Central and Eastern Europe, after a century of revolts against peripheral backwardness; after several, though different types of, revolutions and four decades of desperate experiment, in the end always ended up where it had started. After its long detour, Central and Eastern Europe was still languishing on the periphery of Europe.1

THE DYNAMICS OF ‘TRANSFORMATION DYNAMICS’: FROM THE SOUTH TO THE EAST AND BACK AGAIN

If there was such a thing as a basic consensus characterizing post-communist politics in East Central Europe,2 it was the collective will to leave behind the region’s traditional position at the European periphery finally and definitively. At the end of a century full of lost hopes and wrecked dreams, it was the professed intention of elite and populace alike in these countries to ‘return to Europe’ and to become truly European in political, economic, and social terms. ‘Powered by Europe’: this (sufficiently ambiguous) subtitle could have been given to the transformation of the societies formerly belonging to the so-called ‘Eastern bloc’. Europe—the real, one and only Europe—was on their doorstep, and the European way of life seemed to be within their reach at last. The belated modernization of the post-communist world was thus tackled as a genuine act of Europeanization,3 by both foreign advisors and the local protagonists of transformation policy.

What exactly was to be understood by catch words such as ‘modernization’ and ‘Europeanization’ and what the corresponding reform agenda had to look like was perfectly clear, at least for the majority of—frequently self-appointed—‘transformation experts’ who suddenly turned up in public administrations and

2. The standard caveat should be stated in advance. It is always tempting to think and speak of the former communist countries as a more or less homogeneous group, but in fact there are huge differences among them and these differences (as I shall argue) are becoming more and more marked. I will try my best to maintain a balance between generalization and differentiation, difficult as it is, in the knowledge that the impulse to generalize usually asserts itself in the end.
private think-tanks throughout the Western hemisphere. By happy chance, they had both full-fledged economic blueprints and promising political models at hand that seemed likely to provide ready-made solutions for every conceivable problem of societal transformation in Eastern Europe (and elsewhere). Concerning the economic dimension of post-communist restructuring, there was virtual unanimity in the recommendation that the political actors in the transformation countries should consult the always reliable handbook of liberalism. The simple recipe of market-induced and market-led modernization provided by neo-classical economics had the invaluable advantage of offering a reduced set of clear-cut instructions as to what kinds of measures had to be taken in order to facilitate the unavoidable structural adjustment of the now superseded socialist economies. 'Liberalization, stabilization, privatization'—this was the Trinitarian formula of mainstream economics, one which, paradoxically, seemed to allow an almost planned capitalist transformation of planned economies. As Adam Przeworski noted: "For the first time in history, capitalism is being adopted as an application of a doctrine, rather than evolving as a historical process of trial and error."

Politically, the transitions to democracy of several Southern European countries—Spain, Portugal, and Greece—were widely presented as contemporary examples of a successful societal modernization on the periphery of the European continent. In particular, it was the Spanish experience of 'transición' that was widely praised as a truly exemplary case of a consensual and frictionless process of democratization, a process leading not only to political stability but to a reasonable measure of economic prosperity and social security as well. Not surprisingly, Madrid became the capital of East European 'transition tourism' in the early 1990s.

Looking at the situation of East Central Europe today, it appears that the once envisaged, ambitious goals of political and economic change have not been attained over the past decade of transformation and transformation politics. The general expectations of a swift reorganization of the old institutional settings and steady improvement in living conditions and life chances for broad masses of the population have been disappointed. The political institutions of the socialist regimes have proven more resilient than expected. Even where new elites managed to wrest power away from them, the old regimes have all

