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Not All Roads Lead to Rome

The Unexpectedly Slow 'Transition'

The unforeseen events of the autumn of 1989, and especially the sensational fall of the Berlin Wall as an apt symbol of communist totalitarianism in the former East block countries, triggered a general wave of enthusiasm and optimism on all social levels throughout the European continent. This wave of optimism will also certainly be associated in the future with such sociological and psychological terms as 'charismatic movement', 'raised collective temperature', and the like (Mühlmann, 1964; 251+). In addition, the average private West European citizen, could, for the first time in history, thanks to the media, take part in the festive mood of this 'epoch revolution', even from his or her own living-room.

If one thinks back on the 'Messianistic birth pains' from before the 9th of November, 1989, on the immense process of mobilization of the masses, or on the realization of political coups in the socialistic countries, then a comparison with the most captivating facts of European history in the last two hundred years spontaneously comes to mind. The storming of the Bastille, the battle of Waterloo, the breakup of Metternich's Holy Alliance, the Paris Commune, or the storming of the Winter Palace represented (on the basis of their iconographic tradition through historical painters, naturalistic writers, realistic film directors, and not least, through the rhetoric of canonized history books, all of which taken together have contributed decisively to the construction of a European 'freedom theme' and 'freedom motif') excellent reference points for the events which have led to the breakdown of socialism as a totalitarian system of rule. Just as the above-mentioned facts of European history, which according to socially constructed tradition and collective consciousness are to be interpreted as basic phenomena of the moral revival, social emancipation, political democratization and economic upswing on our continent, so too the ruinous, if not, on my opinion, final collapse of socialism in the countries of East-central Europe has and will continue to signify the 'transition' in the direction of freedom, peace and growth.

The connection in all the above events is obvious: without exception, they symbolize a new beginning or entrance to a new era of 'better' conditions in all areas of life. The storming of the Bastille represented the end of 'ancient regime' which was described as 'unbearable' and perceived as oppressive by the very people involved, while the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of a similarly hated period of socialistic rule. The enthusiasm of 1989 was therefore completely plausible, especially since the transition from totalitarianism to democracy, and from a planned economy to a free market, was supposed to take place quickly and painlessly.

Had this scenario really come true, then the founding of a journal such as *East European Countryside* would have been presumably very hard to justify. Such a forum as this derives its full legitimacy from an analysis of the immense problems which are linked to the post-communist transformation in social, cultural, political, economic, and not the least of all, ecological, spheres.

The painless and speedy transition from socialism to capitalism and from dictatorship to pluralism did not take place. The enthusiasm of the first hours quickly turned into disillusionment and bitter disappointment. To be sure, the realistic and historically sensitive observer can not be surprised by this course of events, for the assumption of a smooth and nearly automatic transformation is based on a fundamentally a historical fallacy, namely, on the fiction of the reversibility of history.

From the Destruction of History to its Reversibility

It is interesting to see how, above all, the institutional elite of the countries of East-central Europe have treated the history of their own countries since the introduction of socialism up until the present time. One almost gets the impression that history was, and still is, being used as a form and manipulable instrument of deceit. But perhaps such elites were, and are, also victims of their own illusions.

Socialism — and this holds true for all former East block countries from the GDR to Bulgaria, with a few exceptions and some deviations — tried, as Matvejevic aptly stated, to move history and with all means at its disposal to push it forward (Matvejevic, 1992; 38). For this reason, the advocates of this endeavor did not shrink from the systematic destruction of the true past which was presented as an oppressive legacy of a corrupt and degenerate epoch of despotism, poverty, exploitation, alienation, etc.

In this sense it is instructive to see how the Bulgarian rulers dealt with land registration after the agrarian reforms of 1946. Driven by the conviction that the dark era of small land ownership is gone forever, the local communist authorities destroyed the land records during the course of collectivization. In such cases, one should never underestimate the symbolic

meaning of such actions, for it is precisely by means of the destruction of such records which document everyday life that the unacceptable past can be eliminated.

The criteria upon which the reconstruction of restoration of the historical monuments of the former GDR was undertaken represented a similar phenomenon. In this regard, it is only necessary to recall how the centers of Berlin and Dresden were dealt with: one can hardly avoid coming to the conclusion that the 'culture management' of the GDR was ready to erase German history before 1945 through the inadequate care and downright destruction of architectural symbols. In contrast to this, the institutions responsible for the protection of monuments in the Bundesrepublik distinguished themselves by such careful attention to the salvation of historical buildings that it seem to the Italian observer as somewhat overplayed and exaggerated. The 'culture man' of the GDR changed his position towards history only at the time of the final death throes of the regime.

The attempts to destroy the unpleasant aspects of history can also be seen in the example of the socialist restructuring of Bucharest, where above all the 'degenerate' evidence of bourgeois construction was supposed to be eliminated. One can easily cite countless similar cases of this 'iconoclastic' rage against history. It must be remembered, however, that in practice socialism was based more upon the view of reality 'as it should be', than on the actual reality itself (Matvejevic 1992: 41). Matvejevic's observation holds true not only for the interpretation of the present and the future, but it is also just as valid with regard to the past.

In this sense, the real past was destroyed and, at the same time, it was replaced by a 'how-it-should-have-occurred' construction of history. Socialism, therefore, did more than simply deny or negate history; the discourses about the past were constantly a process of 'historicization'. Paradoxically, we are dealing here with a teleologically conceived 'historicization', one which is based on a deliberate 'invention of traditions' (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983).

The responsibility for this manipulation of the past belongs, nevertheless, not only to the realm of politics or official history writing, but much more it belongs to the entire social cultural sciences, especially to the prevailing national ethnology. As part of the socialist 'management of culture', these disciplines, with the aid of a clever operation of 'pseudo-historicization' and 'de-anthropologization', created not only a false picture of the work force, but also a fixation on a peasant-based 'folk culture'. The farmers — I am referring here above all to South-east Europe — were dispossessed and either 'proletarized' by their entrance into the agricultural collectives, 'urbanized' by their migration into the cities, or 'systematized' by means of centralized measures. At the same time, there existed the official and party-approved propagation of a fictitious folk culture created and sometimes even administered by the above-mentioned disciplines, and

presented as a real and actual phenomenon arising from 'industrialized' activities in the framework of that which is understood as 'folklore'.

This systematic 'invention of traditions' also served of course in the so-called 'peasant and worker states' — the 'People's Democracies' of East-central Europe — to legitimate numerous political measures. Once again, Todor Zivkov's Bulgaria presents a good example: the 'invention' of a Bulgarian folk culture of a mono-ethnic nature is no doubt closely connected with the policy of forced Bulgarianization or expulsion of the Turkish minority between 1960 and 1989 (Carol Silverman 1992: 269). The fiction of a primeval Romanian folk culture which was suppressed and eclipsed by neighboring groups also facilitated Ceausescu's repression in Transylvania.

The transition of 1989 radically altered this view of history. The socialistic interpretation of the past was suddenly declared 'lies', 'false', 'self-serving of the regime', and therefore unreliable; at the same time, socialism itself, now seen as a part of flow of contemporary history, was denounced as a fatal 'historical' mistake. The socialist discourse with regard to history is based, as already mentioned, on the selective destruction of the past. The post-communist construction of history, on the other hand, begins with the premise of the reversibility of history. The first discourse rests on a 'prospective' model, while the second is based upon a 'retrospective' view. Both views, however, can be characterized by their anti-historical outlook.

By the reversibility of history I mean the idea that the 'burdensome' past can and should be reversed. According to this model, it is necessary and desirable to re-create the conditions of the pre-socialist era, as if socialism never existed, or existed only outside of the 'flow of history'. This endeavour to eliminate history was strikingly described to me by a Polish student who metaphorically compared socialism to a dead end street: 'When one wishes to come out of a dead end, he claimed, then one must return to the original point of entry'. Similarly illustrative is the metaphor of a Chinese intellectual who described socialism as a 'black hole' in which for more than forty years no history taken place (*La Repubblica*, 17. 11. 1992).

Most of the economic, political and social reforms in the post-communist period are, on my opinion, being conceived in accordance with the principal of the reversibility of history. Regardless of whether one is dealing with the criteria for establishing Latvian nationality or the return of urban real estate in the former GDR, regardless of whether the statues of Lenin are torn down or the street names changed, the appropriate institutions responsible for carrying out reforms always refer to the 'glorious' pre-socialist past which is seen as decisive for the transformation of the present and the determination of future change. A similar tendency is quite clearly evident in the design and execution of the agrarian reform law passed in Bulgaria in 1992. This law provides for the return of landed properties to their former owners as of the 'correct' boundaries existing

in 1946. To this purpose, committees were set up throughout the country which were charged with a task indispensable for the reversibility of history, namely, the reconstruction of pre-socialist property rights.

In this regard, the socialist period was treated by the legislators as an historical 'black hole', as they ignored the fact that during the last 45 years processes had been set into motion — such as urbanization and the occupational re-organization of a wide spectrum of rural strata — all of which fundamentally altered the social structure of Bulgaria. It can hardly be expected that the urbanized descendants of the dispossessed farmers will ever strive for a 'return to the land'. Moreover, the new owners are often gainfully employed in secondary and tertiary economic sectors and no longer possess the rural know-how to run a farm. Apparently, we are witnessing in Bulgaria a 'reprivatization without farmers', which will have dire consequences for agricultural production, and as a result, for the supply flow of goods into the cities. The socialist transformation has so thoroughly altered the rural social structure and consciousness of the people that the attempt to recreate the conditions of 1946 can only be seen as illusory and fictitious.

As the Bulgarian example clearly shows, the post-communist discourse on the reversibility of history — just the same as the previous destruction of the past — is emerging as 'anti-historical historizing' which has already had an effect on the appropriateness and usefulness of many reform efforts. This statement of course touches on a highly explosive subject, which no doubt from time to time will occupy the pages of Eastern European Countryside in the future. For the concept of 'rural', with its tradition-oriented symbols often ascribed to it, is predestined for political/economic strategies throughout East-central Europe which refer to the model of the reversibility of history.

The Reproduction of the Elite

The theme of the reversibility of history holds true directly after the transition and continues to hold true, as one of the arguments which legitimizes the taking away of power from the socialist elite. In no way should this be taken to mean that this represents the only legitimating discourse. We are dealing here, to be sure, with a very important model for the justification of de-communization of the political and economic structure of East-central Europe.

Once again, the example of Bulgarian agriculture, on the basis of its exemplary nature, proves particularly instructive: the reprivatization of land within the 'real borders' of 1946 went along with the closing down of the collective farms and state agricultural enterprises. The post-communist

government, in accordance with the above mentioned agrarian law, appointed executive committees which were charged with the dissolution of these enterprises. For the determination of the membership of these committees, what mattered most was the 'correct' political affiliation which, at least on paper, excluded cooperation with the former socialist regime, and not the technical competence of those involved. The compromised local 'nomenklatura' who had run the agricultural collectives in paternalistic fashion in the past were therefore immediately released. Although these existing technical specialists (agronomists, accountants, veterinarians, chemists, etc.) were in fact loyal party members, they nevertheless possessed a good level of training in agricultural matters, even though that training was of course oriented towards a planned economy.

The actual agricultural situation in Dobrudzha (North-east Bulgaria) demonstrates that this dismissed group of technical experts were the only persons who had the know-how and financial means to put free market, efficient enterprises on their own feet in the primary sector.

In socialism, the elite of the collective farms acquired not only the necessary techno-economic knowledge, but at the same time, they could also cover themselves with considerable financial resources from the state, thanks mostly to illegal, but nevertheless tolerated, practices. This combined 'knowledge' and 'capital' can, at the present time, be invested excellently in the newly created rural private sector, especially since there are no evenly matched competitors present who have at their disposal a comparable starting point. The landowners favored by the policy of reprivatization are often city dwellers who show only the slightest interest for agriculture and at the same time, due to their place of inhabitation, no longer possesses any skill for the 'farm economy'. Or they are proletarianized farmers who practically their whole life carried out orders as low-level employees of the collective farms and never had any independent responsibilities for the care of the land, or for the production and sale of agricultural products. For this reason, the new owners tend to lease their own property, or in extreme cases, even sell it, and once again, for reasons already discussed, only the previous socialist, local elite come into the picture as renters or buyers.

The particular experience of Dobrudzha, Bulgaria, clearly shows once again that 'numerous old 'nomenklatura' who held leading positions in the former state and collective farms, were able to work out for themselves the most favorable conditions for renting reprivatized land holdings and thus pursue 'careers' as capitalist entrepreneurs in the private sector. So the Bulgarian agrarian law, which was supposed to provide sanctions against the true believers and opportunistic supporters of the old socialist regime, actually seems to have created a real 'market vacuum', though unintended and undesired by the new rulers, which is being more and more cleverly used by the compromised local 'nomenklatura'.

The present case, which presents the latent function of legal instruments in an almost ideally typical fashion, shows that the influence of the old elite has not been completely eradicated. These groups did in fact lose their political power after the transition of 1989 and the subsequent political reforms. However, they were able to acquire some rather important positions in the private sector. It is in this sense that the term 'reproduction of the elite' should be understood, for this term refers more to the functional shift of the nomenklatura than to the 'inertia tendency' of the positions and structure of the old power system.

The question of the reproduction of the elite as a functional shift now seems to apply to all of East-central Europe and to the most important sectors of the newly privatized economies. Eastern Europe Countryside will certainly have to examine this phenomenon carefully, for without a doubt, agriculture offers a paradigmatic scenario for the detailed study of this process which is making a deep impression of the entire social transformation of the post-communist states.

Post-totalitarianism and the 'Geistesproletariat'

No one can question the fact that socialism in East-central Europe led to dictatorship. But it would be naive to believe — as the Western press often seems to do — that the transition of 1989 simply and automatically brought democracy along with it. At the present, on my opinion, political systems dominate in East-central Europe which can be designated more aptly by the term post-totalitarian 'demokratura' than by the term 'rule of law' democracies. The ruling class of this transitional system consists not of experienced professional politicians, but rather it is composed much more of intellectuals who hardly have any practical political experience.

Interestingly, these intellectuals show a remarkable similarity to the 'Geistesproletariat' in Germany in the previous century who played such an important role in the origin and dissemination of nationalistic ideas and ideologies (Bendix, 1980: vol. 1, 45+). As in Germany in the 19th century, socialism in East-central Europe in the 20th century has produced more intellectuals than it needed or could possibly employ. Suffice it to mention here the numerous universities and Academy of Sciences hopelessly filled up with scientific staff. The initiated, but only partially carried out, restructuring of the educational and research institutions after the transition of 1989 has brought much uncertainty to a large number of intellectuals. They are now confronted both with a loss of status, and also, in view of the drastic rising costs of living, with completely inadequate salaries, or even with short-term loss of employment. This socio-economic decline is particularly evident for those concerned when they compare it to the rapid rise

of the 'nouveaux riches', who seem to be blessed with the success of their commercial activities in the informal, and partially illegal, private sector and characterized by their demonstrative and tasteless consumer attitudes (Sampson 1993).

In such a situation it becomes all the more obvious that a political career for those frustrated 'Geistesproletariat' offers the best chance to compensate for the existing socio-economic deficit. It is a fact that the parliaments of East-central Europe are currently overflowed with intellectuals. Sometimes they have even been successful in reaching the highest offices of the government, such as in the case of former Czechoslovakia or Bulgaria, where a philosopher became president of the republic.

The 'Geistesproletariat' — as Bendix and Riehl, the authors of the term, have emphasized — nevertheless often form the matrix for social and political instability in connection with the political positions which they have achieved. This assumption has already come true in shocking fashion in ex-Yugoslavia, for the ideological 'managers' and often the political leaders of the various sides of the civil war are nationalistically-minded 'Geistesproletariat'. The non-military 'warlords' are for example historians (Tudjman, Djuretić), psychologists (Karadžić), philosophers (Mihailo Marković), sociologists (Milosević's wife, Miryana Marković, Seselj), literary critics (Pavletić), writers (Gotovač and Cosić) or specialists in Islamic studies (Isetbegović) (Matvejevic 1992, 72; *La Repubblica* 28. 2. 93).

In the example of the political career of the Hungarian writer Istvan Csurka, one can perhaps most clearly see which bandwagons the 'Geistesproletariat' have tried to hop onto in East-central Europe. I would characterize their political program with the phrase 'nationalism-populism-ruralism'. Of course, we are dealing here with an old concept, for this ideological combination has fascinated the broad masses of East-central Europe, and not least of all the peasant classes, long before the socialist period. Csurka is also operating, therefore, within the model of the reversibility of history, although under different parameters, as a Western-oriented advocate of a rapid and trouble-free 'transition'. He is propagating the fiction of an 'ethnically pure' peasant community which embodies national virtues and values, and which is not yet polluted by pluri-ethnic and therefore 'unclear' cosmopolitanism (Jews, immigrants), by demoralized urbanity (homosexuality), by secular liberalism and by communist internationalism.

As far as I know, Csurka does not represent an isolated case. At the present, due to the activities of the 'Geistesproletariat', similar, though less successful versions of the formula 'nationalism-populism-ruralism' have increasingly appeared in East-central Europe. With regard to research of the rural milieu in the former socialist countries, it is certainly not irrelevant to observe how the rural population reacts to the political impulse of the 'Geistesproletariat'. When one considers the success of motto 'nationalism-

-populism-ruralism' in the countryside before World War II, then it becomes clear that the 'Geistesproletariat' who represents and propagates such ideas can look rather confidently towards the future.

Whether this gloomy prospect actually comes true, or whether another scenario will take precedence, it is in any case unmistakable that the post-communist 'transition' possesses its own specific 'historicity'. In this sense, the processes set in motion after the fall of communism can never lead to the creation of conditions whereby the societies of East-central Europe become necessarily identical to those in Western Europe. The socialist past, as a historical phenomenon, will, despite all attempts to make history reversible, continue to exert its influence on the experience and aspirations of those concerned. Metaphorically phrased, Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest or Sofia can never become copies of Paris, London, Madrid, Brussels or Vienna.

Legality versus Legitimacy: On the Origin and Persistence of a Work Ethic

During the 1970's and 1980's, Western experts came to the conclusion that the socialist regimes of East-central Europe could count on a certain degree of legitimacy despite their totalitarian structure. The abrupt breakdown of the systems of communist rule in 1989 has, in retrospect, shown that this assumption was false; socialism was successful in carrying out its own brand of legality without having achieved a corresponding degree of legitimacy from the majority of the population. For more than forty-five years, therefore, there existed in East-central Europe a permanent gulf between socialist legality and the principle of legitimacy from which it was defined who should exercise power.

Although the discrepancy between legality and legitimacy supposedly has a tradition in this part of the continent which is much older than the imposition of socialist totalitarianism, nevertheless, the communist rulers monopolized the system of legal norms and the state institutions of force by means of the party apparatus without, from the point of view of the citizens, having been called upon to do so.

It also must be noted that, at the same time, socialism attempted to create a 'new' human being who would find his individuality in the service of the collective. According to this principle, the state and the party were more important than the individual. The bipolarity between legality and legitimacy therefore has led to a value system which must seem like a double standard in relation to the concept of legitimate legality of Western European derivation. In place of 'Homo sovieticus', a type of person has arisen whose main concern is to make it through amidst of unclear 'powers'

(party, state, bureaucracy etc.) above all with the help of survival strategies such as infiltration and avoidance. The common philosophy connected to this, and which is certainly also valid for the rural population, can be summed up by the motto: 'the system is exploiting me, so I can cheat the system'. In this regard, the case of the Polish part-time farmers comes to mind, who gave up their traditional work ethic based on diligence, modest needs and a savings mentality (Galeski 1981: 153), and took on an ambivalent 'wheeler-dealer' attitude. So on the one hand, these farmers increasingly engaged themselves in the illegal, but nevertheless government tolerated, production market of the informal economy, while at the same time, they tried to trick the state processing and marketing enterprises with all the means at their disposal, in order to get the highest returns on their products.

In effect, the Polish farmers who had secondary employment during the socialist period represented a kind of 'dual occupational class' who cleverly exploited not only the economic resources of the nationalized industrial sector, but also took advantage of private agriculture and the so-called 'parallel economy'. Work in the socialist primary sector assured them a constant minimum salary as well as the presence of a 'social net'; the weaknesses of the collectivized production system, on the other hand, offered them a real opportunity to work rather intensively on their own farm. In this sense, Polish part-time farmers took advantage of all that socialist system had to offer. But, at the same time, the system was afflicted with heavy absenteeism in the work place and infiltrated by a rather active participation in the informal sector (Giordano 1988; 193+).

Under conditions of a rapid and total land collectivization policy, similar attitudes can also be seen in Bulgaria, where the small farmer's disposition to work was replaced by a 'socialist' work ethic of dubious character.

The structure of this ambivalent work ethic contains elements which are also relevant for the interpretation of economic behavior after the transition. First of all, it must be shown that the post-totalitarianism in East-central Europe is also characterized by the continued gulf between legality and legitimacy. In this sense, the new regimes are lying on a continuum in their relation to socialism. It is therefore fully plausible that the 'logic of ambivalence' and therefore also the congruence of the above-mentioned work ethic have not lost their relevance.

After those important preliminary remarks, it can now be put forward that such an attitude towards work has a considerable effect on that which is so fundamentally necessary for the functioning of a rational capitalistic economic system. Namely, it diminishes, or even seriously hinders, the readiness to take risks and the spirit of initiative, based on an exact and long-term calculation of market variables. The new entrepreneurs, that is to say, the 'nouveaux riches' and the 'nomenklatura' who have directed

themselves towards the market economy, at the moment also prefer the short-term strategy of quick profits and exploitation capitalism.

Let us return to a discussion of the ambivalent work ethic in the countryside. The economically active farmer could, in the event that his activities in the private sector failed for one reason or another, always fall back on his socialist relationship as a salaried employee, according to the formula 'pseudo-work for pseudo-pay'. He was, in effect, protected against the risks of private initiative and, at the same time, did not have to assume any responsibility for the state enterprises. This situation was fundamentally altered after the introduction of the market economy in 1989, for the new governments, due to the deep economic crisis, gradually lost their function as social welfare institutions. This has certainly led to a wider discrediting of the state, and as a result, to a deepening of the gulf between legality and legitimacy. The persistence of this 'ambivalent work ethic' and the 'entitlement mentality' connected with it has logically awakened feelings of uncertainty and frustration that in retrospect make socialism seem rather paternalistic and 'stepmother-like' from an economic and political point of view, but nevertheless, not completely uncomfortable.

I would certainly not like to convey here the stereotype of the lazy 'Easties' in all of East-central Europe, or even remotely support such a conclusion; I would simply maintain that an ambivalent work ethic is meaningful, that is, rational, in a situation in which — as in socialism and post-totalitarianism — there exist a wide gulf between legality and legitimacy.

Final remarks

In this introduction I have addressed a few, sometimes disquieting, factors which have made their impression upon present-day transformations in East-central Europe. Of course, I make no claims to completeness. Perhaps the reader may ask what is the main theme of the present editorial. The leitmotif which I have dealt with here is 'historicity', and not, as in the case of most other authors, the 'linearity' or 'cyclicity' of events and processes. Up to now, the processes and transformations in East-central Europe have been interpreted according to certain models, which practically did not allow a variety of choices. With this comment about historicity, I would like to emphasize the capability of those concerned to construct the present and the future in a sometimes unpredictable way. For history is not only the compilation of more or less connected facts; much more often people create, through their interpretation, assimilation and passing down of historical facts, a collective memory with its own experience and aspirations, as well as its specific pattern of development and course of action. The main task of Eastern European Countryside, on my opinion, lies in

the investigation of the specific historicity which the rural population in their everyday life design and carry out, on those basis of interdisciplinary as well as structural and cross-cultural analyses. In order to avoid the 'iron cage' of schematism, it seems therefore appropriate to place our new journal under the motto 'not all roads lead to Rome'.

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