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What is This?
ON IRONY: AN INVITATION TO NEOCLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY

Gil Eyal, Iván Szélényi and Eleanor Townsley

ABSTRACT This article proffers an invitation to neoclassical sociology. This is understood as a Habermasian reconstruction of the fundamental vision of the discipline as conceptualized by classical theorists, particularly Weber. Taking the cases of Eastern and Central Europe as a laboratory, we argue against the idea of a single, homogenizing globalizing logic. Currently and historically what we see instead is a remarkable diversity of capitalist forms and destinations. Neither sociological theories of networks and embeddedness nor economic models of rational action adequately comprehend this diversity. A neoclassical approach enjoins an empirical research agenda comparing capitalisms, and an ironic, historical approach to analysis to inform an immanent critique of capitalist possibilities.

KEYWORDS capitalism • class • cultural capital • post-socialist • status

I. SOCIAL THEORY AFTER THE FALL OF SOCIALISM:
RETHINKING ‘THE CRISIS OF WESTERN SOCIOLOGY’

The collapse of state socialism presents a challenge to sociology, and in particular, to sociology’s tradition of critical social analysis. Sociology and socialism were twin-born in the massive social changes of the 19th century, and their original visions shared premises and presuppositions. In particular, both were critical of the anarchy of markets and, as an alternative, both
advocated the collective rational ordering of society, aided and informed by social science. The affinity between sociology and socialism was most evident in the work of Saint-Simon and Comte who wanted to build an intellectually and spiritually superior social order, but it was also apparent in the work of Marx and Durkheim. For these latter thinkers, sociological theory formed an alternative to liberal political economy just as socialism offered an alternative to capitalism. The other branch of classical sociology, represented by Weber, was not as sanguine about the possibility of socialism. Weber subjected the ideals of collectivism to critical scrutiny from the perspective of individual liberty (as did later thinkers like Mill and Popper). Despite disagreement about the desirability of socialism, however, Weber shared a common critical vantage point with Marx and Durkheim, i.e. one informed by an awareness of the possibility of a socialist alternative to capitalism.

In his *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970), Alvin Gouldner bequeathed to us an analysis of sociology that showed how the problematic relation between socialism and sociology continued into the 20th century, long after the classical social thinkers. True, the brutality and bleakness of actually existing socialism tarnished the socialist vantage point for many intellectuals, but Gouldner's analysis demonstrated nonetheless that the 20th-century split between positivism and critical social science was precisely a division over the issue of how socialist realities and possibilities were to be weighed against each other. On one side, 20th-century positivists tended to translate their horror of the ‘dark side’ of actually existing socialism into an uncritical acceptance and apologia for capitalism. The very meaning of positivism changed. Where for Comte ‘positivism’ was a rejection of ‘nativism’ – a call to be brave and to dare to think about a world that could be better – for 20th-century positivists, positivism became a description and justification of the existing world as the only possible one. On the other side, critical social science criticized ‘actually existing socialism’, not from the point of view of the existing order of things, but on the basis of a vision of true socialism. Theorists like the ‘Western Marxists’ argued that the societies of Eastern and Central Europe simply did not measure up to the ideal; they were not sufficiently ‘socialistic’ or worse, they were a version of ‘state capitalism’. In this context, Gouldner argued that what was once a productive tension between actuality and possibility had now bifurcated into a one-sided emphasis on either inert actuality (positivism) or abstract possibility (critical social science), both of which had lost any critical dimension.

We think Gouldner’s search for a way to rescue sociology from the impasse between positivism and critical social science is relevant once again. Our reasons are somewhat different than Gouldner’s however. In 1970, Gouldner, like many other social scientists, believed that he was witnessing the merging of capitalism and socialism – what Daniel Bell (1973) called ‘post-industrial society’. It was in this merger, he argued, that the critical imagination of sociology was lost. Positivism and marxism mirrored each
other from across the divide, because both were ideological reflections of the rise of a new class of intellectuals that would eventually replace the dominant classes of both capitalism and state socialism. This was the ‘coming crisis of Western sociology’: not only had sociology lost the critical vantage point it once possessed in socialism, it had also lost the agent that could occupy this vantage point, namely the Mannheimian socially unattached intellectual.

Gouldner argued nonetheless, that the critical potential of the sociological tradition could be reconstructed. Drawing a parallel with the Young Hegelians and their reradicalization of Hegelian philosophy, he suggested that sociology’s radical potential lay in its commitment to reflexivity i.e. in using the values and weapons of the intellectual’s own ‘culture of critical discourse’ against intellectuals themselves. If he or she is committed to reflexivity as a first principle, even the self-interested social scientist can arrive at a radical vision of a better society because reflexivity means exposing his or her own interests and modes of reasoning to self-critical scrutiny.

We think there is much to be learned from Gouldner. The crisis of sociology he predicted has arrived, although not exactly in the way he expected. Instead of meeting socialism halfway, which seemed likely in the heyday of social democracy, the capitalist world of 21st-century Western Europe and North America is further away from socialism than it has been in the last 50 years. And instead of meeting capitalism halfway, which seemed likely in the years of reform communism in Eastern Europe, postcommunist societies pursue a wide range of new strategies to make capitalism. Indeed, rather than a convergence of the two main social systems of the 20th century, the 21st century presents us with a dazzling variety of capitalisms all over the globe. The only exceptions are the two tiny, moribund islands of actually existing communism: Cuba and North Korea. So, world history has not followed the trajectory predicted by Gouldner (and so many others). With that stipulated however, it is true that the world is no longer divided between two competing social systems, and that in the postcommunist context, sociology is showing signs of ‘crisis’.

The dominant ideology of 21st-century capitalism is globalization: a worldview that asserts the existence of a single global capitalist logic. Sociology has lost its critical vantage point, then, not because of the convergence of marxism and positivism, which Gouldner predicted, but because the perception of a monolithic globalization obviates the idea of a critical vantage point. And this is a dual crisis because it was precisely this critical vantage point that distinguished sociology from the other social sciences, and in particular from economics.

In a world seemingly dominated by the globalizing logic of capitalist markets and liberal culture, sociology struggles to distinguish its object, methods, and social role. Indeed, many contemporary strands of sociology are formulated as a conscious alternative to the dominance of neoclassical economics. This is the case for economic sociology with its emphasis on
embeddedness, of network analysts who purport to demonstrate how markets are composed of networks of social relations, and also for neo-institutionalist sociologists who emphasize the conventionalized and organizational substratum of economic relations. But we would argue that even the most positivist sociology of the past, and even those theorists thought to be the most antisocialist or the most non-political, distinguished themselves from economics by an explicit or implicit criticism of a social order based purely on markets. For example, Parsons emphasized socialization and culture over economic expedience, and liberal thinkers were always suspicious of the elements of collectivism and constructive rationality in his vision of the 'social system' (Wagner, 1994). Ironically, then, even the positivist sociological 'escape route' away from socialism partook in the discipline's critical heritage. It defined social reality as distinct and more fundamental than the operation of markets, and on this basis it could point to an alternative beyond the status quo. With the fall of socialism, however, even the positivist 'escape route' is in danger of being overtaken by the socialist joke, i.e. that socialism is merely a long detour from capitalism to capitalism, or, in this case, that sociology is nothing but a long detour from liberal political economy to neoclassical economics.

Nothing symbolizes this dire possibility better than the ascendancy of 'rational choice' theory which threatens to erase the distinctions between economics and sociology, merging them both into a systematic 'economic description of the social' (Gordon, 1991). Rational choice theory accommodates and marginalizes all the defenses erected against it – embeddedness, networks, institutions – all are assimilable into the maximizing calculus of rational actors. In a world without 'actually existing socialism', it appears that the neoliberal version of capitalism reigns supreme across the globe. Economic actors are disembedded, institutions are consciously designed, and a price tag is put on traditions, path dependencies, and network ties so all can fit within its maximizing calculus. In such a world, the escape route of sociological positivism seems pointless as it circles back and ends at the same place. The imperialism of capital is matched by the theoretical imperialism of 'rational choice', and both point towards a single capitalist destination – the end of history.

Should sociology accept this vision of triumphant capitalism? Must post-socialist sociology lose its object of analysis and its critical perspective? We think not. Instead, we argue that the postsocialist crisis in sociology offers opportunities for renewing the critical vision of the discipline. It offers sociology the chance to take stock and reconstruct its classical heritage, this time outside the polarity of capitalism versus socialism, and armed with the critical powers of ironic self-reflection. Just as economics returned to its classical roots to reconstitute the discipline in the face of massive global market failure in the 1970s, so we think sociology might profitably return to its classical roots to reconstitute itself in the shadow of the fall of socialism. In economics,
such a return implied a return to the notion of the self-interested individual. In sharp contrast, however, in sociology such a return implies the question: what are the origins of modernity, or of capitalism? Thus, we are not suggesting a return to the classical tradition conceived superficially as a theoretical ‘toolbox’ from which to draw concepts and insights at whim. Rather, we propose a reconstruction (in the Habermasian sense of the term) of the fundamental critical vision of the classical sociological thinkers (Habermas, 1990).

In marked contrast to neoclassical economics, which posits a single capitalist logic and a single mode of rational human action, what we call ‘neoclassical sociology’ is a field of critical social analysis in which the method of inquiry is ironic. Taking Gouldner’s analysis as our point of departure, we observe that irony – as long as it is rooted in self-irony – is always undertaken in the reflexive mode. The researcher who engages in irony begins his or her analysis by suspending his or her own values, judgments, and knowledge about the world, and accepting as valid the point of view of ‘the other’. This is done in the understanding that his or her own values and those of the other are relational, i.e. they only exist and take meaning in relationship to each other, or to put it another way, in conversation with each other. This is the reflexive premise of the ironic method, or to put it with Mannheim ([1936] 1985), this is relational analysis. The purpose of ironic analysis is to show the temporary nature of both positions and their determination by the relations that describe and constitute them. Thus irony begins with reflexivity but does not end there. A better world is still a goal of ironic analysis, a goal pursued in the conversation between subject and object, between alter and ego. Indeed, this is the radical promise of irony for critical social analysis. Precisely because he or she does not need a ‘critical vantage point’, the ironic analyst does not have to formulate a positive statement about the most desirable or the best solution. Ironic analysis only has to persuade the other that there is a range of possible solutions and there are multiple ways to perceive and rank those solutions as desirable. Being ironic, then, is the opposite of being serious or earnest. Seriousness assumes faith in the supremacy of a position. The ironic analyst does not occupy such moral high ground, and wants to convince others that they do not occupy such high ground either. It is for this reason that humor or jokes are important instruments in ironic analysis. Irony is also distinct from cynicism. To invoke Mannheim again, we would say that a cynical position is relativist while an ironic analysis is relationist, by which we mean that ironic analysis accepts the possibility of multiple truths, with each truth still distinguishable from untruth.

This article is an ‘invitation to neoclassical sociology’ and therefore to ironic analysis. While we coin the term ‘neoclassical sociology’, we do not think we have invented a new field of inquiry. Rather, we present an examination and critique of sociology’s response to a world without socialism and, in particular, to the ever-powerful challenge of economics. In this effort, we
seek to discover a way to balance the duality of affirmative and critical perspectives that has characterized the discipline from its inception. To this end, the remainder of the article addresses three interrelated questions posed by socialism’s demise, each of which suggests directions for a reconstructed, neoclassical sociology.

First, how should sociologists think about capitalism in the postsocialist era? How can we avoid reifying capitalism as a single homogenous globalizing logic? We think the answer is a reconstruction of the Weberian concept of capitalism, a comparative approach that conceptualizes capitalism as a plurality of forms and destinations.

Second, does the end of actually existing socialism mean the end of class analysis? Should we accept the claim that classes are disappearing or dead (Inglehart and Rabier, 1986; Pakulski and Waters, 1996)? We do not think so. Rather, we argue that the transition to capitalism in Eastern Europe provides exciting new materials for a reconstructed class analysis, raising important questions about the ‘classness’ of collective actors and the role of intellectuals in social change.

Third, is a critical social science possible in the absence of a socialist alternative? Does the repudiation of socialism necessarily mean the repudiation of the role of the intellectual as social critic? Again, we think not. Rather than retreating to the position of a sociological technician, or collapsing sociology into moral critique, we propose that the sobering experience of the demise of the teleological intellectual be used to formulate a new mode of critical intellectual engagement, namely, irony.

II. HOW SHOULD SOCIOLOGISTS THINK ABOUT CAPITALISM IN THE POSTSOCIALIST ERA?

The basic premise of neoclassical sociology is that since the possibility of a socialist alternative can no longer be detected with the instruments of social science, the task before us is the comparative analysis of capitalist forms and destinations. This is a central argument in our book *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists* (1998), which analyzes transitions from socialism to capitalism in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Before turning to our framework for the study of comparative capitalisms, however, we revisit the question of how to think about socialism and capitalism in the postsocialist world.

The absence of a socialist alternative and the nature of capitalism

We argue that the possibility of a socialist alternative can no longer serve as the basis for a critical social science because we cannot currently detect such an alternative empirically. Our premise is that critical social science should be based on the detection of ‘real alternatives’, and a social
alternative can be thought of as real only if there are social actors (other than the social scientist) who are engaged in empirically observable collective action of an ‘emergent’ nature (Williams, 1980: 32–49), i.e. collective action that points toward an alternative social order. This position is empirical without being positivist since reality is indeed praxis, and we (and our analyses) are involved in it. We only add the weak empirical caveat that socially transformative praxis must have an identifiable social agent.

In the current historical moment, we find no collective actor that is willing to take on the project of building socialism. Not only is it the case that workers no longer constitute a class agent mobilized for socialism, even the intelligentsia is no longer interested in building socialism. Indeed, as an empirical matter we observe that the consciousness of the leading fractions of the intellectual class in western capitalism as well as the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe are marked precisely by the experience of disillusionment with socialism. Although they were historically identified with building socialism, disillusionment now permeates intellectual identities and worldviews so profoundly that we think it is unlikely that these class fractions will become carriers of a socialist project in the foreseeable future.

To be clear: we are not arguing that the absence of a proximate socialist alternative means socialism is impossible in principle, or that socialism will not be built in some future we are unable to see. We have no crystal ball and social science has a bad track record of prediction. Nor do we think that the absence of a socialist alternative means that marxism is dead or irrelevant. On the contrary: in a world dominated by capitalist financial markets, where the livelihoods of millions are contingent on the mysterious movement of stocks and currencies, marxism has much to contribute to the ethical critique of capitalism. No longer required to justify the practicalities of building socialism, whether in the form of the Gulag or the inefficiencies of socialist planning, marxism may experience a renaissance. Our point is simply that the probability of finding collective actors mobilized to build a socialist society in the near future are extremely slim, especially in Eastern Europe.

If we are correct that there is no proximate socialist alternative in the new world order, then does it follow that capitalism – defined as a single, homogeneous, global logic – is ‘the only game in town’? We do not think so. To accept such a proposition is both ahistorical and naive. Instead, following Weber ([1904–5]1958: 13–31), we suggest that capitalism comes in many forms, and that a comparative analysis of multiple ‘capitalisms’ and their consequences is the critical task facing sociologists today.

Weber offers a generic definition of capitalist economic action as the building block for a comparative analysis of capitalisms: action is capitalist if it is oriented towards profit through peaceful means, and if it applies rational criteria to measure inputs expended against benefits accrued. No other more concrete criteria of capitalism are required by this definition. Whether or not
an economic system is ‘capitalist’ then, is a matter of degree; it is more capitalist to the extent that it is organized to render the calculation of costs and benefits rational. Of course, since calculation is a social practice, capitalist rationalization implies a host of social institutions and a corresponding set of productive relations that reproduce them. Among these one would usually include individual private property in the means of production, the separation of direct producers from the means of production, and price-regulating markets (Weber, [1915–21]1978: 915, 1393–95; [1927]1981: 276–8; Callon, 1998). But capitalist economic action can also take place under conditions where property is not fully private, where labor is not separated from the means of production, or outside of price-regulating markets (Weber, [1904–5]1958: 13–31; [1915–21]1978: 635–40, 1393–95; [1927]1981: 335–6; Polanyi, [1944]1957). Thus, it is possible to think about multiple forms of capitalism as historically specific assemblages of various elements differing in the type and in the extent to which they enable rational economic calculation.

This understanding is in tension with Weber’s other argument that modern Western capitalism is the most rational or powerful combination of these various social institutions and productive relations. There is, after all, his famous proposition that modern Western capitalism is an ‘iron cage’ of individual private property and self-regulating markets into which agents are locked because these arrangements provide for the most rational profit-seeking behavior. Here, Weber suggests strongly that modern Western capitalism functions as the termi

This is what we do in our book, comparing transitions to capitalism in Eastern and Central Europe to explore how various elements are combined in different cases. Specifically, we describe and analyze the interrelations between property relations, the means and degree of state regulation and planning, the degree of development of capital and labor markets, the nature of welfare state institutions and the disposition of surplus labor, the
availability of intellectual technologies of calculation, the nature of inter-
organizational relationships, the type of capitalist actors and their degree of
classness, and the modes of justification of profit-seeking behavior. In this,
we adopt Weber’s ([1903–17]1949: 33–9) assumption of multiple rationalities
rather than a single unifying capitalist rationality, and we follow his methodo-
logical commitment to a developmentalist rather than an evolutionary mode
of explanation ([1903–17]1949: 50–112). It is on this basis that we propose a
comparative framework for analyzing the diversity of capitalist forms and
relations, and we argue such a framework is absolutely necessary if we seek
to pursue a critical sociology in the face of triumphalist claims of the end of
history.

The globalization-convergence thesis
Since 1989, a new orthodoxy of neoliberal popularizers and neoclassical
economists has interpreted the term ‘globalization’ to mean a process of
convergence on a single homogenous world capitalist system. This system is
understood to be governed by the unified systemic logic of competitive
global markets, bolstered by international economic agencies such as the IMF
and the World Bank. This systemic logic, which approximates the neoliberal
doctrine, weakens states and dilutes the significance of differences between
national economies, pushing them inexorably towards convergence (Omae,
1995; Reich, 1992; Schmidt, 1995). We think that this globalization-as-
convergence thesis has several conceptual and empirical shortcomings.

First, the argument’s plausibility rests heavily on an implicit sense of the
‘end of history’; on the idea that the process of globalization is unique to the
postmodern era, that it is driven by factors that have not existed before, and
that it is irreversible. This is false. Even a cursory glance at the historical
record reveals that what we are witnessing today is, at best, a second round
of globalization, if not a more cyclical phenomenon (Hirst and Thompson,
globalization operated in full force from the late 19th century to the First
World War, a period that witnessed a dramatic increase in the volume of
foreign trade, the rise of international currency markets, and mass movements
of immigrant labor between continents. Even more importantly, we observe
that shortly thereafter, these processes were reversed, blocked, or at least
slowed by the growth of protectionism, restrictions on immigration, and state
intervention (Polanyi, [1944]1957). There is no reason to think that this could
not happen again; indeed, there are some indications that it is already occur-
rting. Powerful antiglobal movements are countering the current round of
globalization. For example, the last decade has witnessed the creation of
more new nation states than in any single previous decade (Mann, 1997). In
addition, there has been an increase in national conflicts, and arguably, a
strengthening of national consciousness everywhere. Strong regional trends
also work against unfettered global capitalism. With respect to commodities
trading, for example, there is evidence that what we are witnessing is not globalization at all, but rather the formation of regional blocks (NAFTA, EU, Southeast Asia), between which there is only minimal trade (Fligstein, 2000; Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Weiss, 1998).

To give the globalization thesis its due, it is probably most accurate when applied to international currency markets and the movement of financial capital. These have become truly global and, more importantly, instantaneous, i.e. shrinking the time–space horizon of economic action (Giddens, 1998; Harvey, 1989: 160–72, 284–307). But even here, we do not see evidence that convergence is propelled by the impersonal economic logic of capitalism per se. Rather, the recent round of convergence was orchestrated by international economic agencies in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. And, while global financial markets brought formidable pressure to bear on the Southeast Asian states, the direction of this pressure towards the greater homogeneity of financial institutions was shaped by concrete actors, by theories of the essence of the crisis, and by the rhetoric of ‘transparency’ deployed by the Fed and the IMF to delegitimate these countries’ existing policies (Stiglitz, 1999). In this context, it is impossible to verify the globalization-as-convergence thesis empirically, since the theory itself has played a central role in defining the situation it purports to explain, shaping the very outcomes it predicts.

In short, although we claim no special expertise on the points reviewed above, we note that they cast doubt on the thesis of globalization-as-convergence. Moreover, where we do profess some detailed knowledge, that is, in our analysis of the transitions from socialism to capitalism in post-1989 Eastern and Central Europe, we find that the evidence weighs quite strongly against the unitary view of global capitalism.

**Eastern Europe: the historical laboratory**

In a very real sense, the countries of Eastern and Central Europe served as the laboratory of global capitalism in the 1990s. Western neoclassical economists were given free rein to impose their capitalist blueprint, and they did so with alacrity. Far from producing a single, homogenous result, however, the laboratory has produced capitalist systems that vary widely. For example, former socialist societies in Eastern and Central Europe vary in the extent to which they receive foreign investment and engage in foreign trade, thus they vary precisely in the degree to which they can be considered ‘global’. Instead of homogenization and convergence, then, we observe that the transition to capitalism in the former socialist world is marked by divergence.

In our book, we try to explain this diversity, arguing that the pivotal causal mechanism that distinguished transitions in different countries was intraclass conflict within the late communist dominant class. The outcomes of these intraclass conflicts were decisive for the subsequent course of transition and capitalist development in different Eastern and Central European
countries, since they explain in each case who the agents were who led the transition, and what kind of capitalism they tried to create.

In Russia, and also to a large extent in Rumania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Ukraine, and Belarus, the victorious fraction of the late communist dominant class was composed of party bureaucrats. During the transition to capitalism, these actors converted their political offices into private property. They were less interested and, arguably, less capable of building capitalist institutions such as free markets in labor and capital. So, in these countries we find capitalists without capitalism: former communist officials amassed private fortunes in the course of the transition but now operate in the context of weak or non-functioning market institutions. The most spectacular case is Russia where one finds a strong propertied bourgeoisie operating in a context marked by the failure of monetary consolidation, the replacement of market by barter, and the enserfment of workers (Bonnell, 1999; Burawoy and Krotov, 1992; Woodruff, 1999). The resulting situation is what Burawoy (1996) calls ‘involution’, i.e. a form of adaptation to the imposition of capitalism from above, in which precapitalist actors and institutions use barter, household production, and client-patron relations to either insulate themselves from the logic of the market or defensively adjust to its pressure. To use Polanyi’s ([1944]1957) terminology, the failure or weakness of market institutions is corrected by institutions of reciprocity, which embed economic relations in a movement contrary to the disembedding logic of markets and money.

In contrast, the countries of Central Europe experienced a different transition process, and they appear to be headed in a different direction than Eastern European involution. In Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and to a lesser extent in Slovakia, and the Baltic states, the bureaucratic fraction of the dominant class did not emerge victorious in the intraclass struggles of late communism. Instead, bureaucrats were defeated by a coalition of technocrats, former dissident intellectuals, and members of the educated middle management of socialist enterprises. By its very nature, this coalition was incapable of engaging in mass conversions of political offices into private property. That is, many of its members never held political office under communism, and those who did were constrained by the fact of the coalition and, in particular, the scrutiny of a free press and democratically elected parliaments. At the same time, the ideological bonds uniting this intellectual coalition were grounded in the idea of building market institutions as an ethical mission – as a means of purging society of the evils of communism. Thus, transitional societies in Central Europe saw the early development of labor and capital markets, a strong emphasis on monetary consolidation and on price liberalization. The transformation of property rights, by contrast, was comparatively slow. Early in the transition, this created diffuse ownership rights, giving managers wide latitude to control firms, with the state still functioning as the final support, particularly in terms of bailouts of ‘privatized’
firms. Later, these countries saw the coalition of managers and technocrats strike profitable deals with foreign business partners, who took over the newly privatized firms and gave the managers and technocrats well-paid managerial positions in what were now foreign-owned firms. During both of these changes in ownership relations, however, we emphasize the absence of a domestic bourgeoisie. This is a particularly glaring feature of the Central European transitions, especially when they are compared to the development of predatory capitalist classes in countries like Russia. There is an absentee capitalist class in Central Europe, in the form of foreign ownership by multinational corporations, but its alliance is with domestic technocrats and managers who also control the state. Thus, we argue that the Central European transition produced capitalism without capitalists, since these countries developed market institutions quickly but no domestic propertied bourgeoisie. The resulting developmental trajectory is not one of ‘involution’, but one of ‘dependent development’ (Evans, 1979); most economic growth is taking place in export-oriented foreign-owned firms with the encouragement of state actors. While domestic markets remain modest, these countries are undergoing an export-led industrialization, typically in high technology sectors.

The conclusion we draw from this most privileged historical laboratory of Central and Eastern Europe then, is that origins, trajectories, and above all, class actors, matter a great deal in shaping the type of capitalism produced in the transition from socialism. We conclude further that this evidence casts doubt on the argument of a single, homogenous, global capitalism. To be clear: we do not deny the possibility that at some point in the future these societies may converge on the neoliberal vision of capitalism, but to engage in such speculation is futurology, not sociology. The epistemological status of the globalization-as-convergence argument, to our mind, is identical to that of the marxist insistence on the existence of a socialist alternative: there is no empirical evidence for it in the present. Indeed, all empirical evidence points to the contrary, with Central Europe, Eastern Europe and even China more different now than they were 20 or 50 years ago.

**Sociological responses: network analysis, embeddedness, and the new institutionalism**

This complex historical diversity of capitalist forms is precisely what is not apprehended in the mainstream sociological response to the crisis caused by the fall of socialism; namely, the response offered by neo-institutionalist sociology and network analysis. This perspective contends that there is a more concrete, and more fundamental level of social reality in which the abstract market mechanisms theorized by neoclassical economics are ‘embedded’; a level of reality composed of networks, conventions, imitation, and habits, rather than the rational maximizing action of individuals or the forces of supply and demand (see for example, Granovetter, 1985; Meyer and
Rowan, 1977; White, 1992). As we intimated earlier, however, we consider the response of neo-institutionalist sociology and network analysis to be the contemporary ‘escape route’ of sociological positivism and, as such, limited. These approaches are positivist because their response to the crisis of post-socialist sociology consists in defining the sociological enterprise as the study of certain timeless social mechanisms, such as networks and interaction. This strategy avoids what we argue to be the main task of a critical sociology – to produce an analysis that responds to the historical specificity of our times.

Just as earlier sociological positivism drew implicit and unacknowledged vigor from the existence of the socialist alternative, we think that neo-institutionalist sociology and network analysis are marked by an implicit and unacknowledged concession that such an alternative no longer exists. Gone are the grand social systems of a thinker like Parsons. Instead, neo-institutionalist sociology and network analysis strike a retreat to the level of the concrete, everyday, interpersonal, and habitual. Thus, instead of contesting the meaning of rationality, they deny its significance and emphasize blind imitation (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Instead of contesting the notion of a single capitalist logic, they evade the issue altogether and emphasize embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985). Instead of responding to proclamations that classes are disappearing, they collapse the notion of social structure into the methodological individualism of ‘networks’. We contend that all of these intellectual choices involve an implicit concession to ‘rational choice’ theory and neoclassical economics: imitation is rational under the assumption of bounded rationality (Simon, 1982); networks are assets manipulated by the maximizing individual; and embeddedness simply denotes the brackets around the rational choice calculus, the assumption of ‘all else being equal . . .’.

The transition to capitalism in Eastern Europe provides an empirical laboratory to assess the utility and critical potential of these positivist approaches, just as it does for the globalization-as-convergence thesis. So, for example, if we apply neo-institutionalist sociology and network analysis to a case like Russia, where there are capitalists but no fully-fledged capitalism, we find economic integration is occurring through networks, embeddedness, and reciprocity, i.e. precisely through those mechanisms highlighted in neo-institutionalist and network-analytic approaches. We do not think this is a vindication of these approaches, however. On the contrary, it reveals their lack of critical historical relevance. Such positivist analyses fail to observe the sociohistorical consequences of embeddedness and networks in the context of the postsocialist transition to capitalism. Such analyses are unlikely to observe that Russia’s economic system is on a path of involutionary economic development toward political capitalism (of the type Weber identified in 19th century Prussia) and, in this context, the political culture is likely to be authoritarian and work against the development of liberal democratic institutions (Schlucter, 1985). Our point is that while it is possible at a certain
level of abstraction to treat embeddedness and networks as invariant conditions of economic action, this approach is unlikely to offer historical insight. It is unlikely to support the kind of historical comparisons between different types of capitalism and their consequences that are the order of the day if sociology is to continue its critical mission.

Put another way, we argue that sociological theories of embeddedness and networks tend to take the nature of social actors as given or unproblematic. In this, these theories are like neoclassical economics. Neither perspective closely examines the role of social actors, particularly collective actors, in the transition from socialism to capitalism in Eastern and Central Europe. On the one hand, neoclassical economists (and many sociologists) think the crucial issue of the transition is ‘institution building’. They think that if they design the correct set of institutions, preferably copied from the West, this guarantees a smooth transition to market capitalism. To this day, neoclassical economists engage in endless justifications explaining why their transition programs have not worked (Aslund, 1995). On the other hand, the crucial issue for network analysts is ‘path dependency’. Here the focus is on how the survival of institutions and network ties from the communist period limits the development of ‘pure’ market relations (Stark, 1992). In the absence of an analysis of actors, however, ‘path dependency’ remains an inert notion, incapable of accounting for the contrast between the dynamism of the Central European economies and the stagnation of the Eastern European ones. It is against both of these perspectives then, that our approach to the analysis of comparative capitalism focuses on actors. We argue that the social positions, trajectories, worldviews, identities, and alliances of the actors who envisaged and implemented the capitalist project in Eastern and Central Europe have been absolutely decisive for the types of capitalism that have emerged in these countries.

**Comparative capitalisms**

Our analysis of comparative capitalism in contemporary Eastern and Central Europe also suggests that we aim our new critical lens at the *history* of capitalism, rereading what we thought we knew about Western capitalism from the historically novel angle of postsocialism. We are not arguing that capitalism has become more diverse since the demise of socialism, but rather that we are more capable of seeing and appreciating its diversity. Previously, the existence of a socialist alternative obscured the importance of capitalist diversity. So, although a wealth of scholarship existed documenting divergent and unique trajectories of capitalist development in the past, for example in Japan or Southeast Asia (e.g. Dore, 1973), these differences have been undertheorized. The dominance of marxist world system theories and neoliberal globalization theories has meant that these rich historical accounts were never used to inform a sustained comparison of the divergent routes of capitalist development, nor were they theoretically integrated back into the
concept of capitalism. Indeed, in contrast to the theoretical development in the field of comparative democratic and authoritarian political regimes (e.g. O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986), we would observe that the theoretical development of the field of comparative capitalism is dismal (for an exception see Fligstein, 1996).

With the demise of socialism, however, we think the field of comparative capitalism will inform a new critical social science. Instead of being drawn into the extortionist logic of choice that dictates that one either stands for capitalism or for socialism, no matter what their varieties and costs, with the fall of socialism we are released from this false polarity. Now we recognize the critical value of distinguishing types of societies and processes of social developments, and mapping their likely consequences. In this we follow Weber, who compared different capitalist formations around the world and throughout history in an effort to address a pressing political choice facing the society in which he lived. Specifically, Weber wanted to show that political capitalism, in both its ancient form and the Prussian version that marked German society in his day, imposed severe costs on social development, blocking industrialization and political liberalism. We tend to share the harshness of Weber's judgment with respect to the contemporary form of political capitalism in Russia. Like Weber we think the social costs of political capitalism are heavy. This is the sort of calculus we believe critical social theory can and should provide, using the tools of empirical social science so that social actors can assess the costs and benefits of different social arrangements and courses of action for themselves. We return to a discussion of the social role of critical sociology in the final section of the article.

III. DOES THE END OF ACTUALLY EXISTING SOCIALISM MEAN THE END OF CLASS ANALYSIS?

Another casualty of the ‘end of history’ proposition has been class analysis. We hear everywhere that classes are declining or dead, and that the East European transition to capitalism proves it. And it is accurate to say that the demise of socialism poses a challenge not only to marxism but also to sociology’s rich tradition of class analysis. The main reason is that the post-communist transition is the first time in history that capitalism has developed in a society that had formerly abolished private property, and which did not have even an embryonic class of private proprietors. This is the central puzzle of our book and why we entitled it *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists*. This label best describes the Central European case, but it also identifies the universal circumstance in which the initial stages of the transition from socialism to capitalism occurred following 1989. Previous theories of the transition to capitalism provide little insight into this unique circumstance because they invariably assume that a propertied class always exists before there is a
capitalist system. For example, the debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism revolved around whether this agent was an urban commercial bourgeoisie or an entrepreneurial landed nobility (Ashton and Philips, 1985; Dobb, 1946; Holton, 1985; Sweezy, 1942). Such an agent was everywhere absent at the outset of the postcommunist transition, and indeed, until much later in Central Europe. In the postcommunist context then, class analysis might seem to be irrelevant to the emergence of capitalism. Into this analytical lacuna the ‘end of history’ argument rushes once again. It proclaims the end of classes, positing the main question of the transition to be: how do we design the correct capitalist institutions to foster entrepreneurship and civil society? Instead of this, we propose the empirical question: who are the agents and forces that shape the transition?

We contend that the question of agents is crucial; indeed, the central claim of our book is that the transition to capitalism in Central Europe was a class project of the intelligentsia. While some intellectuals and technocrats have presented their role in the transition to capitalism as that of a proxy for a propertyt bourgeoisie which had not yet emerged, we argue that these intellectuals are far better characterized as a cultural bourgeoisie, or Bildungsbürgertum (Kocka, 1993). By this, we mean that these fractions of the intelligentsia were class agents defined by the structural characteristic of possessing cultural capital rather than economic capital, and by the historical project of building a bourgeois civilization, i.e. of building capitalist market institutions, liberal democracy, the rule of law, and civil society.

This concept of a ‘cultural bourgeoisie’ requires us to break with traditional class analysis in two ways. First, intellectuals have typically been analyzed as a ‘new class’ when they exhibit anticapitalist or postcapitalist characteristics. The concept of the ‘new class’ has been applied either to the role of intellectuals in socialist systems (Djilas, 1957; Konrád and Szélényi, 1979; Machajski, 1937) or to situations where they emerged as a subversive force within capitalism (Bell, 1973; Burnham, 1941; Gouldner, 1979). In cases where intellectuals do not stand in opposition to the capitalist project, or where they advocate capitalism, this is taken as evidence that intellectuals do not constitute a class, since they do not act in their own interests (e.g. Brint, 1985). In a second sociological tradition, classes are defined as collective actors whose interests are rooted in the economic system; their positions are defined either in terms of property relations or market position. In this perspective, cultural markers of distinction play a secondary role, at best, in class structuration (Giddens, 1973: 99–117). The notion of a cultural bourgeoisie breaks with both these traditions of class analysis and points toward a reformulation. First, we argue that thinking about cultural capital as a basis of class position implies a more general concept of ‘classness’ which has application far beyond the analysis of the transition in Eastern and Central Europe. Second, we suggest that thinking about intellectuals as a capitalist agent means paying attention to the specific power that intellectuals wield,
namely discourse, and on this basis, rethinking the role of intellectuals in social change more generally.

Classness

We trace the idea of ‘classness’ to Weber (again!), taking as our point of departure his distinction between ‘class’ and ‘rank’ as alternative concepts describing social structure. ‘Rank’ refers to a society composed of estates, understood as hierarchies in which personal ties of loyalty and obedience connect members, and in which one’s station in life is relatively fixed by law and tradition. ‘Class society’, in contrast, is composed of classes, defined as categories of actors who do not form a community (in Weber’s sense of the term), and whose members are not bound to each other by personal ties or fixed in place by law and tradition. Rather, in class societies, actors display probabilities to act on the basis of shared market position. This analytical distinction can be described as a continuum. To the extent that very clear and binding rules of inclusion and exclusion define individual membership in a community, one is closer to the ‘rank’ pole of the continuum. To the extent that such rules do not exist but individuals still act in a concerted manner on the basis of shared interests, one is closer to the ‘class’ pole of the continuum. In specific empirical circumstances, social actors may be characterized by their different positions along the continuum; that is, by their different degrees of ‘classness’ or ‘rankness’.

Building on this idea, we suggest that Weber’s analytical distinction between rank and class is usefully elaborated by Bourdieu’s theory of the different types of capital (Bourdieu, [1983]1986; Eyal et al., 1998: 66–70). Thus, rank society can be understood as a stratification order where social capital is dominant. Estates, after all, are hierarchical networks composed of patron–client relations, in which individuals operate according to ascribed social characteristics. Class society, in contrast, defines a stratification order in which economic capital is dominant, and money rather than nobility acquires symbolic power and sets the rate of conversion for all other types of capital.

What of cultural capital? Our argument is that cultural capital occupies a middle position on the rank–class continuum. On the one hand, a stratification order where cultural capital is dominant typically gives rise to groupings that resemble estates. Such groups usually practice professional closure through some form of credentialing, and they cultivate elaborate internal hierarchies. From the moment they are achieved, credentials function ascritively to entitle their bearers to goods and privileges (Collins, 1979). Of course, the credential must first be achieved in competition and legitimated by the ideology of meritocracy, and with respect to this ideology – what Gouldner called the Culture of Critical Discourse (CCD) – intellectuals resemble a class. That is, they are a collective actor brought together not by concrete ties, but by abstract relations and probable shared interests. We contend, therefore,
that because the intelligentsia is a category defined by the possession of cultural capital, it should be seen as a class actor, albeit a class actor characterized by a relatively low degree of classness.

It is precisely this social location between rank and class that describes the contradictory, hybrid nature of the intelligentsia, and that makes it a collective actor with great transformative potential. This can be seen clearly in late communist societies where the intelligentsia was probably the only actor capable of, or interested in, effecting a transition from socialism to capitalism; that is, a transition from a rank order where possessing social capital in the form of party membership and party network ties conferred the most advantage, to a class society (albeit with a low degree of classness) in which cultural capital is dominant, and economic capital is ascendant.

**Intellectuals in the capitalist transition**

How have Central European intellectuals become capitalist agents, and in what sense is capitalism an intellectual class project? This is a counter-intuitive puzzle, particularly when we recall that many of Central Europe’s liberal intellectuals were just as enthusiastic about socialism earlier in their careers as they are about capitalism now. Many of them were once committed to the goal of reforming socialism, as ‘new left’ intellectuals, as technocrats interested in efficiency and scientific planning, or as reformers working inside the communist party. Thus, the temptation might be to see the current zeal for capitalism among Central European intellectuals as a case of ‘bad faith’; one might argue they are no more than ideologues-for-hire providing services to capitalism in exchange for economic security. We think this temptation should be resisted for three reasons. First, as we argue in our book, there was no dominant capitalist class to command the services of the intellectuals during the postcommunist transformation. Moreover, Central European intellectuals were probably the strongest they had ever been, holding more official positions and wielding more social power than ever before. Second, there is no intrinsic reason why capitalism would require the sort of ethical justification these Central European intellectuals articulated. Capitalism is a self-legitimating system. It ‘works’ without requiring that workers or entrepreneurs believe in its superior moral nature. Therefore, the moral zeal and faith in the superiority of capitalism that marked the post-communist transition must be traced to the biographies and worldviews of Central European intellectuals themselves. And this is our third point: an analysis of these biographies and worldviews reveals not just a few scattered intellectuals in high positions who embrace capitalism, but shows instead that capitalism is a class project of the intelligentsia, i.e. a collective action to build a new social order.

Central European intellectuals are no strangers to transformative social projects. Three decades ago, the socialist intelligentsia undertook a collective
project to reform and humanize socialism. They sought to become the new dominant class of a rationalized socialism, exercising power as teleological redistributors (Konrád and Szélényi, 1979). Slowly, they turned away from this project as they came to realize that the bureaucratic character of socialism made such rationalization impossible. It is only in the long path out of this failed class project, after a decades-long process of negotiation, conflict, and struggle, that the Central European intelligentsia has come to embrace the project of building civil society and capitalism. Analyzing this process, we argue that the current capitalist project of the intelligentsia has been adopted for the same reasons that the socialist one was. That is, the project of building capitalism was undertaken, not on behalf of other classes, but precisely because the Central European intelligentsia was searching for a new social role and a new way of valorizing cultural capital (Eyal et al., 1998: 46–85, 135–42).

To elaborate this proposition fully, we argue, we need to think about the class power of intellectuals in a new way. Previous class analysis of intellectuals has tended to think of the valorization of cultural capital narrowly, associating it with social closure based in the monopoly of relatively esoteric discourse. This understanding of intellectual power and intellectual class capacities indicated a permanent conflict between the quest for professional autonomy, on the one hand, and the commodification of professional services in market capitalism, on the other (Gouldner, 1979: 18–27). Consequently, socialism seemed much more conducive to intellectual class formation, because the mechanism of economic exploitation, redistribution, also created a position that intellectuals could occupy as central planners with a monopoly over esoteric, teleological discourse (Djilas, 1957; Konrád and Szélényi, 1979). In both cases, however, we think the analysis of the valorization of cultural capital was limited. Cultural capital is, after all, discourse.

For discourse to operate as capital, i.e. to be converted and accumulated, monopoly – limiting access to non-certified members – is only one condition. The other condition is a certain degree of generosity. That is, for discourse to work as capital it must be able to persuade the largest number of speakers to adopt its rules, to speak its language, to employ the perspective it offers, and to pose problems and justify assertions in the way it does (Foucault, 1982; Gouldner, 1979; Rose, 1992). From this perspective, we argue that the Central European intelligentsia became a ‘cultural bourgeoisie’ and undertook the project of making capitalism and civil society, because they discovered in such a project the possibility of articulating a new and powerfully rational discourse. In the process of transition, the Central European intelligentsia imposed new standards of rationality, and persuaded all other actors to speak the new language that they had invented. It is precisely in this way, that the intelligentsia as a class actor took center-stage in the Central European transition to capitalism (Eyal, 2000).
Marxist and weberian theories of social change

This understanding of discourse as the basis of intellectual class power has implications for classical marxist and weberian theories of social change. Marxist theory explains social change in terms of struggles between antagonistic classes over economic interests, while weberian theory is notoriously vague, offering the nebulous notion of ‘charisma’ as the revolutionary force in history. In our book, we propose a synthesis and revision of these theories: social change is indeed made by classes in conflict, as Marx argues, but the carrier of social change is usually an intellectual class actor; specifically, intellectuals broach change using cultural capital, which functions in the same way that Weber argues charisma does.

How is cultural capital like charisma? First, because cultural capital occupies a middle position between rank and class, groups defined by the possession of cultural capital may develop collective interests in either a stratification order based on rank or one based on class. Put another way, intellectuals in any given stratification system always have an interest in the contrary principle of stratification. So, for example, intellectual critiques of socialist rank order were often based on appeals to merit and talent, while intellectual critiques in class societies are often based in ideologies of social closure, such as professional autonomy or academic freedom. Note, however, that in both kinds of stratification order, where intellectuals function as a collective actor, they are marked by a low degree of classness (or ‘rankness’). This suggests an explanation of the fundamental yet ephemeral nature of intellectual class power in revolutionary transformation; because the possessors of cultural capital constitute a weakly formed collective actor, better-formed actors always eventually take their place.16

Second, the transformative, charismatic capacity of cultural capital is fundamental to its nature as discourse. Inventing a new kind of discourse tends to have revolutionary consequences because it imposes a new mode of speaking and of perceiving the world; it has the power of ‘world-making’ (Bourdieu, 1987a; Goodman, 1978) and ‘world-destroying’. At the same time that discourse imposes a certain vision of the world as true, it also classifies, names, and invokes new social actors, classes among them. In this way, discourse divides the world into the true and the false, the harbingers of the future and the relics of the past. Those who speak in the old ways suddenly find themselves impugned as immoral and irrational. It is not simply that they articulate a different opinion; they are incompetent in the most profound sense of the term since they do not speak the new discourse – they do not understand the real ‘truth’.17 From this perspective, it becomes clear how cultural capital as discourse can produce radical change, similar to the burst of charisma that Weber described. It is even possible to account for Weber’s ambiguous insistence on the importance of the charismatic individual in social change. Discourse, although it is a collective product, tends to consecrate certain spokespersons, virtuosi who embody its charismatic qualities.
Thus, as Weber perceived, a charismatic individual very often triggers the making of intellectual classes and the formulation of transformative discourse; it is difficult to deny the importance of a Mao Tze Tung.

However, just as the role of charisma is temporary – as change is quickly institutionalized and the revolution betrays its sons – so too, the rule of cultural capital is ephemeral. The power of cultural capital is the power of discourse, and discourse, as Foucault explains, cannot be possessed. The power of truth is such that the truthful are also subject to it, and sooner or later, new truths, new versions, and new reflexive twists come to challenge the one Truth. The more it is proclaimed, repeated, and consecrated, the less convincing it is to those conversant with the rules of the Culture of Critical Discourse. Thus in the transition in Central Europe, as soon as intellectuals fulfill their historic mission and the new social structure is in place, the discursive power of the intellectuals who led the transition becomes less important. Intellectuals are slowly relegated back to their positions as members of a comparatively privileged estate. And as soon as this happens, space is opened up where intellectuals begin to disagree with each other again. They attach themselves to a variety of different classes as organic intellectuals, and a plurality of discourses emerges once again. The classness of intellectuals under these conditions is even lower than it was during the period of transition, and correspondingly their capacity for ethical nuance is greatly enhanced. It is also at this point that the ironic critique that we recommend becomes possible. All this describes the ‘universal’ nature of the intellectual class, whose rule is based in the enormous but temporary power of cultural capital, and which is therefore bound to abolish itself in the same moment that it becomes dominant.

This reinterpretation and synthesis of theories of social change highlights Bourdieu’s point that classes are first and foremost ‘classes on paper’. One should not overemphasize structural conditions in the making of classes; the discursive power of intellectuals, what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic power’, is no less important (Bourdieu, 1991). In the transition from socialist rank order to capitalist class society we see this: we find intellectuals playing a crucial role as they name, classify, and make new classes and class positions. While a marxist might argue that intellectuals only seem to make classes when in fact they are ideologues who speak for and about classes already formed in the womb of the previous society, we find this unconvincing. Such an analysis may well characterize the role of intellectuals in the French or other classical bourgeois revolutions, but it is manifestly inaccurate for the 1989 revolutions, or indeed for the Bolshevik revolution. No capitalist class preceded the collective action of intellectuals in the post-1989 Central European transitions to capitalism. On the contrary, a capitalist class was invented and called forth by these very intellectuals. We are not being post-modern. We are not arguing that classes simply come into being if you name them, without the necessary structural conditions, but strictly speaking such
conditions need not include the existence of classes, even in their embryonic form. Socialist economic systems were in deep structural crisis by the 1980s, and this crisis was the material foundation on which the new critical discourse of the intellectuals was constructed. However, it would be naïve and misleading to assume that the nomenklatura was already an embryonic propertied bourgeoisie, and that intellectuals were unwittingly articulating its future interests. It actually required immense imagination to invent the idea of a new bourgeoisie in the context of late communist society. Indeed, if anyone had suggested in 1980 that a transition from socialism to capitalism would occur within 10 years in Eastern Europe, they would have been laughed out of court, even by Western anticommunists and certainly by the finest minds in social science. So, to be very clear: to emphasize the role of discursive power in making classes does not mean that classes are unimportant, nor is it a sophisticated backhanded way of saying that classes are disappearing. Instead, we are proposing a renewal of class analysis that identifies discourse as a central moment in the process of making classes.

Another case: class analysis in 20th-century capitalism

Our rethinking of the class concept and the role of intellectuals in social change also suggests a historical reanalysis of the nature of intellectual class action in western capitalism. Using our analytical framework, we can expand our analysis of intellectual class action not only as it manifests in bursts of anticapitalist agitation, but also in intellectual efforts to reform and rationalize capitalism.

A case in point is the rise of managerialism in the United States in the early 20th century. *Pace* Burnham (1941), we think the significance of this case is not that managers were poised to take power away from capitalists and establish their own class domination, but rather, that managers aimed to rationalize capitalism by persuading all other class actors to speak the new managerialist discourse (Shenhav, 1999). From this perspective, Berle and Means’ (1931) argument and the 60-year debate about ownership and control (Zeitlin, 1974) is beside the point. Managers’ power did not rest solely on their ability to limit discourse, certainly not initially, and hence the fact of ‘control’ was not necessarily the most significant dimension of managerial power. Rather, the managerial revolution was about *propagating* and *generalizing* the discourse of managerialism; it was about persuading owners, trade unionists, and everyone else to speak the discourse of managerialism. In this way, managerialism altered the balance of class forces because it inserted managers between capital and labor, reducing the classness of both. The new center of negotiations between owners and workers became ‘productivity’, and as wage gains became linked to productivity increases (Block and Burns, 1986), managers emerged as ‘professionals of productivity’ – measuring it, fostering it, organizing in order to attain it, motivating workers to attain it, and so forth. In the same process, the class struggle was
decomposed into two component struggles: a struggle between owners and managers over issues of rational management and efficiency, on the one hand, and a struggle between managers and workers over discipline, motivation, and knowledge, on the other. This is the way managers sought to rationalize capitalism, organizing the hegemony of capital in face of opposition by capitalists themselves.

It does not follow then, that simply because managers failed to wrest class power away from capitalists, managerialism is a failed new class project (Martin and Szélényi, 1988). We argue precisely the opposite. Just as the perspective of neoclassical sociology allows us to see the intellectual class as co-founder of capitalism, civil society, and modernity in contemporary Central Europe, so the managerialist movement in the early 20th-century United States can be seen as a successful class project because it effectively imposed its new discourse and altered the balance of class forces by transforming the classness of contending classes. In both cases, the absence of the socialist alternative permits us to think more broadly about the class power of intellectuals and their role in social change. The neoclassical perspective allows us to see that the collective action of intellectuals does not always necessarily point towards the transcendence of capitalism, but also towards its transformation and rationalization into a diversity of forms and destinations.

IV. IS CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE POSSIBLE IN THE ABSENCE OF A SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE?

Does it follow from our analysis that critical social science is impossible? Can we do without the socialist vantage point of classical theory, or do we need to fabricate ‘real socialist utopias’ to ground a new critical sociology? Our answer is that the disappearance of a socialist alternative is actually a great opportunity for critical social science. It means the disappearance of any obligation or temptation for sociologists (and critical intellectuals in general) to play the role of high priests in some emerging or actual social order. Indeed, we now have the opportunity to turn the postsocialist demotion of intellectual claims and aspirations into an intellectual strength – to embrace the critical power of irony.

This new form of critical imagination is not the whim of a few disgruntled intellectuals. It is an historically determined objective opportunity afforded by the same collective experiences we analyzed above; collective experiences which have transformed many formerly critical intellectuals into ideologues of capitalism, and many others into utopian socialists. We propose that this same experience of disillusionment with ‘actually existing socialism’ can also inspire a new form of critical reflection. This is particularly important at the current moment in which the strong polarities of the embattled, transformative discourse of the transition are dissipating and giving way to a
plurality of more nuanced viewpoints. Now we should suspend the attitude of a convert and ask ourselves: If we believed in (democratic, self-managing, humane) socialism for so long but now think we were fundamentally wrong, is it possible we could be wrong again? Is the real lesson of the past that we should not take our intellectual infatuations or ourselves too seriously?

In 1961, after just enough time had passed so the polarities of communism's transformative discourse were weakening, Leszek Kolakowski wrote an essay that asked what the role of intellectuals should be in 'mature' communist society. We think his essay is timely again as we inquire into the possibilities for critical social science in the shadow of the fall of socialism.

Kolakowski distinguished three different roles that intellectuals could play: priest, jester, and philosopher king. The priest is usually critical, since he or she specializes in developing a utopian or transcendent vision of a more desirable, more rational, and morally superior society, which is then contrasted with existing society. The priest's is not the only possible critical perspective, however. The jester produces ironic critique, but it differs from priestly ire in that it is oriented empirically rather than morally, and thus it offers immanent rather than transcendent critique. As immanent critique, the jester's analysis never contrasts the present with a vision of a more rational or more just society. Rather, the jester exposes the arbitrariness of the present, emphasizing that what appears rational, inevitable, just, and pure is accidental, temporary, absurd, and hybrid (Jacobs and Smith, 1997). Different from both priest and jester, the philosopher king typifies the intellectual as a ruler who tries to impose on earth the perfect regime envisioned in thought. Like the priest then, the philosopher king offers transcendence, but unlike the priest the philosopher king does not perform a critical role. The jester presents an even sharper contrast with the philosopher king; not only is the jester critical but also empirical, and therefore non-transcendent.

A fourth intellectual role that can be added to Kolakowski's typology is that of an engineer, or better, Weber's idea of a magician (Weber, [1922]1964; Bourdieu, 1987b). We think this is how most social scientists in the United States see themselves. The magician/engineer is aligned with the jester, in the sense that the technical attitude is also empirical, and is thus opposed to the transcendental stance of the philosopher king and the priest. But the magician/engineer also differs from the jester in several respects. As Weber notes, the magician is strongly constrained by the demands of clients to fulfill specific requests. This is also the situation confronting the engineer. The jester, in contrast, is not answerable to the specific demands of particular clients, but to a public. The jester's task is to surprise the public, to formulate ideas they have not imagined, or to state out loud what they are not willing to admit. The only way for the magician or engineer to protect themselves from the demand constraints of clients is through the complexity and esoteric nature of their expertise, their complicated models and technology. Thus magicians/engineers must take themselves and their models very
seriously, and this works against their capacity for self-irony. We think this is a fair description of most positivist social science, which although it is the ally of critical neoclassical sociology, has difficulty subjecting its own fundamental assumptions to scrutiny or ironic self-reflection.

Figure 1 is an attempt to systematically summarize our distinctions between different kinds of intellectual roles. Beginning with the typology of roles in Weber's *The Sociology of Religion* ([1922]1964), we follow Bourdieu’s (1987b) analysis of the ideal types of priest, philosopher king, magician, and jester to characterize the contemporary field of social science inquiry. This field of cultural production is described by the intersection of two relations.

The first relation that defines the field as we have represented it is the contradiction between critical and affirmative positions. This is the tension between those who are proximate to temporal power on the one hand, and by this we mean political power that is extra-intellectual; and those who lay claim to pastoral power, on the other hand, which is specifically understood to be intellectual power arising from the command of cultural capital, or as Gouldner might have it, power arising from a superior grasp of and commitment to the Culture of Critical Discourse. The philosopher king and the magician always dabble in temporal power either as dictators, technicians, or partisan advisors. In contrast, the priest and the jester do not aspire to temporal power but articulate a critique of the status quo, which attempts to influence others by sheer intellectual force of argument.

The second relation that structures the field of sociocultural inquiry is

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Figure 1. The field of social scientific inquiry in the shadow of the fall of socialism. The prophet does not appear in this figure. Prophecy describes the charisma of cultural capital in periods of social change during which time the social relations in the field of intellectual production are characteristically held in abeyance.
the contradictory interests of suppliers and consumers of cultural 'goods'. By cultural goods, we mean products of intellectual practice such as knowledge, salvation, professional services, technical expertise, or art. In general, suppliers of such goods are interested in independence from demand. Suppliers want to shape consumer tastes but they do not want to cater to the demands of specific clients. This is essentially what the priest and philosopher king do, they tell people what they should aspire to or they try to convert them to their vision of otherworldly salvation or pure aesthetic ideals. In contrast, consumers of cultural goods are interested in getting their needs and wishes satisfied. Consumers would like their tastes to shape intellectual production. This describes the context in which magicians (engineers) and jesters work: they cater to popular demand or specific clients by providing this-worldly salvation or entertainment. In contrast to priests and philosopher kings then, jesters and magicians are more dependent on client demands.

Once we have defined this field of intellectual production, we can use it to array the classification of various research agendas and academic projects that are at play in the analysis of the transition to capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe, and in the contemporary field of sociohistorical inquiry more generally. We borrow heavily here from Michael Burawoy’s new classification of theoretical perspectives, amending it somewhat in light of our disagreements with him.20 We identify four or five paradigms, acknowledging freely that the edges are blurry, which is why we have drawn them as fuzzy, extended, intersecting ellipses. Indeed, the term ‘paradigm’ is not really appropriate since each of these groupings refers simultaneously to research programs, concrete groups of intellectuals, and intellectual projects, and the historical trajectories of these programs, intellectuals, and projects, and the interactions of all of these with each other over time. Nonetheless, there is an understanding that these groupings constitute relatively well understood and continuous lines of inquiry, groups of intellectual biographies, and intellectual projects over time.

Beginning with postsocialist theory, we would observe that it is critical and utopian since it remains distant from political power and attempts to shape consumers’ tastes. The trajectory it has charted in the last century is an upward one from a position closest to the philosopher king to a more priestly role. In its enduring critique of capitalism as well as in its struggles against stalinism and other abuses of actually existing socialism, postsocialist theory remains resolutely opposed to any affirmation of the status quo. At the same time, however, postsocialist theory may be becoming more dependent on consumers’ tastes and therefore more empirical in its methods. It has neglected consumers to its own cost in the past, and it now needs to strike alliances with postcolonial and postmodern theories and practitioners who occupy a great deal of the critical space in the field of social scientific inquiry.

In contrast to postsocialism, we characterize neoliberalism as the contemporary expression of the philosopher king. Thus neoliberal dissidents in
Eastern Europe and neoconservative intellectuals in the United States commonly profess to know what is moral, while neoclassical economists and monetarists assert what is true and efficient. As social scientists, many of these intellectuals are not interested in dictating to the world, and this is particularly true as we move out of economics and into the rational choice movement in sociology. While these intellectuals remain relentlessly non-critical, they adopt ‘methodological individualism’ not because it helps them impose their vision on the world but because it produces empirical results. In this, they display their willingness to cater to consumers’ tastes and distinguish themselves from their more theoretically inclined philosopher king-like colleagues in neoclassical economics.

Turning next to neoclassical sociology, where we locate ourselves, we note that there is wide variation in the orientation to the status quo and therefore a broad range of intellectuals included in this grouping. While some neoclassical analysts are jesters and very critical of the status quo, and here we think of a writer like Foucault, other neoclassical analysts are more affirmative, more willing to connect with temporal power and play the role of technicians. What unites these positions, however, is the rejection of any intellectual claim to represent others or to tell them what to do. Neoclassical sociology claims to provide tools for analysis that are useful for social actors, either because they dispel mystifications or because they allow social actors to measure, calculate, and explain their lives and social worlds.

Similar to critical neoclassical sociology, postmodernism at its best displays a commitment to immanent critique, without claiming to represent social actors or consumers. The danger of postmodern critique, however, is a collapse into cynicism. We understand the distinction between irony and cynicism to be that irony is dialogic, while cynicism is monologic. Cynicism does not think that there is anybody to talk to but irony wishes to dislodge the interlocutors from their received truths in order to converse further. That is why postmodernism is located between independence from and dependence upon consumers. On the one hand, postmodernism is not interested in shaping consumer taste, but on the other hand, it is also not willing to listen or cater to clients; this is particularly true of the more obscure side of cultural studies. Nonetheless, postmodernism is generally critical, although some of its ‘everything goes’ rhetoric is likely to descend into an affirmation of the status quo. Hence we have represented postmodernism diagonally in the social scientific field.

To these four ‘paradigms’ taken from Burawoy’s recent classification, we add the fifth grouping of economic sociology. In many respects, we think this is a more important paradigm in the space of inquiry engaged by the fall of socialism than is ‘postmodernism’. (Indeed, we include postmodernism with some misgivings, since in many respects in this particular representation ‘postmodernism’ is the critical side of economic sociology. After all, both share the attempt to avoid the antinomies of modernity and to find a ‘third
way' between market and plan, rationality and irrationality, etc.) We also include arrows on Figure 1 to convey a sense of dynamism, as individuals and concepts travel on certain trajectories. For example, the neoconservatives are shown as having descended from critical to affirmative space in the field as they traveled the road from Trotskyism to neoliberalism over the course of the 20th century. Arrows also denote certain transactions across boundaries; so for example, some of the concepts of economic sociology and rational choice theory are 'paired concepts', each mirroring the other and thus reinforcing both.

Reviewing the current possibilities in the field of sociocultural inquiry represented in Figure 1, we argue that in the shadow of the end of socialism neoclassical sociology and the ironic method offer the most compelling and fruitful vantage point for a critical social science. Importantly, we feel comfortable with irony because it disengages us from a universalistic moral stance. While the priest may argue that we are morally irresponsible, we respond that the position of the jester is more rigorous than that of priest, since the jester follows a situated ethics of responsibility as distinct from the priest's overarching ethics of conviction (Weber, [1906]1958: 143). What the priest labels irresponsible is precisely what we understand to be the ironic capacity to appreciate one's mistakes. The jester's best jest is always aimed at him- or herself. The jester never takes him- or herself too seriously, so his or her critical position is therefore more flexible and open to nuance than the priest's can ever be. However noble the priest's intentions, he or she cannot escape the burden of persuading people that the ethical superiority of the utopian future is worth certain sacrifices. In contrast, the promise of neoclassical sociology as ironic critique is simply that the critical theorist will not turn his or her gaze away from the sacrifices being made at each step of the way. He or she will not push the flock ahead to the Promised Land, but will take pains to describe the social costs of each step and who will bear them. This means that the critical social scientist must attend to the openness of the present, to the multiple trajectories it contains – as in the framework of 'multiple capitalisms'.

To be clear: the task of the critical theorist is to describe and appraise the possible alternative trajectories of social development empirically; to show that what exists is not inevitable; that alternative forms of conduct are open to social actors; to elucidate the costs and consequences of these forms of conduct; and to do all this without positing which of them is correct or desirable. A critical scientific social theory leaves it to social actors themselves to weigh whether or not they are willing to pay the costs of particular courses of action. Put another way, ironic critique aims to expose the arbitrariness of the present, uncovering its hybrid and accidental origins (Foucault, 1977) without trying to dictate to social actors what to do. The purpose of such irony is to enrich public dialogue by casting doubt on what was taken for granted before the dialogue began; this is precisely the role of the jester. As
Habermas (1972) contends, the human interest represented by social science is critical communication – a project of exchange and dialogue between social scientists and social actors that is meant to increase rationality, in part, by increasing the reflexive capacities of social actors. Irony serves the social scientist well in such an endeavor, since it requires him or her to engage in constant autocritique, not to take him- or herself too seriously, and to remain open to dialogic possibilities.

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**Notes**

1. Gouldner argued that the power of the new class derived from its monopoly on specialized professional knowledges, as well as from its control over the means of cultural legitimation, what he called the ‘culture of critical discourse’ (CCD). This he defined as ‘an historically evolved set of rules, a grammar of discourse, which (1) is concerned to justify its assertions, but (2) whose mode of justification does not proceed by invoking authorities, and (3) prefers to elicit the voluntary consent of those addressed solely on the basis of arguments adduced’ [italics in original] (1979: 28). Gouldner argued that the CCD was the basis of intellectual class identity and that it was often arraigned against traditional authority and social institutions. In the West, where the CCD was objectified as ‘cultural capital’ in the form of credentials and was justified by the highly successful ideology of professionalism, the New Class carried increasing weight in social affairs. New Class personnel were crucial components in the functioning of modern states, economies, and universities in which knowledge had become indispensable and the power of the old bourgeoisie was waning. Hence, New Class members were in a position to press their claims – to disrupt, subvert, and cause trouble for the old moneyed class – with little fear of retribution (Gouldner, 1979: 19–20).

2. Neoclassical economics is serious and anti-ironic. There is only one truth and there is only one system. There is one capitalist logic and one set of rules for acting in a rational economic manner. Those who do not follow the rules are ‘irrational’. Ironically – precisely in the sense of the term we use in this article – marxism converges with neoclassical economics in the common assumption
of a single global capitalist logic. The only difference between the two schools of thought is that one thinks it a desirable development and the other, an undesirable one. In contrast, neoclassical sociology operates with the assumption of capitalism as multiple destinations. Whether or not the capitalism that is now emerging in Russia will converge with capitalism as we know it from the United States or Western Europe must be explored empirically rather than assumed by theoretical fiat.

3. This is where our understanding converges with postmodern analyses of irony. See for example Hutcheon (1992, 1995) and in particular the discussion of the differences between premodernist, modernist, and postmodernist irony.

4. The typical form of a joke is a question to which the listener assumes an obvious answer. A good joke provides an unexpected answer which is as plausible as the one the listener had in mind. We say someone lacks a sense of humor when he or she fails to understand jokes. A person without a sense of humor is serious and insists that his or her own beliefs cannot be made the subject of jokes; that his or her position cannot be questioned in this manner. This is why we cannot conceptualize irony without self-irony. If one loses humor about oneself and one’s own position then there is no irony or reflexivity.

5. Indeed, we acknowledge and thank Victor Nee for the term ‘neoclassical sociology’. We do not deny the realities of capitalist exploitation or suggest that the working class does not exist or that it is disappearing. In contemporary Eastern Europe, however, we do observe that the working class is demobilized, with little capacity for collective action. Elsewhere in the world, when the working class does act collectively, it engages in trade union struggles rather than building revolutionary class consciousness. On this, see our response to Michael Burawoy in the recent review symposium in the American Journal of Sociology which included our book: Eyal et al., 2001.

7. We think that by now the historical record demonstrates beyond doubt that a socialist project is impossible without the collective action of the intelligentsia, or at least a sizable fraction thereof. There are no historical cases where the working class has been able to carry and implement a socialist project without the support of radical intellectuals, but there is, on the other hand, a wealth of evidence to indicate that a radical intelligentsia is a class actor capable of carrying and implementing a socialist alternative even where a working class does not exist (e.g. China). Here we rely on the rich tradition of analyzing socialism as the creation of a ‘new class’ of intellectuals (Bakunin, 1966; Djilas, 1957; Gouldner, 1979; Konrád and Szélény, 1979; Machajski, 1937; Nomad, 1937, 1959).

8. This theoretical choice is precisely what distinguishes our position as neoclassical sociologists from Weber’s position as a classical sociologist. Weber’s slippage from multiple rationalities and trajectories to a single capitalist destination of history was symptomatically historically constrained: first, it reflected his sense of western superiority, and thus the condition of European hegemony over the rest of the world, second, it was an ideological reflection of the political choice between capitalism and socialism that he believed he faced. Weber was no simple-minded ideologue of liberal capitalism. He is better characterized as a ‘liberal in despair’, fully aware of the price that would have to be paid for
liberal capitalism (Mommsen, 1984). But faced with the choice between capitalism and socialism, he opted for the former. This was clear in his late essays about socialism in Russia (Weber [1905–6, 1917]1995), but we also think this political dilemma found its way into his description of capitalism, urging him to depict it as more formidable and inescapable than it appeared on the basis of his empirical analyses. Since we write at a time when the opposition between socialism and capitalism no longer has the same urgency, we think sociology should no longer be constrained by the extortionist logic of the choice between them.

9. The conceptual status of such assemblages is not very different from what an earlier generation of marxists termed 'social formations', and what the ‘regulation school’ today calls ‘modes of regulation’ (Harvey, 1989: 121–2). It strikes us, however, that Weber’s methodology offers a more flexible analytical framework for comparison. Concepts like 'regimes of accumulation' tend to assume a systemic principle operating behind the backs of actors, totalizing their various responses, because they attempt to distinguish economic types according to the mode in which they handle the endemic crisis tendencies of capitalism. Methodologically this means that actual cases must correspond to types. In the weberian scheme in contrast, one compares actual cases with an analytical typology in order to evaluate the likely consequences of conditions in each case, asking how they affect the rationality of economic actors (Roth, 1971).

10. On the left side of the ideological divide, the reception of the 'globalization-as-convergence' thesis has been more complex, and we cannot do it justice here. Some, notably world-system theorists and international political economists, have articulated a similar, though darker, version, in which the unified systemic logic of global capitalism is conquering the globe and finally confirms Marx’s prediction. This version is particularly suited to utopian socialism, which gains strength from being contrasted with the distopic view of capitalism, and has arguably served to inspire the recent attacks on the IMF and WTO in Seattle and elsewhere. But many other marxists have been much more suspicious of the convergence thesis, and in fact supply us with ammunition against it. For a brief presentation of the internal debate, see Hirst and Thompson (1996).

11. For explanations of the diversity of transition paths see Fish (1998) and King (2000). Note however, we do not think the diversity of transitions to capitalism in Eastern and Central Europe reflects a return to presocialist differences, as has been suggested by some authors (e.g. Rothschild, 1989).

12. David Stark (1996) called this ‘recombinant property’, and we have analyzed it elsewhere (Eyal et al., 1997) as ‘managerialism’. In retrospect it seems to have been a temporary snapshot of a particular strategy of transition. On this point see Hanley et al., 2002.

13. This describes the Hungarian case particularly well; no other country of comparable size has such massive foreign ownership, which seems to be responsible for substantial levels of economic growth. Poland and the Czech Republic are the closest to Hungary in this respect, with Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Baltic Republics following somewhat behind.

14. The cases of the Chinese and Vietnamese transitions to capitalism further support our argument about the diversity of capitalist forms. These countries
have approached transition in a wholly different way than Central and Eastern Europe, and they have done so with remarkable success. Simply put, the distinction here is between 'capitalism from above' and 'capitalism from below'. In the first case, the Central and Eastern European countries embarked on a strategy of transition that prioritized the privatization or reorganization of the huge state sector, and this priority meant that the process was controlled by the victorious fraction of the dominant class. In China and Vietnam, on the other hand, the emphasis was not on transforming the state sector, but on encouraging the emergence of entrepreneurship 'from below' in specially designated 'developmental zones', which also enjoy foreign investment. Note, however, that this highly successful strategy, which creates 'socialist entrepreneurs' (Szélényi, 1988), depends on political conditions in which the communist party still maintains the state sector and shields the emerging private sector. The other precipitating condition is the influx of foreign capital, in particular, that from relatively small sources in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Capitalist development in mainland China then, seems (ironically) to follow the pattern that characterized post-Second World War Taiwan: authoritarian government stimulating growth in the small businesses sector in the context of a tightly controlled influx of foreign investment. It bears little resemblance to capitalism in post-1989 Eastern or Central Europe. And, none of the three types of capitalism correspond to the version of neoliberal capitalism that is held out as the global norm today – as the model towards which all systems are converging.

15. We focus on Central Europe here to the exclusion of the East European and Russian cases (i.e. of 'capitalists without capitalism') because the latter pose less of a puzzle. The role played by nomenklatura members who turned themselves into private capitalists allows us to think of them as a capitalist class in-the-making. For those familiar with discussions of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the analogy to tax-farming nobles and officials who utilize their position in the old regime to become rentier capitalists will be obvious (Staniszkis, 1991).

16. The possessors of cultural capital are truly Marx's 'universal class' then, since they tend to abolish themselves and their own class rule after the revolution. They might also be understood as Weber's historical 'switchmen', operators who switch civilizations from one form of social structure and principle of stratification to another, but who, when the train has jumped tracks, stay behind. Their class power never lasts. Thus Gouldner was correct when he argued that intellectuals were a 'flawed universal class' but he was wrong about why: he thought they were flawed because they were self-interested and would set up their own class domination; we suggest that they are flawed precisely for the opposite reason, because they are weakly formed as a class and cannot sustain their class rule in the long run (Gouldner, 1979: 83–5).

17. Bourdieu calls this 'symbolic violence' and it appears self-evident that it would characterize the assumption of power by fascists or communists. We would observe, however, that the liberal intellectuals who took power in Central Europe after the fall of communism also tended to be illiberal toward those who disagreed with them: they immediately castigated opponents as incompetent, as relics of the past, as sliding back into communism, or of totalitarianism (for a good example, see Klaus, [1991]1992). It is ironic to find
this kind of symbolic violence when the new victorious discourse is a ‘liberal’ one.

18. As Kolakowski says: ‘t[he priest is the guardian of the absolute; he sustains the
cult of the final and the obvious as acknowledged by and contained in the

19. As Kolakowski formulates it: ‘t[he jester is he who moves in good society
without belonging to it, and treats it with impertinence; he who doubts all that
appears self-evident. The jester . . . observe[s] . . . from the sidelines in order to
unveil the non-obvious behind the obvious, the non-final behind the final . . .’

20. These are taken from a course syllabus to be taught at Central European
University this year, which Michael Burawoy has kindly shared with us. On our
disagreements, see note 5.

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