

cialist” or a “people’s democracy”. Apart from the horror stories from the history of Stalinist Russia and from other socialist countries (especially during the period lasting a decade or so after the Second World War), the socialist² societies functioned as complex societies in all respects. This, simply put, means that they had by and large a kind of functioning economy, very strong public institutions and quite a complex culture, which comprised of traditional (folk) culture and different constructions of culture as envisioned by the socialist ideology. Still, in spite of whatever anybody may say today, these societies and states were perceived for a few decades as “normal” by their members/citizens, and up until the very last moment before their final collapse, not even social scientists had any idea about the extent of an imminent change.

How did analysts, journalists and the public in different countries read many different signs of a coming change? This question calls for an extensive analysis of the different discourses of the time. Furthermore, social changes (a concept that comprises vastly complex meanings) in different countries had different dynamics. Some socialist countries, ones that had managed to edge closer to some kind of democratisation and market economy, like Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia in the sixties, looked different in the eighties, when Poland and Hungary arrived closer to the invisible limits of the so-called “socialist development”. The whole chain of events has been even less transparent since also different trends and tendencies existed within certain countries, notably those with some kind of federalist arrangement. It was a complex history in which politics and ideology played a central and, most often, a decisive role. However, in the fields of economy and culture, dissimilar developments on the way to different paradigms of society could be perceived. Of course, insights into “what has really been going on” were rare and not until just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, did such insights become known to the interested public worldwide. A full explanation of all the “whats and whys” is still an open task for future historians to undertake. Of course, it is impossible to predict which answers will be found – if any at all.

2 Sometimes one comes across terminological misunderstandings concerning the signification of the notions “communist” and “socialist” – especially with American readers. Since, what is in the West labelled as “former communist” societies, were the States, which considered them to be “socialist” and mostly anticipated communism as a “next stage of a social development”.