The Evolution of Regimes: What Can Twenty-Five Years of Post-Soviet Change Teach Us?

Stephen E. Hanson

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the collapse of the USSR naturally provokes us to reflect on the course of Eurasian and world history in the post-communist era. Upon closer examination, however, it is not clear what significance the precise time span of two and a half decades has for the scientific study of political and institutional change. A review of the social science literature indicates that we are very far from having any consensual understanding of how long processes of regime evolution typically take—and thus, how to establish the relevant time span for judging the scientific accuracy of initial predictions about the outcomes of post-communist "transitions." I argue that the first step in assessing the lessons of post-Soviet political change to date, from a social-scientific point of view, lies in defining the term "regime" more precisely, so that scholars can at least agree when one regime has ended and another begun. In this respect, Weberian sociological theory provides useful conceptual materials for a more general theory of "regime evolution" within which the empirical results of the first twenty-five years of post-Soviet change can be situated.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union—and in the wake of dramatic new geopolitical tensions in the heart of the former Soviet region, and spreading into the rest of Europe and beyond—scholars and analysts have once again begun in earnest to debate the lessons of the rise, fall, and aftermath of the Marxist-Leninist experiment during the twentieth century. From a psychological point of view, given the near-complete global cultural acceptance of the Arabic base-ten numerical system within which the number 25 appears to provide a "natural" milestone on the way to 100 years, it is not surprising that we are engaging in such reflections more frequently than we did, say, on the thirteenth, eighteenth, or twenty-second anniversary of the fall of the USSR. Anniversaries based on common culturally-accepted markers of time’s passage have been shown to be “focal points” for collective action in a variety of sociological contexts, so it is understandable that social scientists themselves tend to utilize the same sort of coordination mechanism for arriving at collective conclusions about the state of the field.2

But are there good scientific reasons, and not only culturally-accepted conventions, underlying the choice of twenty-five years as the proper time span for evaluation of the causes of regime outcomes in the post-Soviet context? Upon closer examination, this seemingly simple question turns out to lie at the heart of a number of understudied theoretical issues concerning the role of temporality in the subfield of comparative politics.3 In order to reach a social-scientific consensus about just how much time needs to pass before we can consider a given set of changes in political institutions to constitute macropolitical “outcomes” worthy of explanation, we must logically first agree on the criteria determining what counts as a change of political regime type—and this, in turn, requires a consensual definition of the concept of “regime” itself. Yet a review of the literature shows that we are very far from reaching such a consensus. And without prior scientific agreement on just how long we should wait before evaluating the success or failure of rival hypotheses about regime change, we are also unlikely to agree on which of these hypotheses to refine, and which to abandon.

In this essay, I will argue that there are indeed good scientific reasons for taking stock of institutional
outcomes in the post-communist region at this historical juncture, coming as it does roughly one generation since the disintegration of the USSR. To make the case that a period of approximately one generation is an appropriate time to assess rival scientific predictions about the drivers of regime change, however, requires that we first set out a broader theory of regime evolution within which generational change plays a significant causal role. In what follows, I will begin with a review of the literature on post-communist regime change, aiming to show just how little scholarly common ground there is at present concerning the proper periodization of regime change in the region. I then set out the main theoretical features of a theory of regime evolution, building on insights from Darwinian evolutionary biology, Weberian sociology, and comparative-historical analysis. I derive from this theory a definition of "regimes" as proposals for social closure that have been successfully established as the primary basis for obedience to political authority in a given territory. I show that this new approach to understanding regime evolution helps to explain both the rise and fall of the Soviet Leninist regime, and the main features of the divergent political and economic outcomes in East-Central Europe and Eurasia over the first quarter-century since the end of communism. I conclude with some reflections about what an evolutionary view of regime change implies for the trajectory of political and economic change in the region over the next twenty-five years.

Assessing a Quarter-century of Post-communist Regime Change

In summarizing the main outcomes of regime change over the course of the two and a half decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the importance of arriving at a consensual periodization of events is immediately highlighted. As of this writing, it is increasingly clear that the post-communist period marked a distinct historical epoch, within which the main trends were toward the consolidation of liberal capitalism in the most advantageously-positioned countries of East-Central Europe in the context of the global dominance of a hegemonic liberal power, the United States. By the autumn of 2016, all signs pointed to a decisive shift away from hegemonic liberal globalization, and toward the re-emergence of a multipolar world dominated by various forms of populist nationalism. As political scientists, then, we need first to account for the remarkably successful institutionalization of liberal capitalism as the dominant regime-type of the post-communist period, before we can then assess the likely effects of the multiple emerging political challenges to the post-communist order.

As many scholars have observed, as of 2016 there had been a fairly clear geographic distribution of regime outcomes in East-Central Europe and Eurasia since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. For most of the first quarter-century after the collapse of Leninism in East-Central Europe and Eurasia, one could observe a sharp difference between the relatively successful institutionalization of essentially liberal democratic capitalism in East-Central Europe and the Baltic States, versus the hegemony of non-democratic, personalistic politics in the rest of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the "post-communist divide" between Europe and Eurasia analyzed by Rupnik upon another major anniversary—the first decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall—seemingly only widened further over the ensuing decade and a half. Those post-communist countries fortunate enough to be admitted to the European Union in the first or second waves of EU expansion to the east were for most of this period stably democratic and they experienced no episodes of violent interstate or interethnic conflict. Notwithstanding growing geopolitical uncertainty in Europe and beyond as the first post-communist quarter-century came to a close—including the rise of power of avowedly illiberal parties and challenges to the constitutional order in countries like Hungary and Poland, combined with new threats to the stability of the EU itself ranging from the vote for "Brexit" to growing dissatisfaction with the European single currency—the contrast between even the most threatened democracies of East-Central Europe and post-communist regimes further east remained apparent.

Remarkably, three of the five countries of post-Soviet Central Asia were, until the death of President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan in September 2016, still ruled by autocratic strongmen who had been in power since the Soviet or very early post-Soviet era. A fourth, Turkmenistan, had experienced little if any liberalization since the death of the Soviet-era dictator Niyazov (better known as "Turkmenbash"") in 2006. The fifth, Kyrgyzstan, suffered from chronic political instability, often accompanied by outbreaks of ethnic violence between its Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations. Liberal democratic opposition movements in all of these countries were marginalized, disorganized, and demoralized.

For most of the post-Soviet period, the countries in between Central Asia and East-Central Europe were nearly all ruled by "competitive authoritarian" regimes of various sorts, which periodically allowed for experiments in electoral competition that provided momentary openings for opposition groups, but which ultimately tended to generate long periods of rule by quasi-patrimonial executives with no apparent interest in establishing and consolidating the rule of law. Russia, the core of the former Soviet Union, experienced a severe crackdown on opposition forces after major protests calling into question the validity of the 2011 parliamentary election in that country. The overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2014, followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine—the latter backed by covert Russian troops—unfortunately only
reinforced the sharp distinction between the relatively pacific regime dynamics in the expanded EU versus the turbulent, often violent politics of the former Soviet republics.

In light of these well-established trends, the passage of twenty-five years since the collapse of communism might seemingly allow for the rejection of some of the early hypotheses advanced by scholars concerning the likely causes of post-communist regime change over time. Theories predicting that a relatively rapid “transition to democracy” throughout the post-communist world could be attained as a result of careful “crafting” of constitutions by post-communist elites, or asserting that the legacies of communism would play a less important role in regime change than the functional “imperatives of liberalization,” were apparently wrong.\(^8\) Given the clear geographic change than the functional communism would play a less important role in regime change, by post-communist elites, or asserting that the legacies of communism would play a less important role in regime change than the functional “imperatives of liberalization,” were apparently wrong.\(^8\) Given the clear geographic change, the enduring power of communist and even pre-communist institutional legacies in shaping post-communist political outcomes in the region would seem to be undeniable. Likewise, the ostensibly similar clientelist political economies of Eurasian countries a quarter-century after the Soviet collapse, notwithstanding their different initial strategies for economic reform, should allow us to reject the notion that the establishment of successful market economies depends on quick initial policies to privatize property, liberalize prices, and stabilize convertible currencies.\(^9\) Instead, those analysts who emphasized the importance of effective state bureaucracies and legal institutions as a prerequisite for establishing secure property rights and financial systems in the post-communist region have seemingly been proven correct.\(^10\) Finally, scholars should presumably now also reject modernization-theoretic accounts of the cultural origins of democratic values that predicted high rates of “civic culture” in the highly urbanized and educated milieu of the core industrial regions of the Soviet Union.\(^11\) A quarter-century after the collapse of the USSR, the failure of democratic consolidation even in the comparative wealthy and highly educated Russian Federation would seem to have validated the alternative view that economic growth and education can serve instead to bolster social support for the authoritarian regimes that oversee them.\(^12\)

In general, the geographic divide between relatively successful democratic capitalism in the post-communist EU member states over the first post-communist quarter-century, versus the ubiquitous rule of “paternal politics” in the former Soviet republics, would appear to confirm the predictions of analysts adopting a comparative historical approach to charting post-communist regime change, and to disconfirm the predictions of scholars who initially downplayed the significance of historical and geographic obstacles to democracy and capitalism in Eurasia.\(^13\) Indeed, the recent heightened uncertainty about the survival of democratic capitalist regimes in the second quarter-century after the Soviet collapse would seemingly only further weaken neo-institutionalist and modernization-theoretic accounts of post-communist regime transformation. Yet there has as of yet been no wholesale abandonment by political scientists of social-scientific theories based on neo-institutionalist, modernization, or neoliberal economic assumptions—in the post-communist context or elsewhere. Why?

A key reason is that we lack any consensual framework for evaluating what would count as a “decisive” example of regime change that would allow us to adjudicate the final success or failure of these rival causal hypotheses.\(^14\) Thus, scholars who wish to still defend the potential power of well-designed constitutions and electoral systems to facilitate democratic change can reasonably point out, for example, that those post-Soviet states with the greatest parliamentary power—including Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Ukraine after the Orange Revolution of 2004—have enjoyed greater democratic freedom than post-Soviet states adopting purely presidential constitutions.\(^15\) If one sees the “regime divide” between these “semi-parliamentary” post-Soviet countries and their neighbors as theoretically important, then the stark opposition between East-Central Europe and Eurasia postulated earlier begins to blur—and more fine-grained differences in formal institutional design among Eurasian states do seem to matter after all.\(^16\)

Similarly, those who wish to argue that neo-liberal policies such as privatization, price liberalization, and monetary stabilization can in principle have a major positive impact on regime change can reasonably argue that in the post-Soviet context such policies were never applied as consistently, for a long enough time period, to really “count” as serious macroeconomic reform. The so-called failure of Russian “shock therapy,” from this point of view, is based on a misunderstanding of the actual policies of the Yeltsin regime during the 1990s, which failed to break old patterns of state subsidy for inefficient Soviet enterprises—leaving this crucial aspect of the Soviet economic regime intact.\(^17\) If so, the counterfactual argument that a more genuine macroeconomic stabilization policy in the 1990s might have generated a more efficient and productive Russian economy cannot be disproven.

Finally, scholars who wish to argue that economic development might still eventually promote democratic breakthroughs in wealthier post-Soviet countries such as Russia can reasonably argue that the Russian middle class—as has been the case with other middle classes around the world—will eventually rebel against Putin’s corrupt autocratic regime.\(^18\) Modernization theory may ultimately be proven correct, then: twenty-five years may simply not have been enough time to allow the process of post-Soviet social development to come to fruition, since “the creative forces among the agents of change can lie dormant for extremely long periods of time.”\(^19\)
In sum, a key reason we have not made more scientific headway though utilizing evidence from the first two and a half decades of post-communism is that we do not yet really agree on what should count as disconfirmation of hypotheses about regime change in a real world setting of unfolding events, as opposed to in a laboratory environment in which precise treatment conditions can be controlled and replicated. Logically, however, to determine how to utilize the evidence of institutional outcomes in historical time for assessing rival explanations of regime change, we need first to agree on a general theory of regime evolution which sets out a clear definition of regime type, and which identifies the general factors that empirically mark a transition from one regime to another. Otherwise, scholars will continue to talk past one another, disagreeing not only on the main causes of macropolitical outcomes, but even on how to differentiate political “causes” and “outcomes” themselves. Indeed, since we currently lack anything approaching a consensual evolutionary theory of regime change, there is no real professional incentive to track and share the results of one’s social scientific predictions about the likely course of regime change over time—as would presumably be necessary in order for the social-scientific community as a whole to learn lasting lessons from the unfolding evidence of regime dynamics in diverse world settings.

**Defining Regime Change**

To remedy this situation, we need to resolve some basic epistemological issues in the social sciences. Behind the problem of assessing how long we should wait before declaring a theoretically-derived prediction of regime change to be verified or disproven lies an even more fundamental problem: what really counts as “regime change”? Perhaps surprisingly, despite the recent resurgence of interest in “regime types” in comparative politics, we still lack any consensusal definition of the term “regime” itself. So naturally there is no accepted way to distinguish fundamental regime transformation from other types of institutional change. Political developments that for one set of scholars mark a decisive change in political order are, for another set, only superficial changes masking “deeper” historical continuities—and vice versa.

Roughly speaking, comparative politics specialists interested in the long-term historical transformation of regimes and institutions can be grouped into three camps—historical institutionalists, rational choice analysts, and inductive taxonomists. In the first camp, we find scholars like Paul Pierson, Kathleen Thelen, and James Mahoney, whose work has demonstrated the surprising persistence of institutions even across what might otherwise appear to be dramatic political turning points. Thelen’s work on types of vocational training over more than a century of German history, for example, emphasizes the remarkable continuity in this sphere, despite the end of the Reich, the fall of the Weimar Republic, the defeat of the Nazi empire, and the postwar division and later reunification of the country. Similarly, Mahoney traces developmental outcomes over the entirety of Latin America to the timing and location of European colonial conquests in the region centuries ago. Neither of these authors, however, devotes much attention to the more “proximate” analysis of regime change within the time periods they examine. As a result, what appear to be rather dramatic forms of regime transformation in the eras they review—such as the rise and fall of Nazism during the period covered by Thelen, and the rise and fall of Peronism in Argentina during the period covered by Mahoney—are presented as largely continuous with previous and subsequent historical trends. Of course, no one study can explain everything, and these authors’ analyses of the sources of surprising institutional reproduction over centuries are clearly path-breaking. But Thelen’s and Mahoney’s decisive emphasis on sources of continuity over sources of change provides us with little theoretical leverage to make sense of more dramatic, revolutionary periods in which entire institutional contexts fall apart, such as the collapse of Leninism and its turbulent aftermath.

A second approach to defining regime types comes from the rational choice school, which rejects the structuralism of historical institutionalist scholarship in favor of an emphasis on identifying the instrumental reasons why particular political rules proposed by state actors are either enforced or break down. Yet the tendency of most rational choice theorists to see regime outcomes as atemporal “equilibria” hinders investigation into the endogenous sources of regime change over time; instead, regimes appear likely to fall only in response to exogenous shocks. Moreover, the limited attention in the rational choice literature to actors’ subjective beliefs about politics provides few grounds for differentiating theoretically what might otherwise seem to be very different types of “authoritarian rule”—whether monarchical, Leninist, military, or presidential. In the post-Soviet context, such an approach runs the risk of making it appear that there has been never been any real “regime change” in Russia, since in no case have genuinely democratic institutions endured long enough to be analyzed as an equilibrium. Even Hale’s magisterial account of the dynamics of “regime cycles” from leading one “patrimonial” leadership to another in the former Soviet Union suffers from this problem: Hale concludes that there has never been any real change in regime type in Eurasia since at least the Mongol period, since there has been no fundamental break from the dynamics of “patrimonial politics” he analyzes.

The third camp of comparative-historical analysts does focus primarily on explaining shorter-term forms of regime change, utilizing a taxonomy of regime types derived from the works of Robert Dahl, Juan Linz,
Alfred Stepan, in which the central dichotomy is that between democracy and authoritarianism. Variations on these two basic regime types—democracy (and authoritarianism) “with adjectives”—are then added to the scholarly agenda largely through an inductive examination of new cases. In the most sophisticated recent work from this tradition, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way analyze dozens of post-Cold War “hybrid regimes” lying between the poles of democracy and autocracy, understood as stable patterns of political order that can endure for relatively long periods. The lack of any deductive theory that generates the various regime typologies found in this literature, however, makes scholarly judgments about what counts as “decisive” regime change necessarily ad hoc. Linz and Stepan, for example, consider the change from Stalinism to post-Stalinism in the Soviet bloc to be a change of regime type, from “totalitarianism” to “post-totalitarianism”; they analyze countries that emerge from the former regime type as distinctively different from those emerging from the latter.

Howard, by contrast, accepts Jowitt’s definition of the entire period of the Soviet experiment from 1917–1991 as “Leninist,” and analyzes Leninist legacies as theoretically comparable in all contexts. Archie Brown, meanwhile, insists that the Leninist regime came to an end during the Gorbachev era, which he argues over time established “social democracy” in the Soviet Union. The fact that scholars working in a similar taxonomic tradition can differ so fundamentally on key questions of regime classification is a serious problem for scientific cumulation.

There is nothing inherent to the social sciences that forces us to accept such a state of confusion about basic issues of regime periodization and categorization. In fact, many natural sciences, too, experienced prolonged periods of debate about definitions of their fundamental concepts—only to resolve them, and subsequently, to experience tremendous periods of progress. The long hegemony of alchemical sciences in chemistry in Europe during the Middle Ages, for example, came to an end only in the late eighteenth century when scientists such as Antoine Lavoisier and John Dalton developed an atomic theory of chemicals, later formalized by Dmitri Mendeleev in the nineteenth century, that clarified why elements with different atomic numbers—like lead and gold—were the fundamental and irreducible building blocks of more complex chemical compounds. Similarly, the bitter struggle between Linnaean static and Darwinian dynamic understandings of biological “species” can be said to have come to a decisive end only when the genetic basis of evolutionary change was discovered in the early twentieth century, allowing biologists to define “species” for most scientific purposes as a set of living organisms that are capable of interbreeding and producing fertile offspring. After these definitional breakthroughs, efforts to turn lead into gold became simply unscientific, while the observation of new species emerging in diverse environments through genetic mutation and recombination became commonplace.

Analogies like these should encourage us, then, to articulate scientific ways of understanding the basic “building blocks” of political and economic regimes so as to reach similar levels of scholarly consensus about basic concepts. Oddly, however, many leading social scientists interested in broad patterns of comparative regime change over time and space have instead insisted on an “eclectic” approach to theory that preserves a “messy” middle ground among competing theoretical traditions. Yet the crucial question of what counts as an “outcome” in the study of regime change, as we have seen above, cannot be answered except through the embrace of a theory that establishes a consensus about basic epistemological principles in the social sciences.

**Darwinian Theory and Social Science**

Fortunately, there is a way to take advantage of the hard work that has gone into comparative study of post-communist outcomes over the past twenty-five years to make more significant progress toward true social science cumulation: namely, to utilize these findings—along with everything else we have learned over nearly two centuries of social-scientific inquiry—to build a general theory of regime evolution, analogous to the Darwinian consensus that emerged in evolutionary biology by the early twentieth century. The prospect that Darwinian theorizing might generate significant new advances in the study of regime change has attracted growing scholarly attention in the field in recent years. If such an approach is to help us resolve the problem of regime definition described earlier, however, we must pay close attention to the particular conceptual features of Darwinian theory that allowed it to generate such widespread agreement on basic definitions and standards of measurement among evolutionary biologists. Unfortunately, social scientists since the late nineteenth century have frequently misinterpreted or misapplied Darwinian thinking in ways that have generated misleading and even nefarious results.

Specifically, Darwin’s theory is built on three precepts: that nature generates variation in biological “types” continuously and randomly; that the distribution of species displaying different typological features at any given point in time is due entirely to natural selection by the environment and to sexual selection in the process of reproduction; and, as a logical corollary, that characteristics acquired during the life span of particular life forms can never be passed along to offspring. The abundant empirical confirmation of Darwin’s three precepts over the past 150 years illustrate the fallaciousness of all varieties of “creationism” in which species are held to have emerged independently of one another. Darwinian theory has also decisively vanquished the rival evolutionary theory
of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who hypothesized that an individual animal’s strenuous efforts to improve its performance over time might give subsequent generations of offspring a head start on evolutionary “progress.”

Strangely, however, social scientists interested in evolutionary theory, from Herbert Spencer through Talcott Parsons and on to the present day, have typically rejected Darwin’s third precept out of hand, insisting that “cultural evolution is Lamarckian” since human beings do appear to be able to “pass along” their acquired knowledge to the next generation.39 For some social theorists, this embrace of Lamarckian theory preserves the comforting idea that human evolution, unlike Darwinian biological evolution, can “progress” in some scientifically meaningful sense, as future societies build on the accumulated cultural knowledge of previous ones on a path toward continuous improvement.40 Others, such as Steinmo and Lewis, insist that such teleological interpretations of human history are untenable—since human knowledge of the future consequences of present decisions is too limited to allow for unilinear historical progress over time—but still allow for the possibility of “replication” of social behavior through Lamarckian “learning” in addition to biological replication of types through natural selection.41

Upon closer examination, however, the moment one embraces a Lamarckian rather than a Darwinian assumption about the possibility of passing along acquired characteristics to offspring, the entire logical structure of Darwin’s theory of evolution dissolves. This is because the definition of “species” emerging from Darwinian theory is built on the knowledge that branches in the evolutionary tree must be traceable in every case to the dynamics of reproduction. Dogs, for example, can be trained by their owners to fetch, lie down, roll over, and even to play with balls of string; but no amount of training will ever suffice to generate a new species of dog, or to turn a dog into a cat. Were such forms of “Lamarckian” speciation to be empirically possible, evolutionary biologists would have no way of knowing precisely where to draw the boundaries of biological species at any given time: all species would be in a state of constant flux. Dogs playing with balls of string, for example, might have to be reclassified as “hybrid canines,” in an intermediate state between dog-ness and cat-ness, since one would never know just how the process of Lamarckian “evolutionary” change might turn out in the end.42 Thus Steinmo is wrong to suggest that we need not define the units of social evolution rigorously and uniformly in order to carry out social scientific analysis, because “there are multiple levels of evolutionary change and selection.”43 Instead, we do collectively need to standardize our concepts and terminology before a successful Darwinian theory of regime change will be possible.

Such considerations have led many evolutionary biologists interested in social change to insist that all institutional evolution must be reducible in the final analysis to biological—especially genetic—mechanisms. This reasoning lies at the basis of the tradition of “sociobiology” founded by E.O. Wilson and his collaborators.44 However, there is no reason why the basic structure of Darwin’s argument about evolutionary change requires that the primary mechanism to generate variation must always be genetic. Indeed, Darwin himself had no knowledge of genetic evolution when he wrote The Origin of Species. All that is required for Darwinian logic to obtain is that something generates changes in types randomly and continuously; that the diverse types produced through this process experience differential success in reproducing themselves in a given environment; and that, finally, no other form of change besides “natural selection” can have an observable impact on the types emerging over the course of generational change. As Dawkins has argued, the units of evolutionary reproduction in social life can just as easily be cultural as biological, as long as these three precepts still hold.45 That said, the postulate of Dawkins and his followers that “cultural evolution” occurs through “memes” rather than “genes” has remained conceptually too undeveloped to generate robust, verifiable predictions about the course of regime change. Instead, many sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists still tend to assume that in the final analysis most if not all of the “memes” that endure in human social life can be traced to some initial genetic mechanism emerging at earlier stages of biological evolution.46

Yet an insistence on the genetic causes of politics cannot help us understand the dynamics of regime change at the time scale involved in analyzing the rise, fall, and aftermath of the Soviet empire. On one hand, studies that attempt to trace contemporary political psychological traits to the supposed evolutionary advantages such traits might have conferred to Homo sapiens in the Pleistocene era are clearly too general to account for more proximate types of institutional change taking place over a few generations.47 On the other hand, studies that attempt to identify specific human alleles that are associated with political behavior such as partisanship and electoral turnout beg the question of just where the parties and electoral institutions that channel such predispositions come from in the first place.48 In order to understand the evolution of political regimes, then, we need a theory that operates specifically at the “meso-temporal” level in which regime change takes place.

The Leninist Regime-Type and Weberian Theory

The rise and fall of the Soviet bloc, viewed from the perspective of two decades, thus presents a fascinating case study for a truly Darwinian theory of regime evolution. For over seven decades, particular rules for organizing political life—ranging from the ritualistic citation of sacred texts from Marx, Engels, and Lenin by
key elites, to the repeated claim that the Leninist party must inherently always represent the most progressive segment of the global proletariat—were somehow reproduced reasonably faithfully over time and space, eventually defining political life for about one-third of humanity. Later, under Stalin, equally obligatory rules for organizing socioeconomic activity around principles of collectivized agriculture and “heroic” industrial planning demonstrated a similar degree of power to reproduce themselves. Even on the cultural level, consistent rules for aesthetic judgment were implemented throughout the Leninist bloc—to the degree that statues of Lenin in towns throughout East Europe and Eurasia, from Tirana to Bishkek, had recognizably similar features. Then, after the revolutions of 1989–1991, suddenly not a single one of these formal rules for political, economic, or cultural organization was passed down to the next generation in anything like their previous form, except in a handful of countries in East Asia. Communist parties endured, but without their former Marxist-Leninist ideological underpinnings; the legacy of planned economics continued to shape economic destiny for millions of people, but without any central planners attempting to reinforce the old system; and once-obligatory communist-era artistic tropes could be reproduced only with a sense of irony.

For understanding the full sweep of Leninist history, then, both Lamarckian and sociobiological approaches to regime evolution are clearly insufficient. It turns out that there are indeed situations in which institutional rules are generated more or less randomly, then selected for by the social environment over impressive swaths of territory and for significant periods of time, but finally become maladaptive and go “extinct,” with no discernable connection to any larger story of cultural “learning” or historical “progress.” Moreover, this process can unfold in its entirety in less than a century—far too short a period of time for changes in the human gene pool to exert any direct influence. Social scientists, it would seem, should use the scientific opportunity occasioned by the collapse of communism try to identify more precisely what it is in the social environment that continuously generates institutional experiments of the Marxist-Leninist sort; why some of these institutional experiments endure for decades while others quickly collapse; and crucially, why it is sometimes impossible for the generations that built and defended particular institutions to ensure that new generations of young people maintain previously mandatory forms of behavior.

In the broadest outlines, the view presented of the rise and fall of Leninism as part of a general process of regime “evolution” implicitly lies behind the seminal work of Ken Jowitt. The continuing power of Jowitt’s theoretical approach to the comparative study of Leninism and post-Leninism owes a great deal to its successful articulation of a genuinely dynamic, rather than static, taxonomy of “regime types,” built on the foundation of Max Weber’s sociological theory. However, it must be admitted that Jowitt’s own use of evolutionary metaphors is at times stylistically less precise than might be ideal for scientific theorizing, Jowitt’s arresting and engaging use of language, it is true, is one of the attractive features of his work, but his rhetorical flair has arguably come at the cost of a wider acceptance of Jowitt’s underlying theory among comparatists more generally.

My recent book, Post-Imperial Democracies: Ideology and Party Formation in Third Republic France, Weimar Germany, and Post-Soviet Russia, tries to outline a more precise articulation of Weberian social theory, emphasizing (unlike Jowitt) Weber’s own strict methodological individualism as well as his insistence that human beings are fundamentally interpretive and expressive beings.

This combination of axioms, I argue, is unique among the four major social-scientific paradigms. Rational choice theory is based on methodological individualism but assumes that human action is fundamentally strategic rather than expressive. Durkheimian and Parsonian variants of modernization theory accept the idea that humans are expressive rather than necessarily strategic actors, but embrace methodological structuralism. Finally, Marxist approaches to social change are both structuralist and strategic, rejecting Weber’s two axioms in toto. A widespread failure to recognize Weber’s simultaneous commitments to methodological individualism and to an interpretive approach to social action has led the majority of commentators to misunderstand Weber’s distinctive theoretical approach, assimilating it to the other three, more familiar social-science paradigms.

For the development of a genuinely Darwinian, non-sociobiological approach to regime evolution, however, the Weberian approach has unique strengths. Weber’s methodological individualism forces social scientists to trace variations in macro-sociological outcomes back to the observable interactions of individual actors, allowing us to specify more precisely the evolutionary mechanisms that generate institutional rules capable of reproducing themselves over time and space. Weber’s insistence on taking human beings as fundamentally interpretive actors, meanwhile, allows us to avoid the unwarranted reduction of social evolution to genetic or other biological mechanisms. In short, Weber’s political sociology posits that individual creatures with brains large and powerful enough to generate symbolic understandings of their environment can sometimes propose authoritative rules for patterning behavior that resonate with and are adopted by other such creatures—creating institutions that function with relative autonomy from the genetic forces operating in biological evolution. Indeed, on occasion, Homo sapiens as a species is capable of engaging in institutionalized conduct that eventually destroys the environment in which the biological survival of the species is possible.
There is evidence that Weber understood his own sociological theorizing in precisely these Darwinian terms. Weber’s effort to define the distinct scientific field of “sociology” as the study of “interpretive beings,” for example, included an explicit discussion of the possibility of a similar “sociology” of advanced primates, and he concluded that such a sociology would depend on the ability of scientists to translate the symbolic worldviews of animals faithfully enough to allow for true Verstehen of their motivations. He did not, however, reject such a possibility out of hand. In contrast to contemporary sociobiology, then, Weber insisted that a new, non-genetic form of evolution, with its own emergent properties, automatically begins to operate as soon as any life form develops the ability to engage in symbolic reasoning.

It is in this context that Weber also proposed a key evolutionary mechanism in the creation of social order—namely, the ability of individual human beings to propose symbolic forms of “social closure” marking the boundaries between one human community and another. Homo sapiens possesses a distinct tendency to propose “theories of membership” that have no direct genetic basis, but which are nevertheless prone to be quickly adopted as social realities for those who are exposed to them. As subsequent research in social psychology has amply demonstrated, human beings are remarkably quick to change their behavior to favor members of one’s “own” group, even when assigned group identities are both novel and seemingly arbitrary. Individuals who propose successful new definitions of group identity are thus frequently able to generate collective action in support of other subjectively-defined “members” of that group, with the effect that there can be evolutionary advantages—both social and biological—for individuals to embrace what are otherwise mythical conceptions of belonging.

When subjective conceptions of membership also involve a perceived duty to obey group leaders, an even greater degree of social power can be unleashed. This insight lies at the basis of Weber’s analysis of Herrschaft (domination). Oddly enough, Weber’s three types of “legitimate domination”—especially the “traditional” and “rational-legal” types—are now widely understood among social scientists as static descriptions of forms of general social order, or social “systems,” as Parsons described them. Weber himself, however, defined Herrschaft in implicitly dynamic terms: namely, as “the probability that certain specific commands” given by some individuals would be obeyed by others. A 100 percent probability of obedience of any command given by a leader thus equates to a situation of total domination; a 0 percent probability of obedience means no relationship of domination exists—but all real social situations lie somewhere in between these ideal typical extremes, and the probability of obedience can shift remarkably rapidly in certain social contexts. Domination, Weber argued, is unlikely to be widespread or sustained on the basis of instrumental motivations alone, since instrumentally rational order-takers will comply only when there are direct threats or payoffs involved; when immediate social circumstances change, so will patterns of obedience.

This is why Weber insists that “legitimate domination”—i.e., domination that is considered subjectively to be one’s “duty” or legal obligation as a result of one’s conception of group membership—is typically more enduring and generates more social power than domination with no basis of legitimacy. He hypothesizes that human beings tend to see obedience to leaders as their duty for one of three reasons—because such a pattern of obedience is “traditional” in one’s community; because obedience is consistently justified by abstract rational-legal principles accepted in one’s polity; or because one sees the person giving orders as a representative of an extraordinary “charismatic” mission or force binding on all followers. This hypothesis is a key evolutionary insight, explaining why new forms of regime can emerge in unexpected ways due to the random generation of novel religious or ideological principles in particular social contexts where these happen to be adaptive.

We are now in a position to see how Weberian sociology can be interpreted as fully Darwinian, conforming to all three central tenets of the theory of natural selection. First, variation emerges as new definitions of social closure are proposed continuously by human individuals on the basis of their ability to create symbolic understandings of group membership. Of course, further advancements in neuroscience may ultimately demonstrate previously unrecognized natural constraints on this process. However, the evidence of human history shows that notwithstanding the limits of human biology, the range of possible subjective understandings of human identity is extremely wide. Certainly no one would have predicted at the beginning of the twentieth century, on the basis of objective social circumstances alone, that a proposal by a tiny radical sect to establish a new form of social closure would dominate most of Eurasia within a few decades—while ironically failing to take root in the more advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe.

Second, the selection of particular proposals for social closure depends entirely upon whether or not they are likely to reproduce themselves in a given social and natural environment. Most truly novel proposals for a new group identity, like most genetic mutations in evolutionary biology, will prove to be maladaptive and disappear relatively quickly. Some—such as the group identity of the Heaven’s Gate cult in San Diego, which committed mass suicide in March 1997 because of a subjective belief that a time portal had opened up with the passage of the comet Hale-Bopp—ultimately generate dysfunctional behaviors that eliminate the material basis for the
subjective group identity altogether. Others, like the Branch Davidians sect that formed around David Koresh in Waco, Texas from 1985 to 1993, arouse enough hostility from established, competing groups that they lead to ostracism or police action, making further reproduction of the marginalized group identity less likely.

However, occasionally a new proposal for group identity proves both emotionally compelling and materially successful, allowing for the creation of stable institutions that reinforce that identity over time and space. In particular, proposals for group membership that include explicit principles of obedience to authority, once successful in establishing themselves in a given territory, can produce new political and socioeconomic “regime types” that more or less faithfully reproduce their essential institutional features over wide geographical territories—by providing material incentives for “conversion” by previously uncommitted individuals, by monopolizing the legitimate means of violence in order to sanction disobedience, and by training new generations to believe in the truth of the established order. In short, we can define a regime in Weberian evolutionary terms as a proposal for social closure that has been successfully established as the primary basis for obedience to authority in a given territory.

Third, the fact that religious, civic, or ideological training of the younger generation is necessary to ensure institutional reproduction of a regime indicates that the mechanism for Weberian social evolution is indeed Darwinian, not Lamarckian. No matter how thoroughly one studies the established principles of one’s faith, creed, or doctrine, and no matter how fervently one may embrace those principles, one’s offspring are nevertheless born in a state of blissful theological and ideological ignorance. The inherent creative capacity of the human brain tends to encourage young people to explore alternatives to established belief systems as they grow to adulthood, making the task of recruiting a new generation of institutional enforcers a difficult problem for regime elites throughout history. When recruitment of new “staff” willing to accept the legitimacy of a particular form of domination fails, once-powerful regime types sometimes retreat to tiny “niches” of the global environment—or even become extinct altogether. As is the case of Darwinian biological evolution, nothing in this evolutionary process guarantees that social history will “progress” toward any given set of values over time. Whether the successful reproduction of some regime types or the extinction of others constitutes “human progress” or “civilizational decline” depends entirely on the values of the observer.

Leninism and Post-Leninism in Evolutionary Perspective

It would obviously require more than a short essay to articulate a full-blown Weberian theory of regime evolution. Still, everything we have learned in the last twenty-five years about the case of the rise, fall, and aftermath of the Soviet empire appears to fit the theory articulated earlier quite well. We have already seen how the ideological definition of “professional revolutionary” membership in the Leninist party organization provided an organizing principle for elite recruitment in Leninist regimes that endured until the collapse of the Soviet bloc—and that still endures in East Asian Leninist regimes to this day. Not coincidentally, the disintegration of the Soviet empire occurred precisely when Gorbachev’s abandonment of the core elements of this ideology led to spiraling defections from the ruling party.

The failure of the August Coup of 1991 thus did mark a decisive end to the Leninist regime type in Eurasia. It left in its wake a disorganized, often chaotic milieu in which collective action to support the creation of new forms of legitimate domination became extremely difficult. Where well-organized alternative regime types could exert decisive leverage over the decisions of ambitious politicians and entrepreneurs, due to the geographic proximity of particular countries in the former Soviet bloc to powerful neighboring states, the reorientation of political parties and state bureaucracies toward new institutional norms could be carried out relatively successfully. Thus liberal capitalism spread uniformly throughout East-Central Europe and the Baltic states, while the Chinese preservation of one-party rule provided an attractive institutional model for Central Asian elites. Elsewhere in Eurasia, however, competitive authoritarian power structures, rather than fully-formed political regimes, until very recently remained the norm, precisely because no new form of legitimate domination—traditional, rational-legal, or charismatic—had yet evolved. Most strikingly, within the Russian Federation itself, even after the passage of over two decades there was still no consensual definition of political order that might convince ordinary Russians that they had a genuine patriotic duty, rather than simply an instrumental interest, in upholding state institutions. Efforts in the early Putin era to inculcate such a sense of state loyalty among youth were undermined by their transparently instrumental nature. As a result, the social environment remained fertile for would-be charismatic leaders proposing radically new visions of national, imperial, or religious greatness to recruit committed followers for crusades against the status quo.

It is in this context that we should understand the dramatic changes in the Eurasian socio-political environment over the past few years. In the wake of the major street protests following Putin’s announcement of his return to the presidency in autumn 2011, the Russian president began for the first time openly to embrace “patrimonial” traditionalism as the primary basis of his legitimacy, discarding the instrumental balancing of traditional and rational-legal legitimation that had marked his
rule since the end of the Yeltsin era. Putin’s increasingly open embrace of longstanding Russian conservative tropes—including a new emphasis on imperial greatness in political discourse, an increasing reliance on advisors who insist on the distinctiveness of “Eurasian” civilization, and state campaigns to promote Orthodox Christianity as a superior spiritual alternative to “degenerate” Western liberalism—have brought the quarter-century of explicitly anti-ideological, “pragmatic” politics in Russia decisively to an end. Whether or not Putin himself has come to believe in his own role as the legitimate patrimonial leader of “great Russia,” this shift in official discourse constitutes an effort to change the dominant basis of social closure underlying the legitimacy of the Russian polity, defining as “members” those who consistently uphold these and other “traditional” understandings of loyalty to the Russian state, and labeling all those who openly oppose them as disloyal “fifth columnists.” Putin’s redefinition of Russia as a traditional patrimonial great power has also fundamentally delegitimized the formally “rational-legal” boundaries of the former Soviet republics in favor of “historical” claims to expanded Russian territory—including not only the annexation of Crimea, but also on one occasion explicit presidential backing for the idea that much of contemporary Ukraine is “really” part of the historic “Novorossiya” region of the Russian Empire.

If Putin succeeds in recruiting a sufficient number of loyal state agents among the previously-disaffected and cynical post-Soviet generation who are willing to embrace this new definition of Russian identity, and eventually to train their children to accept it as well, we may eventually be able to speak of the consolidation of a newly-patrimonial Russian regime—for the first time since at least the tsarist era. However, we should not underestimate the difficulties Putin will face in this recruitment effort, given Russians’ disgust with official corruption, their continuing widespread cynicism about the motivations of political elites, and the serious economic challenges facing the country in an environment of relatively low energy prices. In the short run, Putin’s embrace of traditional legitimacy in the classic Weberian sense appears to have enhanced his popularity and strengthened his grip on power. In the longer run, Putin’s newly-overt patrimonialism cannot help but reawaken long-dormant issues of identity and belonging, both within Russia and throughout Eurasia, with potentially dramatic consequences for the dynamics of regime evolution across the region and beyond.

**Conclusion: Regime Change in the Second Post-communist Decade**

Returning to the question that animated this essay, then: what can we conclude scientifically about the evolution of post-communist, and in particular post-Soviet, regimes on the basis of two and a half decades of political, economic, and cultural change? Our understanding of the precise mechanisms of regime evolution is still preliminary. Yet taking a Weberian evolutionary view of institutional change allows us to have at least some confidence about certain key lessons of the past twenty-five years. If we consider this time span as roughly equal to the time it takes for one new generation to reach young adulthood, the post-communist period provides a reasonable benchmark for assessing how regimes and political institutions evolve in generational time. Certainly we can now be pretty sure that the simple promulgation of formal institutional rules for new electoral systems or market economies is not the decisive factor in accounting for regime outcomes in the wake of imperial collapse. Nor does the passage of a single generation necessarily guarantee that new forms of legitimate domination will be articulated and successfully institutionalized, even in highly-modernized societies; the post-Soviet experience shows clearly that post-imperial institutional turbulence can continue for many decades. However, twenty-five years does seem to be enough time for new elites in countries with favorable institutional legacies and geographic placement successfully to recruit enough reliable state agents to emulate the formal institutions of stable, consolidated neighboring regimes.

If the Weberian evolutionary approach to regime change is correct, it follows that we will begin to witness a series of attempts to redefine the regime identities of post-communist states as a result of variations in the degree to which dominant political conceptions of social closure have been fully inculcated among the generation of citizens who were born and grew up after the end of the Leninist period. In the case of the former communist states now within the EU, the problem of recruiting new state officials who subjectively identify with liberal “Europe” as their primary definition of social closure is becoming increasingly acute. For opposition movements chafing under “really-existing socialism,” the idea of a “return to Europe” represented an inspiring shift of identity; for young adults in East-Central Europe who have lived their entire lives within the EU, in contrast, this form of social identification has far less charismatic power. As the EU lurches from crisis to crisis, and its expansion to the east comes to a grinding halt, the attractiveness of “joining Europe” may soon lose its appeal even for idealistic youth in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia.

Unless political actors emerge who can articulate creative new conceptions of social closure with an affinity for civic tolerance and rational-legal proceduralism, then, the early signs of breakdown in post-communist democracies such as Poland and Hungary may portend a much more widespread collapse of liberal democratic regimes—not only in East-Central Europe, but throughout the European Union. In the former Soviet Union, meanwhile, continuing social disgust with the corruption
of patronal politics may not in the short run be enough to
galvanize collective action to establish any enduring
alternative post-Soviet regime type. In the longer run,
the rise to power of ideologues proposing more radically
anti-liberal notions of social closure in Europe and Eurasia
cannot be ruled out—particularly if the stability of long-
established liberal capitalist regimes, including the United
States, is undermined in the years ahead.

Finally, the Weberian theory of regime evolution high-
lights how the twenty-five-year history of post-communism
can be analyzed as a distinctive period in global political
history, with regime dynamics quite distinct from those
prevailing for much of the twentieth century. The com-
petition of three strongly-institutionalized competing regime-
types—fascist, Leninist, and liberal capitalist—that shaped
social life for four generations from World War I through
the revolutions of 1989 and 1991, in retrospect, constituted
a unique evolutionary period in which collective action in
the service of deeply internalized and directly antagonistic
pictures of the human future was remarkably widespread.
The post-communist era, by contrast, was a much more
cynical age, in which individuals in many world regions—
and nowhere more so than in post-Soviet Eurasia—by and
large rejected political ideologies and began to act roughly
like the “instrumentally rational” actors portrayed by
mainstream neoclassical economic theory. Paradoxically,
this cultural condition temporarily facilitated the contin-
ued global hegemony of the liberal capitalist regime type,
which had the advantage of inheriting its legitimacy on
the basis of successful ideological mobilization many
centuries earlier. Contrary to Fukuyama’s famous hy-
pothesis about the “end of history,” however, neither
biological nor social evolution came to a full stop after the
fall of the Berlin Wall. As the twenty-first century now
approaches its third decade, deepening political and social
uncertainty in multiple regions of the world, environ-
mental threats ranging from climate change to water
scarcity, and political challenges from new charismatic
leaders with anti-liberal conceptions of social closure will
almost surely combine to produce major changes in the
global status quo. Weberian evolutionary theory thus
predicts with high certainty that the next quarter-century
of change in Eurasia, and elsewhere, will prove to be every
bit as turbulent as the period we are reviewing now—if
not more so.

Notes
1 Gel’man 2015; Hale 2015.
2 See, for example, Pfaff and Yang 2001.
3 Pierson 2004; Grzymala-Busse 2011; Singh and vom
   Hau 2016.
4 Kopstein and Reilly 2000; Ekiert and Hanson 2003.
5 Rupnik 1999.
6 Radnitz 2010; McGlinchey 2011.
8 See, for example, Di Palma 1991; Crawford and
   Lijphart 1995.
9 See, for example, Sachs 1993; Aslund 1994.
11 For example, Lewin 1987; Fukuyama 1993.
12 Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Darden and
   Grzymala-Busse 2006.
13 On “patronal politics,” see Hale 2015.
14 Coppedge et al. 2011.
15 Fish 2006.
16 Fish and Kroenig 2011.
17 Shleifer and Treisman 2000; Sachs 2012.
18 Inglehart and Weizel 2009.
19 Kolesnikov 2015, 7.
20 Sartori 1971.
21 Tetlock 2006.
22 North 1990; Arthur 1994; Pierson 2004; Mahoney
   and Thelen 2010.
23 Thelen 2004.
24 Mahoney 2010.
25 Elsewhere, Mahoney and Thelen refer to such forms of
   institutional change as “displacement,” contrasting
   this with more gradual types of change such as the
   “layering” of new rules alongside older ones, institu-
   tional “drift” in which old institutions take on new
   functions in changed environments, and “conversion
   of the purpose of institutional rules by their strategic
   utilization for new political goals. The bulk of their
   analysis, however, focuses on the latter three types
   of institutional change; they emphasize that even
   “displacement” can take place gradually over time.
   See Mahoney and Thelen 2010.
26 See, for example, Treisman 2007; Svolik 2012.
27 Weyland 2008.
28 Hale 2015.
31 Levitsky and Way 2010.
32 Linz and Stepan 1996, 40–41.
35 Huxley 1943; Mayr 1963.
36 Sil and Katzenstein 2010; Kohli et al. 1995.
37 Runciman 2009; Whitehead 2011; Steinmo 2010;
   Lewis and Steinmo 2012; Blyth et al. 2011.
38 Darwin 1859.
39 See, for example, Chirot 2012.
40 Parsons 1964.
41 Lewis and Steinmo 2012.
42 Recent advances in the study of “epigenetics”—that is,
special contexts in which environmental conditions
might alter genomes enough to affect offspring—do
not undermine the point here, since even in these
cases, evolution must ultimately take place through
inheritance and not directly through individual effort.
Note that the argument here does not require us to deny that new ideologies, theologies, and other proposals for social closure have linguistic and cultural antecedents. Biological antecedents are obviously also present in the context of “random” genetic variation: the human genome is made up of the same basic chemicals regardless of what mutations it undergoes. On one level, this fact does introduce some constraints on how human genotypes evolve; human babies do not suddenly acquire the ability to fly or breathe underwater, for example. The “randomness” necessary for Darwinian processes to operate does not require any wholesale break with history or nature; natural selection only requires that mutations continue to be generated in ways that are not predictable from previous observations of the human genome and their associated phenotypical expressions. The same can be said about the relationship between new proposals for social closure and the pre-existing cultural materials from which they are fashioned.

The Weberian evolutionary approach to defining regimes is thus consistent with Geraldo Munk’s similar emphasis on patterns of rule enforcement in regime formation. See Munk 1996.

References

June 2017 | Vol. 15/No. 2  339

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717000044 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Articles | The Evolution of Regimes


