Weasel Words and the Analysis of “Postcommunist” Politics: A Symposium

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A weasel word is a term used in academic or political discourse whose meaning is so imprecise or badly defined that it impedes the formulation of coherent thought on the subject to which it is applied, or leads to unsubstantiated conclusions. In this symposium we consider several key terms central to the study of postcommunist politics and discuss the extent to which they fall into this category. The terms discussed here include regime terminology, the notion of postcommunism, the geographic entity “Eurasia,” socialism, populism, and neoliberalism. While the authors come to different conclusions about the extent to which these terms are weasel words, they also provide pointers for how to deploy terms in ways that are consistent with the underlying concept and thus aid in the cumulation of knowledge about the region.

Keywords: Eurasia; postcommunism; socialism; populism; neoliberalism

Introducing Weasel Words

Michael Bernhard

What is a Weasel Word? The term stems back to a phrase in Shakespeare’s As You Like It, “I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weazel sucks eggs.” Weasels dine on the eggs of nesting birds and other creatures by making a small hole in the egg shell and sucking out the contents, leaving the shell largely unchanged in appearance.
A weasel word is a term used in academic or political discourse whose meaning is so imprecise or badly defined that it impedes the formulation of coherent thought on the subject to which it is applied, or leads to unsubstantiated conclusions.

In social science, the first step in formulating meaningful propositions about the world is conceptualization. Concepts are the building blocks of theory. And theory can be validated or invalidated by the deployment of evidence that is consistent or inconsistent with the theory. The collection of evidence necessitates observation and measurement. The testing of theories requires that when we operationalize concepts that we turn them into things that can be observed and measured.

Some concepts are defined too narrowly and only capture a part of the relevant observations of the phenomenon in which we are interested. We then draw conclusions on only a part of the relevant evidence. Other concepts may be defined too broadly, and this leads us to consider a set of observations of the social world that goes beyond the phenomenon in which we are interested as representative of that phenomenon. We then make inferences and draw conclusions based on observations that are miscategorized under or irrelevant to our theory. And still other concepts are not defined in a rigorous and heuristically useful manner. The conclusions that we draw from them usually only sow obfuscation.

Let me begin by illustrating via example and exploring the ramifications of a common practice in social science—the qualifying of established concepts by the prefix semi- to describe a referent that has a combination of properties that defines more than one concept, in this case regimes. This illustration is drawn from the work of Freedom House. Before engaging in this analysis, let me say that I support and admire the work of Freedom House, and this is not meant to undermine that work. However, the evaluation of how we define, operationalize, and utilize concepts is an essential social science practice that is necessary to progress in research. And in this case, I do believe that a rethinking of the conceptualization of regimes in their annual assessment of democratic progress/regress in East Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union—Nations in Transit (NiT)—is warranted and would enhance the value of the data that they have expended substantial time and effort to collect.

The NiT conceptual framework specifies five regime types—consolidated democracy, semi-consolidated democracy, transitional government or hybrid regime, semi-consolidated authoritarian regime, and consolidated authoritarian regime. Here I will concentrate on the semi-consolidated democracy concept/rating. The report characterizes several countries in the region as semi-consolidated democracies—Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Serbia, and Bulgaria.

If one looks at their criteria for this assessment in a macro-sense, it seems to apply to cases that have adopted a basic democratic framework in a de jure sense, but de facto politics are not played according to these rules. The countries in question are subject to one or more of several practices that are not fully congruent with minimal conditions of liberal democracy—electoral systems with built in advantages for the incumbents, control of state and private media that complicates full-fledged freedom of expression, widespread corruption, undermining of institutions/
mechanisms of horizontal accountability, or discrimination against a subset of civil society organizations.

Let me next turn to the pairing of the term consolidated with the prefix “semi.” The term consolidation or regime consolidation in political science can have several different meanings, most of which were formulated with regard to democracy and are well summarized in a classic article by Andreas Schedler devoted to the concept. I have added a couple of others:

1. Durability, that is, “avoiding democratic breakdown or erosion.” The form of rule is stable and is not subject to regime change, and there is an expectation that this will persist into the future. This includes historical episodes (coup, putsches, auto-golpes, civil wars, indefinite emergency rule or martial law) or a process of slow deterioration where the minimal defining conditions for democracy are no longer present.

2. Full institutionalization of democracy, that is, “completing democracy.” Regime change entails a reorganization of the system of rules that govern any society. The transition from one sort of regime to another entails an interregnum where institutions need to be reorganized despite the transfer of power from an authoritarian regime to a democratically elected government. The new system needs to be put in place: Consistent rules need to be adopted and actors need to operate according to them. When this process of institutionalization is complete, a regime is consolidated.

3. Deepening. When a regime type is defined by a set of minimal conditions, the subtype of that regime can be enhanced by exceeding the minimal conditions and attaining a second set of qualifying conditions. In the study of democracy, this is also described as democratic deepening. Another way to define consolidated democracy is to think about the achievement of a second higher set of criteria to which we attribute a different status, for instance, movement from electoral democracy to liberal democracy.

4. Behavioral adaptation. Linz and Stepan define consolidation as a situation in which “democracy is the only game in town.” By this, they mean that all major political actors accept and play by the rules of democracy. This addresses whether society or at least elites adopt values congruent with the operation of the new democratic institutions adopted, for example, effective democratic socialization.

5. Self-reinforcing equilibrium. Democracy will function and persist when all actors in the system see compliance with the rules of democracy as preferable to their subversion. In rational choice institutionalism, this occurs when all actors view the expected utility of participation in democracy as superior to expected utility of defecting from democracy (the potential payoff of defection discounted by the costs of defection times the probability that defection will end in success). When this is the case, democracy should be self-reinforcing without recourse to a third party to enforce the rules.

Given this complex semantic field, before using such terminology, one needs to first specify what one means by consolidation conceptually as there are several contested meanings. However, in all these meanings, consolidation is presented as something attained, enduring, and/or established. A regime is either reliably durable or at
risk (1). The new institutions of a democratic regime are either in place or not (2). A higher quality of democracy (whatever the criteria) has been achieved or not (3). All major political actors accept the rules of the game or they do not (4). All actors either see the benefits of democracy in their interest, and thus abide by the rules, or they do not and pursue strategies of defection (5).

Under all these definitions, consolidation is as a bounded whole; either the state of affairs is attained or it is not. Consolidated or not is a logical contradictory. Ergo, consolidation as most commonly defined in political science is not divisible and thus pairing it with “semi-” makes for a contradiction in terms. Semi- only makes sense if the underlying concept is a contrary, the end point, or range on a continuum that captures a single fundamental but divisible property that is more or less present.

These initial problems with conceptualization then carry over into operationalization. The NiT scores are presented on a scale and the different regime types noted above are demarcated by partitioning different ranges on the scale and assigning them names. The scale is aggregated from measures of seven different aspects of democracy—national democratic governance, electoral process, civil society, independent media, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence, and corruption. These are compiled on the basis of a multistage expert rating procedure and each of the indicators is individually valuable. The individual components are rated from one to seven, from most democratic practices to least.

This nominally yields a 42-point scale that ranges from 7 (most democratic) to 49 (least democratic). Given that scores are not only assigned as integers, but admit quarter point increments there are 168 possible rankings for the sample of 29 countries coded. The NiT score is then produced by averaging the seven scores. This is essentially an additive aggregation that is then divided by seven. Consolidated democracies range from 1.00 to 2.99, semi-consolidated democracies from 3.00 to 3.99, transition or hybrid regimes from 4.00 to 4.99, semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes from 5.0 to 5.99, and consolidated authoritarian regimes from 6.0 to 7.0. This means that for any given value on the NiT scale, there are a large number of different configurations of the seven indicators all averaging to the same score. In short, this means any given point on the scale captures observations that may be the same, may differ in small ways, or may combine widely different combinations of rankings on the seven dimensions. And this problem gets even larger when one demarcates substantial ranges on the scale as capturing the same concept, especially when the concept is not explicitly defined.

This stands as an example of unconscious operationalization. NiT produces what Sartori would call operational definitions, but without first defining what the underlying concepts mean. Thus, we face a situation in which a highly contested concept in the literature is grafted ex-post facto on an operationalization without clarifying which meaning is being used. Thus we have no notion of how the seven indicators are connected to the meaning of the term and thus no underlying basis to
think about how we would aggregate this set of indicators into a variable that captures the meaning of the underlying concept. NiT chooses to add up the seven indicators and divide them by seven and demarcate a six-point scale into five different categories with integer cutpoints. When one creates a single indicator out of seven sub-indicators, special attention needs to be paid to the relation between them, and only a definition of meaning can provide that guidance. Why simple additive aggregation? Why not multiplicative if something constitutes a necessary condition? Should they all be weighted equally? Why is one range two points in length while the others are only one? Or is one or more component more central, justifying differential, rather than the equal weighting of the components? Or if we believe all the components reflect a single underlying concept, should all the components be aggregated into a score by some sort of factor analysis?18

What drew my attention to this issue in NiT was its face validity when I came across the term in their annual report on Hungary, a country that has suffered from a sustained episode of back-sliding.19 From a dynamic point of view, the concept of semi-consolidated is not particularly useful. Hungary had a fairly high level of democracy prior to the current Orbán regime. The regime has since undermined many of the basic rules of the game of democracy and has ignored others. To describe Hungary as a semi-consolidated democracy when it has suffered from several years of democratic backsliding or even regime change from democracy to electoral authoritarianism further obfuscates what is going on.

It is worth recalling what Sartori wrote almost fifty years ago and marvel that the warning he issued continues to be ignored:

My focus is conceptual—about concepts—under the assumption that concepts are not only elements of a theoretical system, but equally tools for fact-gathering, data containers. The empirical problem is that we badly need information which is sufficiently precise to be meaningfully comparable.20

No matter what methods of inference we use to analyze and generalize about postcommunist politics or politics in general, we need reliable measures to exercise control across observations. The failure to do so impedes our ability to generate reliable inferences. If measures do not correspond to a coherent set of concepts, which is the basis for any coherent and testable theory, then we are doomed in our attempts to enhance what we know and can learn about issues that matter to us.

If I have been hard on Freedom House in this discussion let me reiterate that their work has been remarkably sustained and has measured things that are important from both intellectual and moral perspectives. The ratings of the individual components of NiT that they have compiled are extremely useful data and represent an unprecedented opportunity for researchers of postcommunist politics to draw conclusions on the basis of a consistent standard of measurement. My only gripe is that in aggregating them, they were too haphazard in thinking about what was the best way to
combine them into a higher-level concept. Defining that concept a priori is essential to measuring it accurately, and aggregating subcomponents without thinking about that relationship makes the higher-level aggregation less useful than it could be.

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In the symposium that follows, my esteemed colleagues will subject several concepts that enjoy a wide circulation in writings on postcommunism to a critical discussion of their utility. They will make their own independent judgement of the degree to which those concepts help us in our pursuit of knowledge or sow obfuscation. Yoshiko Herrera, Dmitrii Kofanov, and Anton Shirikov will examine the concept of “postcommunism” itself. Stephen Hanson will examine the concept of “socialism.” Anna Grzymała-Busse will examine the concept of “Populism” and we will close with Venelin Ganev’s examination of the concept of “Neo-Liberalism.” And hopefully they will further enlighten us on how clear and careful conceptualization can allow us to avoid wasting effort that leads to misleading, muddled, or confusing conclusions that do little to help us address the important questions of our day.

Eurasia and Postcommunism: Weasel Words?

Yoshiko M. Herrera, Dmitrii Kofanov, and Anton Shirikov

In this section, we consider the terms Eurasia and postcommunism, terms that describe the formerly communist states in geographic and substantive terms. Since the fall of communism, scholars and analysts have struggled to categorize and re-categorize the set of countries that emerged in the place of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc. Should this group of countries be understood in merely geographic terms, as a space that exists somewhere between Europe and Asia, that is, “Eurasia?” Or are there substantive characteristics of countries that merit understanding as specific regions per se, for example, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the former Soviet states? Or should we just drop the whole idea of treating Eurasia as a region, now more than twenty-five years after the end of communism?

This categorization is not just about the name of the region: Scholars continue to debate the meaning and impact of the experience of communism and ask whether postcommunism captures that legacy. Regional classifications affect the scope and framing of research questions, the construction of regional variables, and research findings, and they are used in public policies as well.

In this article, we consider five ways to think about what postcommunism or Eurasia is, and why it matters for research. First, is it a geographic space or marker of social distance that exists somewhere between Europe and Asia? If so, what about the sub-geographic units, for example, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the former Soviet states? Second, does Eurasia or postcommunism represent a shared institutional or cultural legacy? Third, do Eurasian or postcommunist states share similar political, economic, social, and demographic attributes? Fourth, should we think of
Eurasia and postcommunism as “dummy” variables, and what exactly do such variables stand in for? And fifth, what about the use of the region in qualitative case studies?

In thinking about the meaning of Eurasia and postcommunism, our goal is not to suggest the terms should not be used, or that their multiple meanings render them useless, but rather to encourage scholars to be explicit about how they are using the terms, which hopefully transforms potential weasel words into clear and valuable concepts.

**Eurasia and Postcommunism as a Geographic Region or Spatial Divide?**

Since 1989, “Eurasia” has been increasingly used as a geographic term in studies of postcommunist countries and adjacent regions, but its coherence and meaningfulness have been widely criticized in the scholarly community. The renaming of specialized journals, research centers, and academic associations, as well as creation of the new ones, are particularly illustrative of the first tendency. As an example, *Soviet Geography: Review and Translation* first changed its name to *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics* after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and due to competition with other journals publishing economy-related articles about the region,22 and then to *Eurasian Geography and Economics* because “the transition economy concept has become increasingly dated and regional geography itself has become more conceptually sophisticated.”23 In both cases, renaming was concomitant with the broadening of the scope of the journal. Kotkin24 and Vinokurov and Libman25 provide numerous other examples of foundations and research centers that included “Eurasia” in their names.

While many scholars have been happy to use Eurasia as a substitute for the “post-Soviet” countries or “Russia and Eastern Europe,” that choice has also been criticized. Smith and Richardson26 bluntly state that “far from being a significant ideational, geographic, economic and strategic space, Eurasia . . . is an incoherent mess of spaces.” They argue that the Eurasian “meta-narrative” tends “to obfuscate and obscure” the actual diversity of this purported region with its malleable external and internal borders. Similarly, Kotkin argues that these “territories roughly between Germany and Japan”27 possess “no underlying or overall coherence. Eurasia is not a system; it is an arena.”28 Matsuzato29 also undermines the notion of a coherent Eurasian space by focusing on cross-border exchanges between “the former Soviet Bloc and the neighboring territories,” which seems to have led to a creation of what he calls “New Border Regions.”

On the other hand, some scholars see this de-centering and lack of firm boundaries in a positive light: von Hagen30 argues that the concept of “Eurasia” helped overcome problems with previous paradigms in studies of Russian and Soviet history, which were rooted in either cultural determinism or universalistic notions of
“modernization” processes. Shifting the focus to “Eurasia” allowed scholars to “de-center” and “de-Russify” historical narratives, drawing more attention toward borderlands, diasporas, internal and external movements and interactions of imperial subjects—that is, everything that did not fit the hegemonic and homogenizing narratives of imperial centers.

Eurasia and its subdivisions are not unique in the sense of being subject to contested regional definitions. We can observe similar phenomena in other places (e.g., “Latin America” and its subdivisions, or the “Maghreb” and “Middle East”). However, Eurasia, as it is understood currently, stands out in three respects. First, some of the names associated with the region are not geographic but institutional, and they refer to institutions that have been abandoned, for example, the former Soviet Union and postcommunism. This is similar to “post-colonial,” but the latter is not considered a region. Second, there are numerous overlapping and competing subdivisions, for example, the Baltic States are often considered part of Eastern Europe, but are also former Soviet states, and now EU members. Third, there is a great deal of variation in usage of the terms Eurasia and postcommunism. For example, Hale uses the term Eurasia to signify FSU countries; Kitschelt and Nölke and Vliegenhart focus on East Central Europe. Key international organizations such as the UN, the World Bank, or the IMF use a mix of geographic and institutional attributes in regional classifications, but do not use the terms Eurasia and postcommunism per se.

Another way to think about the geography of Eurasia or postcommunism is in terms of divides or distance, rather than in terms of coherent regions. The idea of the East–West divide among postcommunist countries is still prominent in the discourse of both politicians and scholars, for example, the idea of the “Great Divide” in explaining literacy, nationalism, and communist collapse as in Darden and Grzymała-Busse. Distance to the West has frequently been considered an important determinant of democratization. Kopstein and Reilly demonstrate that in terms of democracy and economic freedoms, countries’ trajectories are defined by both spatial proximity and level of openness, which can lead to the formation of spatial clusters. Eastern and Central European countries gravitate towards their Western European neighbors, while Central Asian countries show more similarities with Iran and Afghanistan. This argument is akin to Levitsky and Way’s “linkage and leverage” theory, given that geographic proximity constitutes an important part of “linkage.”

Given that the concepts of East versus West, Europe, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Eurasia, Central Asia, and others have traditionally had strong normative and/or ideological connotations, and often were used strategically for political purposes and sometimes with moral or normative overtones, one must be cautious when treating them as natural or merely geographic divisions.

Eurasia and Postcommunism as Institutional and Cultural Legacies

Beyond geography, another way to think about Eurasia, and especially postcommunism, is in terms of institutions and cultural legacies. Kotkin writes that the
communist past is embodied in “‘harmonized’ institutions, practices, ways of thinking, and experiences,” as well as visible material culture, such as architecture or clothing.\(^{37}\) In addition, there is the spread of the Russian language, used as the *lingua franca* in the Soviet Union, and the dispersion of ethnic Russians themselves (also a result of both Soviet and pre-Soviet policies). Despite the cultural diversity of the former Soviet states, some of these shared linguistic and cultural attributes undoubtedly linger, and provide some recognizable cohesion to the region. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the cultural aspects of postcommunism do not seem to be the focus of most social science theories that invoke the region as a variable.

In terms of political and economic institutions, there is a well-known tradition of “despotism”\(^ {38}\) or “patronal politics”\(^ {39}\) in Eurasia. However, similar authoritarian traditions exist in other regions, and hence do not seem to be a unique feature of the region. The experience of communism per se as a political-economic system may be what links countries (e.g., this is how it is designated in Denisova et al.\(^ {40}\)), but this makes postcommunism an institutional rather than regional variable, and one that spans Europe, Asia, Latin America, and even Africa.\(^ {41}\)

Postcommunist countries may also be distinct for reasons other than their communist experience. A number of scholars have turned to examining the role of the pre-communist imperial past in the explanation of diverse political and economic trajectories of former communist regimes or regions.\(^ {42}\)

Related to institutions, postcommunist countries might be thought of as being similar in terms of shared values: allegedly, decades of communist propaganda, specific developmental legacies, and economic practices have produced a specific set of attitudes. In one of the first studies of economic attitudes in the former communist bloc, Schiller et al. found that citizens of these countries had somewhat distinctive attitudes towards risk and labor ethics, but on various other dimensions, such as responses to economic incentives, they were not distinguishable from citizens of capitalist countries.\(^ {43}\)

However, Schiller et al. also argued that these differences were explained by contemporary external conditions rather than by deeply ingrained values or traits.\(^ {44}\) Similarly, Guriev and Zhuravskaya explained differences in life satisfaction between postcommunist and other countries primarily by patterns of economic growth; they observe gradual convergence in attitudes between postcommunist and other countries.\(^ {45}\) Mishler and Rose also explained lower trust in political institutions among citizens of postcommunist nations by their contemporary, defective, institutions.\(^ {46}\)

By that logic, even if postcommunist countries inherited certain values owing to past institutional context and economic conditions, as institutions harmonize and economic growth occurs, the distinctiveness of postcommunist countries should disappear, and they should become more similar to other (Western) countries. Hence the label “Eurasia” or “postcommunist” should lose its substantive contemporary meaning. This was essentially the argument that Shleifer and Treisman put forward to describe Russia as a “normal” developing country.\(^ {47}\)
At the same time, Pop-Eleches and Tucker, using a series of cross-national surveys, find that citizens of postcommunist countries still differ from citizens of other countries in terms of their attitudes towards democracy, markets, and state-provided welfare, despite dramatic changes in institutions, politics, and economies of the former communist states. Thus, postcommunism today may be less about countries, and more about individuals and their lived experiences.

**Eurasia and Postcommunism as Political, Economic, or Social Clusters**

Given the wide range of meanings of Eurasia and postcommunism discussed above, one way to address the question of meaning empirically is to use cluster analysis to see whether the Eurasian or postcommunist countries constitute a distinct group based on their contemporary properties. To those ends, Shirikov et al. use model-based clustering to examine a set of forty-seven countries from Europe and Asia, including the twenty-seven postcommunist countries. The analysis is based on twenty-two indicators reflecting five dimensions: political, economic, social, demographic, and attitudinal characteristics in the countries under consideration.

Their analysis does not offer much support for the idea that postcommunist Eurasia is a single, coherent region, along a number of dimensions. Only demography showed clear distinctiveness of postcommunist states among all European and Asian states. Many countries (and groups of countries) in this geographical space have grown more diverse between 2000 and 2014, and many were quite different to begin with. While there are several groupings of similar countries that emerge in many of their analyses, Eurasia does not stand out as a region.

There is evidence, however, of an East–West divide, although the border line between the two is not consistent across dimensions. In some cases, Eastern European countries are similar to Western European countries, for example, in the case of politics and social attributes. But, for example, in the analysis of values, all FSU, Eastern European, and Asian countries are in one cluster, while all Western European countries are in a separate one, suggesting it might be Western Europe that is unusual and separate from other countries in the world.

The analysis of economic variables presents a different type of divide, which is not East–West, but instead is a distinction between the more and less developed countries. In 2014, the most developed Eastern European and former Soviet countries, as well as some Asian countries, are placed in the same cluster as most Western European countries, while the other cluster includes the less developed countries from all parts of Europe and Asia. Among other things, this result illustrates the obsolescence of the “transition economy” concept particularly prominent in the 1990s, but now largely abandoned (EBRD’s Transition Report might be an exception).
Eurasia and Postcommunism as “Dummy” Variables

The results from the cluster analysis cast some doubt as to the existence of Eurasia or postcommunist countries as a region. But does that mean we should no longer use Eurasia or postcommunism as a dummy variable? Not necessarily. A dummy or dichotomous variable for the region can be used in a regression equation as an independent variable in order to examine whether “the region” (or its interaction with another variable) turns out to be significant. For example, Pop-Eleches examined former communist countries in comparative perspective and argued that the link between modernization and democracy worked differently in these nations because of the communist era political distortions. Pop-Eleches and Tucker argued that all postcommunist states have certain political and developmental legacies that should have left a sizable imprint on public attitudes. The argument could also involve the pre-communist past: for example, there are some historical factors that exist in all the postcommunist states because of their common imperial roots. A Eurasian or a postcommunist dummy variable could also be used for robustness checks or as “controls.”

The challenge, however, is to really link postcommunism to a particular institutional legacy. And without making a principled theoretical case for what postcommunist countries might have in common, these variables should be treated with caution because they may be themselves outcome variables or affected by other variables of interest.

On the other hand, regression analysis that tests postcommunism as a dummy variable often uses repeated cross-section, individual-level survey data. This kind of analysis is not especially reliant on a precisely delineated sample of countries, because the concept of postcommunism or the postcommunist experience on the individual level can be decoupled from a particular set of postcommunist countries. That is, the communist (or precommunist) past might be an important factor affecting the individual behavior of citizens of these nations, while at the same time, when these nations are analyzed as countries, they might not be very different from other countries that have not experienced communism. In other words, while dummy variables might be appropriate in some cases, scholars should still exercise care when using such dichotomizations, because they often mask significant heterogeneity within a group of countries.

Eurasia and Postcommunism in Qualitative Case Selection

Case selection can be driven by many reasons: Comparisons can be facilitated by convenience (common language, geographical proximity, etc.); they can be fostered by traditional academic distinctions; or cases might be chosen because a variable of interest is thought to be shared by certain cases (e.g., Tavits and Letki examine the development of party systems in thirteen postcommunist countries because they shared
the context of both transition to democracy and to a market economy). Similarly, Hale analyzed patterns of “patronal politics” in former Soviet countries, arguing that countries in the Eurasian region were distinguished by high levels of patronalism.\textsuperscript{65} Jones Luong and Weinthal analyzed the effect of ownership structure on the “resource curse” and chose to compare five oil-rich former Soviet republics primarily because of their shared fiscal legacy.\textsuperscript{66}

Such studies are useful and informative; they contribute to our knowledge of particular cases, and the selection of cases in a region based on shared variables may be entirely appropriate. Nevertheless, these studies do not necessarily suggest the existence of a region per se. As the above discussion demonstrates, there is a substantial heterogeneity within all three common groupings for the postcommunist countries—Eurasia, former Soviet Union, and (Central and) Eastern Europe. Thus, regularities an analyst might find among the countries in one study, based on one or two variables, do not automatically extend to the region as a whole.

Moreover, regional labels tend to overstate the level of coherence and homogeneity across variables in a region. For this reason, works that treat the postcommunist world as a “laboratory” or a “grand experiment” in which lots of variables can be held constant are becoming less and less appropriate, and as Gehlbach and Malesky remind us, many postcommunist countries were not that similar even at the moment of transition.\textsuperscript{67}

And, even if such studies reveal similarities between certain countries, this does not mean the region in which they exist is distinct from other parts of the world. Hale argues as much in his \textit{Patronal Politics} book:\textsuperscript{68} former Soviet countries share high values on patronalism, and hence it makes sense to compare them, but patronalism also exists in other parts of the world. Similarly, Jones Luong and Weinthal used their study of resource wealth in former Soviet states to make a broader argument about the relevance of ownership structure on mineral wealth around the world.\textsuperscript{69}

Final Thoughts

Are \textit{Eurasia} and \textit{postcommunism} irretrievably “weasel words?” On the one hand, geographic terms are applied inconsistently to countries of this region. Cluster analysis along five different dimensions also shows that the countries of Eurasia or postcommunism do not cohere into a clear cluster (or clusters). We find overall that the terms \textit{Eurasia} and \textit{postcommunism} are sometimes used with only loose connection to theory, and their coherence is often over overstated. Hence there is no question they are, sometimes, weasely.

But on the other hand, postcommunist countries still appear to be distinct in some respects, first of all in terms of institutional and cultural legacies. And if, as many scholars noted above have done, one is clear about what the terms \textit{Eurasia} and \textit{postcommunism} are standing for in analyses, whether that is spatial distance, culture, or...
institutions, and whether one is using quantitative or qualitative analysis, then, from this perspective, Eurasia and postcommunism are redeemable.

**What, Exactly, Is “Socialism”? From Weasel Words to Theories of Regime Change**

Stephen E. Hanson

Is the contemporary United States on a slippery slope from capitalism to socialism—and perhaps eventually to Stalinism? This argument, unthinkable even a few years ago, has recently entered the mainstream of American political discourse. In his 2019 State of the Union address, after strongly criticizing the “brutality of the Maduro regime” in Venezuela, President Donald J. Trump declared himself to be “alarmed by new calls to adopt socialism in our country.” Some liberal commentators with views otherwise antithetical to those of President Trump found themselves in agreement on this point. Cass Sunstein, for example, warned darkly against the socialist turn among left-wing American politicians: “those who now favor large scale change should avoid a term, and a set of practices, that have so often endangered both liberty and prosperity.” As the 2020 Presidential election campaign began in earnest, the issue of whether victory by a Democratic Party candidate would lead to the imposition of a “socialist regime” in the United States promised to become a central theme of partisan debate.

Perhaps the apotheosis of such reasoning was set out in the October 2018 report of the White House Council of Economic Advisors on The Opportunity Costs of Socialism. The authors of this report aim to show that policies advocated by “democratic socialists” such as Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, including “Medicare for All” and free attendance at public universities, are analytically similar to efforts under dictatorial Marxist-Leninist regimes to eliminate private property and to collectivize agriculture. After all, the authors argue, “present-day socialists echo the historical socialists by arguing that healthcare, education, and other sectors are unfair and unproductive, and they promise that large state organizations will deliver fairness and economies of scale.”

To those who might intuitively resist grouping Senator Sanders and Representative Ocasio-Cortez in the same taxonomic category as Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, the authors point out that “socialism” is not a “zero-one designation.” Rather, they continue, we should understand socialism as a “continuum,” defined by the degree to which the state controls the means of production and the extent to which the state distributes goods to the population without regard to consumers’ ability to pay. From this point of view, any policy that extends state control over any economic sector in order to improve economic “fairness” objectively pushes a society further along the scale toward the extreme found in “highly socialist regimes.” Since such regimes led to economic misery and the deaths of hundreds of millions of people, it
follows that policy proposals to extend state control over healthcare or education in the United States could well produce the same disastrous results.

But surely there is some difference between the democratic socialism now found on the American left and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” established by Vladimir Lenin and his followers? The authors concede this point, but insist that the slippery slope from expanded state provision of social welfare to the catastrophic results of highly socialist regimes remains: “Historical socialists such as Lenin, Mao, and Castro ran their countries without democracy and civil liberties. Modern social democrats are different in these important ways. Nevertheless, even when socialist policies are peacefully implemented under the auspices of democracy, economics has a lot to say about their effects.”

At this point, however, a logical flaw in the arguments of Trump, Sunstein, and the Council of Economic Advisors alike becomes manifest. Having first defined “socialism” as a continuum measured solely by the degree of state control over economic production and distribution, these critics surreptitiously reintroduce a sharply dichotomous categorization of “socialism” in the sphere of politics—within which, no matter how passionately contemporary social democratic politicians might oppose dictatorship and violence, Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez, Stalin, and Mao are all essentially alike. The analytic possibility that political approaches to “socialism” might themselves vary just as gradually, along one or more dimensions, as do degrees of economic statism in different countries, is never taken into account. Nor, it must be said, are proponents of “democratic socialism” in the contemporary United States particularly clear or consistent in their own usage of these terms—further exacerbating the confusion.

In short, the word socialism in the contemporary American debate is a “weasel word”—that is, as defined in the introduction, a “term used in academic or political discourse whose meaning is so imprecise or badly defined, that it impedes the formulation of coherent thought on the subject to which it is applied, or leads to unsubstantiated conclusions.” As deployed by supporters of President Trump, the word socialism is used in a way that shifts its meaning as needed to trap one’s political opponents and to rally one’s political allies. For those who might doubt that a single-payer health care system or subsidized university tuition lead inexorably to communist terror, “socialism” is defined as a continuum in which every step toward the left must logically bring us a bit closer to perdition. But for those who insist that politically, “social democracy” is hardly equivalent to “Leninist dictatorship,” “socialism” is simultaneously redefined as a “zero-one designation” in which all socialists and their allies, whether they realize it or not, are de facto supporters of tyranny and terror.

Identifying the way in which “socialism” is used as a weasel word, however, can hardly settle all debate about the likely effects of the discourse and policy proposals of self-identified socialists in contemporary democratic capitalist contexts. Whatever one’s evaluation of the scholarly quality of the CEA report on The Opportunity Costs of Socialism—whose authors elide all distinctions among Marxist and socialist politicians
over the course of the past two centuries, never mention that the nationalization of Venezuela’s oil industry occurred decades before the election of President Hugo Chavez, and insist that US public universities forced to raise their tuition fees in response to state budget cuts are exemplars of quality-enhancing market competition in higher education—it is still perfectly reasonable to raise the question of whether or not new efforts to promote socialism in the democratic West might ultimately in some way threaten individual liberty. Even if we conclude that there is no slippery slope leading from the election of Representative Ocasio-Cortez in New York, to the possible election of a “socialist” politician to the US presidency, and finally to the imposition of a “highly socialist regime” in the United States, we need to identify the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical reasoning that gives us confidence in this assertion.

Specialists in the study of communist and postcommunist societies would seemingly have a lot of expertise to bring to bear on this debate. Indeed, the question of whether or not Marxist theory leads “inevitably” to Leninist one-party dictatorship, Stalinist state-led models of economic planning, and/or mass terror against real and perceived “class enemies” was not so long ago a staple of undergraduate syllabi in Soviet and early post-Soviet studies. More than a century after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and three decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, specialists on communist and postcommunist societies should now be in a good position to weigh in on current debates about the likely effects of “socialism” in the twenty-first century. Presumably, a vast majority among us would want to insist that the difference between Senator Bernie Sanders and President Fidel Castro—to take one illustrative pairing of self-avowed “socialists”—is one of kind and not just one of degree.

Yet on closer examination, it is far from clear that we specialists in communism and post-communism are necessarily in full agreement about just how to make this case. After all, one reason why our Soviet politics syllabi used to include an obligatory reference to the debate about the causal relationships (or lack thereof) among Marxist theory, Leninist politics, Stalinist economics, and mass terror is that this debate remained unresolved through the end of the Soviet period. Scholars as eminent as Leszek Kolakowski insisted that the “totalizing” impulse of Marxism contained all the necessary theoretical seeds for full-blown Stalinist dictatorship, while equally prominent scholars like Stephen Cohen saw efforts to link early “Bolshevism” (let alone Marxism) to later Stalinist totalitarianism as highly misleading at best. Yet between these two extreme positions, one could find a diverse range of informed views regarding the degree of continuity or discontinuity between various articulations of “socialism” from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Soviet historians continue to debate these interrelationships passionately to this day. Yet if specialists on communism and post-communism still lack consensus on the degree to which “socialist” ideology might have contributed to regimes of terror under Stalin and Mao, our efforts to engage in the contemporary US debate about “socialism” might unwittingly simply reproduce the same deep divisions, and the
same passions on both sides, that emerged in our scholarly community in the Cold War era.

Some political scientists reading this essay might think that the problem in finding consensus about the origins of “socialist regimes” might lie in the interpretive approaches to the subject matter favored by our colleagues in the humanities. After all, one should hardly be surprised that in disciplines that prize interpretive understanding over “scientific rigor,” interpretations of such a politically charged subject might differ. Might contemporary social science theory, then, provide some additional support to those who wish to insist that the “slope” from contemporary advocacy for “democratic socialism” to the establishment of a “highly socialist regime” in the United States is anything but slippery?

Unfortunately for advocates of a “rigorous” political science treatment of the causal relationship between “socialism” and “dictatorship,” current mainstream social science approaches leave us with few reliable tools to address this question. To address the hypothesis of how quickly rhetoric about “socialism” might lead to “regime change” in the United States in a scientific way, we presumably need both a clear and consensual definition of “socialist ideology” and a precise delineation of what counts as fundamental “regime change.” At this point, political science as a discipline offers neither.

Defining what counts as “socialist ideology” in social scientific terms is a project undermined by the relative lack of attention in the social sciences to ideology itself as a potentially important independent variable. Rational choice theory, Marxist and post-Marxist structuralism, and postmodernism alike have tended to treat ideology as a mere reflection of underlying individual, class, or elite interests, and hence mostly irrelevant to causal analysis. Indeed, it has been a sort of cultural norm in the social sciences for the past century and a half to see those who take ideological beliefs seriously as naïve and unscientific. The result has been an unwillingness by scholars to invest much time in understanding the nuances and intricacies of ideological debates, including those that have historically divided adherents of “socialism.” If the Trump administration can so easily elide the distinctions among European social democrats, Leninists, and Stalinists—a triad that is already a vast oversimplification of the complex universe of interpretations of Marxism—surely one reason is that few prominent social scientists today possess the deep understanding of intellectual history necessary to push back effectively.

Beyond our simple lack of empirical knowledge about the various schools of thought that in some way trace themselves back to the works of Karl Marx is an even more fundamental problem, namely, the necessity within social science to utilize terms taken from ordinary language in creating social science definitions. As Russell Faeges has pointed out, attempts to standardize social science terminology using ordinary English words such as democracy, legitimacy, nation, and so on inevitably give rise to the dilemma of “classificatory perversity”: If a scholar insists on using her preferred definition of an ordinary language term in a way that violates
conventional understandings of a word, she will meet with howls of protest from people who find such usage jarring and inappropriate. Yet if a scholar tries to adjust her classificatory schemes in order to incorporate ordinary language understandings, the end result will be simply to reproduce the fuzzy, imprecise usage of everyday political discourse. Max Weber’s famous definition of the state as a “human community that (successfully) claims a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory,” for example, would seem to imply that the well-armed compound of the Branch Dravidian cult in Waco, Texas, led by David Koresh in 1993 should be analyzed as a (very small) state—and thus the battle between Koresh’s supporters and the forces of the US Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agency should be classified as a (very short) civil war. Indeed, pursuing this line of theoretical reasoning further might lead to interesting new insights in the study of both state formation and civil war. But the word state also is part of everyday language, and no ordinary person would ever describe Koresh’s compound in Waco with this word. As a result, political scientists interested in state formation and civil war do not include this event in their data sets.

A similar problem bedevils us when we try to arrive at a consensual social scientific definition of socialism. As the above discussion has already demonstrated, this is a word deeply embedded in a panoply of different political and cultural “language games,” and it is sociologically impossible to force all political scientists—let alone all politicians—to adopt a single uniform definition of the term. Faced with this problem, social science theorists are seemingly left with two equally problematic choices. Either we can stick with a given theoretically driven definition of socialism and utilize it consistently—even if the vast majority of self-professed “socialists” as well as their critics reject it—or we can simply try to map the various usages of the term socialism over time and abjure any attempt to provide an independent analytic vantage point from which we might test hypotheses about the causal effects of socialist ideology. The former approach, however, ultimately leads to the creation of an increasingly abstract theoretical jargon that only dogmatic academics would ever actually use, while the latter approach leaves plenty of room for the deployment of socialism as a weasel word in the form described earlier.

Nor are we as a discipline on any firmer ground in evaluating precisely when “quantitative” changes along one or more political or social dimension can be said to have generated a “qualitative” change in “regime type.” When the Council of Economic Advisors argue that for economists, socialism is not a “zero-one” designation but instead a continuum, they are merely echoing the contemporary consensus that nearly all subjects of interest to social scientists should be studied using linear quantitative scales rather than qualitative categories. In fact, all of the most advanced databases now used by mainstream scholars to categorize democratic and authoritarian “regimes” consist of a series of such continua. Freedom House may give higher scores to more authoritarian countries, while Polity IV gives higher scores to more democratic countries, but the general notion that we should understand regime
change as a gradual and continuous progression back and forth between “more” and “less” popular representation is entrenched in the discipline. Within this framework of analysis, the question of how to define the “break point” between one regime type and another becomes, inevitably, a judgment call left to individual scholars. Nor does such a scalar methodology, no matter how sophisticated, encompass the possibility that there might be fundamentally different types of democracy, different types of authoritarianism, and diverse additional “regime types” that should not be scientifically classified using either of these conventional terms.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the problem of determining when one “regime” can be said to have changed decisively into another one is poorly understood even within the school of thought in political science focusing on “comparative historical analysis.” Much of this literature, including seminal works by Paul Pierson, James Mahoney, and Kathleen Thelen, has been more concerned to show how institutions and social structures set up in one historical period continue to be reproduced over time despite episodes of regime change than to analyze the causal factors leading to regime change itself. Meanwhile, rational choice institutionalists interested in historical change, ranging from Avner Greif to Henry Hale, have focused primarily on showing how particular regimes can be understood as representing “Nash equilibria” that can be expected to reproduce themselves unless some exogenous factor changes key parameters. In both Greif’s and Hale’s works, the result has been to depict centuries of political history in Europe and Eurasia as essentially continuous in terms of regime type.

Thus, contemporary political science is ill suited to address the reasonable, scientific question: Does the observable shift within the US Democratic Party and its electorate today toward a greater use of the term socialism in the twenty-first century actually threaten a repeat of the process by which Marxist discourse generated tyranny in the twentieth century? Possessing neither a deep understanding of the power of ideological belief in catalyzing institutional change, nor a consensual scientific taxonomy of “regime types” that would allow us to determine just when “democratic capitalism” can be said to have been replaced by “authoritarian socialism” (or any other regime type), contemporary political scientists have no way to reformulate this question in a way that can be tested scientifically. In the absence of a robust scholarly effort to address this topic, however, the use of “socialism” as a weasel word by pro-Trump conservatives to divide their opponents and rally the emotions of their supporters will dominate the discursive field.

It is high time for political scientists, then, to devote serious scholarly attention to understanding the problem of regime change. The starting point for such a reexamination, I would argue, is to admit that we have been wrong to discount the independent power of political belief systems to generate significant political, economic, and cultural change. If so, we need to abandon previous efforts to analyze “regime types” merely as points along a set of linear quantitative scales. Instead, we need to understand political “regimes” as polities, economies, and political cultures organized
around core commitments to favored values and identities. From this point of view, “regime change” (as opposed to mere institutional change) is a rare and truly disruptive occurrence, thoroughly transforming the assumptions and practices that underlie politics and society in more stable historical periods.

Such an approach to the analysis of regimes suggests a different way to define and categorize “socialist” ideologies—one ultimately rooted in the actual writings of Marxist and post-Marxist socialists themselves.89 Perhaps the central problem in the socialist tradition since Marx’s death in 1883 has been what to make of Marx’s vision of “communism” as a revolutionary new society in which human beings would be freed of all prior historical constraints to realize a global society of unity, autonomy, and abundance. For “left” socialists, this revolutionary goal must be realized through immediate revolutionary action from below. For democratic socialists, Marx’s heroic vision of “communism” must be abandoned as an unnecessary distraction from slow, patient efforts to fight for workers’ rights within existing political and economic structures. Finally, “Orthodox” Marxists insist that revolutionary workers and their leaders must reject both of these “leftist” and “rightist” deviations, while awaiting the inevitable downfall of capitalism as a result of its inner contradictions.

It is only in this ideological context that we can understand the distinctive core commitments of “Leninist regimes.” Disgusted by the factional infighting of left, right, and center Marxists and by the disintegration of the Second International during World War I, Vladimir Lenin and his followers argued explicitly for a fusion of “revolutionary transcendence” and “professional discipline” in a dictatorial “party of a new type”—one that could effectively bring out revolutionary change in the here and now. When Lenin’s Bolshevik Party managed to seize state power in Russia in November 1917, this ushered in a period of true regime change—one that Lenin’s supporters and opponents alike could recognize as a monumentally important turning point in world history. Indeed, from 1917 until shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the notion that “Soviet power” represented a qualitatively new type of social order remained an article of faith among the Soviet leadership. Stalin’s collectivization of agriculture, rapid industrialization, and use of mass terror were all justified by the need to defend the “dictatorship of the proletariat” against external and supposed internal enemies. Nikita Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization campaigns were legitimated as efforts to restore “true” Leninism, while Leonid Brezhnev’s efforts to restore party rule and social stability were portrayed as reflecting a more mature, “developed socialism” in the USSR. Even Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika was ritually legitimated as a continuation of the October Revolution and its ideals, until the impending breakup of the Soviet Union made such arguments impossible to sustain. And when the USSR finally did collapse in 1991, the astonishing and disorienting scale of “regime change” was once again subjectively apparent to participants and observers alike—precisely because once again, a set of core commitments to values and identity enforced throughout most of Eurasia for seven decades had been irrevocably abandoned.
Is Senator Bernie Sanders, then, the same sort of socialist as Vladimir Lenin? Given an approach to categorizing “regimes” that takes core commitments seriously, the scientific answer is an unequivocal “no.” Sanders is a consistent, vocal defender of moderate democratic socialism—an ideological perspective that has never yet in world history formed the basis of an authoritarian (let alone totalitarian) regime. Rule by self-avowed “Leninist” parties, in contrast, has nearly always resulted in the establishment of highly authoritarian polities and highly statist economies. Even a cursory examination of the available historical evidence, then, allows us to predict with a high degree of confidence that the current crop of US politicians arguing for “democratic socialism” in American society, should they emerge politically victorious, would hardly be likely to resort to authoritarian measures in order to implement their favored policies. That danger, instead, would emerge if and when the current “fuzzy” discourse about “socialism” in the U.S. or other Western democracies is replaced by explicit calls by powerful party leaders to enforce a “socialist dictatorship” and to repress “class enemies”—a possibility that itself is certainly conceivable, and thus well worth watching carefully in the years ahead.

Populism as a Weasel Word

Anna Grzymała-Busse

The specter of populism is haunting Europe. The term is everywhere: usually applied to political parties, but also used to characterize politicians, movements, grievances, demonstrations, policies, and electorates. Support for populist parties has more than doubled in postcommunist democracies, to an average of more than 30 percent by 2019, as Figure 1 shows.

Populist parties are as diverse as they are ubiquitous. They range from the conservative and culturally very traditional Law and Justice Party in Poland, to the Swedish Democrats in the former social-democratic stronghold of Sweden, to the Alternative for Germany, which traveled a surprisingly quick path from a pro-austerity party in 2015 to electoral success as an anti-immigrant right-wing populist party in 2017, polling nearly 13 percent. Populist parties also include the Cinque Stelle, an ideologically amorphous but strongly anti-immigrant party in Italy, or Syriza in Greece, which rose to power on the promises of bringing order and services to the people. In Latin America, populists are characterized by a posited dichotomy of “pueblo contra la casta” and promises of both a more inclusive understanding of citizenship and greater redistribution and services to the people.

Given this diversity, it is not surprising that the term has become a weasel word—a term, as Michael Bernhard eloquently puts it, “whose meaning is so imprecise or
badly defined, that it impedes the formulation of coherent thought on the subject to which it is applied, or leads to unsubstantiated conclusions.”

This same confusion has led to curiosity. Google searches for “populism” predictably spiked after the Brexit referendum, the 2016 US election, and the January 2017 inauguration of President Donald Trump, as Figure 2 shows. Accordingly, both
pundits and analysts have focused their attention on populism. Google Scholar shows over 290,000 references as of February 2020. Indices such as the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index (since 2016) now trace its rise, levels, and consequences, much as Freedom House has done for democratic liberties and Transparency International has done for corruption. Analysts and scholars both have entered the fray, with cheerfully titled books such as *On Tyranny*, *How Democracies Die*, *Trumprop* and *Can It Happen Here?* and *How Democracy Ends* flooding the market over the course of the last few years. Pundits ranging from David Brooks to Paul Krugman to Fareed Zakaria have all commented extensively.91

But what, exactly, is populism? And why does a precise conceptualization matter? Below, I examine what populism is and what it is not, and show how a coherent conception of populism hints at both the roots of populism and its consequences.

### What Is Populism?

To resolve some of this confusion, we can rely on a precise (if not always consistently used) definition which stresses that populist parties share a fundamental emphasis on the division between a popular, positively valued “us” and a corrupt, elite “them.”92 In his widely adopted definition, Cas Mudde conceptualizes populist parties and movements as pitting the “‘pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’” and [arguing] that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”93 This is thus a “thin” ideology, which is compatible with both Left and Right policy claims.

Populist parties emphasize the unity and organic cohesion of the people/nation, who mistrust an equally monolithic political elite.94 Such elites include other politicians, top government officials, central bankers, the media, and the “chattering classes.” Such elites are distant from the concerns of “real” people, and cannot understand, represent, or address the people’s needs. Rather than seeing class or economic interest as the relevant cleavage, then, populist parties and politicians argue that the “people” have a common shared interest, a general will that ought to be the aim of politics, and that the “elites” betray it. Accordingly, they emphasize demands for popular sovereignty and direct democracy, rather than the mediation of interests through democratic institutions such as parliaments or parties. Populist parties thus claim to speak in the name of the people or the nation against a corrupt elite. As Deegan Krause and Haughton argue, parties may have some populist characteristics but not others, and combine them to varying degrees with other appeals: “populist” is a spectrum rather than a binary category.95 This definition does not assume that populism is a pathology of democracy—nor does it elevate populism as the expression of “true” sovereignty.96

### What Populism Is Not, No Matter What Some Economists Tell You

Populist parties thus make two claims, about the corruption of establishment elites, and the unity of the people. Importantly, while this definition distinguishes
populist parties by the ideological claims they make, it also underlines that there are no additional ideological commitments that distinguish populist parties.

This means that populists do not necessarily pursue redistributive policies, contrary to arguments by prominent economists that populist economic policies consist of “economic programs that rely heavily on the use of expansive fiscal and credit policies and overvalued currency to accelerate growth and redistribute income.” Some populist leaders have done so, notably in Latin America, but this is not a necessary or sufficient quality of populist parties. Nor are populists necessarily pro-labor, or committed to redistribution for the sake of the people, contrary to Paul Krugman’s assertions that populists are necessarily committed to the welfare of the working people.

More broadly, there is no such thing as a coherent populist policy program, beyond the Manichean division of society into good people and bad elites. Populist parties, as noted earlier, can be either Left or Right, inclusive or nativist, and so on. That said, in Europe at least, populist support correlates strongly with anti-immigration stances, authoritarianism, anti-EU sentiment, and negative perceptions of how the national economy is doing. Empirically, populist parties in Europe often have elective affinities with “nonorthodox” and “anti-establishment” parties, and their shared desire to “throw the bums out.” This is because most European populists are on the radical right, and espouse both nativist and xenophobic views. Yet even here, exceptions exist: the supporters of Syriza, die Linke, Podemos, and Cinque Stelle exhibit far fewer of the authoritarian/nationalist tendencies than other populist parties do.

The critical aspect here is that even if populism in Europe especially is associated with nativism, xenophobia, or authoritarianism, it is distinct from them—and if we do not keep these distinctions in mind, we will not be able to see the relationship between them. Populism is illiberal, in that it prizes the collective over the individual, and group claims over institutional rules and protections. However, as Takis Pappas points out, populism is only one of the ways to be illiberal—and it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the erosion of democracy.

What, Us Worry?

So then why worry about the global rise of populism? There are two reasons. First, the illiberal consequences of populism follow directly from its claims of a corrupt elite and a united people. Second, its rise is a canary in the coal mine—it is both a consequence and an indicator of the weakness of mainstream democratic political parties.

Thus, if populism is defined as an anti-elite movement that expresses the general will of an organic and wholesome “people,” several deeply worrying implications follow immediately. First, the people have to be defined. Such definition necessitates the exclusion of some groups. In practice, this often means that specific (and often already vulnerable) ethnic, religious, or economic groups are left outside the boundary. The result is a populist conception of democracy as majority rule without
minority rights. Second, those who disagree with populist representation of “the people” are obviously not the “real” nation. The opposition (whether elite or popular) is thus by definition treasonous and treacherous. Third, precisely because desirable popular rule should be unmediated and direct, and because formal institutions are the creatures of a self-serving and corrupt establishment elite, populists often view democratic institutions with skepticism, if not suspicion. In practice, this sentiment undermines the formal rules of the game, since populists view and dismiss formal institutions of democracy, such as autonomous courts, minority rights, the rule of law, or the freedom of the press as obstacles to genuine popular rule and corrupt legacies of previous establishment elite rule. This anti-institutional stance further undermines the informal norms of transparency, accountability, and deference to precedents that underlie democratic rule. The repeated invocation of a corrupt and monolithic popular elite both further delegitimizes democratic legislatures and judiciaries—and lays the foundation for undermining the formal institutions. Critically, of course, these implications can become reality if populist parties become governments, and they are exacerbated if these parties rule without a coalition partner or an effective opposition. Poland since 2015 and Hungary since 2010 illustrate precisely how populist governments can subvert judicial autonomy, freedom of the press, civil society, property rights, and even constitutions, all in the name of keeping these parties in power.

The Roots of Populism in Mainstream Party Competition

Just as worryingly, the rise of populist parties is a consequence and an indicator of the weakness of mainstream political party competition. The emergence of populist parties has been laid at the feet of economic dislocation produced by the transition, the political “cartel” that emerged prior to EU accession, the constraints imposed by the EU that led to a displacement of other concerns. More broadly, existing “mainstream” parties have emphasized responsibility in government while neglecting representation—and populist parties capitalize on this perceived indifference. Further, they have converged on economic (and other) issues, leaving a space open for populist parties to offer a critique and compete on the cultural dimensions.

The common thread here is a perceived mainstream failure to represent voter cleavages. This failure explains the greater support for populist parties after EU accession, because political parties in the region never developed strong linkages to voters and the representation of clear cleavages. Much like the broader set of economic and political reforms, EU accession was an elite-driven project that invited little popular consultation, and generated a false consensus. Political parties in post-communist democracies were never satisfactory representatives in the first place, by dint of their constant births and deaths, their consistent hewing to a broad set of market policies, and their lack of linkages within society.
Mainstream parties across Europe failed to address popular anxieties about the welfare state, already frayed at the end of the post-war *trentes glorieuses*, and then further strained by the new waves of immigration. On the Left, the response to the changing economic situation was to pursue “Third Way” policies of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, or Gerhard Schroeder, effectively blurring the distinctions between mainstream center-Left and center-Right parties. On the Right, parties coddled rather than co-opted nascent extreme-right wing competitors. The result was a rise of welfare chauvinism: the fear that public services such as education, health care, or the welfare state would be overrun by new immigrants—and mainstream parties did little to recognize, much less address, these fears.

This competition-centered explanation may have more explanatory power than accounts that focus simply on economic hardship. First, it is not clear that the economic crises of 2008 and especially 2011 boosted populists and extremists in the new member countries. The new members were far less affected than the rest of the EU by the crisis (the rate of GDP growth *increased* in all the new member countries between 2002 and 2012, while it dropped in all the old). Conversely, populists gained support in countries largely unaffected by the crisis (Finland, where the Finn’s party went from 4 percent in 2007 to 19 percent in 2011), and did not arise where the crisis was severe, as in Ireland, Portugal, or Spain. Finally, the electoral ascendancy of populists in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, as well as in Greece, Denmark, and the Netherlands, pre-dates the economic crisis. Indeed, in some countries, such as Poland, Belgium, Denmark, or Norway, populist parties *lost* electoral support in 2011–2013. This is not to say that the economic crises had no effect: in Italy, France, or Greece, the soaring popularity of populists has been laid squarely at its feet. But the impact is neither consistent across countries, nor does it explain the greater support for populists in the new member countries.

**Final thoughts**

Populism is thus a weasel in two ways: both in its wriggly slipperiness and in its potentially devastating consequences. It does not imply a coherent, specific ideological or policy program. Yet to isolate precisely how populism can erode democracies, we need to pay attention to the claims and commitments it does make: the suspicion of status quo elites, and the institutions, rules, and norms that are laid at their feet, and the claim to represent an organic nation—one that must be defined and circumscribed first. Nor are its negative consequences inevitable; but if we do not crisply define and conceptualize populism, we may not be in a position to recognize them.

**Neoliberalism: The Paradigmatic Weasel Word**

Venelin I. Ganev

What is a weasel word? One possible answer is that it is a slippery term brought into play by authors whose intention is to defend arguments and opinions deliberately
surrounded by a penumbra of ambiguities and uncertainties. Those who prefer this definition will have to acknowledge that in the literature on postcommunism neoliberalism is not a weasel word because the term is always used to buttress a fairly simple claim, namely, that everything that went wrong in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union should be confidently blamed on neoliberal reformers who pursued radically pro-market economic policies. But if “weasel word” is held to mean a rhetorical device that, irrespective of the intentions of those who deploy it, invariably derails scholarly efforts to understand what has been happening in the former “second world” and inevitably substitutes ideological polemics for empirically and methodologically cogent explorations, then neoliberalism should be singled out as the paradigmatic example. The fascination with neoliberalism–focused explanatory frameworks decisively pushed the discourse on postcommunism away from lines of research that held the promise of elucidating the institutional complexity, intricate patterns of unequal distribution of power, and context-specific structures and modes of agency that characterized the historically unique milieu that emerged after 1989—and toward over-reliance on well-known anti-capitalist clichés, boilerplate market-based interpretations and self-righteous condemnations. The unstoppable rise of anti-neoliberal grandiloquence and the ceaseless incantation of its battle cry, *Ecrasez l’infâme!*, are also major factors that molded the reactionary socio-cultural environment which made possible the electoral triumph of xenophobic populists in the newest members of the European Union.

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In December 1990, *East European Politics and Societies* published for the first time an article mentioning Jeffrey Sachs—and a careful examination of the main argument advanced in this article is a propitious point of departure for any conversation about the ways in which critiques of neoliberalism permeated and eventually came to dominate the field of postcommunist studies. At that time, this scholarly journal was the flagship venue where many of the most insightful scholarly articles on postcommunism were published—and Jeffrey Sachs was an ambitious Harvard economist who was rapidly establishing a reputation of the global guru of neoliberalism. In the immediate aftermath of 1989, references to Jeffrey Sachs started to pop up in the emerging literature on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union—and these references rapidly began to cohere into an emotionally charged narrative about how, prompted by Sachs and experts like him, postcommunist governments were about to unleash neoliberal reforms that would inexorably push the region into an abyss of economic, social, political, and cultural calamity. It is this narrative that the Hungarian economist János Mátyás Kovács tried to counter in the above-mentioned article. He warned those who apparently believed that analytical depictions of postcommunism should be treated as synonymous with the ritualistic trashing of Sachs and everything he came to personify—for example, “shock therapy,” “austerity measures,” “the Washington consensus,” “the diktat of international financial institutions”—that they would completely miss the salient characteristics of the social,
political, and economic landscapes that were shaping up in the former communist countries. The effort to illuminate such landscapes by invoking a totalizing neoliberal onslaught would only obfuscate the motives and considerations in the light of which postcommunist decision makers judged certain policies to be more attractive than others. It also assumed that postcommunist transformations were propelled by a single neoliberal logic operating on a global scale, thus obscuring the nature of the power wielded by strategically situated local elites. In his essay, Kovács did not describe neoliberalism as a weasel word; what he did make clear, though, is that scholars who wish to probe the postcommunist political condition face a choice: either lament neoliberalism’s alleged impact on the postcommunist region—or try to understand what was really going on there.109

With the benefit of hindsight, we can only marvel at the Hungarian scholar’s prophetic capacity to envision the evolution of the emerging field of postcommunist studies. Confronted with the choices described by Kovács, many pundits pontificating about the pitiful fate of the formerly communist countries opted to put the critique of neoliberalism at the forefront of their analyses. The thrust of their argument is that at some point in the last quarter of the last century neoliberalism became the dominant political weltanschauung in the world, and therefore this ideology is essential for understanding what has been happening in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union after the implosion of Marxist dictatorships in these regions.

In thinking critically about such an analytical interpretation, the elemental weasel-iness of the word that stands at its core will be easily revealed. To begin with, in the burgeoning literature on postcommunism, this term is never properly defined.110 In the postcommunist context, who is a neoliberal reformer, and who is not? How is a set of “neoliberal policies” different from other types of policies? And what is the evidence that decision-making elites were actually driven by neoliberal passions rather than other considerations? Such questions are almost never accorded the attention they deserve.111 What readers are offered, instead, is a facile axiom: once Marxist dictatorships imploded, an era of “neoliberal hegemony” commenced. It is worth accentuating that this axiom cannot possibly be justified with reference to any particular body of evidence—it is posited as an empirically unfalsifiable proposition.112 Arguably, the contention that at some point in time some postcommunist governments launched some reforms that in some respects were compatible with some of the ideas championed by Jeffrey Sachs arguably might be backed up by sufficient evidence. But the very different contention that during the entire postcommunist period all governments pursued only reforms that pedantically reflected the tenets of neoliberalism might not. That is why in the literature on postcommunism the “neoliberal hegemony” proposition is treated as a vulgate authenticated by the consensus of experts who have studied other parts of the world (Reagan’s United States, Thatcher’s Britain, Pinochet’s Chile).

Despite the lack of clarity regarding its precise meaning, the adjective neoliberal is interspersed enthusiastically in the discourse on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet
Union. In fact, from the vantage point obstinately promoted by critics of neoliberalism, it is precisely this adjective that captures what all postcommunist countries have in common. The only difference between such countries is the degree to which neoliberal practices were embedded in the fabric of society. The term is applied across time—as a moniker mechanically attached to the entire motley crew of ideologically diverse and politically short-lived governments that alternated in power in the 1990s and early 2000s—and to the manifold reforms that were constantly modified, radically revamped or frequently abandoned. It is also applied across space—to depict what happened in Kazakhstan as well as Poland, and in Moldova as well as Estonia. Thus one of the most far-reaching implications of the widespread circulation of the word neoliberalism is that the universe of postcommunist cases is in an important sense fairly homogeneous. Ultimately, all these cases have something fundamentally neoliberal about them. It bears emphasizing, though, that this homogeneity is rhetorically ascertained through the aggressive use of an undefined term haphazardly ascribed to countless actors, policies, interactions, and dynamically unfolding phenomena—in other words, by definitional fiat. As a result, the descriptions of postcommunist contexts that critics of neoliberalism offer are deliberately truncated: everything in such contexts that matters is more or less arbitrarily characterized as neoliberal, and everything that cannot be so characterized is cavalierly disregarded.

The weaselly nature of the word is also on display in the widely popular explanatory frameworks that conjure it up as the main cause of the many afflictions that have plagued postcommunist societies since 1989. These frameworks might be described as mono-causal mono-diabolism: the entire world is subservient to only one evil force—and this force is the ultimate source of all problems. It would not be much of an exaggeration to argue that in the literature on postcommunism neoliberalism has been brought up to account for every troublesome aspect of the post-1989 transformations: economic downturns, social dislocations, the exacerbation of inter-ethnic conflicts, novel ways of discriminating against women, demographic shrinkages, the rise of inequality, the rise of human trafficking, the rise of mortality rates—and the bloodiest tragedy of the 1990s, the collapse of Yugoslavia. It could be the case that the multitude of scholars who zealously embrace this term do so because they believe that an omnipresent constant can explain a multiplicity of variations across vastly divergent postcommunist experiences. An alternative explanation is also plausible, however. The popularity of neoliberalism as an explanatory factor might be linked to one of the most worrisome symptoms haunting the literature on postcommunism, a symptom Michael Bernhard diagnosed as “theory-building in an empirical wasteland.” Put differently, what transpired in analyses of postcommunism was a tendency to construe selectively chosen pieces of evidence as a validation of a pet theory and, in the process, to give short shrift to anything that is puzzling, unexpected, or complex.
Strictly speaking, of course, postcommunism was not “an empirical wasteland.” What Bernhard referred to was not lack of information or dearth of data per se but, in a sense, the exact opposite—the monumental difficulties facing anyone who took seriously the task of fashioning causal explanations grounded in diverse, contradictory, hard-to-classify data. Such researchers would have to gather, systematize, and think through piles of perplexing facts and confounding evidence in order to map postcommunist terrains—terrains that no one had ever seen before. As Kovacs anticipated, some scholars did take this task seriously—and the defining characteristic of their research is that they examined factors other than neoliberalism.

One such crucially important factor has been the legacies of communism. In the early 1990s, a conversation began about the various ways in which these legacies might negatively affect the course of postcommunist transformations—and the exchanges that ensued were intellectually stimulating, analytically rigorous, and theoretically engrossing. One of the most problematic “achievements” of the advocates of neoliberalism-centered interpretations of postcommunism was the marginalization of this conversation. Instead of reflecting on how the ruinous past might impinge upon possible futures, detractors of neoliberalism prefer to stick to a highly proximal cause: They trace all problems of postcommunist societies to the very recent day when capitalism mysteriously “arrived”—or privatization was announced, or shock therapy was decreed, or a stand-by agreement with the International Monetary Fund was signed—and no further back in time. Put differently, to pick out neoliberalism as a singularly important causal factor would only be warranted if the very notion that postcommunist developments might be the outcome of lengthier causal chains—for example, causal chains that originate in communism or even the pre-communist past—is summarily discarded.

The legacies of communism is thus one important factor that analysts obsessed with neoliberalism tend to ignore. Among the other factors that are similarly overlooked are the capacity to re-deploy “portable skills” acquired under communism, the weakness of state institutions, the shifting matrix of incentives and constraints within which decision makers had to operate, the sway of culturally embedded psychological predispositions; the relative strength of civil society, the behavioral implications of puzzling “experience gaps,” the spread of qualitatively different corrupt practices, various forms of state capture, context-specific modes of predatory elite behavior, and the impact of the European Union. Mono-causal explanations of postcommunist travails can only be maintained by ignoring the diverse set of variables explored by intellectually curious researchers.

As Bernhard correctly intuited, such explanations are appealing not because they somehow enable us to make sense of the facts. The parsimonious mono-causal mono-diabolism is easy to embrace because it is rooted in a grand theoretical narrative emanating from a totalizing vision of the contemporary world. Its attractiveness confirms that “in the history of modern social thought” the prevalent tendency is to engage in “the struggle to formulate a plausible version of the idea of totality.”
And in this struggle, no other ideology has been as successful as Marxism. It is the Marxist effort to depict the “capitalist world system” as a holistic entity whose “various component parts, as disparate and disconnected as they appear, are inextricable elements in a larger complex whole” that has defined the parameters of the modern quest for totalistic explanations. Hardly surprisingly, then, it is the leitmotifs orchestrated by the author of Das Kapital that are incessantly regurgitated by the fans of neoliberalism-focused accounts of post-1989 developments; no other classic of modern social theory receives even a fraction of the attention lavished on him. It is even less surprising that these fans invariably reach the same triumphant conclusion: “Russia and Eastern Europe offer resounding corroborations of Marxist theories of global capitalism.”

Apropos of this construal of postcommunism, two observations are in order. First, it is not intended to cast much needed light on a bewilderingly multi-layered context—its purpose is to interject in narratives about the former second world a heavy dose of what Arthur Lovejoy described as “metaphysical pathos,” or the desire to cast “any description of the nature of things, any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which . . . engender a congenial mood or tone of feeling on the part of the philosopher or his readers.” This pathos is antithetical to genuinely analytical endeavors. What it signals is the abandonment of any ambition to understand the distinctiveness of postcommunism and the ill-conceived determination to resort to mesmerizing formulas in order to enchant postcommunist realities, to make the unknown instantly recognizable, to carelessly breed analytical complacency where intellectual alertness is needed—and to engage in a kind of ideological cheer-leading that can derail attempts to expand the horizons of our knowledge.

Second, the claim that what postcommunism teaches us is that Marxist truths have been confirmed means that what transpired in the former second world is but a validation of what we already knew—because “Marx is right!!!” was a view widely shared by Western academic and intellectual elites even before 1989. When everything is said and done, then, the forthright message conveyed by those who construe postcommunism as an era of neoliberal failures is that the study of postcommunism teaches us no new lessons.

The fixation on neoliberalism has diminished the quality of scholarly analyses of postcommunism. To this argument, I will now add a second one: In a postcommunist context, the unceasing bashing of neoliberalism has important political consequences—and the most important among them is to make vituperative scapegoating intellectually respectable.

Commenting on scholarly attitudes towards neoliberalism Eliot Borenstein recently pointed out that “it is just slightly more plausible to talk about neoliberalism positively than it is to talk about the unsung wonders of Ebola.” And I submit that the omnipresence of a discourse that purports to identify and condemn a narrow elite beholden to foreign actors as responsible for the people’s suffering contributed to the
creation of a cultural environment that empowered illiberal East European populists vigilantly on the lookout for domestic enemies. To be sure, contemporary East European populism has historical antecedents and is fueled by an assortment of dynamics, but it is easy to demonstrate that anti-neoliberalism lends credence to aggressive rhetorical tropes, half-baked arguments, and a basic interpretative framework congruent with the grievances that populists used to gain political support.\textsuperscript{127}

It was already pointed out that the story offered by anti-neoliberals is fairly simple. Before 1989, the Soviet Union and its satellites experienced some problems but also accomplished great things. After 1989, a bunch of arrogant Westerners, acting through their home-grown lackeys, began to conduct ill-conceived economic experiments on East European populations anesthetized with promises of consumerist bliss. The real purpose of these experiments was to integrate these populations into a global economic system that serves the interest of capital. It is therefore imperative to resist the West’s neo-colonial impositions by disempowering local politicians who endorse rather than repudiate corrupt Western principles and values. Notably, in the context of this story, the term \textit{neoliberalism} remains weaselly: who the neoliberals are and what exactly they have done is far from clear. What \textit{is} clear, however, is that this particular group of individuals should be held accountable for what went wrong after 1989.

More generally, in postcommunist settings, detractors of neoliberalism advocate a profoundly reactionary agenda. This claim might sound strange—until we remember Albert Hirschman’s dissection of reactionary thinking. For Hirschman, in any specific context the reactionaries are those who assault any suggestion that the status quo might be changed for the better and insist that thoroughgoing reforms will only make the situation worse. His example was American conservatives who rallied against the notion that the welfare state should be expanded. In the postcommunist regions, however, the same rhetoric is used by radical critics of neoliberal markets in order to discredit reform proposals intended to change a state-socialist status quo. It is precisely neoliberalism’s critics that have persistently deployed the three discursive devices Hirschman associates with the rhetoric of reaction.\textsuperscript{128}

The \textit{Perversity Thesis} posits that if reformers push a society in a particular direction, it will go in the opposite direction. In a postcommunist context, one encounters the claim that reformers harbor the illusion that they are advancing a progressive agenda, but as a result of their dismantling of the socialist system society actually is worse off than before.

The \textit{Futility Thesis} maintains that efforts to implement reforms are destined to be futile because the status quo, which the population prefers, will spontaneously reconstitute itself. In a postcommunist context, this thesis sounds like this: Reforms intended to make the citizenry less economically dependent on the state have precipitated a crisis, because socialist attitudes still prevail and the vast majority of citizens will continue to expect that the state will solve their problems and will remain dependent on a system of welfare whose level of generosity has been reduced in line with neoliberal dogma.
Finally, there is the Jeopardy Thesis that contends that even if reform is desirable, it will generate prohibitive costs that will offset any potential benefits. In the post-communist region, this thesis takes the following form: While theoretically it might be desirable to introduce some market dynamism and entrepreneurship in the economy, the price society will have to pay in order to adjust to the changes would be too high and therefore the institutions and practices of the ancien régime should not be radically altered.

The popularity of the word neoliberalism, then, should be attributed to its usefulness as a focal point of frustration, anxiety, and the resolve to excommunicate those who appear to be different from the majority of “natives.” The term is deeply embedded in rhetorical repertoires used by populists who decry the post-1989 democracies as nothing more than a façade camouflaging the suffering of the people and insist that the institutions and practices of liberal governance have gone too far and need to be curtailed.

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In a nutshell, my argument is that neoliberalism functions as a weasel word in two ways. First, it deflects scholarly attention from what matters to what is ideologically familiar and thus complicates the accumulation of new knowledge. Second, and more menacingly, it infuses the analyses of postcommunism with a zealous rhetoric that legitimates partisan assaults on postcommunist democracy.

As Michael Bernhard reveals in his essay, we borrow the notion of a “weasel word” from Shakespeare. The Bard mentions weasels twice, both times with reference to empty shells from which something important has been extracted. In As You Like It, Jacques declares that he “can suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs.” And in Henry V, Westmoreland argues that England must confront the Scotts before going to war with France because

once the eagle England being in prey
To her unguarded nest the weasel Scott
Comes sneaking and sucks her princely eggs
Playing the mouse in absence of the cat
To tear and havoc more than she can eat.

As is often the case, Shakespeare’s insights are unexpectedly pertinent to contexts far removed from his original object of interest. The term neoliberalism threatens to “suck out” much that is novel, interesting, and important from the intellectual conversation about the post-1989 period. And it “tears and havocs” an otherwise promising scholarly sub-field because, time and again, it obscures much more than it reveals.
Conclusion

Michael Bernhard

Social science stands or falls in equal measure on the twin pillars of theory and evidence. We formulate theories that purport to explain outcomes, and we devise inferential strategies that present evidence consistent with our theory and inconsistent with competing explanations. The building blocks of our theories are concepts that we conceive of as corresponding to essential elements of social reality. Our ability to effectively test our theories is limited by how well we can operationalize and measure our concepts (whether qualitatively or quantitatively). When we use a weasel word, a term that is imprecisely or badly defined, as a central concept in research, we actively sabotage our ability to produce good social science from the outset. The discussions in this symposium point out some basic pitfalls that might be avoided so as not to make the vexing task of doing social science more difficult than it already is.

My introduction sheds light on the problem of taking a concept that is a contradictory, an either/or proposition, democratic consolidation in this case, and treating it as a contrary (the end point of a scale). It takes a scalar measurement project and puts the prefix *semi-* on a contradictory concept to describe an intermediate range on the scale. It is rather like calling a female mammal of reproductive age “semi-pregnant” or a sick person “semi-dead.” The problem here is fusion of sloppy conceptualization with first rate measurement. It squanders the latter.

The piece by Herrera, Kofanov, and Shirikov might be described as pointing out the pitfall of a “ghost” weasel. Both *Eurasia* and *postcommunism* are terms that stem from the short twentieth century and the dominant role of the Soviet Union in shaping the politics, society, and economy of the area from the Elbe to the Pacific. Their deployment is widespread today, and we even use one of the them in the title of the symposium, but the question remains, despite the widespread use of these terms to describe and group together former communist countries, whether this fact of history remains relevant to the study of the set of countries that now occupy this same geographic space. Or is the continued application of the prefix post- to the ancien regime something that serves to just obfuscate rather than elucidate recent developments in the individual countries today?

But because of the work of our colleagues, we now put it in quotes, because they find little evidence that they cluster as a region or a set of distinctive sub-regions. The one way they find that the term makes sense is that they all shared at least some aspects of the communist experience, and this in itself constitutes a legacy. What has happened since has introduced a great deal of variation across different countries. In this sense, the region offers itself as a wonderful research opportunity, particularly for studying the durability of legacies and the ways in which they can be overcome or at least incorporated into new formations. This set of findings alert to the importance of
defining what we mean by a term that can have several meanings, and in this case, the
analysis of Herrera, Kofanov, and Shirkov guide us to the ways in which we can still
use these terms in ways that are useful rather than misleading.

We can observe similar strictures in Grzymała-Busse’s discussion of populism.
The takeaway here is that when populism is defined clearly and operationalized
effectively, it is not a weasel word. It is clearly an important global phenomenon, one
that unfortunately too often defines our current condition, and this in fact makes such
definitional considerations even more important. The problem here may be described
as a “fashion” weasel. Because populism is a central problem of our age, many things
are labelled populism by many authors, sometimes without much consideration.
Because populism is ubiquitous, everything becomes populism. Grzymała-Busse
illustrates this by showing how an accompanying characteristic of an earlier genera-
tion of Latin American populism, redistributive policies, has been turned into a defi-
nitional characteristic by certain analysts (for convenience sake let’s call them
economists). Once this partial accompanying characteristic is posited as a defining
characteristic, this narrows the number of parties we will consider populist. Given
the potential danger that populism poses to democracy, Grzymała-Busse emphasizes
the importance of focusing on the electoral dimension of populism and its anti-elitist
character, not only for reasons of coherent social science, but of understanding and
coping with it on a practical level.

We see the fashion weasel problem also in Ganev’s discussion of neo liberalism.
The ascendency of globalized capitalism in the late twentieth century and the view
that the market could solve many of the problems of modern social life became wide-
spread. And its impact on the region following 1989 was taken up by many authors.
In many countries of the region, the proscriptions of the so-called Washington con-
sensus and conformity with EU regulation were seen as the path to prosperity. And
even where these were not actually implemented, lip service and homage was paid to
them. In many places, there was neoliberal reform and in others there was klepto-
cratic conversion of collective property into private fortunes under the cover of neo-
liberal rhetoric. What Ganev points out is that there are large numbers of authors who
because of their ex ante political commitments (running from reticence to hostility to
the market) were somewhat sloppy in distinguishing between the two. Thus, any
poor economic outcome is blamed on neoliberalism, when in fact a much more
nuanced evaluation of relative merits of orthodox and heterodox policies and their
outcomes is warranted. Clearly, many of the worst economic outcomes in the region
have nothing to do with neoliberalism, but with kleptocracy and patrimonialism that
have in fact impeded the emergence of fully functioning markets. This is not only a
fashion weasel, but a political weasel.

We also see the corrosive effects of ex ante political commitments on coherent
political analysis in Hanson’s discussion of the redeployment of the term socialism
since the failure of European communism. This political weasel has found new life
in the domestic politics of the United States. Here the culprits are those who wish
discredit the American left, by treating any redistributive policy (healthcare, education, higher marginal taxation of the wealthy) as socialism, and as such leading to an outcome, if not akin to Bolshevism, then, at least, Chavismo. Such arguments are found mostly on the right though they find their echo in the mainstream press where democratic presidential candidates are routinely pressed to discuss whether they are socialists or capitalists. What Hanson’s essay makes clear is that political science has failed to do serious work that connects different modes of socioeconomic organization (communism, and different modes of capitalism—liberal, social-democratic, corporatist) and different modes of rule (democracy and dictatorship). This, in turn, allows terms like socialism to be bandied about in ways that portray policies that have been practiced for years within existing capitalist democracies as the road to dictatorship.

Both the discussion of neoliberalism and socialism point out the danger of letting political values shape our analyses. While we can never fully escape our biases when we engage in analysis, we had better do our best to try to neutralize them; otherwise we will end up only with the answers that we want. This is not only bad science, but from a political point of view such answers are pretty worthless. They only represent a recapitulation of our values. If we want to realize those values in practice, we would do better to heed Max Weber’s counsel and be first guided by the dispassionate reason of the mind, and then use the answers that such an analysis yields as the starting point to formulate a strategy to realize our values in practice.132

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Notes

1. Authors are listed in alphabetical order.
5. Ibid., 94–96.
6. Ibid., 97–98.


12. With bounded wholes there is one exception to this—when the concepts are not descriptive but ideal-typical. Ideal types are abstractions that capture critical elements and principles embodied in real-world referents but are drawn so starkly and purely that they rarely correspond to real-world observations. Their purpose is measurement, not to describe real-world referents. They are used to gauge the degree to which a real-world referent corresponds to the principle or characteristics inherent in the ideal-type. By their nature, all real-world observations combine elements of multiple ideal-types, and thus all observations partially correspond to multiple types. This represents an alternative system of measurement to that used in the majority of contemporary social science. See M. Weber, “Objective Possibility and Adequate Causation in Historical Explanation,” in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch (New York: Free Press, 1949), 164-88.


15. The middle category on the scale is perhaps the most unsettling—transition or hybrid regimes? These are distinct concepts, so at minimum we would need a detailed explanation on why they belong together at the same point on the scale composed of these seven components.


21. The term *Eurasia* may have other interpretations and uses. E.g., the concept of Eurasia is central to Eurasianism, an intellectual and political movement that posits that Russia is a part of the Eurasian rather than Western civilization and highlights Russia’s importance in the region. In this analysis, we consider only the usage of the term in contemporary social science research.


28. Ibid., 508.
38. Ibid., 525.
41. Chen and Sil suggested a “stretching” of the concept of postcommunism so that a larger number of countries could be used in small-N research. They argued that besides Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states, China, Vietnam, Tanzania, and even the West Bengal region of India might be included. From this perspective, the phenomenon of postcommunism geographically transcends the frames set by most popular definitions of Eurasia (in fact, any of them, once we include Tanzania). See C. Chen and R. Sil, “Stretching Postcommunism: Diversity, Context, and Comparative Historical Analysis,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23, no. 4 (2007): 275–301.
44. Ibid..
50. Polity IV democracy scores, WGI government effectiveness, Freedom of the Press score, Corruption Perceptions Index, and Human Rights Protection scores.
51. GDP per capita, services and industry as shares of GDP, unemployment, and FDI.
52. Enrollment and gender equality in education, technical literacy, and homicide rates.
53. Life expectancy, population growth, urbanization, and the share of immigrants.
54. Attitudes towards democracy, the market, social welfare, homosexual neighbors, trust in government, and life satisfaction based on responses in the World Values Survey.
58. Pop-Eleches, “Hisorical Legacies.”
60. E.g., see Darden et al. 2006.
63. E.g., in county-level clustering analysis such as in Shirikov et al., “What Is the Region?”
67. Gehlbach and Malesky, “The Grand Experiment That Wasn’t?”
69. Jones Luong and E. Weinthal, *Oil Is Not a Curse*.
73. Ibid., 5.
74. Ibid., 4.
75. Ibid., 13.
76. Ibid., 13.
77. Ibid., 9.
78. The Democratic Socialists of America, e.g., provide the following vague and encompassing definition of their main creed: “Democratic socialists believe that both the economy and society should be run democratically—to meet public needs, not to make profits for a few. To achieve a more just society, many structures of our government and economy must be radically transformed through greater


86. J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer, eds., Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).


89. The section that follows is taken from the more comprehensive analysis of Marxist ideology and its relationship to Leninism presented in S. E. Hanson, Time and Revolution: Marxism and the Design of Soviet Institutions (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).


98. Krugman, “Stop Calling Trump a Populist.”
110. A recent exception is H. Appel and M. A. Orenstein, *From Crisis to Triumph* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Notably, the tone of this book is much less accusatory than is usually the case with writings on neoliberalism.


127. This theme is developed more fully in V. I. Ganev, “‘Neoliberalism is Fascism and Should Be Criminalized’: Bulgarian Populism as Left-Wing Radicalism,” *Slavic Review* 76, suppl. 1 (2017): 9–19.


129. As You Like It, 2.5.830–831.


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