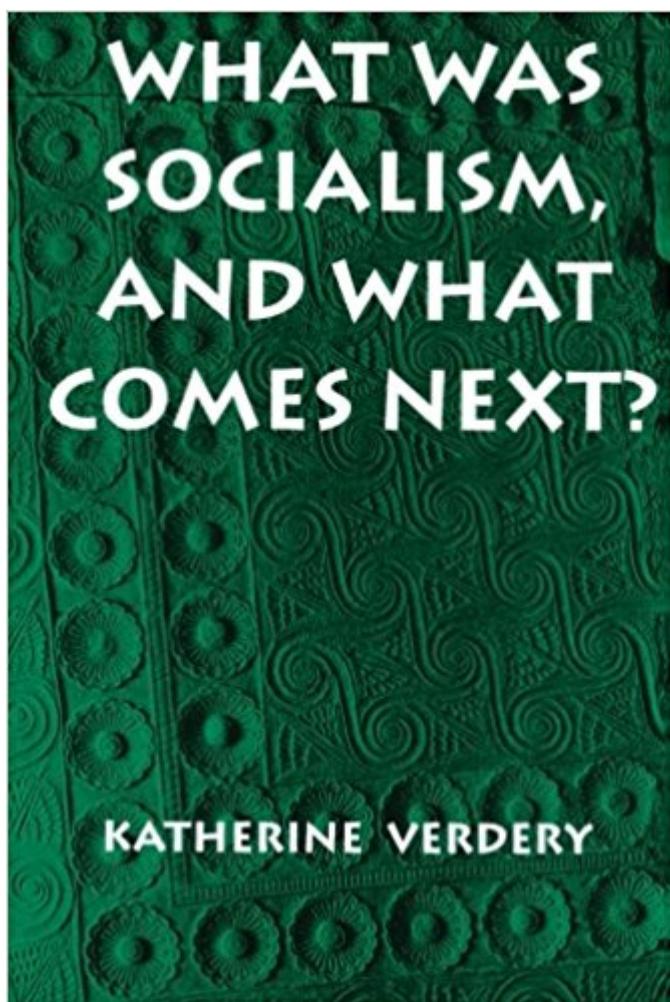


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What Was Socialism, And What Comes Next? (Princeton Studies In Culture/Power/History)



Synopsis

Among the first anthropologists to work in Eastern Europe, Katherine Verdery had built up a significant base of ethnographic and historical expertise when the major political transformations in the region began to take place. In this collection of essays dealing with the aftermath of Soviet-style socialism and the different forms that may replace it, she explores the nature of socialism in order to understand more fully its consequences. By analyzing her primary data from Romania and Transylvania and synthesizing information from other sources, Verdery lends a distinctive anthropological perspective to a variety of themes common to political and economic studies on the end of socialism: themes such as "civil society," the creation of market economies, privatization, national and ethnic conflict, and changing gender relations. Under Verdery's examination, privatization and civil society appear not only as social processes, for example, but as symbols in political rhetoric. The classic pyramid scheme is not just a means of enrichment but a site for reconceptualizing the meaning of money and an unusual form of post-Marxist millenarianism. Land being redistributed as private property stretches and shrinks, as in the imaginings of the farmers struggling to tame it. Infused by this kind of ethnographic sensibility, the essays reject the assumption of a transition to capitalism in favor of investigating local processes in their own terms.

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Customer Reviews

"Verdery starts always with real people's thoughts and experiences, putting her inquiries on a solid footing that both statistics-heavy economic reports and arid efforts at political theorizing

conspicuously lack. This solidity is a boon to those who want to understand how formerly existing socialism came to be what it was--and a warning to those who traffic in simple models of how it is being surpassed."--Joel Robbins, In These Times

Katherine Verdery is Professor of Anthropology at the Johns Hopkins University. Among her books are Transylvanian Villagers and National Ideology under Socialism.

As Karl Marx noted originally, "islands of socialism cannot exist in a sea of capitalism". Marx, Lenin, Djilas, Marcuse, and some others have explained why this was so. In What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?, anthropologist Katherine Verdery explains how and why the Soviet bloc socialist experiment failed in general terms and in sharp narrative detail. As the system of state socialist governance began to disintegrate in the late 80's says Verdery, the first casualties were the classic Marxist-Leninist theoretical constructions about the role of vanguardist cadres, production, the true meaning of economic and political liberty, and the role of the state in society. Verdery gives careful and detailed explanation of this conflict of theory with practice. Verdery creates her own nomenclature for her explanations of these processes and their actors in the decline and fall of state socialism in Russia and the rest of the Soviet bloc. For example: "Entrepratchiks" explains Verdery, are well connected party members who collude with managers and bureaucrats who gamed the reformist programs of the late 80's for their own pecuniary and political gain [page 33]. A useful term has been coined here. "Etatization" says Verdery, are "ways in the which the Romanian state [in this case] seized time from the purposes which many wanted to pursue", by means such as creating shortages of electricity, food, consumer goods (and so which required long waiting in queues), and irregular transportation and work hours [page 40]. "Bourgeoisocracy": "All across the former Soviet bloc entrepratchiks have consolidated their advantage [when reformist policies were instituted in the late 80's] by using Communist Party-based political connections and political office to gain [personal] control of wealth and resources" [page 196]. The classically trained Marxist bureaucrats and party leaders, says Verdery, could find no answers or solutions for their problems in the copious literature of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and the rest. Theories could not be made into useful guidebook for a successful and just society. Their theories could not be reified. Theory had conflicted with reality, and as always, reality won [page 229]. The failure of land reform, the dehumanizing effects of state capitalism, and the total inability to eliminate (or even reign in) corruption in the Communist Party and the bureaucracies all led to the demise of the Soviet bloc states reports Verdery. As for the "what comes next?" part of Verdery's book title, the pessimistic

answer on her part is feudalism, albeit with a more modern face. In other words, a devolution from state socialism that bypasses liberal democracy and market capitalism and reverts to a form of high-tech modern peonage in which most people are locked into a society based on land tenure, wage slavery, and rule by local strongmen based upon violence and force and all the rest of the inequities that such a system necessarily entails [page 205]. An aspect of Verdery's work in this book that I didn't like is that at different points in her narrative she goes off on feminist gender theory inspired rants that diminish and distract from her other wise trenchant observations and which reduce the power of her work; Verdery should have left all this out. Should readers be interested in this though, they will find numerous feminist theory bon mots liberally sprinkled throughout the text and there is a whole chapter on feminist criticism of Soviet bloc state socialism included as well [Chapter 3, pages 62-83]. On the whole this is a very readable work on the decline and fall of Marxist-Leninist style state socialism in Eastern Europe, and it deserves serious consideration from social and political theorists.

Katherine Verdery's use of her experience in Romania as the basis for generalizations on 'actually existing socialism' and 'what comes next' left me skeptical at first. However, after more serious study this book constitutes one of the seminal works for study of this region.

The author has chosen an interesting topic. However, I was more than a little put off by her treatment of it. If socialism subjected "hundreds of thousands to terror and death," then its professed concern with "hunger, inequality and poverty" is absurd on its face. If socialism produced hunger, and killed millions, why see it as a "liberation movement"? While surely death brings liberation from suffering, that could hardly be thought a sufficient response "to major problems (of) capitalist liberal democracies." The author attempts "to broaden a critique of Western economic and political forms." At the same time, she does not critique her own critique. While she purports to see these "forms" through Eastern Europeans' eyes, she totally ignores that the dead have no eyes with which to see; they are dead. And the number of dead caused by socialism exceeds "hundreds of thousands."

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