

## LIFE IN TRANSITION From Socialism to Post-Socialism and Beyond

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*Abstract The socialist transition was an example of a partial process of modernisation. As the central project of cultural revolution was soon abandoned, socialist societies had permanent problems with border maintenance. On the level of the person, the situation could be described as one of personal modernity and public socialism, as persistence of public social forms devoid of almost any intimate cultural meaning. In this context, the present-day process is not so much a transition from pre-modernity to modernity as from partial to complete modernity.*

postsocialism, transition, modernisation, social form vs. cultural meaning

### Introduction

People in Central and Eastern European ex-communist societies have long experience of living in transition: after decades of socialist transition to a prospective communist community, we recently set out on the path of post-socialism as the transition from the transition period of socialism. Since the previous phenomenon of socialism - abruptly terminated - remains largely ambiguous and undefined, and as the process of post-socialism is still in its initial phase and as such unstructured, it is not surprising that little consensus exists among the population at large as well as among sociologists regarding the definition of the existing situation.

How are we to understand the present processes? Are we dealing with a retrograde process of reinventing the past, the values and knowledge of modernity which were suppressed under socialism? Or are we rather witnessing the continuation of modernisation processes already initiated under socialism? It is my conviction that in most of these societies post-socialism can best be understood as a "back to the future" phenomenon: as a reinvention of suppressed social actors of modernity and as a continuation of the existing cultural orientations of these social actors, as the latter were never abandoned under the previous communist regimes.

Socialism was never a social formation *sui generis*. The ambitious project of total communist transformation began to disintegrate almost immediately after the revolutionaries took over (Tomc, 1994). The first years witnessed the disintegration of the cultural revolution. For all practical purposes, the project of the New Man was abandoned, only to be revived at

occasional political rituals and in periods of fundamentalist campaigns. This was soon followed by reforms in the economic sphere: socialism became not so much a process of creating new economic relations as a process of catching up with the level of production and consumerism of developed industrial societies. These initiatives of economic reform were usually soon followed by demands for political democratisation (demands for freedom of speech and the press as well as for basic human rights, voiced by various dissident movements).

Societies in which communist revolutionary elites assumed political power varied significantly amongst themselves primarily for three reasons. First of all, their starting positions differed significantly: from archaic (examples of new Third World countries) to modernising (most Eastern European countries) and already modern societies (Czechoslovakia being the most characteristic example). The extremely voluntarist nature of socialism also became obvious to many analysts: there were as many paths to socialism as there were revolutionaries who embarked on the road of yearned-for liberation. To make matters even more complicated, these societies also varied significantly in the rate of disintegration, depending on numerous factors (the level of (in)tolerance of the revolutionaries themselves, the degree of organisation of opposition movements, the level of democratic political tradition, the level of existing economic development etc.). This makes a meaningful definition of socialism even more difficult. Periods of reform were also often followed by long periods of fundamentalist backlashes. But the general trend was nevertheless obvious: from the moment of its creation in the political laboratory of communist revolutionaries, socialism was a terminal patient. Or to put it another way: post-socialism was an integral part of socialism from the initiation of the socialist transition period after the political revolution.

### Periods of social transition

Periods of social transition can be defined as states of protracted instability resulting from the discrepancy between cultural values and knowledge on the one hand and social relations which they regulate on the other. Let us briefly illustrate this with some historical examples.

In archaic societies, an important function of religious doctrine is to master the forces of nature (to prevent droughts, floods and other natural calamities, as well as personal misfortunes such as diseases, hardships, old age etc.). As the archaic person is not in the possession of rational means of their rationalisation and regulation, he/she has to rely on superhuman forces and beings instead. The social space of supernatural actors is thus established, of protagonists of otherworldly values of religious ideology, at least in the eyes of the believers. It follows from this essential function of religious ideology that the criterion of its legitimisation in the last analysis rests in the efficiency of supernatural intervention in everyday human affairs as well as in its intervention in the natural environment. In periods when a critical gap occurs between the ideal state of supernatural intervention and the real state of undesirability, a very likely outcome is a crisis of legitimacy of supernatural intervention,

leading to a secularisation of everyday life and eventually leading to the disintegration of social life.

In ancient Egypt, for example, such a delegitimation of the religious order occurred after longer periods of famine or after severe military defeats, generating a paradoxical situation (Frankfort, 1987: 51-52). Namely, all that happened could only be willed by a Divine Pharaoh who ruled in the name of a higher justice. So, when people starved to death or Egypt was defeated in battle, this could only be the result of the Pharaoh's will. Yet such undesirable states were clearly opposed to the principle of higher justice which bound him in all his actions. One word of authority would have sufficed to achieve the desirable change of events. It was virtually impossible for the religious person to resolve the paradoxical situation within the context of the existing religious tradition. When the undesirable situation persisted, lawlessness spread throughout the kingdom and the order which seemed to be eternal crumbled within a single generation.

In traditional societies of Renaissance Europe, religious doctrine was put to a similar test of efficiency. This was a period of history in which most Europeans were afflicted and put to the test by the "four horsemen of the Apocalypse": hunger, plague, religious persecution and war. Not only did the Christian church not offer salvation, it even actively participated in the creation of these hardships. The personal despair (preoccupation with one's mortality, the art of dying, personal pessimism, pathologies of everyday life etc.) of Renaissance man are well documented (Tenenti, 1987; Delumeau, 1986; Delumeau, 1987). But the outcome of the crisis of legitimacy was - in comparison to previous cases - qualitatively different: modernity. How can we account for this? In European historical experience, religious doctrine gradually dissociated itself from the criterion of effectiveness which eventually led to the secularisation of everyday life. What was unique in comparison with ancient Egypt and other similar historical examples was the fact that secularisation was in this case paralleled by more efficient rational methods of mastering nature and society, methods based on the fact that knowledge was being generated by a systematic and institutionalised scientific pursuit. The "spiritual base", to paraphrase Marxist terminology, of secularisation was being created which made modernity possible as a complete and ongoing socio-cultural process.

Like pre-modern religions of the past, communist movements also sought their source of legitimacy in the greater efficiency of their ideology. Revolutionary ideologues of communism criticised the anarchical production, inauthentic democracy, cultural alienation etc. of early modern man and society, claiming that they had more efficient solutions to the problems of modernity at their disposal (state ownership, central planning, avantgarde party rule etc., to be executed by the New Man imbued with the new and powerful faith). The criterion of efficiency was in this respect central to the whole communist transformation project. When the failure of this transition became increasingly obvious with the passage of time, the crisis of legitimation was unavoidable, just as in the two previous examples. But the manifestation of the crisis was, paradoxically, mitigated by the fact that the majority of the population never internalised the basic ideals of socialist ideology to begin with, because

*LIFE IN TRANSITION*  
*From Socialism to Post-Socialism and Beyond*

of the failed process of total cultural renewal. This led to a certain impasse and stability of these societies. For one needs faith in order to lose it, to become disillusioned and as a result to question authority. All those who never internalised the ideals of communism, who basically perceived it as an exotic and marginal counterculture, as was the case with the vast majority of the population of socialist societies, were not influenced by the crisis of legitimation and their basic attitude remained one of passivity and reitritism. We see that in this sense the socialist transition is unique in comparison with the previous two examples: as it did not involve the creation of a socialist culture (socialist art or science, as opposed to its "bourgeois" counterparts, for example), it could not imply the loss of specific cultural orientations in the disintegration period. This, incidentally, is also the reason why the critique of socialism that was articulated in these societies was for the most part of a heretical nature, articulated by disappointed believers (in the case of socialist Yugoslavia most notably by Milovan Đilas, the Praxis circle of "humanist Marxists", leftist student radicals etc.).

If the basic ideals of ideology internalised in the socialisation process became problematic in a period of protracted societal crisis in the first two historical illustrations, then the socialist transition period was specific in the sense that the internalisation in the person was as a rule too inadequate to be problematized in a period of crisis. Previous value orientations persisted in socialism, but in the absence of the possibility of communal actualisation, they were reduced to the sphere of a person's private existence. As a result, a wide gap appeared between the particular and the general, the personal and societal. Because of inadequate intermediation in the public sphere, dissociation became characteristic of social life under socialism. A Polish sociologist speaks of Poles under socialism who experienced their society as a "federation" of primary groups united on the national level, because of an absence of political, trade union, professional etc. organisational mediation (Nowak, 1981). A social vacuum existed between "us" and "them", between the levels of private and national.

Attitudes concerning public matters which were not anchored in communal values internalised in the person's me were as a result of a relatively arbitrary nature. They were strongly influenced by what was perceived as expected and desired on the societal level. These attitudes often seemed superficial, subject more to external factors than to internal value orientations.

Socialism in transition approached the ideal type of a mass society: because value orientations of the private and societal levels ran parallel to one other, a public vacuum appeared between them, creating a collectivity of private persons who lacked the social resources to constitute themselves in public in a consistent cultural manner. The mass-societal nature of socialism helps us to explain the suddenness and unpredictability of change when it did arise after long periods of petrified stability. The transition to post-socialism at the end of the 80's, which took practically everybody by surprise, is a characteristic example of this.

Significant differences in attitudes are not characteristic of these societies because of a lack of occupational and other intermediary public mediations, as was already pointed out. Let

us again take Poland as an example: differences over the nationalisation of the economy, social inequality or socialism were relatively small when compared among unskilled and skilled workers, non-manual workers and intellectuals throughout the socialist period of transition (Nowak, 1981).

Even in cases when it appears that private value orientations overlap with elements of communist revolutionary ideology, the situation is in reality much more complex. Some Third World countries are good cases in point. After the independence of Kenya, Tom Mboya spoke of a belief of many Africans that all are sons and daughters of the Earth, of a logic and practice of equality among them, of the absence of the profit motive and exploitation characteristic of capitalism etc., which all make socialist ideology very attractive to them (Mazrui, 1980). In neighbouring Tanzania, Nyerere was even more explicit: Africans do not have to be "converted" to socialism or to be "thought" democracy. Both are embedded in their past, in traditional society. The 19th-century Russian socialist P.N. Tkachev perceived similar advantages of backwardness in his own country. He was convinced that the Russian people were devoted to common property and as such instinctive communists, closer to socialism than people of Western Europe. Svetozar Marković perceived traditionalism as a developmental advantage in the backward Serbia of his time: the collectives presented the supposed basis of socialist modernisation (Županov, 1977: 14). In socialist Yugoslavia such a traditional value orientation was egalitarianism (in the sense of equal allocation and not of equal opportunity). The incorporation of such ideals into the revolutionary ideology was incompatible with the proclaimed modernisation process. If applied it could only have had retraditionalizing effects. In socialist Yugoslavia it was mostly used in periods of political campaigns when the revolutionaries perceived the need to legitimate their rule by appealing to traditional values in the doctrine. But as there was no autonomous public sphere to continuously intervene between the private and the societal and because of the standardizing effect of mass society, the attitudinal retraditionalization which was sometimes observed was to a large extent only superficial.

At the end of the 80's, democratic revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe brought about the gradual articulation of a public sphere mediating between the private and the societal. Public attitudes are increasingly anchored in communal value orientations, and as a result, change generated by continual cultural innovation - something characteristic of modernity - has been introduced into these socio-cultural contexts. Attitudes become increasingly differentiated, causing many analysts, unaccustomed to such a situation, to interpret this as a deepening social crisis and a failure of the post-socialist transition period.

### The Transition from Socialism in Slovenia

People are beings extended in time: we are active in the present according to what we have learned in the past and because of goals we set ourselves in the future. In order to determine where we are and where we are heading, we must first ask ourselves where we have come from (Tomc, 1993).

*LIFE IN TRANSITION*  
*From Socialism to Post-Socialism and Beyond*

Where did we come from? The project of cultural revolution in Slovenia was to all intents and purposes abandoned in the 50's. It soon became obvious that the revolutionaries did not succeed in establishing either a new culture (proletarian values instead of middle class careerism, ascetism instead of hedonism, collectivism instead of individualism, the cult of work instead of orientation to leisure time, gratification in the distant future instead of consumerism "here and now", belief in the harmonious communist community instead of individuals preoccupied with their autonomy and mortality etc.) or, even more specifically, a new creativity (socialist realism instead of decadent elite art and mass culture, progressive science instead of bourgeois science in the hands and interests of the exploiting classes). As a result, the project of creating the New Man as the agent of the New Culture, the avantgarde movement generating, maintaining and disseminating the radical redefinition of socialist social life was for all practical purposes soon abandoned. Without the New Man, socialism remained an empty shell, a social form of public relations with others which had to be imposed from without, a social project of transformation without its own cultural identity. In political terms, the intended totalitarian project of cultural revolution was redefined as an authoritarian project of Party monopoly centred on the preservation of power. In this sense, the political democratisation of the late 80's and early 90's did not entail radical change in the Slovenian person, because socialism as a cultural project was sterile almost from its initiation.

This does not imply that 45 years of communist rule did not have a significant influence on social life. The revolutionaries succeeded in penetrating the person's public relations with others, all those relations that the revolutionaries succeeded in establishing, maintaining and controlling. In the case of Slovenian society, this meant a ramified system of selfmanagement which penetrated practically all aspects of public activity of the person, regardless of whether or not these were perceived as legitimate.

The number of those who internalised the ideology on which this system of social regulation was based was relatively small. This category of people was mostly made up of (some) members of elites closely connected to the party rulers. In all truth, it has to be admitted that they included a significant number of sociologists and that these functioned as normative elaborators of the socialist system. But numerically much more significant were those who advocated the cause of self-management ideology in public for opportunistic reasons, only to repudiate it in their intimate relations with others. By far the largest category were those who simply evaded problematic public relations, except at occasional more or less unavoidable and/or obligatory ritual expressions of support for the system (most notably at elections). The superficiality of the self-management value system was such that even most of its initiators, the ruling ideologues of the party and their scientific normative elaborators, were able to abandon these attitudes with great ease and speed immediately before the democratic reconstitution of Slovenia. To express this change of spirit, the communists did not merely change their name (in the case of Slovenia from the League of Communists to the Party of Democratic Renewal at the first democratic elections, and to the Associated List of Social Democrats at the second democratic elections) while retaining their old ideological convictions, as is often claimed by their most obstinate political opponents. It follows from

our analysis that after the failed cultural revolution, they soon had very little faith to lose. This fact also led to a gradual erosion of their will to power in the 80's.

For the purposes of further analysis it seems appropriate to distinguish between the "social" and the "cultural" levels of a person: the social level indicates forms of interaction among persons, whereas the cultural level indicates the content of these relations. When the party elite began to abandon the project of cultural revolution in the 50's, the network of public relations, as was already observed, nevertheless persisted. As a result, the process of formalisation was extremely radical in this second phase of socialist development. If in western modernity form was limited to the democratic procedure of political regulation of the so-called sphere of civil society, then socialist suppressed modernity was characterised by the reduction of large segments of civil society to formal social procedure without corresponding cultural value orientations. Modern value orientations were for the most part preserved on the intimate level of the person, whereas they were to a large extent subdued in his/her public relations. This made socialist public life characteristically uniform, conformist, uneventful and in the last analysis meaningless for the actor. Socialist life maintained itself as an aborted phenomenon: deprived of most of the intimate content of the person, it persisted as a rigid ritual of public social forms of activity devoid of almost any relevant cultural meaning. In periods of political campaigns, the party rulers attempted to reverse this state with purges, ideological propaganda, censorship and other means of repression. But these were insignificant battles against invincible opponents in a war that was lost from the outset. The gaps between public and intimate, cultural and social, only widened with time. Since the 60's, this gap could be articulated in public in a legitimate fashion: one could often read that the system was good (meaning that the party leadership still perceived it as a legitimate cultural goal to be socially realised), but that the people did not act adequately (that they did not internalise the cultural values compatible with the system). Or another example from that period: it was very fashionable among sociologists to point out the gap between the desired (the proclaimed party goals) and the real (the actual absence of these goals in the everyday life of the person) as the basic problem of the society in transition. As the average sociologist of the time was indoctrinated in communist ideology, he perceived the party goals as real and set about elaborating strategies which would awaken the "working people" from their alienated stupor.

Was the socio-cultural type after the Second World War in Slovenia socialism or was it something else? It follows from the above analysis that there can be no straightforward answer to this question. The answer is either:

- \* yes, if we consider the person's prevalent public relations with others, or
- \* no, if we consider his/her intimate relations with others and the cultural content of these relations.

This situation could be defined as a combination of personal modernity and public socialism. After its failure as a cultural revolution, socialism became to a large extent reduced to social form, to a procedure that had long ago lost its meaning.

*LIFE IN TRANSITION*  
*From Socialism to Post-Socialism and Beyond*

Now that we have a somewhat clearer understanding of where we came from, we must ask ourselves about the present. In other words: where are we? In the last three years we have witnessed an accelerated process of disintegration of the network of public relations of self-management. Or to put it more precisely: we are witnessing a process of social disintegration (old networks are becoming obsolete while new ones are still in the making), but not of cultural disintegration (the Slovenian person, with rare exceptions, has always been non-socialist in orientation).

Sociologists tend to designate such transition periods as periods of "anomie", but a certain caution is in order. When defining a situation as anomical, we often only express the attitude of the traditional political community regarding what is considered an inadmissible loosening of moral relations among people. This was certainly true in Durkheim's case. Even though present-day French society is more disintegrated, conflictual or pluralistic than the one which caused so much concern to Durkheim, sociologists of today have grown more accustomed to the "triumph of individualism" and as a result interpret "anomie" with a more benevolent attitude. Processes which do not contribute to stability are today more likely to be interpreted in terms of autonomy, competition or privatism and as potentially contributing to positive social change rather than necessarily to social disintegration. (In the same fashion, "alienation of the working people" or "bourgeois consumerism", created by sociologists of a leftist persuasion, were not so much social phenomena as social problems, reflecting the ideological position of the imaginary socialist political community. For a modern person, alienation and consumerism are of course not so much problems as assets.)

In a sense, the difficulty of sociology in general is that it appeared in the period of transition to modernity. As a result, the founding fathers of sociology tended to perceive social change as a problem, while order and stability were for them desired and normal states. Even those among them who perceived their role as apologists of industrialism, Marx for example, often located the terminal goal of development in a harmonious community of the future. As a result, our present expectations concerning social life are often more compatible with traditional or even archaic socio-cultural contexts than with modern ones.

In modern societies socialisation in communal values is becoming increasingly loose, unpatterned, which leads to the creation and maintenance of an equilibrium between the particular and the general, the collective and the individual, the I and the me of the modern person (Mead, 1964). A greater autonomy of I in the dialogue with me, a more assertive and creative individual in relation to his/her community, has at least two possible implications. If the communal values are still well-defined and perceived as authoritative, a growing deviation of the person from common values will be a likely implication. But if the communal values themselves are loosely defined and perceived, as above all optional, then deviance becomes increasingly difficult to define or to locate and a growing anomie of the person is a likely implication. Anomie is thus not defined by a lack of respect for common values but rather by a relative absence of these values in the community itself.



From the perspective of the community, the following socio-cultural ideal types can be distinguished (in periods of stability): archaic/traditional communities in which cultural values internalised in I and me significantly overlap; modern societies, in which individual and communal levels are clearly defined and distinct, and are to a greater extent balanced than overlapping; authoritarian/totalitarian societies, in which individual value systems are suppressed at the expense of the common normative value system; and forecasts of postmodernity, in which individual value systems will become predominant at the expense of eroding communal value systems disintegrating in me.

In the context of the modern socio-cultural type, different forms of personal deviation can be distinguished. Let us enumerate some of them. A thief who steals generally affirms the institution of property - he/she does not give away what has been stolen, but nevertheless violates the norm in the hope of avoiding negative sanctions of transgression on the individual level. A prostitute selling sexual favours in a society where such activity is legalised is on the other hand not behaving in a deviant manner in terms of the communal value system internalised in me, yet may nevertheless experience it as objectionable because of an internalised value system on the intimate level of the individual. A drug addict living in a society in which intoxication is regarded as an approved form of behaviour and who has also internalised such behaviour as acceptable on the individual level, can no longer be considered as deviant in any of the above meanings - freedom of intoxication represents an integral part of a hedonistic/escapist mode of behaviour acceptable to I as well as to me. Mutual deproblematization as a precondition of a 'postmodern' anomie is even more characteristic of modern non-conventional or nonconformist behaviour - aesthetic innovation, which is seldom perceived as deviant, serves as perhaps the most indicative example.

In the case of the Slovenian transition from socialism in the last three years, the term anomie would not serve as a very good description of the transitional situation. What can actually be observed is rather the coexistence of the culturally modern person and the relative absence of relevant modern social relations with others which would affirm and maintain its cultural orientation. The basic problem of post-socialist development does not lie in the fact that old values are inhibiting the modernisation process, that the old stands in the way of the new, but in the fact that a vacuum has been created regarding social forms: adequate orientations of actors exist but the means of their social application are largely absent. In the process of post-socialist transition, social forms of modernity will gradually have to replace the old forms of social mediation. In the sphere of work, the institution of collective bargaining between newly-created trade unions and still largely non-existent employers' organisations will have to replace self-management agreements, state (social) property will have to be privatized, democratically elected governments will have to apply new forms of state mediation, market regulation will have to be inaugurated etc. In the sphere of public decision-making, a functioning multi-party system, division of power, parliamentarism, media autonomy etc. are the prerequisites of necessary political reform.

The common denominator of this modernisation process is, as was already pointed out, the growing autonomy of the person. The first manifest and expected effect of modernisation in

Slovenia which can be observed is negative, namely the growing proportion of deviant behaviour since democratisation (Svetek, 1992). We are approaching rates of deviance characteristic of Western societies. On the one hand, some of the deviance can be directly attributed to the still inconsistent normative regulation of social relations (for example, wild privatisation, illegal discharge from work etc.), while on the other hand, some of it can also be attributed to a growing modernity (increase in the number of murders, robberies, burglaries, addictions etc.). Although at the present moment these rates are still lower, the trend is towards catching up with the developed European countries.

As was already pointed out, our present-day activity according to past experience is motivated by goals we set ourselves for the future. Where are we heading? If socialist society was in transition to the final goal of a communist community (albeit one which turned out to be utopian), then the present-day transition does not imply an analogous terminal goal, still less one of harmony and stability. Rather, it leads to increasing social change, pluralism and instability in which the individual I will dominate over community values in the me of the person. The person will be relatively self-sufficient in his/her interactions with others at the expense of his/her group extensions. Such a situation is characterised not only by great autonomy but also by great isolation. The transition which we are witnessing leads nowhere, it is a continuous process of change influenced by numerous unpredictable contextual situations. From this aspect our final question is problematic from the perspective of modernity: the modern person has no substantive goal to strive towards, at least not in the context of modernity (while archaic-traditional enclaves of cultural content and social activity are of course still open to him/her).

## Conclusion

The socialist transition was an example of a partial, subdued process of modernisation. The glorification of industrial society by communist revolutionaries was continuously problematized by linking it to a process of substantive emancipation. Efficiency of labour was substituted by the cult of work, democracy by avantgarde party rule. But as the central project of cultural revolution was soon abandoned, socialist societies had growing problems with border maintenance, as they incorporated elements of modernity in practice which they were supposed to transcend in theory. As a result, the present transition to post-socialism is not one from pre-modernity to modernity. It seems to be much more meaningful to describe it as a process of transition from partial or deformed modernity (Adam, 1989: 19) to complete modernity.

What is at first glance surprising is that socialism lasted so long, in view of the fact that it became a culturally sterile project of transformation almost immediately after the political revolution. One possible explanation of this fact has already been mentioned: as communist values were never internalised in the dominant person, disenchantment could not result from ideological ineffectiveness. Instead of activity for change, resignation with one's fate was thus the most likely adaptation to the delegitimation of the socialist project. It also

explains the fact that most of the opposition to the regime was of a dissident and heretical nature, from ex-believers, as was also already pointed out. This kind of fatalistic and resigned view of life was made even more likely by the relation to time imposed by the revolutionaries: the flow of time was interpreted as relatively independent of the active agent. The perception of the past was negated, so that the future goal could control our present activity. By attempting to determine what is by definition unpredictable, our future, the revolutionaries made it more difficult for one to articulate one's present as an arena of alternative possibilities.

Modernity, as Habermas once stated, is still an incomplete project (Habermas, 1985: 3). There are still numerous potentialities hidden inside it which we are realising. It has still not penetrated numerous Third World countries, while socialist societies, as we have seen, have only partially been penetrated. But the project is also still far from complete in developed modern societies themselves. It seems safe to assume that mass culture and its essential material media are still in the process of being created. As it is virtually impossible for us to forecast how our perceptions of ourselves and of others will be transformed, and consequently how our creativity will be affected, the easiest way out for social theorists is simply to pronounce the present state terminal modernity. In such a fashion these theorists reveal more about their present selves than about the future of other(s). We are just the first generations witnessing the descent of modernism as state-subsidised subversion, of totalitarian movements as critiques of modernity in the name of revolutions in the past and of science often serving as a tool of one or the other.

Modernity will only meet with its limits when the autonomous person, as a monad of the global village, will lose his/her interest in other and others to such an extent that this will critically endanger the maintenance of modernity as such.

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*LIFE IN TRANSITION*  
*From Socialism to Post-Socialism and Beyond*

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