

A Pluriversal Perspective on the Life and Death of the Socialist World

Written by Mathieu Mignot

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MATHIEU MIGNOT, AUG 13 2019

When asked by Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich to share her thoughts on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the collapse of socialism, Elena Yurievna S., a retired Russian citizen and still a committed communist, replied: “Socialism isn’t just labour camps, informants, and the Iron Curtain, it’s also a bright, just world: everything is shared, the weak are pitied, and compassion rules ... Do you really think that this country fell apart because people learned the truth about the Gulag?”[1] Elena S.’s response might be interpreted as a manifestation of mindless nostalgia and idealisation of the communist past. Indeed, this condition is deemed so common in the former Soviet Union and other post-socialist countries that Russian President Vladimir Putin once stated that “[p]eople in Russia say that those who do not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart, and those that do regret it have no brain.”[2] More than mere nostalgia, however, such comments illustrate the disjuncture between common scholarly narratives concerning the demise of Soviet communism, and the multiplicity of stories retold by the “Last of the Soviets.”[3] While the former tend to emphasise the role played by economic stagnation, geopolitical pressure resulting from the Cold War, and the gradual spread of democratic values and national sentiments throughout the Eastern Bloc,[4] the latter tell us about socialism and its demise as they were felt by those who experienced them. This discrepancy between academic knowledge and situated experience, I argue, ought to be seen as a major challenge for to the field of International Relations (IR). Indeed, IR’s Western modernist roots have created an “incapacity to acknowledge, confront, and explore difference.”[5] This essay thus seeks to explore ways of bridging this gap between theory and experience by asking the question: How can IR scholars reconcile a theorisation of Soviet communism and its downfall with the situated experiences of Soviet citizens?

The essay proceeds in three steps. First, I describe the theoretical challenge inherent to the study of difference from within the boundaries of Western universalism, and shows how it relates to the study of 20th-century socialism. This leads me to introduce the concept of the pluriverse, a perspective which addresses this challenge by allowing IR scholars to acknowledge and respect difference. Second, I apply the pluriverse theory and offer a sketch of the socialist world, focusing on its ontological features and how Soviet citizens related to it. Third, I investigate the collapse of socialism whilst retaining my pluriversal perspective, arguing that the collision between the Western capitalist and the Soviet socialist worlds led to the demise of the latter by altering its fundamental principles. The conclusion returns to the main points of the argument and points at its broader significance.

Leaving the One-World World and Entering the Pluriverse

My analysis of socialism begins by identifying the origins of the discrepancy between the academic explanations for the fall of the USSR and the oral history that emerges from the testimonies of former Soviet citizens. I argue that this challenge arises from what Law calls the ‘one-world world’, [6] and that it can be met by adopting a pluriversal perspective.

Law argues that the notion that there exists one single reality called the universe is itself a construct of Western science. When confronted with other realities that contradict the notion of the universe as constructed by Western philosophy, such as indigenous worlds possessing their own ontological features, proponents of the one-world world rationalise the encounter through the notion of belief. They argue that while all human beings inhabit the same reality,

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beliefs about it can differ, which is itself an object of analysis for constructivist scholars.[7] Belief, however, does not constitute an adequate way of knowing. Instead, the only way for human beings to know the world is to detach themselves from their beliefs and observe reality from a neutral, rational standpoint, which is the basis of modern science.[8] Perversely, this distinction between science and belief serves to enforce the erasure of alternative worlds and the hegemony of the one-world world by excluding from knowledge production those who question the existence of a single reality. As Quejazu highlights, the notion of a single reality is powerful, having become “so strong and natural that it seems indisputable.”[9] Mignolo describes this process as the “coloniality of knowledge”, which operates by “silencing or relegating other epistemologies to a barbarian margins, a primitive past or a communist or Muslim evil.”[10]

The dismissal of Soviet citizens’ testimonies as mere nostalgia clearly belongs to this colonial logic of ‘primitive past’. The goal of this essay is precisely to examine this ‘communist evil’ that the Western liberal world seeks to tame and rationalise via a claim for universal scientific knowledge. Indeed, the study of Soviet communism since the dissolution of the USSR has been characterised by Western universalist thinking. Socialism, it has been argued, was merely an anomaly that survived for seven decades, temporarily keeping Central and Eastern Europe beyond the reach of Western liberal modernity. Fukuyama’s *End of History*[11] is the best-known example of such liberal teleological thinking, but the latter can be found in much of IR literature on the Soviet Union and its demise. Constructivist scholars such as Koslowski and Kratochwil follow a similar line of reasoning when they argue that the withdrawal of the Red Army from the USSR’s satellites allowed liberal democracy to flourish throughout the Eastern Bloc, eventually reaching Moscow itself.[12] Furthermore, the point made by Law concerning the categorisation of other forms of knowledge as mere beliefs is illustrated by Barner-Barry and Hody’s analysis of ideology in the Soviet Union, in which they argue that Marxism-Leninism ought to be understood as a quasi-religious, nationalist mythology produced by the Soviet regime to indoctrinate the population.[13] Far from providing a deeper understanding of the communist experience, such analyses reproduce common narratives that reify and justify the hegemony of the Western liberal project. This, in turn, calls for an inquiry into the Soviet project that follows a different logic and avoids the tropes associated with the one-world world.

In order to undertake such a project, what is needed is a conceptual framework that allows for an engagement with the stories of Soviet citizens on their own terms, without referring back to the categories and ways of thinking that characterise the Western universe. The concept of the pluriverse provides the means to do so by shifting the discussion away from epistemology and towards ontology, away from the study of different beliefs about the world and towards the study of different worlds altogether. For Law, it is possible to imagine a multiplicity of contingent, relational realities that are not contained in a single universe.[14] Rather than conceiving of the world as a given object, we can conceive of worlds as being enacted, perpetuated, and constantly performed by those they are comprised of: “realities are done in practices”. [15] As Quejazu puts it, there exist “many kinds of worlds, many ontologies, many ways of being in the world, many ways of knowing reality, and experimenting those many worlds.”[16] It is crucial to understand, however, that those worlds do not exist in complete isolation. Central to the pluriverse is the acknowledgement that while they are mutually incommensurable, they are interconnected, and it is in these connections that difference can be understood.[17] The various realities and their ‘practitioners’ are embedded in a network of relations that is characterised by power differentials, and it is precisely the study of these power differentials that allows us to understand how worlds come about and how they disappear.

If the one-world world science only provides us with distorted or incomplete narratives concerning Soviet communism, how can we, in concrete terms, deploy the notion of the pluriverse and treat the socialist era as a world in its own right? The limited space of this essay precludes a complete recovery of the lost socialist world, should such a thing even be possible, therefore my analysis must limit itself to its most important basic ontological features. Quejazu provides an outline of what form such an analysis might take, arguing that “[p]ersonhood, property, time, space, existence, power ... could be analysed and understood in a radically different way ... by trying to see what these concepts look like or refer to from distinct ontologies.”[18] In her study of socialism and its successors, Verdery echoes this sentiment when she writes that foundational concepts such as “citizenship, individuality, time, homogeneity, states, inequality, nations, property, and territory”[19] cannot be grasped by existing theories when emerging from the socialist or post-socialist context, and must be engaged with on their own terms. Since realities are done in practice, and basic ontological premises are performed, the oral history comprising the testimonies of the

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Soviet citizens who performed them can provide us with a glimpse into the workings of the socialist world. In turn, understanding the collapse of Soviet communism involves investigating how the ontology of the socialist world collided with that of the capitalist world that colonised it.

Hence, the assumption of Western science that there exists one single shared reality must be abandoned if we are to understand what socialism was and how it collapsed. The concept of the pluriverse, by accepting that there is a plurality of incommensurable ontologies, provides the means to analyse socialism as a world in its own right, possessing its own ontological features that fundamentally differed from those of the West.

Time, Space, and Life in the Socialist World

Having rejected the Western universalist categories of thinking and accepted to treat the ontology of Soviet communism as fundamentally different, I now turn to sketching out an outline of the socialist world. This involves discussing its main ontological features: time, space, and life.

Like other ontological characteristics, time in the socialist world was performative. It was shaped by the practice of its inhabitants and their notions of past, present, and future. These notions, in turn, were derived from the foundational theory of the socialist world, Marxism-Leninism. For Lenin, the creation of the classless society envisioned by Marx required the Party to guide the society through an intermediary stage following the collapse of capitalism, namely socialism, during which the means of production would be converted into common property and the vestiges of capitalism would not yet be completely abolished. Once the society would attain full economic maturity and achieved abundance in consumer goods, the state and the remnants of the bourgeois order would be dismantled, and communism would be achieved.[20] Hence, the temporality of the socialist world did not operate independently of those who experienced it; instead, it was propelled forward by the society and its guide, the Party. Time consisted of an evil, defeated past, capitalism; an imperfect present that demands hard work on behalf of the citizens, socialism; and a perfect future where all needs will be fulfilled and equality will be achieved, communism. As Marina Tikhonovna I. recalls about her husband's manual labour: "[H]e built communism! The bright future ... We believed that one day, we'd live to see the good life ... We spent our whole lives shuttling between bunkers, dormitories, and barracks." [21] Time was on the side of the Soviet citizens; their hard work would be rewarded with the emergence of the communist society.[22]

Time in the socialist world was closely intertwined with space. Indeed, the building of communism was a spatial process as much as a temporal one. World communism was inevitable and necessary, but in the meantime the USSR was the bastion of the workers, where socialism was gradually leading to communism.[23] For most of its existence, the socialist world existed largely independently of other worlds such as the Western capitalist world, and internal expansion within Soviet borders took precedence over revolutions beyond them; the building of communism was a vertical process rather than a horizontal one. Alexievich herself recalls that after school, pupils would enthusiastically volunteer to take part in Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign during the 1950s, building farms in desolate areas such as the Kazakh steppes and the Siberian wildlands in order to enhance the food production of the USSR.[24] The internal expansion of the socialist fortress was paralleled by its conquest of the spatial realm, which took the vertical expansion of communism even further. Space was indeed seen as the first place where the genius of the Party could be unleashed, and the immense potential of communism fully realised. Alexievich's father "started believing in communism after Gagarin went into space".[25] "People went out into the streets laughing, embracing, and crying. Strangers. Workers came out of their factories... 'We're the first! Our man is in space!' It was an unforgettable moment"[26], remembers Margarita P. Spatial expansion also meant the taming of nature: "we're going to be the first to fly over the North Pole, we're going to control the Northern Lights! We'll change the course of the mightiest rivers... We'll irrigate the endless deserts... Faith!" [27]

The existence of those who performed the Soviet world was thus geared towards the construction of communism. The pursuit of the future was the organising principle of life in the USSR; hence, economic activities were at the heart of the definitions of citizenship, virtue, and success. Jowitt points out that whereas in some societies "the hunt is considered a heroic undertaking suitable for warriors ... [in] the Soviet Union, heavy industry, machine-building, and construction of missiles and Kama trucks are equivalents".[28] Production was central to the existence of the

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socialist world, and the Party was at the centre of production, deciding on the allocation of materials and labour as well as the production and consumption targets. Individual life, in turn, was regulated by the socialist *oikos* to the extent that there existed “a highly elaborate “production” system parallel to the system for producing goods – a system producing paper, which contained real and falsified histories of the people over whom the Party ruled”.^[29] Hence, political subjects were themselves created according to production targets; official individual identity could be granted via awards and medals or the creation of a file by the political police.^[30] For Alexievich, in the USSR human life in its entirety sprang from the production system of the socialist world: “People who’ve come out of socialism are both like and unlike the rest of humanity – we have our own lexicon, our own conceptions of good and evil, our martyrs. We have a special relationship with death.”^[31]

Production was thus not merely a material process; in many ways, it was more ideational than material, given the widespread shortages that characterised the economy of the socialist world.^[32] Russian philosopher Lev Shestov, while on exile in Western Europe during the 1920s, wrote that the Bolsheviks were idealists; in spite of their faith in historical materialism, they acted upon the potential of their ideas and the power of their words.^[33] This remained a defining feature of Soviet communism long after the days of the original Bolsheviks, and the production of ideas ran the socialist world. “In Soviet times, the word had a holy, magical significance,” ^[34] remarked an anonymous inhabitant of Irkutsk, ten years after the dissolution of the USSR. Despite the value placed upon material production and manual labour, life in the socialist world primarily originated from ideas. “Before, I had hated money, I didn’t know what it was...We grew up in a country where money essentially did not exist.”^[35] Commenting on the contrast between the harsh material conditions of Soviet life and the ubiquity of hope, dreams, and ideals, one of Alexievich’s interviewees admitted that until communism collapsed, he “was totally Soviet – it’s shameful to love money, you have to love a dream.”^[36] “Something higher than reason”^[37] governed life in the socialist world.

Hence, this brief sketch of the Soviet world yields specific ontological features. In the socialist world, time was propelled forward by the work of the Soviet citizens guided by the Party; it was moving away from the remnants of capitalism and towards a just future. This entailed the spatial expansion of socialism outside the USSR, but more importantly within its borders and up into space. Life was a function of the production system, which was an ideational process as much as a material one, creating individuals and shaping society.

Colliding with Capitalism: How the Socialist World Collapsed

Now that I have outlined the main characteristics of the socialist world, I can turn to the final stage of my analysis: the collapse of Soviet communism. I argue that the Soviet world began to unravel when it tethered itself to the Western capitalist world. To support this claim, this section proceeds in two stages. First, I describe why and how the doctrine of developed socialism was launched in the 1970s. Second, I analyse how developed socialism fundamentally altered the ontology of the socialist world by allowing capitalism to penetrate it, thereby causing its demise.

If the promise of the communist future had been damaged by the incalculable violence that Stalinism inflicted upon the Soviet people, the ‘thaw’ initiated by Khrushchev created renewed expectations for a better life. The socialist world was about to enter the communist phase, Khrushchev promised. The system of central planning, however, could not possibly deliver the classless society. Faced with unachievable production targets and poorly designed investment plans, production managers began to bargain more materials and funds, before hoarding the surpluses in prevision of the next production cycle, resulting in endemic shortages.^[38] Citizens followed the same logic: “Mama would buy everything she could ... and stash it away for a rainy day...”^[39] While the centralised economy could keep up with the basic needs of the population, the promise that the hard times would soon come to an end created a paradoxical surge in consumption, breaking from the ascetic life of the 1930s. This, in turn, fostered the emergence of black markets and alternative production circuits.^[40] The grey economy was not merely a threat to the Party’s authority, as is often asserted. As I have indeed argued, time and space in the socialist world revolved around the principle that everyone’s work had to be directed towards the building of communism.

The ousting of Khrushchev and the coming to power of Brezhnev is usually thought to have ushered in the ‘era of stagnation’. While I do not dispute the term ‘stagnation’, I agree with Verdery that the turning point for the socialist world occurred during the Brezhnev era, not with the launch of Gorbachev’s perestroika in the late 1980s, as most

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narratives assert.[41] Brezhnev indeed precipitated the USSR into stagnation by abandoning the transition to the communist stage and switching to a more short-term strategy, thereby dealing the first major blow to the ontology of the socialist world. Brezhnev's solution to the endemic shortages of consumer goods was to trade with the West and import the consumer goods that the USSR was lacking in return for raw materials and staple industrial products.[42] This ended the spatial isolation of the socialist world, which had expanded to Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War but had remained shut away from its Western counterpart ever since. It also ushered a direct economic competition between the two worlds, fought on capitalist terms. This competition was short-lived. By the 1970s, it had become clear that Soviet products could not compete on the Western markets; the centralised production system was not meant to ensure that its products were competitive, but merely that they fulfilled the basic needs of the Soviet citizens – in other words, its rationale was completely different to that of the Western capitalist system.[43] The only way to acquire foreign currency and continue importing was to borrow from Western banks. The debt of the Eastern Bloc skyrocketed, rising from \$7 billion to \$29 billion between 1970 and 1975.[44] In the late 1970s, Western banks decided to stop lending to communist countries, thereby planting an economic time bomb that would result in the political instability of the 1980s.[45]

Gorbachev's reforms were merely an attempt to control the damage done by Brezhnev's decision to open up to Western trade. The relaxation of economic and political control was meant to adapt to the capitalist world to which Brezhnev had tethered the USSR, but the damage to the fundamental features of the socialist world had already been done. The demise of socialism was not due to economic crises, but to an ontological collision with the capitalist system. Unlike its socialist counterpart, the capitalist world places a premium on time: time can be measured in money, and dynamism and acceleration are the core dynamics of the capitalism. Allowing the capitalist world to penetrate the USSR had the unintended consequence of tightening the time-space horizon of the socialist world; time was no longer on the side of the Soviets, who were now faced with the stark choice of catching up or going under. [46] The progression towards the communist future was replaced by the race for imports and debt repayment, while the spatial expansion of socialism was beaten back by the penetration of financial interests eager to undo what the Soviets had built. The entire production system that ran the socialist world could not cope with the acceleration of time and the shrinking of space caused by the collision with capitalism.

This, in turn, created irreversible changes in the lives of the Soviet citizens. As capitalism entered the socialist world, the idealism that had prevailed for seven decades was replaced by consumerism and materialism: "What kind of idealism can the Pepsi Generation have?"[47] The temporality of the Soviet world no longer revolved around the long-term goal of creating a communist society, but around the short-term goal of acquiring consumer goods. Soon, "cosmic enthusiasm" was replaced by "nostalgia for the future." [48] "Instead of 'Our Future is Communism,' the signs began exclaiming, 'Buy now!'...Words no longer meant anything,"[49] and so "the Soviet major [became] a businessman." [50] The ontology of the Soviet world was no longer socialist; the socialist world ceased existing because Soviet citizens and the people of the Eastern Bloc ceased performing it. Theories relying on political, economic, and societal factors to explain the collapse of communism all underestimate the magnitude and violence of the crashing down of the socialist world: "The discovery of money hit us like an atom bomb..."[51]

Conclusion

Starting from the disjuncture between academic theories seeking to understand communism and its demise and the testimonies of Soviet citizens, I have sought to offer a different perspective on socialism, reconciling conceptual thinking with situated experience.

First, I have examined why mainstream theories of the social sciences and International Relations in particular fail to engage with situated experience and difference in general. Following Law's critique of the concept of the universe, I have showed how the idea of a one-world world and the categorisation of other ways of conceiving of life as mere beliefs serve to dismiss the testimonies of Soviet citizens retelling their experiences. Hence, I have left the one-world world and entered the pluriverse, meaning that I refrain from questioning alternative ontologies and engage with them on their own terms. Second, I have applied this reasoning to the study of socialism, focusing on its main ontological characteristics as they are found in the testimonies of Soviet citizens. I have established that time in the socialist world consisted of a specific relation between past, present, and future, according to which the hard work of the

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Soviet people would create a just society. The building of communism was also a spatial process, albeit a more vertical than horizontal one, meaning that communism was being built from the barren lands of the Soviet backcountry up to space itself. Production was what made the world go round; this was both a material and an ideational process, literally producing life in the forms of individuals and a society. Third, and holding on to my pluriversal perspective, I have provided a theorisation of the collapse of socialism. Situating the turning point in the 1970s, when developed socialism was implemented and trade with the West soared, I have analysed how the collision between the Soviet and the capitalist worlds resulted in the shrinking of time and space and the transformation of life itself, leading to the alteration of the Soviet ontology and the demise of the socialist world.

While this essay has provided a different perspective on socialism, its implications go beyond the study of the communist experience. Indeed, its relevance is methodological as much as historical or anthropological, as I have showed that taking seriously the idea of the pluriverse opens up new ways for creating knowledge that respects difference. More importantly, perhaps, this brief encounter with the defunct socialist world reminds us that unbeknownst to us, worlds come to life and meet their end. Not only are many worlds erased by Western liberal modernity, but the liberal modern world itself might disappear and be replaced by a new reality.

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