INTRODUCTION

Challenges of the Disappearance of the “Second World”

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The implosion of the Soviet Empire is historically unique for several reasons and historians still have problems explaining what happened and why. It is clear though that the dramatic transformation processes post-1989 will have domino-effects on a global scale, and the consequences can only be dealt with in terms of the effects of globalization on regions and national economies. In 1918 three empires vanished but a Czarist Russian Empire re-emerged, further extended after WW2, when the spheres of influence were largely decided by where the troops were standing at the time of German surrender.

We might note that mere ideology is no stable basis for legitimacy. Post-1989 has also been imprinted by the “late children of 1848,” and by delayed processes of nation building. The end of a bipolar world with one remaining super-power in demise raises questions about the use of the past to understand the present.

Social science as a battlefield for concept formation is an intriguing theme. The Second World refers to the Soviet empire, but sometimes also alternatively to countries on the rise from Third world status; the super eight (G 8) becoming the super 20, and more to add. So the BRIC-countries (sometimes BRICS, when South Africa is added) are sometimes seen as the Second world, emerging powers redefining global competition in the twenty-first century. The new global order is emerging that Zakaria called “post-American world” (Zakaria 2007). “The West and the Rest” is a theme with variations, although the development in Occidental nations is also path-dependent (see for instance Niall Ferguson 2011).

Many issues of collective memory and historical legacy, formative historical experiences, etc, are on the agenda at the same time as a chain of big events leading to new regimes replacing old ones generates a “Stunde Null,” a good market for social engineering and institution building.

Our edited volume deals with some aspects, as outlined below, by Beckert & Swedberg:

The changes from Fordist regulation to more flexible types of organizational structures, the transformation of Eastern European economies, and the process of globalization make the economy appear to be in a state of dramatic change with the final outcome, the implications and
sometimes even the directions as yet unclear. These economic changes will have profound effects on society at large. They will change the role of the state, will make non-economic variables like social capital into important economic resources, and they will affect the family through radical changes in types of employment. But on the basis of which theory can these changes be understood?

Beckert & Swedberg 2001: 381f

The global and regional developments after the fall of Communism in the late 1980s–early 1990s and its versatile consequences have been at the centre of a broad intellectual and political debate on social transformation and the models of post-communist development in the last two decades. This made practical sense: the collapse of Communism (at least of its major representative, the Soviet Empire) radically changed the agenda in global affairs, broke the balance of power, compelled a change of the very categories of social-political analysis; such terms as “Cold War,” “Second world,” “Communist system” seemed to become obsolete. In that context, new approaches to the interpretation of the new global situation were in great need. As Stephen Turner (Turner 2009) put it, the necessity to understand the topic of the “peaceful collapse of Soviet communism” is among the global challenges facing social theory in the last two decades. Social theory had to find the appropriate answer to this historical challenge.

In the light of the implosion of the Second world and especially the Soviet empire, the whole epoch that was characterized by the struggle of Western Modernity with the Communist version of Modernity—although “inherently and permanently crisis-prone” (Arnason 2000: 76), but still a version of the same type of society—came to an end. A new era without a Cold War and global opposition of two world power systems has started. A search for a new world order to replace the “three worlds” system and bi-polar vision of the global reality began. At the beginning of the new millennium, new challenges, such as global terrorism, ecological problems and financial crises, came to the foreground. Still, for scholars in social science and history, it is important to understand and reconsider the past events that put an end to the previous epoch of Communism. “The future started long ago.”

There are many interpretations of the background to the sudden collapse and the post-Communist aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics as well. Some of them are based on pure economic reasoning (E. Gaidar, A. Åslund), others on a combination of internal and external factors (K. Dawisha), or nationalism (A. Khazanov, M. Beissinger). None of these approaches was considered to be overwhelming and accepted by the