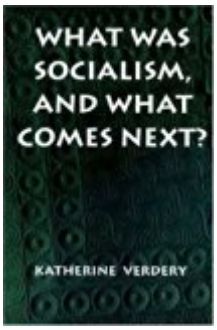
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Katherine Verdery. *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. 298 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-01133-2.



Reviewed by David A. Kideckel

Published on H-SAE (December, 1996)

This collection of essays speaks to some of the most critical questions of the twentieth century. As Katherine Verdery indicates in her introduction, our current century takes much of its character from Bolshevism. In the name of Karl Marx, Bolshevik political forms were ideologically and rhetorically committed to the struggle for human betterment, a liberating division of labor, and the expansion of socio-economic equality. Their failure to produce and their resulting fall has diminished the pursuit of these goals as legitimate political ends. It behooves us, then, to consider what were the essential failures of these forms and what might succeed them.

This volume appears at a propitious time. Ongoing change in East and Central Europe is highly uneven, despite a few successes like Estonia and the Czech Republic. Furthermore, the last months have evidenced growth of a reinvigorated Left (the recent Russian elections notwithstanding), troubles with privatization, restive nationalism, and growing economic inequality. What are the social processes and cultural logic that underlie this, how do such changes relate to the defunct socialist system, and what are the likely results when it all shakes out are some of the questions addressed by this book. The author offers no easy answers. Rejecting both facile end-of-history triumphalism and scholarly certainties, Verdery suggests that full knowledge of this moment is illusory. The best we can hope to do, through ethnographically sensitive research, is to recognize the forces in contention, delineate their multiple meanings, and suggest a trajectory or two.

As expected from Katherine Verdery, these essays are broadly insightful, tightly reasoned, thoroughly documented, and stylistically accessible to both scholars and an interested public. The book consists of three parts following a brief Introduction. The Introduction covers familiar ground in discussing Cold War influences on Western interpretations of East European life. Verdery also argues that continued study of the region is even more important now that socialism has faltered. Part One considers the essences of socialist political economy and the contradictions behind its failure. It illustrates socialism's operation by viewing the political economy of time in the party-

state. Parts Two and Three consist of six essays viewing identity (gender, nationalism, and familistic versus civil societarian) and political economic processes (privatization, market conceptions and practices, and state political reorganization) in the post-Socialist period. There is also a brief Afterword.

Verdery's analysis of socialism's structure and demise deserves some attention. Following the Hungarian economist J. Kornai and others, she sees socialist essences in the bureaucracy whose power was created and maintained by accumulating and controlling resource distribution. This logic pervaded all institutions that operated according to "soft budget constraints." Profit and productivity were not mandatory. Access to distributed value was the only critical need. To best assure redistributive power, central leaders demanded production of capital as opposed to consumer goods. Fearing lack of distributed resources, institution heads hoarded. Taken together, both produced the fabled "economy of shortage" and its features such as labor shirking, separation of private and public sectors, and all-encompassing state control.

This analysis is well in line with that of others from Djilas and Milosz to Bahro and Konrad and Szelenyi. However, Verdery's view of this system's failure demands further scrutiny. She suggests that the party-state managerial elite, chafed by lack of ownership of resources they controlled, subverted the system from within via reform, covert privatization, and side-dealing with Westerners. At the end of socialism this same class was thus able to grab the lion's share of resources while retaining the commanding political heights.

This argument is both compelling and troubling. No doubt such processes operated for a time and among certain elites. However, it effaces the role of people throughout these states who resisted, conspired, manipulated, and just lived their lives and in those ways produced a system that cried out for radical change. The essential domination of the wee folk is also assumed in discussion of the "etatization of time." Here control of time by the state is manifested in queues for goods, extensive commutes, lack of available labor-saving devices. This is assumed to be a state strategy to dominate the schedules and lives of the citizenry, though little in the way of the vast resistance to these efforts is portrayed.

Verdery's discussion of the transition in Parts Two and Three gives greater credence to contest, and real people now make more than an occasional appearance. The master trope of these sections is that of uncertainty and the diverse possibilities of change growing from the struggle over transitional meanings and structures. For example, in chapter three, "From Parent-State to Family Patriarchs: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Eastern Europe," a fine discussion shows how the Socialist state and the majority nation sought to substitute for the family in most realms. Among other things, this temporarily enabled female self-actualization. As the state came under attack from within and without, it voided its feminism and again emphasized female domesticity. Further, Verdery sees the diverse anti-feminist, anti-abortion movements of the transition as attempts by its adherents to overturn state patriarchal control and return it to the patriarchal nuclear family.

Chapters four and five deal with nationalism in similar vein. The former, "Nationalism and National Sentiment in Postsocialist Romania," offers, to my mind, one of the best and most systematic critiques of the simplistic idea that nationalist belief was submerged under socialism and reemerged with a fury "after the fall." Simplistic or not, Verdery takes it apart methodically, showing how nationalism, in Romania in any case, was reproduced by socialism as well as serving a multiplicity of functions for the transitional state. Chapter five, "Civil Society or Nation? Europe in the Symbolism of Postsocialist Politics" again focuses on Romania and its diverse political groupings. Here Verdery shows how each is pulled by

the twin symbols of Europe (the outside world) and nation (the essential us). The domination of nation as symbol is so strong, in part by its using the moral capital attached to suffering, that it disrupts coalitions and prevents formation of organizations outside its purview.

Related discussions where structures are ill-formed and up for grabs are found in Part Three in essays on agricultural privatization ("The Elasticity of Land: Problems of Property Restitution in Transylvania") and changing political authority ("A Transition from Socialism to Feudalism?: Thoughts on the Post-Socialist State"). In the first, Verdery presents a good summary of the physical, historic, demographic, and above all political factors that intervene in land restitution in the village where most of her field research has occurred. The process pits households, villages, and rural and urban-dwellers against each other all to the continued domination of the former elite and those in charge of the restitution process. Verdery implies that the constant legal processes and their questionable outcomes atomize local villagers, whereas under socialism such emulsifying phenomena were largely absent.

In the latter essay a similar theme is echoed in discussion of national political structures. The end of socialism has put the state up for contest with both disintegrative and reintegrative forces simultaneously at work, often supported by the same groups. Thus, the so-called mafia, so common in the discourse of the transition, are described as resulting from the attempted usurpation of state power by local and regional bosses. The latter still support certain state functions, however, to gain access to resources and subsidies. Again, Verdery raises the issue of citizen frustration with legal procedures to question the understanding and future of democratic process. The manipulated quality of markets and economic possibility in favor of an insider elite is similarly (and richly) described in "Faith, Hope and Caritas in the Land of the Pyramids: Romania 1990-1994," which focuses on the proliferation of pyramid schemes in that country and elsewhere in the region.

Despite the cogency of each essay and of her themes of struggle and uncertainty, I find a few drawbacks in the materials. First is the question of generality. Most of the essays, many published previously, were written with Romanian issues in mind. In revising them Verdery has added some language here, a section there, to give her arguments greater universality. However, given the essays' coverage the book might be more aptly titled "What Was (a chunk of Romanian) Socialism, and What Comes Next (in that country's unique transition)?" The Romanian case, though not entirely exceptional to recent East-Central European history, is different enough to make it a questionable archetype for socialist culture and political economy and the passage into a post-socialist world. Romania had one of the most centralized political economic systems and accumulative bureaucracies in the East. Its regions differ extensively from one another. Its ethnic equation has a number of particularities. It's been more dependent on agriculture than its neighbors. Quite naturally growing from the Romanian focus, the essays overwhelmingly assume the ability of elites (both in socialism and beyond) to have their way. In other words, Verdery does not totally follow her own admonition on struggle and the multiplicity of potential structures and meanings.

Many of her (albeit tentative) conclusions about life in the transition also evidence what Steve Sampson and I previously termed the "verdict mentality."[1] This is a tendency to judge every problematic issue, act, and statement within (then-Socialist, now- transitional) East Europe as indicative of the system's overall failure. Thus, when push comes to shove, Verdery universally comes down on the side of the negative implications of transitional issues. Though I agree, for example, that local citizens are at a huge disadvantage in their land claims, I see their anger and at-

tempts to challenge elite land grabs as fertile ground for collective organizational activity. Further, it ignores reality to suggest, even by implication, that life under socialism was less atomizing than the struggle for private land resources.

Each transitional issue that is problematic (and what in social life is not?) is thus enlarged to say something definite about the quality of the developing social system. However, even in a place like Romania, not to mention most of the rest of the former East and Central European nations, remarkable and impressive strides have been made in a fairly short period. This is especially so given problems like environmental degradation, outmoded technologies, the lack of budgetary resources, and international economic competition.

Finally, there is even a slight Orientalist quality to some of Verdery's critique of transitional conditions. The growth of anti-feminist ideology and practice and the claim of fetal national identities by anti-abortion forces in the region, for example, fit well within fundamentalist religious traditions of the Nation of Islam and Christian Identity here in the United States. The mass hysteria of Caritas and other pyramid schemes paints Romanians, Russians, and others as mystified by capitalist relations. However, the growth of these schemes in the East occurs by the same logic and processes as do Western investment scams. They prick the same emotions as Powerball, Lotto, and casino gambling. They serve the same functions of release and hope in a changeful world. And they ultimately benefit the same business and political elites and agencies of state of control. Though from the first Verdery speaks of the transitional East's relationship with global capitalism, and the Introduction encourages using East-Central European developments to "critique ... Western ... forms ... by seeing them through the eyes of those experiencing their construction," the book ultimately loses sight of this end.

In sum, then, this is a wonderful and important book. Its quality of writing and analysis is destined to attract for it an extensive readership and influence over the interpretation of both socialism and its successors. However, though its importance is well deserved, the book is also problematic. Too great an analytical cachet will encourage readers to crunch the diverse forms of East-Central European socialism and the diversity of its transformation into the ovoid shape that is Romania. Too facile a read without keeping in mind the world historical context may encourage the book's audience to pigeon-hole current social processes into a "there they go again" kind of judgment. And both again threaten to diminish the voice of the workers, peasants, families, and others in whose name the transition allegedly occurs and who, for better or worse, are active participants in determining its outcome.

Note

[1]. Sampson, Steven L. and David A. Kideckel, "Anthropologists Going into the Cold: Research in the Age of Mutally Assured Destruction," in Paul Turner and David Pitt, eds., ***The Anthropology of War and Peace*** (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1989), pp. 160-73.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sae

Citation: David A. Kideckel. Review of Verdery, Katherine. *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. December, 1996.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=693


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.