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Obstacles to Liberalism in Post-Communist Politics

George Schöpflin

The post-Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe have opted for liberal democracy as the only viable alternative to communism. While this defines their position in broad terms, it says very little about the extent to which they will shift towards liberalism in their new structures and practices. In this paper, an attempt will be made to discuss some of the obstacles to the introduction of political and economic liberalism, both structural and attitudinal.

The pivotal factor conditioning the horizons of those involved in the construction of these post-Communist systems is, of course, the legacy of communism. Communism can be defined as the apotheosis of etatism, as well as having other attributes. Central to Communist legitimation was the proposition that the state was knowledgeable and society was ignorant, that the state embodied progress while society was an obstacle to this. This reversed the well-established West European ideal that society was creative and the state was reactive.

The legacy of what might be termed "hyper-etatism" is a contradictory one. On the one hand, there is a rejection of the centralized, command economy model, as well as the monopoly control of political power by a single party; on the other, there is confusion about how far reversal of this should go. Society is anxious that any radical break with the detested past would leave it worse off economically and, although it appears to value the new-found political and economic freedoms, it remains largely uncertain as to how to use them. Much the same applies to political elites. They too are uncertain about how far they should dismantle the Communist-built "hyper-state." Indeed, the first and possibly most significant political debate of the new post-Communist democracies is about the proper role of the state.

There is no one answer to this question of how far the state should exercise its regulatory and programmatic powers. The tradition in Central and Eastern Europe has been that the state played a preeminent role

in this respect—to this extent, communism had carried a genuine pre-existing tradition to absurd lengths—but the past did not necessarily provide adequate answers for the 1990s. The Communist caesura had been a real one. But legitimation of policies in the present by reference to the past was, of course, a possibility. Perhaps more important, the new political elites were hemmed in by an old dilemma, the dilemma that the pre-Communist modernizers had also faced and which they overwhelmingly failed by liberal criteria.

The pre-Communist pattern of development had given rise to relatively weak and dependent societies. The Communists had done little to strengthen society and encourage its autonomy, with the consequence that the new leaderships felt they were obliged to use the machinery of the state to substitute for the weaknesses of society, to help individuals and groups who were inexperienced or ignorant of the new opportunities. This was not automatically an unworthy objective, but it almost automatically led these new systems into the temptation of bureaucratic autonomy over civil society, where the state continued to exercise functions that nobody else would or could and doing so in a way congenial to the bureaucracy rather than to its ostensible purpose.

This pattern creates major obstacles to the emergence of civil society and liberalism, for it reestablishes the state as the central and unquestioned actor, making all others dependent on it. As society gathered its strengths, it would be difficult for the organs of the state to make way for it and the untried governments were unlikely to whittle down the bureaucracies either. Fearful of the cold, harsh winds of competitive politics and economics, societies would tend to acquiesce in this, thereby helping to reproduce etatist patterns.

A part of the debate is about state regulation and equality. The Communist legacy in this respect may turn out to have been highly influential. The Communist use or misuse of egalitarian slogans has left much of the population suspicious, but the aspiration for equality and, equally importantly, hostility to differentiation makes it difficult for the state to avoid playing a regulatory role in this regard. Yet the operation of the market will inevitably bring into being new winners and new losers, and state intervention to prevent this or to slow it down would be counterproductive.

Something must also be said here about the nature and definition of

change. Change is not universal or identical everywhere, but its nature and pace vary from society to society. Some are used to much more rapid change than others. The post-Communist countries have a particular difficulty here. Communist systems were highly conservative and indeed static, so that the concept of change became more rhetorical than real. This can be seen in a wide variety of areas affecting human relations, from the family to politics. On the whole, expectations are that change will be marginal and, in general, change has tended to have negative connotations, as something over which individuals have little control. This factor, too, was likely to strengthen the role of the state, this time as comforter.

There is a final structural factor impelling modern societies towards etatism, one that applies to all democracies.¹ Once the government entered the fields of military investment and social welfare in a significant fashion, around the turn of the century, they found themselves with no alternatives but to continue. And continuing did not mean level funding or funding tapering off, but an ever intensifying participation by the state in wider areas. Once this was established, the strategy in question acquired its own dynamic and became increasingly immune to questioning. The proposition that, say, the welfare system be eliminated is generally regarded as beyond rational discourse.² At the same time, the state builds up a substantial and growing clientele with a vested interest in the maintenance and expansion of its activity. The implication of this factor for post-Communist states is that even if they attempt a radical de-etatization, this will be blocked by “natural” barriers of the kind sketched here.

The Role of Infrastructure

The principal areas where the role of the state was bound to remain high and probably intensify were in the provision of infrastructure and industrial subsidies. The case that the state should play a major role in the provision of infrastructure does not need to be made, but how far and in what way this role should be played is another issue. Infrastructure may be broken down into four broad categories—social welfare

1. This argument is based on William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power*, (Oxford, 1983). See also Maurice Pearton, *The Knowledgeable State*, (London, 1982).
2. Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York, 1984).

(health, education, social support), the economy and environment, culture, and commerce and telecommunications.

There could be little disagreement that the state would have to have a regulatory and strategic function in the provision of social welfare as such; the difficulty lay in the peripheral areas of provision, like food price support, transport, and housing subsidy. These could not be immediately discontinued for fear of triggering off major social unrest, yet their maintenance was liable to become a permanent fixture. Any attempt to impose dramatic cuts in social welfare provision would, given the low level of economic activity, immediately pauperize significant sections of the population.

As far as the economy was concerned, an immediate withdrawal by the state was impossible, and the debates on the pace and extent of privatization persisted in 1990 without any clear outcome, except that the principle was universally supported, at any rate in theory. Even in Poland, where the radical Balcerowicz plan was successful in bringing inflation under control, little headway was made with the introduction of market conditions through privatization, while in Czechoslovakia the debate on the extent of privatization remained unresolved even after the elections of June 1990.

The environment, which was in a state of near-disaster, would obviously demand far-reaching state intervention if any progress was to be made in remedying the situation. According to rough estimates, at least \$200 billion would be needed simply to prevent further deterioration. If sums of this magnitude were to be made available, from the West presumably, governments would be automatically involved.

Cultural subsidies would also have to continue, though maybe at a lower rate, simply to sustain activities for which there was no internal market. State prestige would dictate that drama, music, and publishing would go on receiving some state support. The necessary investment in commercial infrastructure could, again, only be channeled through the state—no private entrepreneur could conceivably contemplate the modernization of the area's antiquated telephone network, for example.

One question remained open, however, and this might point in a positive direction. Given the highly distorted nature of Communist modernization,³ with its bizarre emphasis on heavy industry virtually

3. George Schöpflin, "Stalinism in Eastern Europe," *Survey*, October 1988.

to the exclusion of everything else, the post-Communist leaderships might conclude that the dismantling of this sector was a high priority. If privatization plans included the heavy industrial sector, its future would be severely limited and the role of the state as patron would be restricted with it.

Ethnic homogeneity should be seen as a crucial factor in affecting the future of liberalism. Ethnically homogeneous states have an important advantage in this respect, in that ethnic heterogeneity creates near-automatic imperatives towards centralization. The function of ethnicity in politics is to satisfy the affective dimension of societies by creating identities through which individuals can define themselves against a wider community. That, in turn, promotes loyalties underpinned by a network of symbols and rituals.⁴

The problem is that these loyalties tend to transcend those toward the state in multi-national states, and the non-majority communities will inevitably be perceived as a potential or actual threat to the integrity of the state simply by their very existence. The way in which the Romanian authorities used the conflict in Tirgu-Mures in March 1990 as an excuse to strengthen the security forces is a clear illustration of this. There was little discussion of what really took place; instead it was automatically assumed that the mere existence of the Hungarian minority constituted a threat and justified stronger security measures. Examples could be multiplied from other polities. The difficulty is that because ethnic issues appeal to the emotions, it is next to impossible to discuss them rationally, and calls for more central power will be readily heeded.

A final point to be discussed in this paper is corporatism.⁵ Once an interwoven pattern of state-private enterprise activity has come into being, it becomes exceedingly difficult to root it out. Given the nature of the Communist legacy and the corresponding weakness of the market, coupled with the timidity of society, a corporatist outcome for Central and Eastern Europe looks highly plausible. In this dispensation both the state and the privatized economy will have a continuing

4. George Schöpflin, "The Prospects for Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe," in Peter Volten, ed., *Uncertain Futures: Eastern Europe and Democracy* (New York, 1990).

5. I am not referring here to fascist or fascist-type state corporatism, but to liberal corporatism, as it exists in Austria and Sweden and elsewhere, see G. Lehbruch and Philip Schmitter, *Patterns of Corporatist Policy Making* (London, 1982).

interest in maintaining a permanent relationship, which will act as a constant factor of distortion on both political and economic transparency. The transmission of existing enterprises into the private sector, the circumstances in which this takes place, and the survival of a network of personal ties and loyalties, as well as attitudes of mind that favor dependence on the state for subsidies and economic targets, are likely to provide fertile ground for a corporatist system, which naturally enough will entrench the state with a high-profile role. All in all the prospects for liberalism in the post-Communist world look poor.