Stalinism as a Civilization: New Perspectives on Communist Regimes

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A new line of inquiry into the history of communist regimes and the cold war has emerged. Pioneered by Stephen Kotkin and other American historians, it views Stalinism as the defining era of socialism, building a specific anti-capitalist and illiberal modernity that mustered voluntary participation and international legitimacy. This model of Stalinism as a rival civilization, held together by participatory totalitarianism, challenges older research on communist regimes – both revisionist and totalitarian studies. However, the degree of originality of this perspective is questioned here, citing precursors, parallels and contrasts within European research and political science.

The Soviet Union claimed to represent a politically, culturally and morally superior modernity – a new civilization. A young generation of American historians take this claim seriously, focusing on the translation of ideological claims into discursive practice and how discourse helped secure the astonishing inner stability of communist regimes. From this perspective, the most important foreign relation between the former East bloc and the West was neither the arms race nor the technological and economic rivalry, but the struggle for legitimacy – the clash of civilizations as competing modernities (compare Westad 2000; Wohlforth, 2001, pp. 224–7). In this review, I will focus on this new American research perspective on communist regimes, concentrating on the work of Stephen Kotkin as pioneer and trendsetter. I will offer a terminology to describe the new paradigm and outline its themes and some surrounding debates. Throughout, reference will be made to some parallels and unrealized points of connection and contrast with European research and political science.[1]

A New Paradigm

Stephen Kotkin's magnum opus, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, was published in 1995.[2] With time, it has proven to be perhaps the key reference to the themes and methods common to a new generation of American researchers into communist regimes. For lack of an established name, I suggest that the two interconnected lines of research pioneered by Kotkin be dubbed 'competing modernities' and 'participatory totalitarianism'. In a compact summary, the claim of communist regimes to represent a superior modernity was key to their success in making Stalinism participatory.

Both these concepts – competing modernities and participatory totalitarianism – highlight the paradigm's intellectual indebtedness to both totalitarian theory

and revisionist research. But they also describe the innovative break with them. In 222 pages of long footnotes, *Magnetic Mountain* gave a blazing critique of older revisionist accounts and the totalitarian literature. But at the same time, it revived and revised themes from the earlier classics. Whereas totalitarian theory had traditionally assumed Soviet citizens to be subjugated and atomized, Kotkin highlighted their positive integration and willing participation. While the revisionist convergence theory assumed that, with time, the two systems would grow more similar, his point of departure was the communist aspiration to be different from capitalism and the regimes' competitive quest for legitimacy – that is, for discursive domination.

Since its publication, *Magnetic Mountain* has been lauded as 'certainly the outstanding contribution to the literature of the last decade' (*Europe-Asia Studies*), a 'monumental study' (*Journal of Modern History*), 'a splendid book' (*The Russian Review*), and 'a masterpiece ... sure to become a classic' (*Slavic and East European Journal*). Still, not surprisingly, it has not pleased all camps. The praise from revisionist reviewers seems particularly reluctant: Kotkin may perhaps be 'one of the aspirant leaders of the new scholarship of the 1990s' (Fitzpatrick, 2000, p. 7). But, in the eyes of these reviewers, it builds both too much and too little on earlier revisionist work. Lynne Viola saw the work of Kotkin and his followers as much inspired by revisionist scholarship of the 1980s, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick's writings on everyday life under Stalinism (Viola, 2002). Gábor Rittersporn, on the other hand, complained of the reverse – that Kotkin offers only a '*déjà vu*' of the totalitarian thesis that what shaped the Soviet system were the grand designs of Bolshevik ideology, rather than the resistance to the official propaganda that is emphasized in revisionist scholarship (Rittersporn, 1996).

Sources versus Perspectives

New to Kotkin's research is, of course, the improved access to historical sources. He was one of the first wave of researchers to gain extensive access to Soviet archives in the latter half of the 1980s. *Magnetic Mountain* is a focused and detailed case study of the construction of the famous metal works and adjacent Magnetic Mountain City (Magnitogorsk). It shows how Soviet industrialization in the late 1920s and early 1930s was part and parcel of an effort to build a new socialist civilization. Stalinist civilization made a proud claim to its own 'language' (Bolshevism), 'religion' (Marxist–Leninism), a particular understanding of world history, new and 'modern' customs and institutions, and a self-identification as the superior modernity. *Magnetic Mountain* draws on state and party archives, contemporary press coverage, reader's letters and debates from various Soviet publications, small and large. He has also stumbled on a gold mine for his particular project – documents, interviews and memoirs of Magnitogorsk inhabitants, collected for a Soviet research project. ('[T]he project and its leadership were "liquidated" in 1938', Kotkin tersely remarked on page 371.)

Still, the academic impact of *Magnetic Mountain*, as Kotkin would be the first to agree, derived not from any unique access to the archival material, but more

from how he has sifted it. He argued that, over time, it is not primarily new archival sources that have changed our understandings of the communist regimes, but shifts in research perspectives. Looking back, history has always been a product of its time and of the generational turnover in the profession (Kotkin, 2002).

'Generation K'

Kotkin's work has helped to inspire a new generation of American researchers into communist regimes, whom Martin Malia, Kotkin's former mentor, has dubbed 'Generation K' after the journal *Kritika*, published since 2000 at Indiana University in Bloomington (Malia, 2001). Kotkin and later Generation K scholars have moved beyond the sharp cold-war divide between totalitarians and revisionists and made new inroads into the analysis of communist regimes. They have employed new research methodologies that ask novel types of questions from a more postmodern theoretical perspective.

Some important roots of the research agenda can be traced back to Malia, who emphasized the crucial role of ideology (Kotkin, 1998). In Malia's analysis, Marxism was the 'genetic code' that predestined the communist project to terror and ruin. Kotkin questioned this image (typical of totalitarian approaches) of how Marxist aspirations caused an 'almost mechanical unfolding' of events. In his line of analysis, what must be explained instead is how ideology was made into discourse. Marxism alone had no 'black magic' qualities (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 9–23). It was only in the mixing with nationalist geopolitical goals and social-welfare concerns that the deadly discourse emerged. His research posed questions about how communist ideology could be put into practice – how it could be made operative. His focus landed on popular participation – on how communist ideology was made part of shared understandings and practices.

Kotkin's view of the causality of ideas owes less to Malia and more to the father of discourse theory, Michel Foucault (see Kotsonis, 1999; Malia, 1999). The French philosopher paid an extended visit to the University of California, Berkeley, in the early 1980s, where Kotkin attended his seminar. During the eventful spring of 1991, Kotkin himself led a graduate seminar at Columbia University, which became a formative experience for a number of researchers of communist regimes, among them Igal Halfin, Jochen Hellbeck, Peter Holquist, Yanni Kotsonis and, later, Amir Weiner.[3] Despite internal differences, Kotkin, his former seminar participants and the broader Generation K have in common new research methodologies, inspired by discourse theory. They share key analytical concepts such as subjectivity, identity, discourse and practice and a bent to intensive fieldwork (Kotkin, 1998). Since contemporaries took ideology seriously, so must researchers, the argument goes. Through biographies and memoirs, their studies focus on the impact of communist ideology on lived experience.

The Power of Discourse

In the research paradigm of participatory totalitarianism, no neat division is made between active believers and passive victims of the Soviet regime. State ideology was neither supported nor opposed. Instead, ideology was simply inescapable, both in terms of its actualization in state policy and as a belief system or world view (or 'religion') that so permeated the language and organization of Soviet society that there were no viable alternatives, other than direct 'heresy'. This view of ideology as discourse differs from the general 1990s trend of 'bringing ideology back in'. The East–West rivalry is interpreted not as a clash of ideas or ideologies, but as a clash of actual civilizations, the result of ideology converted into discursive practice (see Gaddis, 1997). Parallel discussions within British political science have identified the discourse perspective as a much-needed tool to haul the study of ideology out of its long-term analytical cul-de-sac (Schull, 1992; Robinson, 1995a; Walker, 1995). From this perspective, ideology is no longer seen as a simple belief system or a psychological phenomenon, but as a societal structure, consisting of powerful conventions that legitimate action (Schull, 1992). Still, these studies restricted their focus to the language of the Marxist–Leninist communist elite and did not look at how ideology was translated and implemented into everyday practice and discourse in Soviet society (compare Urban and McClure, 1983; Walker, 1989, 1995; Schull, 1992; Robinson, 1995a).

However, Kotkin did make one fundamental observation about the official ideology – namely within the centrality Stalinist discourse of the antagonism between socialism and capitalism (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 151–3). Discourse theory emphasizes how our conceptions of our world are ordered as binary and hierarchical states of opposition – 'antagonisms' (see, for example, Howarth, 1995). Marxist–Leninism was indeed rather flexible as to its content (Walker, 1989), but basic to the discourse that derived from it was the opposition to 'capitalism' – a label that linked all and every form of non-compliance to the geopolitical enemy in the West, identifying a threatening 'enemy within'.

Kotkin also made some crucial observations on the 'religious' nature of discursive practices under Stalinism. Some discourse analyses have viewed the rituals and myths of state socialism as 'blockages' in communication (Urban and McClure, 1983). In Kotkin's view, communication was not blocked, but simply illiberal. He compared the party state to a theocracy, and Stalinist discursive practices to those of the inquisition, replete with 'miracles', 'sacred causes', ceremonies and demands for confessions, self-criticism and purity (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 280–354). The party members had a 'special calling' to participate in the 'grand crusade' of building socialism and to unmask the capitalist enemy that was hiding among the citizens, within the ranks of the party members and within the very souls of the accused. In his analysis, the key to the regime's success in controlling its citizens was not so much the ideological proclamations as such, but the practices that supported them: 'discourse ... accounted for the strength of Stalinism' (p. 237); 'It was the participation of the masses in the

socialist system, on negotiated terms, that helped account for that system's basic stability' (p. 279).

What, then, made ordinary people participate in the system? Earlier generations of researchers have mostly depicted Soviet citizens as kept in check by various forms of compulsion, such as the state organizational monopoly and terror (totalitarian theory) or material self-interest (revisionist theory). In contrast, the discourse-theory perspective allows us to observe processes of individual consent, active participation and integration. Under Stalinism, hegemonic discourses were indeed supported by practices involving both material self-interest and terror – in Kotkin's vocabulary, 'bread and circus'. What Kotkin highlighted, and other Generation K historians have expanded on in their empirical studies, is not only how discursive practices were enforced by terror and material self-interest, but also how discourses invoked non-material self-interests such as personal reputation, shame, honor and community, as well as ideological enthusiasm, moral sentiments and sincere belief. For the individual, the hegemonic discourse was as good as impossible to exit. With time, 'speaking Bolshevik' (whether forced or voluntary) shaped the sense of self of Stalinist subjects.

'Fashioning the Stalinist Soul'

Like Foucault, to whom *Magnetic Mountain* is dedicated, Kotkin studied the process of how individuals are made, and make themselves, into subjects of the state. But unlike Foucault, Kotkin claimed, he analyzed not only the disciplinary techniques of the social engineers at the top of hierarchies, but also the varying individual resistances, compromises and resulting 'everyday politics'. Accordingly, he accounts in turn for the 'grand strategies of the state' (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 27–146) and the 'tactics of the little habitat' (pp. 147–354).

This division – of state force versus micro-level tactics – has led some members of Generation K to question the consistency of Kotkin's analysis (Halfin and Hellbeck, 1996). The point of *Magnetic Mountain* is how discourse permeated society and how Soviet subjects actively participated in the implementation of totalitarianism. But the outline of the book follows a different logic, where state and society are analyzed in separate chapters, seemingly assuming the Soviet subject to be in simple reaction, rather than giving a consent to state policies and terror. Hence, Halfin and Hellbeck argued that Kotkin had abandoned his methodology half-way. They meant that he stopped short of analyzing how Soviet citizens struggled to abide by the eschatological imperative to refashion their souls and make all their actions a contribution to the attainment of communism.

In retrospect, the debate seems to build on somewhat of a 'constructive misreading' of the text, a fruitful misunderstanding. And not surprisingly, the debate has progressed towards increasing consensus. In fact, Kotkin had already asked the same question that Halfin and Hellbeck posed in their critical review: how detached could the individuals be assumed to have been from their public performance (Kotkin, 1995, p. 225)? Under Stalinism, it was neces-

sary to participate as if one believed. Is it not reasonable to assume that 'speaking Bolshevik' day in and day out involved some degree of internalizing its values? He meant that this question must be left open, not least because of the lack of source materials. Instead, he pointed to the weak grounds for forming and maintaining alternate beliefs and identities, such as the censorship of information, and the difficulties of contradicting the fundamentals of the discourse – the proclaimed righteousness of socialism as opposed to capitalism.

In response, Hellbeck built on Kotkin's study, working with a new type of source (diaries) to analyze how the Bolshevik state's ideological efforts shaped an individual's subjective identity, his most intimate beliefs, doubts and concept of self (Hellbeck, 1996, 2001). Halfin, in turn, examined Bolshevism as a messianic ambition, derived from the eschatology of Marxism; rather than economic advancement or social change (2000, 2001, 2003). The ultimate goal of the Russian revolution was to create a 'New Man', which would mark the 'End of History'. Hence, the Communist Party aimed not only to force subjects into passive compliance, but also to alter their subjectivity. Party interrogations, purges and campaigns of self-criticism focused more on the 'soul' of the accused than on his and her actions. Rather than amassing factual evidence, party courts and comrade trials would demand testimonies from the accused in an effort to reveal doubts and expose thought-crimes.

In later writings, Kotkin reaffirmed the analytical importance of belief and identity and the value of biography and autobiography for the study of communist regimes (Kotkin, 2002). Halfin, on the other hand, seemingly retreated from the arguments he and Hellbeck made in their 1996 article. He suggested later that the question of the 'Stalinist soul' may perhaps be wrongly posed (Halfin, 2001). If we insist on finding an answer to whether confessions in interrogations and trials were 'sincere', we risk posing the same question that the accused once had to answer. Instead, Halfin suggested that it might be more fruitful just to map the discourse of the time and attempt to understand the assumptions that it rested on, a position more in tune with Kotkin's earlier argument (1995).

Eric Naiman has portrayed the debate as one between scholars who derive their methodological core from the humanities (Hellbeck and Halfin) and those who do so from the social sciences (Kotkin). A trained historian is more hesitant about the researcher's ability to determine what people actually thought and felt (Naiman, 2001). Halfin complained that the discipline of history is not methodologically susceptible to these questions (Halfin, 2003, pp. ix–xi). He argued that it is about time that historians not only try to read between the lines, but also open themselves to the possibility that people actually meant what they said – however ideological their language. The human self is a historical construct, and people do not think, feel and hope the same way everywhere. A parallel but unrelated political science treatment of a similar topic grapples with similar questions. To a social scientist, the efforts to distinguish whether ideology was believed or not believed may seem fruitless (Robinson, 1995a). Still, the persuasive capacity of the telos of

communism, what Halfin termed 'eschatology', seems to have been empirically important.

On a separate track, the historian Anna Krylova has taken Kotkin to task for claiming to launch a 'new' analytical framework but in fact employing concepts already developed within revisionist and totalitarian research and dissident literature (Krylova, 2000). In her reading, 'resistance' is the main category of Kotkin's analysis, so that he persisted in the revisionist analytical mistake of presuming an unencumbered liberal subject, coerced by self-interest or fear, or both (Krylova, 2000, p. 142, citing Kotkin, 1995, p. 222). She seems to have missed his crucial argument – that participation was, to a high degree, voluntary and rested not only on coercion, but also on self-identification, consent and the 'willing suspension of disbelief' (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 225–37). An illustrating image in *Magnetic Mountain* is perhaps the photo 'Voting in the open-hearth shop to approve the verdict of execution', where young workers raise their hands in unison, some seemingly in fear, most seemingly with confidence (1995, photo 55).

New Social Identities

Kotkin described how, in the 'language of Bolshevism', everything was defined in terms of work, and work itself was intensively politicized (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 198–237). Improvements in productivity were portrayed as contributions to the international class struggle and as a 'blow to Fascism'. In cooperation with the local newspaper, public competitions were organized, where the productivity of top ('Stakhanovite') workers would be measured and compared. Winning workers would be rewarded with their picture in the paper and a motorcycle. Not surprisingly, in memoirs and letters, individuals identify themselves through their work achievements, which in turn had ideological significance. Kotkin emphasized his view of these social identities as neither accurate nor erroneous, neither true nor false, but simply unavoidable. With such practices, the state was able to appropriate much of the basis for social solidarity and hence of opposition. But still, he argued, this does not mean that individuals were 'atomized', as totalitarian theory has it.[4] Instead, the Soviet state was able to forge both new social identities and a political community (1995, pp. 235–7). To some extent, there was a 'positive integration' of the Soviet working class into the political system.

Ideology, or revolutionary truth, could seldom be flat-out negated. Even when everyday experience rang false compared to the professions of the state, there were few bases for alternative beliefs, since the Soviet regime succeeded in controlling the dissemination of information. Furthermore, the Soviet claims to international superiority were strengthened by some current events of the time, such as the economic crisis of Western capitalism in the 1930s, the achievements of the Soviet welfare state and the patriotic Soviet battle against, and later victory over, Nazism (see Weiner, 1996, 2001a, b). Kotkin described how 'bread and circuses' were used to re-enforce support for the regime (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 238–79). He showed how, especially in the early life of Magnitogorsk, material rewards such as rations, access to medical service

and housing depended on perceived loyalty to the regime and individual political performance. Later, when the so-called shadow economy grew in importance, show trials with severe punishments were staged to battle economic 'speculation'.

Participating in Terror

In a long concluding chapter, Kotkin put the insights from the earlier chapters into use in an analysis of Stalinist terror (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 280–354). 'What made the terror possible?' he asked. Among multiple factors, he pointed to the crucial importance of the participation of Soviet citizens. In contrast to both traditional totalitarianism accounts and the revisionist critique (which argued public resistance), his model is one of participatory totalitarianism.

On the question of the Stalinist purges, the 'traditionalist' brand of research has focused on the role of Stalin and his inner circle in instigating the 'Great Terror' (Conquest, 1968), which Kotkin admitted was crucial. According to the 'revisionist' challenge, equal importance must be attached to the role of power struggles among lower-level power-holders and their willingness to please the center by fulfilling and exceeding the centrally prescribed purge 'quotas'. Although he made some efforts at expanding on the latter argument (efforts which are less convincing, since he lacked access to the relevant archives[5]), his main argument is another one – that the execution of the terror also required and received broad participation by Soviet citizens. This, in turn, explains 'why people were not just rounded up and shot or deported without the labor-intensive formalities' (Kotkin, 1995, p. 335). He directed attention to the process of the terror – how it was put into practice and what forms it took. He argued that it is necessary to explain not only the origins of the terror ('how the bomb was set off'), but also what made the terror possible (how the bomb was adopted). The ideological justification and ceremonial were necessary to win legitimacy and elicit active participation.

Purges as Populism and Inquisition

Magnetic Mountain highlights and empirically illustrates the process of terror as a form of populism. Whereas in the first waves of terror it was party members who purged their own kind, later, with the intensification of purges, the secret police (the NKVD) were the persecutors. This meant that the terror also hit the party elite (the new gentry), whose privileges had aroused resentment among the broader population. Elite lifestyles emerged as a central theme of the terror. Second, purges were used to blame the shortcomings of the socialist economy on 'wreckers' and hiding 'class aliens'. On both these grounds, the terror acquired a certain populist aspect.

Centrally, throughout *Magnetic Mountain*, Bolshevik ideology is described as a religion, and the purges as a form of 'inquisition'. Curiously, Kotkin claimed that 'Such a parallel ... has been remarked on by a few scholars, *usually in passing*' (Kotkin, 1995, p. 336, emphasis added). This statement is questionable. What of Raymond Aron? What of Erich Voegelin's 1938 volume on

communism, fascism and Nazism as 'political religions' (see, for example, Maier, 1999 [1995])? On this point, Kotkin's focus on American scholarship and an American audience becomes obvious. In the German literature, totalitarianism as a religion counts as one of maybe three main theoretical models of totalitarian systems (Siegel, 1998).

Totalitarianism Revisited

Why, then, include the term 'totalitarian' in the label 'participatory totalitarianism'? One reason is the consonance with historical-philosophical versions of totalitarian theory, which emphasize the analytical importance of the Soviet ideological ambition to create a New Man for the new socialist civilization (Holquist, 2003). Like Hannah Arendt, Generation K scholars have appreciated the intrusion of modern totalitarian regimes into the inner life of its subjects. A second common ground with totalitarian theory is the focus on the ideological underpinnings of state violence. Third, like political science treatments of totalitarian theory, Kotkin and other Generation K scholars take seriously the state monopoly of organization, the outlawing of private property and the resulting absence of civil society (see Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956; Linz, 2000). Despite the very different treatment of these themes, the return to them constitutes an epistemological break with the revisionist tradition, which was academically dominant up until the fall of the Soviet Union. Revisionist research emphasized the normalcy and similarities of socialist society with life in the West. In contrast, Generation K researchers have brought to light the importance of belief and illiberal subjectivity, resulting in and from voluntary and coerced participation in the totalitarian project.[6]

Their empirical work has undermined persistent revisionist claims that Stalinist subjects took communism 'with a shrug', engaging in 'everyday resistance' and saying: 'This too will pass' (Fitzpatrick, 1999, pp. 218–27). They do not disagree that Soviet citizens were generally profound skeptics, nor that their typical 'posture' was passive conformity, outward obedience, impersonation and 'willful fraudulent deception' (Fitzpatrick, 2001). The term 'participatory totalitarianism' highlights how participation was not just the 'posturing' of timeless and heroic liberal subjects, not just a surface learning of rituals. Rather, everyday life under Stalinism involved internalizing and integrating oneself into the practices of the dominating discourse of the time, supported by, and supportive of, the communist ideological project – a process that totalitarian theory, unlike revisionist scholarship, has pointed to as a central characteristic of communist regimes. In the words of Arendt, communist regimes did not leave 'the inner life of the soul' intact (1951, p. 245).

Krylova has claimed that Kotkin has in fact revived the scarecrow model of a 'Soviet *homo sapiens*', articulated within totalitarian theory during the cold war (Krylova, 2000). However, Kotkin (perhaps unfortunately) actually rejected totalitarian theory, partly on the grounds of its alleged association with cold-war politics – a perception shared with Krylova (Kotkin, 2001b, p. 114, note 8).[7] He also disagreed with common tenets of totalitarian theory, such as the claim

of discontinuity between Leninism and Stalinism, the causal role ascribed to ideology, and the central role of terror (Kotkin, 1995, p. 376, notes 4 and 6). Furthermore, in participatory totalitarianism, power is not centralized (as the traditionalists would have it) but lies also with the discourse itself (1995, p. 23). To some degree, the center could use and manipulate the discourse as a means of power. But according to the theoretical definition, the ultimate power over a discourse is dispersed and reciprocal (Howarth, 1995). A discourse has many carriers, and it influences those who carry it. An engrained discourse is a strong and tenacious structure, not a weapon to be wielded swiftly at will.

Political science versions of totalitarian theory linked the ideological 'indoctrination' of the center with its terror (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956). In contrast, the participatory-totalitarianism paradigm has highlighted the mobilizing appeal of the Soviet Union's modernizing, civilizing mission. Kotkin questioned whether terror was really the most central feature of the Soviet system, as Brzezinski claimed in *The Permanent Purge* (Brzezinski, 1956; Kotkin, 1995, p. 376, note 6). How then, he asked, could the astonishing post-purge stability of the Soviet Union be explained, and the absence of organized opposition long after the terror had abated? *Magnetic Mountain* did much to highlight the appeal of the idea of a higher modernity and the strength of the ideological discourse built on this juxtaposition with Western capitalism.

According to the competing-modernities paradigm, the terror was not primarily an instrumental means to stave off opposition. Kotkin views the terror as 'enormously dysfunctional' (1995, p. 357). Other Generation K scholars argue instead that its goal was aesthetic, to weed out members of the 'parasitic classes' in order to achieve what a 1952 Soviet article on the concept of the beautiful described as 'The idea of communism, as the highest, most harmonious, most complete form of human existence on earth' (quoted in Holquist, 2003, p. 22). Victims were chosen individually, through sociologically 'scientific' procedures of observation, registration and classification. Violence was but a technique employed towards the higher aim of remaking society.

From Totalitarianism to Post-Totalitarianism

Something that Generation K historians have not elaborated on is how the new research paradigm might change our view of the post-Stalinist era, when large-scale violence had ceased. Here, I will briefly compare the competing-modernities paradigm to the concept of post-totalitarianism coined by the political scientist Juan Linz (Linz, 2000; Linz and Stephan, 1996; Thompson, 1998, 2002). His writings on totalitarianism emphasize what communist regimes destroyed, not what they tried to build. Totalitarianism did away with pre-existing institutions, organizations and interest groups, 'flattened' society and imposed limits of various kinds (Linz, 2000; Linz and Stepan, 1996). In effect, he postulated away that which the competing-modernities paradigm points out as the most salient features of totalitarianism – the efforts to build a new kind of society, and the molding of new common understandings. He claimed

that the totalitarian politicization of society was '*unlikely* to be fully realized'; hence, 'The shaping of the individual, the internalization by the mass of citizens of the ideology, the realization of the "new man" of which ideologists talk are obviously even more *unlikely*' (Linz, 2000, p. 188, emphases added). For example, it should be possible for participants in state-run organizations to distinguish between the 'substantive functionings' of the organizations and their ideological schooling (p. 209). In the same vein, in the writings on post-totalitarianism, we again recognize the timeless 'liberal subject' that the studies of Generation K historians have put into question. According to Linz and Stepan's definition (1996), post-totalitarianism is characterized by a retreat from politics, the hollowing out of ideology, demobilization of the population and an absence of ideological enthusiasm. Under post-totalitarianism, forced mobilization is an empty ritual and ideological convictions wane (Thompson, 2002).

In contrast, some studies on East Germany show striking congruencies with Kotkin's analysis of communist regimes as participatory, drawing on common understandings and the citizens' very sense of self. Recent contributions on East German history emphasize how legitimizing discourses had a strong hold on a much broader segment of society than the minority of ideologically convinced Marxist–Leninists – an observation that blurs the distinction between 'perpetrators' and 'victims' of the regime (Sabrow, 1999). The astonishing stability and the eventual disintegration of what Martin Sabrow called the East German 'consensus dictatorship' must partly be ascribed, he claimed, to the power of discourse. According to him, the 1989 collapse of East German communism was a cultural not economic or military phenomenon. It cannot be explained by realist historical factors alone, such as the loosening grip of the Soviet Union or the economic decay. The collapse was also the result of the long-term erosion of the legitimizing discourse, including its central organizing feature – the enemy image of the West.

However, Kotkin himself has a slightly different take on the role of ideology and discourse in ending the cold war. In his book *Armageddon Averted* (2001a), he reminded us of how Moscow's decision to avoid superpower confrontation was part and parcel of an attempt to reform Soviet socialism. Gorbachev and his generation of reformers could have their way because they set out to reclaim the ideals of the communist revolution. The new leadership under Gorbachev had been 'profoundly shaped by socialist idealism' – they were believers in the strength and superiority of communist civilization (2001a, pp. 9, 175–81). It was this futile attempt to rid socialism of its 'Stalinist distortions' and realize its humanist potentials that unintentionally allowed for the eventual collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet empire. Gorbachev clung on to the socialist ideals, but by dismantling the enemy image of the West he undermined the discourse that had kept the party in power. This historian's view of the cold war and its end affirms current challenges to the realist tradition within political science and international relations, which sees the cold war primarily as a rational struggle over strategic and economic interests (Robinson, 1995b; Westad, 2000; compare Wohlforth, 2001).

Making Sense of Terror

A central tenet of the competing-modernities paradigm is that, to contemporaries, the purges made sense – as dominating discourses. The communist ideology did not compel the purges, but it offered a rationale and a certain degree of legitimacy for them. According to the Bolshevik ideology (based on Marx), building socialism was an adversarial process, a 'class war'. The terror was conducted in the name of the grand crusade to build a socialist civilization and create the New Man; 'intriguing and heresy-hunting', Kotkin argued, 'were rooted in the party's origins, nature, and identity' (Kotkin, 1995, p. 351).

What is new about Kotkin's study is how he differentiated between ideology and the resulting discourse – how ideology is translated into policy and practices that are resisted and negotiated, but which unavoidably shape the subjectivity and identity of individuals under socialism. Here, he refers to the insights of Eastern dissidents, such as the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz and his 1953 book *The Captive Mind*. What needs to be explained, Kotkin argued, is how 'the USSR's claim to being a socialist society continued to make sense and motivate people the world over until the very end in 1991' (Kotkin, 1995, p. 357).[8]

Stalinism as a Civilization

In his striving to make the Soviet Union a great power, Stalin paid careful attention to explaining and justifying his actions in ideological terms (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 17–18; compare Schull, 1992). Kotkin emphasized how Stalinism was not an aberration from revolutionary socialism, but a revival of its utopianism in a nationalistic shape (pp. 14–18, 380–1). Stalin presented his rule as the continuation of the October Revolution legacy. By building socialism, Russia was to become an example for the rest of the world to admire and emulate. Bolshevism was not just an ideology or a set of institutions, but a set of values and beliefs, a culture, a language, new forms of speech, more modern customs and new ways of behaving in public and in private. In short, Stalinism identified itself as a separate and superior civilization.[9]

Contemporary Western publications remind us that this was how many in the West perceived communism at the time. It lies near at hand to read Kotkin's analysis of 'Stalinism as a civilization' as a belated reply to Sidney and Beatrice Webb's (in)famous books on *The Decay of Capitalist Civilization* (1923) and *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization* (1936). Kotkin argued that the Stalinist industrialization grew first and foremost out of a competition with capitalism. Rather than compare Stalinism with Nazism – the basic idea of totalitarian theory – he focused on socialism as anti-capitalism. This definition contrasts with other 'historical-genetic' models of the origins of totalitarian regimes, such as François Furet's argument that both Nazism and Stalinism emerged out of a common history of a 'European civil war' (Furet, 2001; compare Holquist, 2003; Hedin, 1999). Whereas Furet argued that the main enemy (and hence the main source of imitation) for Stalinism was fascism, Kotkin argued that American capitalism was the focus of attention for the Soviet regime. However,

it must be mentioned that this line of argument falls deceptively close to the official communist doctrine of regarding Nazi Germany as a capitalist enterprise. After all, Stalin's rhetoric of 'capitalist encirclement' (so crucial to the language of the terror) was not only, or even primarily, focused on America, but on Germany.

By highlighting the competition of the Soviet Union with the US – or what he argued to be 'the Soviet cult of America' – Kotkin brought the international situation to bear on his analysis of Stalinism. He argued that traditionalists and revisionists alike have ignored not only ideology, but also foreign affairs (Kotkin, 1995, p. 540, note 21). Undoubtedly, a new theme for research should be the reciprocal influence caused by the 'competitive modernity' that he has brought to our attention.

The Soviet Union as Welfare State

To Kotkin, the main reason why the Soviet Union should be incorporated into Western history is the international competition to achieve 'progressive modernity' and to build welfare states. The claim of Marxism to be scientific 'inspired millions of people, both inside and outside the Soviet Union, and informed the thinking of much that went on under Stalin (and afterwards)' (Kotkin, 1995, p. 8). Rather than being a pathological case, in the narrative of the time, the Soviet Union was the standard welfare state that challenged the rest of the world to respond (p. 20).

In a somewhat curious afterword to *Magnetic Mountain*, Kotkin then took this analysis one step further, arguing that since Stalinism 'constituted a quintessential enlightenment utopia', it 'shared a great deal with other industrial countries' (Kotkin, 1995, p. 364). In the book's last sentence, he wrote that this (somehow) implies that the current crisis of the Soviet welfare state 'might better be seen as also our own'. At first glance, he could be seen to conflate two levels of analysis here, failing to differentiate between what Soviet communism claimed to be (an Enlightenment utopia) and what it actually was. However, within the research paradigm of discourse theory, there are no such easy exits from the discourse to 'what really was'. If people at the time, both in the East and the West, believed that the Soviet Union was the carrier of 'betterment' and 'improvement', of modernity and Enlightenment reason, then this is important for our understanding of history (Kotkin, 2001b, pp. 159–60). Historians, he noted, have found it difficult to accept the contemporary popularity of illiberal modernity.

Again, it seems that Kotkin picked a line of analysis that goes against the grain of both traditional totalitarian theory and revisionist scholarship. Whereas totalitarian theory saw communism and Nazism as unique systems, incomparable with Western liberal democracies, the revisionist convergence thesis saw the opposite – communist systems shared some traits with Western democracies and might, with time, grow more similar to the West. In contrast to both, Kotkin argued that communist regimes did have common traits with Western welfare states, but that the traits were not the result of any objective mod-

ernization imperatives. The common traits involved a degree of overlap in how modernity was discursively defined, such as, for example, in the 'goals and techniques of social welfare' (Kotkin, 1998, p. 425). Hence, Western welfare states should be analyzed with Soviet history in mind.

Dark Modernity

How can we understand these rather radical statements? Is this a new Europe–America divide, to replace cold-war doctrines as the means of American self-understanding? To some European readers, the scholarship that has emerged on the other side of the Atlantic might seem to be the product of its time and geography. Curiously, however, important roots of the participatory-totalitarianism paradigm can be traced not to the American context, but to European political thought. The key to the pessimist perspective on modernity that permeates the scholarship of Generation K lies with Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman.[10] It is based in a profound skepticism towards rationalism as 'an Enlightenment science of society' and towards any attempts at social engineering – which are seen to possess 'a tremendous capacity for violence' (Weiner, 2001a, p. 30). In this research paradigm, paradox is 'endemic to the West and intrinsic to the Enlightenment' (Kotsonis, 2000, p. 2; Kotkin, 2001b, p. 159). For example, 'reason' and 'rationality' were globalized only through the 'civilizing' enterprises of European imperialism.

The writings of the school of participatory totalitarianism are replete with central but brief references to European history, arguing how the Soviet experience realized the dark potentials of modernity present in the whole pan-European context (Kotkin, 2001b, pp. 156–61). In his important article on Soviet surveillance, Holquist urged researchers to reconsider how Soviet surveillance techniques were not unique compared to early twentieth-century France, Britain and Germany (Holquist, 1997). In the same vein, Weiner argued that the impetus to sculpt society – in Bauman's terminology 'the gardening state' – was 'a cross-ideological phenomenon, involving liberal, socialist, and fascist polities alike' and resulting in 'planned economies, elaborate surveillance systems, and thoroughly politicized eugenics research' (Weiner, 2001a, pp. 7–39, p. 31). A difference between totalitarian and non-totalitarian projects was that the former were millenarian and utopian and the latter reserved their most violent schemes for their colonial projects (Weiner, 2003). Modern technologies of social intervention made the terror possible, but did not determine it (Hoffmann, 2000). So far, however, Generation K scholarship has not mapped the exact crossroads where their Foucauldian perspective diverts from the self-understandings of Europan liberal democracy as outlined by, for example, Jürgen Habermas, where hegemonic discourses take shape democratically, in parliamentary fora and the public sphere (Habermas, 1992; compare Scott, 1995, p. 101–2).

It is also not clear how Kotkin meant that an 'Enlightenment utopia' (the Soviet Union) could at the same time be controlled by a 'political religion' (Marxism–Leninism) that was plagued by 'inquisitions' (purges) (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 6–9, 293–6, 336–7). Was the Stalinist civilization indeed an Enlightenment

utopia, or were rationalism and science only a legitimizing framework? This question may have no easy answer. The distinctions are complicated by the observation that the communist states were, to some extent, taken seriously as international apostles of modernity, at least in terms of their welfare-state measures. Indeed, according to more postmodern views, the paradoxical nature of modern rationality may be what researchers ought to focus on.[11]

East–West Isomorphism

Modernization theory long grappled to find evidence that the communist systems showed signs of 'modernizing'. Evidence of some degree of social or institutional pluralism was interpreted as signs of modernization, and totalitarianism was defined as an inability to 'modernize' (see, for example, Kneen, 1998). Modernization theory rests on an assumption of a unitary and uncontested definition of modernity. However, as postmodern scholarship has gone to great lengths to show, Western modernity has never been without inner contradictions. From this perspective, communist systems can be viewed not as more or less 'modern' compared to Western modernity, but as a rival, illiberal modernity. In the cold war, the West may have 'clashed' with the Stalinist civilization. But the cold war was also a struggle over hearts and minds; and in many fields, Kotkin argued, communist modernity greatly influenced Western definitions of what was 'modern'. The rivalry of competing modernities resulted in mutual influence, borrowing and isomorphism – for example, regarding welfare-state policies (Kotkin, 2001b, pp. 114–15). The competing-modernities perspective highlights how this international isomorphism contributed to the internal and international legitimacy of communist regimes.

Interestingly, this theoretical suggestion of East–West isomorphism seems to be confirmed, for example, by some statistical studies of education. According to Meyer *et al.* (1977), the post-war expansion of higher education was not forced by objective economic and social imperatives alone (as modernization theory would have it) but seems to have reflected an international convergence in the meaning and value of 'development'. This puts the realist assumptions behind modernization theory into question. The discursive definitions of 'progress' and 'modernity' were the object of international competition and convergence. However, as new-institutionalist theory points out, isomorphism in outer form and terminology can be quite 'de-coupled' from actual practices (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer *et al.*, 1997). I would suggest that, despite many parallels in terminology and form (for example, concerning the organization of education, women's policies and workplace democracy), the content of welfare-state policies in East and West was still fundamentally different. Indeed, as Kotkin emphasized, the liberal versus illiberal divide between the West and the East remained 'enormous' (Kotkin, 2001b, p. 114).

Conclusions

The cold-war international competition to represent the more modern, successful and morally superior civilization had a central role in socialist discourse.

The Soviet Union was constantly looking to the West and measuring itself against Western achievements. It was from capitalism that socialism derived its identity. The support for the socialist cause rested critically on the bogeyman image of Western capitalism, representing militarism, imperialism and economic crisis. Socialist discourse linked the dreams and fears of ordinary citizens to those of state planners and ideologues, keeping totalitarianism participatory. The Generation K research agenda involves a hermeneutic effort to understand how Stalinism made sense. This effort has spawned historical studies not of what Soviet socialism tore down and limited, but of the civilization it created, the subjective self-understandings, identities, practices and institutions.

How can political scientists take inspiration from these American historians? One line of inquiry would be to follow Kotkin's call for an analysis of the Soviet example's impact on the Western world, picking up where E. H. Carr left off in 1947. Second, the historic study of Stalinist discourse suggests that, in the study of post-terror communist regimes, we should also take more seriously these regimes' dependence on anti-capitalist, anti-Western discourse. Finally, viewing the cold war as a struggle between competing modernities explicitly links comparative politics with international relations and renews questions of how the international struggle over 'hearts and minds' impacted on domestic discourses supporting participatory totalitarianism.

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Notes

1   This article is a translated, revised and expanded version of 'Stalinism som civilisation – nya perspektiv på kommunistiska regimer', published in 2003 in the Swedish journal *Historisk tidskrift*, 123 (3), 429–44. And in German as 'Stalinismus als Zivilisation – Neue Perspektiven auf kommunistische Regimes', *Comparativ: Leipziger Beiträge zur Universalgeschichte und vergleichenden Gesellschaftsforschung*, 13 (5/6), 235–47.

2   The book was a reworking of his 1988 PhD thesis, 'Magnetic Mountain: City Building and City Life in the Soviet Union in the 1930s: A Study of Magnitogorsk', University of California, Berkeley.

3   Fitzpatrick called this group the 'modernity' group (Fitzpatrick, 2000, p. 11).

4   Throughout *Magnetic Mountain*, Kotkin chose not to discuss Hannah Arendt's classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), but instead cited the work of Brzezinski (Kotkin, 1995, pp. 2–3).

5   Missing from Kotkin's large research material are the archives of the secret police (the NKVD); the unpublished documents of the local party organization (which might have revealed more about the local party organization's relation to higher levels of party hierarchy); and the archives of the American corporation that helped construct the Magnitogorsk metal works.

6 Like Arendt, Juan Linz questioned Western leftist admiration of the 'participatory democracy' of communist regimes (Linz, 2000 [1975], p. 193; Arendt, 1970, pp. 22–3).

7 More recently, numerous scholars have pointed out how the theory of totalitarianism in fact pre-dates the cold war. The late 1990s saw a broad revival of the concept. See, for example, Linz (2000 [1975], pp. 2–5) and Dreschler *et al.* (1997).

8 A similar observation was simultaneously made by the prominent French historian François Furet, whose monumental work on 'The Passing of an Illusion' was published in the same year (Furet, 1995).

9 Compare Samuel Huntington, who reads the cold war as a conflict between ideologies within the Western civilization, whereas, for example, Muslim societies are seen as part of a rivaling 'civilization' – with a distinct cultural identity defined by 'language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people' (Huntington, 1993, p. 24).

10 Foucault himself, however, was ambivalent on the point of whether the Gulag camps should be regarded as a modern or pre-modern phenomenon (see Plamper, 2002). On Bauman's argument that modernity made the Holocaust possible, see his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989).

11 Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between science and scientism – or even Arendt's distinction between science and pseudo-science – might offer an answer to the question of science versus religion in Bolshevism (Todorov, 2001, Arendt, 1951). However, from a more postmodern per-spective, it could be argued that science and scientism are inseparable.

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