The Continuity of Expecting Discontinuities

Commonly, post-1989 is associated with the expectation of a return to normality. The beginning of normality would be the consolidation of democracy, a further stabilization of economic growth, a gradual exit from the extraordinary: that is, a post-revolutionary phase. Inversely, the rise of anti-capitalist attitudes and the questioning of the new rules of the game would signify the search for a new utopia (Wnuk-Lipiński, 1996:274–5). The assumption of the break-up of 1989 implies a thinking that wishes to end the drama of the disrupted East and West by a return to stability and normality. ‘It would be nice to know how the drama of the revolutions of 1989 will end: then the history of these events could be written as a coherent play, with a beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, a development during the cold war, a climax in the late 1980s, an unfolding of the consequences of the climax in the 1990s, and a logically satisfying end at the start of the twenty-first century.’ With the advent of 1989 there was widespread hope that the transitory pre-1989 normality would discontinue and Poland would exit into the normality of Western-type structures. This prospect of an exit route opened up in a way comprehensible through a variety of conceptual approaches which relied mainly on expectations of stability. ‘Normality is essentially coterminous with high levels of stability and predictability – with well-established and defined patterns of behaviour. After all, this is what norms are.’ In turn, normality was defined as the future status quo, to which Poles were supposedly returning after a long, forced separation caused by the Second World War and communism (Szacki, 1991:721).

In a similar vein, one can point to three major possible conceptions of normal politics (Holmes, 1997:337). First, there is normality
from the perspective of the West; second, a return to the normal conditions of the pre-communist traditions of these countries; and third, the return to the past of the communist era. These three conceptions of normality are, to a large extent, mutually exclusive. This triad is almost equivalent to what Claus Offe defined as the guidelines for the East German situation.

Social and political forces that emerge in the aftermath of state socialism are split among three centres of gravity, namely the (‘golden’) pre-Communist past, the (‘better’ aspects of the) Communist past. . . . and the ‘better future’ of prosperity to be achieved through an emulation of Western-style democratic capitalism. There is hardly anything that proponents of the three orientations making up this triangle of forces could easily agree upon.  

Normality of the new order is regarded as being impaired by the effects of institutional, mental, social, and political legacies of communism. ‘The Leninist legacy, understood as the impact of Party organization, practice, and ethos, and the initial charismatic ethical opposition to it, favor an authoritarian, not a liberal democratic capitalist, way of life; the obstacles to which are ( . . .) rather how to institutionalize public virtues.’ Such an inheritance would cause a new world disorder as a new way of life. While the first strand is about determination as regards expected results (dependent variables, democracy, and capitalism), the second strand rather derives a future non-consolidation from the determinating legacies of the past (Jowitt, 1992:268).

The standard approaches to normality are flawed by their bias towards dichotomies. Continuities in Eastern European transitions are generally conceived as sequential and evolutionary. In such a reading, communism as a system is followed by post-communism, which will be unique in human history, because communism itself was unique. In a similar vein, the presumed re-communication of Polish politics as of 1993 was followed by an attempt at de-communication in the second half of the 1990s. Any reference to the Western model is linked to the economic or political reality of capitalism or democracy. This sequential scheme focuses on continuities in terms of political outcomes that pertain to normal politics in the first reality.

This book has questioned the dichotomy of sequential continuities by analysing processes such as the jump to the market economy,