seen little reason to be optimistic regarding the revival of civil society. The recent experience of women in Eastern Europe does much to confirm the skepticism, as the gains made by women in terms of employment, social rights and public participation under communism have been seriously eroded at the same time that post-communist politicians attempt to reassert traditional roles for women in the name of restoring a healthy civil society (Funk and Mueller, 1993; Einhorn, 1993; Wolchik and Meyer, 1985). All of these criticisms are well placed, and yet, do not compel us to jettison the concept of civil society, so long as we are able to interrogate its gender bias. East or West, the women's movement is as rooted in civil society as any other and must act to reshape the "private" relations in civil society. Furthermore, citizenship seems especially important as a resource for women's mobilization, especially in the reconstruction of social and political rights. Nevertheless, democratization and civil society by themselves are no guarantee of the emancipation of women; democracy can provide the opportunity to challenge male dominance or to extend it in post-communist societies and here Verdery's (1994) work on gender politics in post-Communist societies is instructive.

Neo-liberals have asserted that the residue of socialism, such as an attachment to social justice, are destructive of the pluralism and opposing interests that sustain an active civil society. The claim is that "The lack of self-organization of society may be impeded, interestingly enough, by the legacy of excessive egalitarianism: differently put, the striking of bargains — that is, the practice of normal, civil politics — only becomes possible once interests have become conscious and organized" (Hall, 1995: 23). There is much truth to this observation, particularly as it relates to the problem of differentiation in post-Communist society, but as Hall notes, there have been those who have taken the argument to mean that inequality is a precondition for democracy. Habermas has been criticized, for example, for expecting more equal-

ity and solidarity in civil society than liberalism would allow. A common assumption in the civil society literature has been that a minimal state that leaves as much space as possible for organizations and associations in civil society to fill, will be the most advantageous for establishing democratic self-government. The assumption draws as much from Tocqueville, as from the Scottish moralists. It is assumed that state involvement in the economy and social affairs tends to suppress independent initiatives arising from civil society. Clearly, the Communist states of the Soviet type might exemplify an extreme version of the argument.

The belief that civil society can only truly thrive where the state plays a minimal role in economy and society and contends that inequality is a functional requirement of liberal democracy seems to be misplaced, with important implications for post-Communist societies. While excessive egalitarianism (in communism a *de facto* "equality of poverty") and an authoritarian state may crowd out civil society, the implication that the most effective way to transform Eastern Europe is through a minimal state and a maximum market seems mistaken. Even the paradigmatic case of "shock therapy" transition in Poland does not bear the case for the retreat of the state (Domanski and Heyns, 1995). The claim that the state must withdraw from economic and political affairs if a rich associational life is to develop also seems false. The Nordic countries, with their extensive welfare states and social democratic traditions, have rates of associational membership and voluntarism which compare quite favorably with the vaunted "liberal individualism" that is said to obtain in the United States (Wuthnow, 1991; Janowski and Hunt, 1995). We should not forget, of course, that Tocqueville also warned that inequality would be the undoing of democracy. All of this suggests that the conditions of democratic civil society still need to be examined closely, particularly in post-Communist societies which are seeking their way between statism and market liberalism. In an analysis of civil society in post-communist societies, Garcelon (1997: 309) notes that frustration with civil society discourse in the East European transitions stems from "the tendency to place instances of both 'public' political rebellion and

'private' economic pursuits under the rubric of 'the rebirth of civil society'. Garcelon contends that Communist societies in practice promoted a radical privatization of the social and economic realms by repression, particularism, clientelism, and conformity. The political, or rather "official" realm, engaged in an extreme colonization of the social such that autonomous social life retreated deeply into the life-world. Communist parties bent on economic modernization and political control left behind societies both under-differentiated and socially fragmented. As economy declined, the system found itself incapable of reflexivity or responsiveness. The oppositions, on the other hand, learned through repression that a direct assault on the political monopoly of the party state was a less effective strategy than the reconstruction of social spaces outside the state's direct control. The creation of voluntary associations, human rights groups, second economies and social movements became essential. Garcelon reminds us, however, that the fall of the Communist state cannot be seen as the end of democratization but as a necessary condition of its fulfillment. In the post-Communist era, reconstructing the public realm and civil society continues as an on-going process of democratization and differentiation. Garcelon argues that economic liberalism, employed as the chief instrument of social reform, is poorly suited to the restoration of social and public life and the laws, institutions, and a democratic civil society that support it.³

Critical social theory is beginning to rethink the concept of civil society in a way that addresses many of the weaknesses of the concept. Social theorists are reclaiming the concept of civil society in discussing not only the "self-limiting" opposition to Communism, but also the processes of democratization and differentiation in modern societies. A central claim is that social transformation relies on the mobilization of a civil society that can be reduced neither to the state nor the market, and which is rooted in institutional pluralism and a public sphere. As Keane (1988) notes, the neo-liberal understanding of democratization, with its emphasis on the market and privatization, could well undermine the very pluralist civil society desired by the proponents of market democ-

racy. What is needed is a theory of civil society which can account for social action and political change.

Social Movements and Civil Society

If the concept of civil society is to be employed in understanding the practices and institutions of democratic society, then it seems clear that we must be able to link a political theory of civil society to social movements and collective action. To be considered useful in understanding post-Communist societies, the political aspects of civil society must be clearly specified. In his recent work on a discourse theory of law and democracy, Habermas (1996a) has done much to define civil society as an object of analysis with specific institutional features. Habermas argues that

[civil society at] its institutional core comprises those non-governmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the life-world. Civil society is composed of the more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements... (1996a:367).

For Habermas, the function of the democratic civil society is to bring social conflict from the periphery to the center of the political system. This communicative function is essential to social integration and differentiation in modern political societies. In Habermas's view, the crisis of the Communist states can be linked to the lack of communicative institutions, but the advanced democracies also face the challenge of protest parties and a growing apoliticism which withdraws from political responsibility and undermines the organization and legitimacy of the political system (see also Eder, 1993).

Drawing on a critical theory of civil society directs our attention to social movements which link the public of citizens to the state. At the same time the embeddedness of the state in civil society limits the autonomy of the political system. This theory of a differentiated public sphere, consisting of networks of organizations and associations mediating between civil society and the state, provides for the communicative

action of parties, movements, associations, churches, and public interest groups (Habermas, 1989a, 1989b, 1996a). The challenge to social research posed by Habermas's theory is to analyze the impact of movements on the political system and the shifts in power between civil society and the state effected by collective action. The link between this re-conception of civil society and the process of democratization relies not only in the emergence of a differentiated public sphere, but in the development of an active citizenship. Historically, the claim to citizenship has been the foundation of political enfranchisement and social rights in liberal democracies, a legacy which today is challenged in both post-Communist and advanced industrial societies (Marshall, 1965; Esping-Andersen, 1994). Citizens as passive bearers of rights or as the subjects of administrative power are unlikely to make democracy work; they are citizens in only the minimal sense of being welfare clients or objects of administration. The daunting challenge faced by post-Communist societies in building democracy is to manage economic change while making space for a contentious citizenry possible.

Cohen and Arato's (1992: ix) civil society is "a sphere of social interaction between the economy and the state composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of association (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication...created through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilization." In this formulation, a democratic political society (parties, movements, associations) relies on an active civil society in communication with the state. If the democratic revolution involves the mobilization of civil society against the state (predominantly private life and informal associations), then in the post-Communist period the question becomes sustaining an active civil society rather than the "depoliticization, disillusionment, and the channeling of opposition into the party and electoral systems that demobilize the 'popular upsurge'" (Cohen and Arato, 1992: 56). These authors pose an important question in understanding post-Communist politics and society, particularly as regards the "failed" mission of the East German civic movements. Is the dream of a radically democratic society un-

workable? Is the process of demobilization an inevitable feature of institutional democratization? Is there a positive legacy to mobilization discernible even if it failed to achieve its immediate goals?

Too often civil society theory has focused exclusively on institutions and participation without adequate attention to the cultural foundations of civil society. Craig Calhoun's (1993a, 1993b, 1995) work makes an important contribution to the study of civil society in post-communist transformations by linking collective identity and culture to the theory of civil society. For Calhoun, a democratic civil society relies on both an active citizenship and the capacity of groups to organize themselves in pursuit of collective interests. Democracy is not the sum of individual attitudes, but the social organization of groups and a public sphere which supports a critical culture and encourages political discussion. Crucial in this regard are the sources of shared identity and group solidarity which make democratic organization and communication possible. In his analysis of the Chinese student movement of 1989, Calhoun (1994) examines the often conflicted relationship between democratic movements, national culture, and collective identity while revealing the tensions implicit in the attempt to construct civil society within the shell of an authoritarian regime. In linking the public sphere to the problem of collective action, Calhoun reveals that identities are not fixed prior to mobilization, but are constructed and reconstructed in collective action; movements not only transform identities in civil society but they may also give birth to them. The development of spontaneous protest identities, such as the populist claim to membership in "the people" (*Volk*) in the Leipzig demonstrations, or transformed identities, like the attachment to a specifically East German identity after unification, reveal a link between identity formation and collective action.

Somers (1995) calls for a "third sphere" of citizenship that focuses on participation and solidarities beyond the state and market dualism. She argues that an institutional and historical conception of the public sphere is needed if we are to move beyond the implicit assumptions of Anglo-American political culture. It seems clear that civil society is not a single

theory with predictive consequences, but rather a useful theoretical orientation that allows researchers to ask a number of important critical questions concerning this "third sphere." It belongs, along with nationalism, to the realm of discourse and can be an extremely valuable object of analysis. Discussing civil society in light of the East European transformations can thus provide a starting point for both social and critical analysis (Kennedy and Galtz, 1996). The social movements perspective on civil society is a useful refinement and can help to capture the dynamic and process of post-Communist transformation. In the remainder of this paper, I wish to address the following questions: does an examination of social movements and civil society in the East German case (1) help to explain the outbreak of protest in the revolution of 1989; (2) reveal a sphere of mobilization and communication; (3) and ask what substance adheres to the ideal of a democratic civil society in the context of economic, social and political change?

The Revolution of 1989: Understanding Popular Protest in the GDR

The East German revolution of 1989 was in many ways distinct from those in other parts of the region that toppled the Communist system. In what follows, I will address two points that have been present in much of the discussion concerning the revolution in the GDR. The first is the *endogenous* process of mobilization that led to the revolutionary breakthrough in the GDR in 1989. While West Germany and the Soviet Union played crucial roles in setting the stage for the revolution, the mass protests of autumn 1989 that toppled the Honecker regime and the Berlin Wall were both internally and externally driven. Secondly, while the East German transformation is distinct in many ways, particularly because its neighbor was a capitalist democracy of the same nationality, there are enough similarities with other countries in the region to warrant comparisons with other post-Communist societies. That is not to deny the peculiar circumstances of the GDR in 1989-1990, but rather to reject the claim that East Germany represents another incomparable *Sonderweg* that prohibits historical comparison.

The relatively peaceful and seemingly spon-

taneous nature of the mass protests, that finally toppled the Honecker regime and its successors in the GDR, suggests new approaches to the study of revolution. The rapid pace of the revolution in the GDR startled the populace as much as it did Western social scientists, posing a challenge to prevailing theories of collective action and the revolution. Beginning in the summer of 1989, tens of thousands of East Germans abandoned the GDR for asylum in West Germany through new holes in the "iron curtain," primarily through the newly opened border between Hungary and Austria or by taking refuge in West German embassies. This "exit-ing crisis," combined with signals that a reform-minded Gorbachev regime would tolerate a challenge to the ruling party, encouraged the tiny East German opposition to make public calls for reform. These demonstrations were soon swelled by masses of ordinary citizens in Leipzig, Berlin, and other cities. Declaring themselves the true people of the GDR (*Wir sind das Volk!*), demonstrators revealed both the lack of legitimacy of Honecker's regime and the state's unwillingness to repress mounting protest. Within a few weeks of the first mass demonstrations in the GDR, the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9 signaled the end totalitarian party-state.

There was considerable popular discontent in the GDR in the 1980s, much of it directed not so much against socialism, as against the mismanagement and abuses perpetrated by the Honecker regime. From the early 1970s on, East Germans were led to believe in an implicit social contract between party elites and the people. In exchange for compliance, the bulk of East Germans could expect improving living standards, social mobility and an expanding social welfare net. It had become clear by the late 1980s that this contract was becoming impossible for the regime to fulfill. The rapid pace of mobilization in the East German revolution was possible in part because the population shared common ideological frames and value orientations by which grievances were understood. A notion of social justice that drew its roots from the socialist tradition informed, and apparently continues to inform, East German consciousness and social protest (Kluegel, Mason and Wegener, 1995; Weil, 1993; Roller, 1994). The contradictions between socialist claims to justice

and democracy with the pervasive economic stagnation, ideological hypocrisy, political corruption, and personal subordination in everyday life became impossible to overlook or accept.

It is intriguing to consider how the so-called "silent majority" of East Germans — who were widely believed to be socially atomized and politically complacent — took to the streets to challenge a party with the full force of state repression behind it. We need to correct the tendency in the transitions literature to focus solely on the intellectuals and dissidents, on the one hand, and state actors on the other. The East German case complicates such accounts and raises critical questions regarding the nature of popular mobilization and post-Communist politics. How could mass mobilization occur in a political system characterized by totalitarianism and acquiescence? What accounts for the seemingly spontaneous nature of the revolution? How could an atomized population foster enough solidarity to risk state repression? What were the grievances, structures and identities that compelled collective action?

From a "Society of Niches" to Civil Society?

The GDR had an associational life, represented above all by the labor union federation and the various "mass organizations," such as the communist youth and the socialist women's league. These organizations, however, had never developed much beyond the "transmission belts of Communist power" that was a hallmark of Stalinism and were widely perceived as instruments of party dominance and legitimation. As to the semi-independent political parties of the "anti-fascist bloc" that were under the control of the Communist party, little could be expected of them beyond the limited roles assigned to them by the regime. Despite the state's attempt to smother independent social organizations and the widespread infiltration of the secret police, informal groups played a remarkably large role in everyday life in the GDR. East Germans described themselves as "living on two tracks" (*Zweileisigkeit*): split between an authentic private life and public accommodation to the regime. Outsider observers could not easily detect the deep dissatisfaction that

existed in nearly all classes of GDR citizens, in large part because the public, dominated by the regime, was unavailable as a site of protest or debate (Kuran, 1991, 1995). East Germany was famously described by Günter Gaus (1983) as a "society of niches" (*Nichengesellschaft*) in which individuals retreated into pockets of private life which could provide relief from conformity and compliance. In this niche society, East Germans turned to circles of like-minded friends, or to West German TV, or into alternative milieus where the dissatisfied sought refuge from conformity and deprivation. Complaining, joking, or nervously expressing their doubts for the future, networks of friends and confidants provided a relief from the conformity and hypocrisy of public life. Such informal group interactions were apparently typical of the lived world of ordinary East Germans. Retreat into an "authentic" private sphere and political strategies rejecting open confrontation with the state were found not only in the GDR, but throughout Eastern Europe (Havel, 1986; Konrad, 1984).

In previous research (Pfaff, 1996), I traced the emergence of large-scale protest to informal groups within East German society which provided a foundation for collective identity and solidarity. Protest identity played a crucial role both in grievance interpretation and in protest framing. Appeals to the "genuine" people (*Volk*) of the GDR to oppose the dictatorship which claimed to rule in their name and interests proved an effective framing device. Usually these informal groups were tolerated or ignored by the authorities because they did not represent an overt challenge to party authority or state management. Although a more authentic reflection of the popular mood than public displays of loyalty the regime demanded, such informal social life was much more opaque to the authorities and difficult to control. As one East German worker explained:

we had a little dacha, and this is where we met over the weekends with friends, that is where we talked and complained and got angry. And this is exactly how every other GDR citizen did it as well. Everybody had a niche in which he sat and quietly complained (quoted in Philipsen, 1993: 127).

The niches provided a sphere of autonomy

and sociability often under attack by the disciplinary bodies of the state. The same logic also applied to the world of work, often operating within areas of state control.⁴ Such niches provided relief from the reality of life in the GDR and they also provided a sphere of informal interaction independent of the state. They were neither resistance cells in the classic sense, nor were they identical to civil society. As Burawoy and Lukacs (1992) argue, these informal groups not only provided a measure of workplace autonomy in the face of bureaucratic management, but within the socialist workplace they were also a functional adaption to shortages and the lack of collective representation. Although they may have had a mobilizing potential in times of protest, they also helped to stabilize labor relations in socialism. Most importantly, these niches provided the foundation for alternative organizations outside of both the party's mass organizations and the opposition movements. Yet, we should not lose sight of the fact that the niche society was not a form of political rebellion. By and large they represent the escape from politics. Glaeßner (1996: 29) captures the essence of this when he notes that niche society was a fundamental element of the "political culture of an unpolitical society."

As hopes for reform and openness in the GDR faded with the Honecker's rejection of both Gorbachev's program in the USSR and of "counter-revolutionary" developments in Poland and Hungary, private disillusionment and dissatisfaction grew. The broad public opposition to the 1988 ban placed on the Soviet magazine *Sputnik*⁵ was an important moment in which dissatisfaction with the regime was at last openly expressed. In the summer of 1989, the mass emigration of tens of thousands of highly skilled, youthful workers to the West revealed the economic, political, and moral crisis that the GDR faced. As the tiny opposition grew more bold, for example with the founding of *Neues Forum* in September, and the determined hard-line stance of the regime became apparent in the blithe preparations for the celebration of forty years of "heroic socialism" in the GDR, discontent overflowed from private circles into public life. Membership in informal groups served not only to frame the actor's opposition to the regime, but as an effective in-

strument of spreading information and later for spontaneous mobilization. Survey research on the Leipzig protesters (see Opp, Voß and Gern, 1993) has confirmed the impression conveyed in demonstrators' accounts of circles of friends and close associates informing one another of the progress of the demonstrations and in joining them together as a group.

The 1989 protests thus revealed a "niche society" suddenly made public. The tendency to retreat into a sheltered private sphere may have done much to help defuse protest in the past. In the context of new political opportunities and a faltering regime, ordinary East Germans mobilized for protest. The mobilization of this niche society, or more precisely of informal social networks, made spontaneous protest possible by people to the streets in opposition to the regime. Informal ties also helped to overcome the obstacles to communication in Communist society by dispersing information about the opposition movement and the growing protests. Such word-of-mouth made it more difficult for East Germans to believe the government portrayal of the protesters as "hooligans", "rowdies", and counter-revolutionaries. This informal, loosely-structured movement also simplified protest participation. As Jarausch (1994: 46) notes, there were "no clear leaders or followers; onlookers melted into the ranks and marchers dropped out when they had enough." The demonstrations grew from the Monday evening "peace prayers" held by opposition groups in a Leipzig church, effectively drawing on the very limited resources available to a nascent civil society in church-sheltered niches.

It is important to note that the new civic movements played only a limited role in organizing these protests; most organizers wished to avoid a confrontation with the state and deplored the participation in protests of people demanding the right to emigrate (Torpey, 1996; Joppke, 1996). Although they provided the seed, they did not orchestrate the protests. One demonstrator recalled that "There was no head of the revolution. The head was the Nikolaikirche and the body was the city center" (Opp, Voß and Gern, 1993: 46). An important factor that limited the mobilizing potential of the civic movement is that it remained a very small movement until *after* the key breakthrough demonstrations

in Leipzig and Berlin. It has been estimated that the number of people associated with the opposition in the GDR in fall 1989 was no more than 10-15,000 in a population of some 16 million (Pollack 1990). Schlegelmilch's (1995) study of the small Saxon city of Wurzen reveals that the local "opposition" consisted of no more than five or six individuals.

Despite all of the obstacles to collective action in the GDR, group solidarities significantly lowered the barriers to participation, especially as grievances became more openly expressed in the wake of the exiting crisis. The key point to recognize here is that the account of a "civil society against the state" in the East German revolution is hard to accept, particularly during the breakthrough demonstrations of October 1989 (McFalls, 1995). It was the spontaneous mobilization of the socialist niche society, rather than the development of an alternative civil society, that accounts for the demonstrations. As numerous studies of the civic movement have shown, the opposition groups had an uneasy relationship with many of the protest groups and attempted to restrain efforts that might imperil the survival of the GDR. The civic movements clearly believed in the vision of a democratic civil society and played an important role both as a catalyst for protest and in attempts to democratize the GDR. However, it seems that they did not constitute a civil society or mobilize one against the state.

The East German Civic Movement (Bürgerbewegung)

Civic activists and their allies in the West German left have claimed that unification stunted the development of a democratic society in the East. While it is clear that the radical democratic vision of the "third way" between capitalist democracy and Stalinism was not realized, does that mean the democratization was stillborn in Eastern Germany? The emergence of opposition movements are of particular interest in the East German case because not only was an independent civil society effectively banned in the GDR, but through its Ministry for State Security (*Stasi*), the state infiltrated and undermined the opposition. In this regard even the semi-autonomous church was no ex-

ception. The emergence of sustained oppositional movements in the GDR in the 1980s was important for its attempts to lay the foundations of a civil society based on human rights. Nevertheless, the mass emigration that gave rise to the protest demonstrations of fall 1989 came before a well-developed civic opposition had taken shape (Rucht, 1996; Dennis, 1993). Civil society, understood as a field of movements and organizations outside of the regime's control, were only embryonic. Although the Protestant church provided some space for alternative political association and did shield some of the small opposition groups, the church's stated role of providing a moral voice while remaining the "church in socialism" limited its radical impact (Pieratt, 1997). In contrast to Poland or Hungary, the collapse of the Communist state in the GDR came before an alternative civil society, so either an emerging market or independent organizations could develop. Instead of a negotiated transition, the government of the GDR rapidly collapsed, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 — only a month after the first mass demonstration in Leipzig.

Despite the role played by the emerging democratic movement in the East German revolution, it was unable to prevent unification on terms hostile to its project of a separate, socialist GDR. The irony of 1989 is that the revolution bypassed the revolutionaries. The civic movement was quite unprepared to either take power or to confront the national issue. Unlike the opposition movements of other Eastern European states, the East German opposition remained largely committed to socialism. Because of their "anti-fascist" commitments, the civic movement was unable to offer an alternative program on the basis of anti-Communist populism (Torpey, 1995; Joppke, 1995). The East German civic movement also began with serious disadvantages that included a lack of charismatic leadership, organizational disarray and the lack of a clear program. In the year that followed on the mass demonstrations of fall 1989, the civic movement lost its leading voice in reforming East Germany. Although these groups remained politically vocal, they lacked organizational cohesion and declined rapidly with the introduction of Western media and

well-funded and organized political parties. Several came together to form the Alliance 90 party which eventually was compelled to merge with the West German Greens (Niedermayer and Stöss, 1994). The civic movement, which had played such an important role in the revolution, had been eclipsed by political movements better able to adjust to the changing situation. Parties became the prime vehicles to articulate social, economic, and regional discontents without the civic movement's emphasis on active citizenship and *Basisdemokratie*.

Under the pressure of Western political and economic dominance, a rapid unification without the drafting of a new constitution replaced the nascent movement-based politics of the civic movement with Western-style parties and media-driven elections. The process of democratization in East Germany thus included the formation of a loose civic movement aimed at the radical reform of the existing GDR, and a popular rejection of the reform program the acceptance of Western-style political parties. Did the rush to unification and radical economic reform constrain the possibility of thorough democratization of German society as the civic activists claimed when they spoke of *Anschluss* and "colonization"? Was a gradual, consensual path to German reunification on the basis of a new republic sacrificed to a demand for unity based on "D-mark nationalism"? Did a rapid unification on Western terms constrain the possibility of a fully developed and inclusive civic nationalism on the basis of a new constitution (Habermas, 1996b)? Critics of unification maintain that it is not only the economic calamity that the GDR faced that led to unification on Western terms, but the West German party system's narrowing of radical democratic alternatives opened up by the revolution.

Post-Communist Politics in the New East European States

Unification meant both a dramatic political transformation and an eclipse of the hopes of both reform socialists and radical democrats to democratize the existing GDR. The failure of the civic movement to adapt itself successfully to the western political system provided the PDS with an opportunity to redirect political discon-

tent. As distrust with Western institutions mounted after 1990, the PDS offered the dissatisfied a specifically East German protest identity as well as a pledge to guard Eastern interests (Spittmann, 1994). This fact, coupled with the PDS' local organizational strength (itself a legacy of Communism) and the leadership provided by familiar figures from the old reform wing of the party (e.g. Gregor Gysi) made the party an attractive, compelling, and specifically East German protest party (Phillips, 1994).⁶

For many East Germans, particularly those who see positive accomplishments in the former GDR, supporting the PDS means to support the eastern *Heimat* against western "colonialism" and most importantly, to defend the positive aspects of the GDR system in the face of their historical erasure. Thus some of the same concerns with solidarity, social justice, security, and stability that had motivated ordinary East Germans to reject Communism in 1989 also led them to reject the western political system in favor of the PDS and regional opposition. The process of political and economic unification in Eastern Germany was hardly as simple as Bonn politicians promised or as some "shock-therapy" economists predicted. The most profound impact of unification on the lives of ordinary East Germans was the collapse of the Eastern economy, brought on by a currency union with the West, rapid privatization of socialist firms, and the lower productivity of the eastern workforce, which remained less than sixty percent of Western levels in 1995 (Drost, 1993; Frohwen and Hölscher, 1997). Not only were Eastern products rejected in favor of Western ones by long-deprived consumers, but local economies collapsed under the pressure of efficient Western competition. The socialized manufacturing sector was particularly hard-hit, initiating a massive decline in industrial production and employment. Early retirements and mass layoffs affected even those firms which survived the market transition. Unemployment soared immediately after unification as high as forty percent and remained about twenty-five percent in 1996. Employment in the East is protected from an even more profound collapse by federal government employment programs which provide hundreds of thousands of jobs. De-industrialization and mass unemployment had a

profound impact on a society which had known itself as a "worker and peasant society" and a "socialist community of labor." Although relatively generous welfare and retirement policies shielded most East Germans from immiseration, it is not surprising that many of the grievances created by this process were directed at the Bonn government and West Germany more generally.

The cultural consequences of unification were similarly profound. During the revolution, a separate GDR identity does not appear to have had much resonance, aside from circles of intellectuals, democratic activists, and communist stalwarts. Identification with the East appears to have grown far stronger following unification. Indeed, German unification with its rapid absorption of the East, privatization strategies, and wholesale adoption of the Western institutional and legal model may have done much to undermine national identity, discourage democratic participation and heighten regional divisions. In large part because of the feeling of economic and political dependence on the West, a sense of cultural inferiority and social disorientation affects many East Germans (Merkel 1994). All of these developments would seem to suggest a gloomy future for civil society and democracy in Eastern Germany. After all, economic depression, class and regional cleavages, and political withdrawal do not seem to provide ideal conditions for developing democratic practices and institutions.

The feeling of unity which had greeted the fall of the Wall and the first phase of unification was replaced by growing suspicion and hostility between East and West Germans. This growing rift, sometimes referred to as the "Wall within our heads," was complimented by growing antagonism towards foreign workers and asylum-seekers in both areas of Germany, which culminated in well-publicized attacks against immigrants and asylum-seekers (Fijałowski, 1996). Left-wing critics of the unification process were quick to see these developments as the dark side of the national passions roused by unification. Even if threat of racist nationalism is often overstated, a sense of social fragmentation, violence, and inequality did replace the national optimism of 1989-1990. This has been unfortunate to the extent that it has ob-

scured the accomplishments of a peaceful process of revolution and national unification. The post-Communist political history of Germany has been described as a "unification crisis" (Kocka, 1995), a period of profound political and social upheavals which have yet to be resolved. It is in light of this ongoing crisis that we must analyze civil society and the process of democratization in the new eastern states.

Conclusion

At a recent international conference, Margaret Somers (1997) noted the disillusionment with the concept of civil society that is increasingly found among both social scientists and the civic activists. "Civil society" for both Eastern European intellectuals and Western activists was a vaguely defined concept useful in imagining an alternative to the market/state dualism which has constrained democratic and egalitarian visions. But the "real existing" civil society of the liberal free market evidences a growing apoliticism and privatism in the West and scarcity and apathy in Eastern Europe. The future challenge for civil society theory is to develop a concrete theoretical framework that escapes post-revolutionary melancholy and provides a tool for historical and comparative analysis.

The key point that needs to be made in current discussions surrounding the "transitions" is one that links the overall problem of democratization to the movements that constitute the process of change. There are already valuable and important works on the emergence of opposition in the GDR, but a fuller account of the everyday forms of opposition in the GDR, the structure of informal groups of dissenters, and the factors that made mass mobilization possible is still needed. This must include an account of the relationship between the formal opposition and the ordinary demonstrators if we are to understand why the democratic opposition in the GDR lost the support of the masses. Too often the history of Eastern European transitions is in fact the history of public figures and dissident intellectuals. It is crucial that we also examine protest and movements and their role in social change. An account of democratization in East Germany must not only

discuss the collapse of the GDR, but include the effects of economic and political reforms in united Germany. This means a critical examination of the basis of East German collective identity, including the persistence of class consciousness, nationalism, and regionalism.

The resources from which civil society might be constructed are varied. Islands of cultural tradition, collective identity, and sociability may provide resources from which protest may be mobilized or organizations created. The space provided by the Protestant church in East Germany aided the survival of oppositional networks in the face of state repression. Niches offered a refuge from the suffocating effects of the party and acted as informal spheres of communication and mobilization. Such spaces, however, should not be overestimated in terms of their capacity to provide resistance to state power. Informal groups and sociability may provide a refuge from state intrusion, but they cannot displace it. As Ralf Dahrendorf acknowledges this passive retreat in his *Society and Democracy in Germany* "We have seen that withdrawal to one's private existence constitutes one form of resistance against the ruling regime. However, this withdrawal is seriously possible only for a few, and for all to a decreasing extent" (1967: 407). It was not the presence of a "niche society" that brought down the Wall, but rather the mobilization of privatized individuals into a broad protest movement. The challenges faced by post-Communist societies are different. They must somehow nurture a plural and active field of civil society in the face of economic scarcity and political disillusionment.

In this paper I have outlined some of the challenges that social researchers face in embracing civil society discourse in the study of post-Communist societies. I have attempted to employ the tension between "niche society" and "civil society" to explore the East German revolution and its consequences. The themes that I have explored are linked by concerns with political protest, democratization, social movements, and the role of collective identity in these processes. These issues are of substantive and theoretical interest in both political sociology and social movements research, but they also have a much broader relevance to discussions of political and economic transformations. Stud-

ies of post-Communism make a mistake if they use the shorthand "civil society" to refer to mobilization within a society. Civil society, if it is to be meaningful, should refer to a sphere of action, institutions and practices, not as a catch-all term for any collective action within a society.

East Germany provides a fascinating case study in political transformation and economic restructuring because of its unique position among former Communist societies in Eastern Europe. In East Germany, West German leadership and resources seemed to provide ideal conditions for economic transformation and democratization. Nevertheless, political, social and economic problems persist long after the fall of the Wall. Civil society discourse will remain important only if it can help us make sense of cases like East Germany. It will no longer do to simply assert that 1989 is the story of the triumph of civil society over the state.

Notes

1. A version of this paper was presented at the 9th International Conference on Socio-Economics, Montreal, Canada, July 1997. I am very grateful to Lynne Haney for her helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Elisabeth Clemens, Craig Calhoun, Barbara Heyns, Jeff Goodwin and Karen Snedker for their comments and criticism on previous drafts of this research.
2. Jarausch and Gransow (1994: xxv) state the central problem quite clearly, albeit with a touch of national indignation: "Many social scientists who are uncomfortable with the notion that the Germans could actually revolt prefer to speak of an 'implosion' of the GDR. But this mechanistic metaphor begs the important question of agency. More analytical observers emphasize post-totalitarian transition from dictatorship to democracy, resembling the transformation of Southern Europe or Latin America. While illuminating some common features of collapsing authority, this approach fails to explain the national turn of the East European transformations."
3. In his *Making Democracy Work* (1993), Putnam outlines the "new institutional" approach to the study of democracy. Putnam argues that there are three central dimensions to the "civic community" which makes responsive democratic government possible: civic engagement, political equality, and solidarity. The central institution in nurturing these "social structures of cooperation" are voluntary associations which promote solidarity and public spiritedness while serving as structures of interest aggregation and articulation (90). However, Putnam's account of

- civic life in modern Italy is far stronger in demonstrating the institutional sources of civic pluralism than it is in accounting for solidarity and cooperation. Putnam's reliance on survey questions measuring the respondent's trust in others, for example, fails to satisfy as an account of the prerequisites of collective action and democracy. Because he ignores issues of collective identity and fails to identify the role of social movements as a special type of voluntary association in democratic society, Putnam fails to give a convincing account of why Italians engage in collective action and the mechanism by which civic life impacts on political society.
4. A skilled worker in an East Berlin factory reported that he and his colleagues: "...grilled chickens in the tempering furnace, cooked pork knuckles and whipped cream on the boring mill. But this did no harm to anybody. They all went back to work afterwards. It may sound a bit strange to a Westerner, but this was exactly what made things worth living here...We sat for hours in this enterprise. From seven to half-past four, and this made it bearable. It was really a great bunch of people...the niches that were found here and that made life agreeable, they were also at work, they were not only in our free time. And they were to some extent pleasant niches I must say (quoted in Müller, 1995:260).
 5. The reason behind this were a number of articles critical of Stalinism and public outcry over the blatant electoral fraud in the spring 1989 communal elections.
 6. The PDS engages in the same sort of cultural retrieval that can be seen in other aspects of contemporary East German life. This retrieval is reflected at the level of popular culture by the new interest in the much-ridiculed *Trabant* automobile, East German films and music, and affection for Communist political kitsch (see *Der Spiegel*, 27/3 1995). In many ways continued support for the PDS represents a nostalgia for the old way of life as much as it does attachment to socialism. The danger is that such nostalgia may preclude an honest confrontation with both the Stalinist past and a contemporary problems (Ahbe, 1997).
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