

Iván Szelényi:

Paternal domination and the mafia state under post-communism

This review essay discusses Bálint Magyar's most recent book, *Stubborn Structures: Conceptualizing Post-communist Regimes* (Budapest: CEU Press 2019). Bálint Magyar first published in Hungarian in 2015 (published in English by CEU Press in 2016) a path-breaking book on *The Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary*. This was the first major attempt to move beyond political controversies and offer a systematic critique of post-communist states. The book also went beyond the usual accusation of "corruption." Magyar's key point is that—at least in Hungary—a mafia style of "upper-world" was created, with a "godfather" at the top of it and an "adopted family" below it. This fascinating idea was followed by edited books that included contribution by other scholars. The latest such book is Magyar's *Stubborn Structures: Conceptualizing Post-communist Regimes* (CEU Press 2019), which includes articles applying the "mafia state theory" to a great variety of post-communist countries.

Bálint Magyar is a Hungarian sociologist-ethnographer turned politician. In the 1980s, as a young man, he published an important book on collectivization. Later he joined the democratic opposition and as a liberal politician (an intellectual on the road to class power?) served a number of years as a minister of culture and education. We are fortunate now that he is out of politics and back in sociology. In this recent book, Magyar is posing some of the most intriguing questions anyone who is dealing with the post-communist region can be interested in.

One of these questions is: How shall I call you? Over the last thirty years this was the most frequently asked question by scholars who studied post-communist (often labelled as post-socialist) capitalism. Almost every author new to the field felt obliged to create a term of his or her own—without a new term you supposedly did not made much of a contribution. The most fashionable topic was politics. Since hardly any (if any at all) of the post-communist regimes are consolidated democracies (but more often than not they were assumed to move from communist dictatorship to liberal democracy, inspired by Samuel Huntington's Third Wave of Democratization) a great deal of terminological struggle was fought over where on this continuum a given country can be placed. While many authors—some with tongue in cheek—called a few countries simply "democracies," at least in certain periods (see in *Stubborn Structures*, Kornai's article, pp. 30–31; see also Magyar, p. 108), others added qualifications, such as.

- managed democracies
- electoral autocracies
- leader's or illiberal democracies

- hybrid system (between democracy and dictatorship)
- neo-patrimonialism
- neo-nomenklatura
- authoritarianism
- (even) dictatorship (or neo-fascism or neo-Stalinism), etc.

Fewer, though some, theorists focused on the political economy of the system, hence they called post-communism as

- state capitalism,
- crony capitalism,
- kleptocracy
- mafia state, etc.¹

This volume is a refreshing break from the standing body of literature in several respects. First, it is disciplined by Henry Hale’s “patronal” theory, which is some ways—while mainly within political science—breaks the politics-economics divide. Second, the “patronal” concept creates space for cross-national comparison: to what extent the system “patronal” present is different in various post-communist systems (acknowledging that some degree of “patronal” system is present in all actually existing—even in liberal democratic capitalist— societies). This is a non-trivial achievement.

Let me begin with the concept of “patronal” system. To my embarrassment, before reading this book I was not familiar with Hale’s 2014 book and theory of “patronal” systems. It is not a good enough excuse that we belong to a different cohorts and practice different disciplines (he being a political scientist, me being more of a sociologist). Anyway, I became familiar with the concept of “patronal” system” while reviewing this book and my first reaction—as a rather orthodox Weberian—was negative. But the more I thought about it, the more value I began to see in this innovation.

One seduction—and limitation—of Weberian theory is to use concept only (or mainly?) in historical context (this was not Weber’s intention, but it is the practice of most Weberians). It is the strength and weakness of Weberian theory of social structures. Indeed, concepts like patriarchalism (as in a tribal society), patrimonialism (a Western type of feudalism), and prebendalism/Sultanism are historically specific phenomena and it is problematic to use them in modern contexts. Hence, after a great deal of soul searching I found the idea of “patronal” an improvement—at least in certain respects—over Weber’s position. Unlike Weber, Hale puts patron-client relations into a generalized framework. This is terrific: a narrow Weber reading can be interpreted as types of “traditional authority” and that is dangerously close to simplified and easily misleading the “traditional-modern,” East-West distinction.

Weber of course can be read in different ways. My preference is to interpret his typology as applicable in many (all?) historical instances. For instance “patriarchy,” a social structure in

¹ There is a rich overview of the literature in this volume by Magyar, pp. 97–176.

which (eldest) males rule, is a dominant feature of our “modern” societies, and not only in the family, but has a great deal of impact on the structure of modern capitalist economy and liberal democratic societies. It is one of the reasons why Hillary Clinton lost in 2016 and why neither Elizabeth Warren nor Kamala Harris may not even make it to the democratic nomination—and they would be certainly handicapped in a competition against male-chauvinist Donald Trump. The same goes for paternalism. Trump wanted James Comey, Director of the FBI, to swear allegiance to him; Comey replied with only his loyalty to the US Constitution (acting in terms of what Weber calls legal-rational authority) and therefore he was fired. This is exactly what you would expect a “patron” to demand from a “client.” Nevertheless it is still a stretch to call Trump a “feudal lord,” which he is not, of course, but he does act in a patrimonial way or, to put it in Hale’s terms, as a “patronal” boss.

Hence if we see “patronal” as a more generic concept, Hale is right by claiming that “patrimonialism” is just a type of the paternal system (or Aleksander Fisun—following Eisenstadt—calls it in this volume neo-patrimonialism, see pp. 75–96, a typical way to try to free patrimonialism from traditionalism. I myself tried to use neo-patrimonialism—in retrospect wrongly—in my earlier writings). Hale calls patrimonialism a subtype of “patronal” domination. Bravo, well done. Well, as with all theoretical innovation, beyond its benefits it also has costs; what is gained by re-labelling concepts of earlier theories is accompanied by something also being lost from the original theory.

In my reading of Weber, social domination has two major types: one either obeys a personal “master” or one obeys “pre-established rules” or laws. Patronal domination refers to the first type. The theory of “patronal” rule, however, misses two important questions: who is the “master” we obey and on what ground do we obey such a master? As is well known, Weber believed obedience to the personal master can be based either on charismatic or traditional grounds. Invoking the concept of patronal is a useful way to get rid of the “traditional” label, which comes close to the highly problematic traditional/modern binary code, but it bypasses the question of “charisma.” This is unhelpful, since charisma seems to be quite important in post-communist regimes, but in Magyar’s 600-page book there are only a few references to the concept. Andrey Rybkov, in an impressive overview of various post-communist regimes, points to the “weaknesses” of charismatic authority (p. 430) and to some extent he is right: charismatic leaders emerge when political institutions are weak, but charismatic leaders—like Putin or Orbán—do have a strong authority as long as “charisma is attributed to them” and may not be simply the products of weak political institutions, but may be the causes of weakening of such institutions. Mizsei—in his article on the Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—also engages this question and sees the success of J. Tymoshenko in her charismatic appeal. But then soon he corrects this by suggesting that she had a “lack of policy intelligence” (p. 605). Yes and no. Indeed, if charismatic leader do “stupid stuff”—to use Obama’s expression—and as a result they may lose their charisma; their domination is not questioned as long as clients can be made them believe they will eventually deliver “miracles.” Donald Trump, according to most the policy experts, does not have much (if any) “policy intelligence” but, so

far, with his focus on “building the wall” could retain the faith of his followers. So does Viktor Orbán, by his claim that he defends European Christian culture with his anti-migrant policies. My modest contribution—a friendly amendment—to Hale’s theory is to interpret charismatic authority as a subtype of patronal authority, and to other authors my suggested improvement is to pay much more attention to charisma in country case studies.

Let me just finish this section with one brief note about “legitimacy.” Magyar powerfully suggests that the concept of patrimonialism or neo-patrimonialism cannot be used since it “inherently carries its own legitimation” (p. 111). To a large extent, this is right on the dot. But for Weber “illegitimacy” is a marginal case, when rulers can assure their rule by systematic use of coercion, hence for Weber patrimonialism (the Western type of feudalism) or prebendalism/Sultanism were legitimate systems. Magyar’s aim is quite obvious. He wants to call the “single pyramid system” (or “mafia state” in his own vocabulary) illegitimate. For political purposes this is powerful, but analytically for a Weberian—like myself—is not persuasive. As long as people accept authority because they do not see a credible alternative, the system is legitimate. Let me just offer a very crude example: since about 80% of Hungarians believe that the major threat against their livelihood and security are migrants and that Orbán defends them against these migrants, from this it follows that Orbán’s regime is legitimate. Whether such a claim is true or not is secondary; the critical question is whether people believe it or not. Hence I am open to accepting the concept of the theory of patronal domination as long as it has four subtypes—charismatic, patriarchal, patrimonial, and prebendal/Sultanist—and all these types can exist in all historically specific system as subsystems.

The other major contribution of the theory of patronal domination is that it opens space up to comparative analysis. A critical distinction is made between two major types of patronal system:

- a competing pyramid (Alexei Pikulik’s analysis on the Ukraine, p. 492), or
- A single pyramid (Mizsei, p. 540, see also Magyar p. 117)

This is a superb insight, and it opens up the analysis even for liberal capitalist countries (Magyar does this on p. 117) and enables the analysts to locate various post-communist countries on a scale from competing to single pyramids.

Furthermore, I gather that the spiritus rector of this volume behind Hale is Bálint Magyar and his theory of mafia state. This was certainly one of the great achievements of post 1989 critical theory, moved beyond daily politics and offered a system analysis. When it appeared its target was the post-2010 Orbán regime and may not have appreciated the world-wide spread of “illiberal” regimes (interestingly there are just a few references to illiberalism in this book though since Viktor Orbán’s 2014 speech in Băile Tuşnad this rather obscure political science term became part of regular political discourse and appears daily on the front page of The New York Times). The authors probably did not want to exaggerate the theoretical importance of Mr. Orbán and if that is the case I sympathize with their motives. Intriguingly in the volume

only one paper, the article by Miklós Haraszti (pp.372–383) focuses on the concept of “illiberal regime” and correctly identifies it as the practice of subordination of media to executive power. This is correct and important, but misses the grossly reduced separation of two other branches of power from the executive: the legislative and the judiciary. Thus patronal systems, even if they are composed of competing pyramids, can be illiberal. Trump’s attacks on Congress and the judiciary are clear examples of “illiberal policies” and one of the most damaging feature of illiberalism in Russia or Hungary is the limitation of autonomy of the judiciary branch.

The theory of mafia state was a great step forward, but it had a touch of journalistic—and parochial—emphasis. When I first read in 2015 Magyar’s mafia state theory I was thrilled but—with tongue in cheek—I noted, “I am teaching at UCLA in Westwood and not in Hollywood.” Mafia, godfather, adopted family were terms we might expect in a Hollywood movie script; and while Bálint emphatically claimed he offers a “value neutral” analysis—what is wrong with calling somebody a godfather?—this was not very persuasive. We all knew Viktor Orbán was not flattered by having been called the “godfather” (Paul Klebnikov, the author of “The godfather of the Kremlin” was murdered under suspicious circumstances) so Orbán turned the notion of “mafia” against his socialist and liberal opposition. And indeed there have been a great deal of patron-client relationships in all post-communist countries, starting with early privatization. If this is what mafia means, all post-communist states were mafia states.

The distinction between “single pyramid” and “competing pyramid,” on the other hand, offers an excellent opportunity to re-conceptualize the mafia state. Putin’s Russia and Orbán’s Hungary indeed are close to a “single pyramid” system, though Nikolay Petrov suggests that Putin has complemented his personal power with a newly built “nomenklatura” system² and to some extent they can act as “proxies,” though with little autonomy and a great deal of dependence on Putin himself (p. 188). Country case studies show that single pyramid systems (or mafia states) are more common in the successor-states of the former USSR, though not all of these countries fit the mafia state definition.

One example is found in Sarah Chayes’s analysis. She offers the most sophisticated analysis of Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova, with a careful evaluation of how important single and competing pyramids are functioning in these countries. Azerbaijan comes closest to the single pyramid system. Moldova similarly operates a unitary system, but it is not dominated by a

² The term nomenklatura (originally a value-free Russian word, borrowed from the Latin, meaning a list of names) was widely used in the Soviet Union. In all former socialist countries (including China!), it meant a category of people who held various key administrative positions in the bureaucracy, running all spheres of society: government, industry, agriculture, academia, etc., whose positions were granted only with the approval of the communist party of the country. Virtually all members of the nomenklatura were members of the Communist Party. Nomenklatura is a similar concept to the western “Establishment” holding or controlling both private and public powers (e.g., media, finance, trade, industry, state, and institutions). In other words, nomenklatura is a broader concept than “elites.”

chief of state, while in Kyrgyzstan rivalries—driven by ethnic and political divisions—are far more pronounced than in the two other countries (pp. 510–511). Mikhail Minakov arrives at similar conclusions in the case of Ukraine (pp. 217–243). He calls this country a “republic of clans” and, though there were attempts to build a single-clan supremacy, those attempts were never fully successful and did not last very long. Uladzimir Rouda’s study of Belarus surprisingly argues that Belarus is not really a mafia state, since it still has a substantial state owned sector and as a result power is much more bureaucratic than in Russia or Hungary.

The volume has relatively little on Eastern Europe, or on the former satellites of the USSR. In a careful study of Romania, László Nándor Magyar sees the Romanian corruption system as multi-centered and concludes that the Hungarian mafia state is a unique phenomenon in the region (p. 303). Bálint Magyar, in his fascinating comparison of Poland and Hungary, does see a convergence of Orbán’s Hungary and Kaczyński’s Poland towards an illiberal regime, but he finds little in the way of a trend in Poland to redistribute wealth from the wealthy to the regime’s clients, which is the dominant trend in Orbán’s Hungary. Poland today is driven by power and ideology, Hungary by power and wealth (p. 637). While corruption is widespread everywhere in post-communist Eastern Europe, Hungary stands out with its single pyramid system—though some interesting cases, such as Serbia or Bulgaria, remain to be analyzed.

All in all, this is a wonderful collection of essays, a fertile marriage between Hale and Magyar with many splendid applications of their theories to many interesting countries and far-reaching implications for countries beyond the former USSR and East European post-communist world, and not only for China, but also for the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the emergent trend to limit the separation of branches of power even in countries we normally label as liberal democracies (like Trump’s vision of the United States).