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Czechoslovakia: the Dialectic of the 'Reforms'

'Lenin awake, Brezhnev has gone mad!' This inscription on the walls of Prague during the first days of the occupation reveals the caricatural truth of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. Anti-communism, scenting an unexpected advantage, at once whipped up the invasion hysterically into a Russian Vietnam. The clouded, ahistorical consciousness of the West German liberal Press proclaimed it to be a second edition of the Soviet act of force in Hungary 1956. In reality it belongs to just that historical constellation (a moment of a process still meaninglessly unfurling through natural contingency) which provided the philosophical point of departure for Marx's presentation of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: 'Hegel somewhere observes that all great world historical events and individuals occur in a manner of speaking twice over. He omitted to add: once as tragedy, the second time as farce.'[1] Prague 1968 reflects the tragedy of Budapest 1956 as farce. The heroes of 1956 were executed, while those of 1968 came home in tears. The reformer-hero Dubcek may have been

threatened with liquidation; yet his Russian hosts contented themselves thereafter with treating him to handcuffs and cold meals. Meanwhile in the streets of Prague isolated angry teenagers who resisted the occupation were gunned down. The 'Hero of the USSR' and grey-haired popular idol Svoboda, in Prague a Russian prisoner, was received in Moscow with the full diplomatic honours due to a Head of State and a counterfeit kiss of brotherhood. But this *grotesque* of corridor-politics among the ruling State functionaries (a product of haggling and blackmail) appeared to the betrayed and bartered mass of the Czechoslovak population as a brutal, Stalinist natural catastrophe. They resisted it with a traditional spontaneity and tactical skill. August 21st was the Eighteenth Brumaire of Russian foreign policy.

1. Popular Nationalism

The resistance to the occupation was marked by the same ambivalence of political and historical conscio-usness that frequently surfaced during the reform period. This ambiguity objectified the liberal need for civic freedoms—a need traceable to the class position of the intellectuals and students who were the principal audience of the reform movement. This need derived essentially from a past phase of bourgeois emancipation, and it involved neither the ability, nor any desire, to activate an adequate proletarian class consciousness. Under the forced conditions of the military invasion, the popular will to resistance inevitably radicalized intellectual and journalistic liberalism, and its mass component thrusting towards the goal of sovereignty, into an intransigent national consciousness—just such a national consciousness as was historically generated in revolutionary periods of bourgeois politics. The ideological content of this nationalist resistance became diffused among the population as a growing indifference to Communism (without, however, the basic option for a socialist mode of production being as a rule put in question.) It became diffused too in the ever-widening demand for neutrality, and in the restriction of protest against the Russian invasion merely to the principle of national sovereignty, of the non-interference of foreign powers in the *internal affairs* of another country.

On the other hand, the determination of the workers to strike gave embryonic expression to the practical necessity, still disguised by false consciousness, of pursuing the revolutionary class struggle of the proletariat (whose dictatorship had until that time been administratively confiscated) even on the material basis of nationalized production.

It was inevitable that the ruling 'Reform Group' around Dubček would attempt to divide and impede the resistance of the masses—not only in view of the massive Russian pressure, but also in view of their own political aims and ruling interests. The ceaseless calls to act with prudence and—as a citizen's first duty—to preserve order may have been genuinely motivated by a sincere fear, that should not be dismissed, of the danger of bloody suppression of an angry insurrection; nevertheless the fact is that they functioned to prevent the population from forming autonomous organs of resistance. The institutions of the

[1] KarlMarx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, S.W. Vol. I. p. 247

working class, in the name of reform, behaved in a way typical of revisionist mass organizations: the verbally radical proclamation of an unlimited general strike was, in fact, followed by its fragmentation into a series of short strikes—a well-tested device, employed with virtuosity for years by the French Communist Party among others, for placating the workers' will to struggle and simultaneously canalizing and controlling it.

The 'Moscow Diktat' which the demoralized reformers brought back to Prague was an obvious provocation to the nationalistic mood of the masses, which excluded any line of political compromise. 'Betrayal' was the immediate, spontaneous reaction to the communiqué of August 27th; for the first time Dubcek was not extolled unanimously and uncritically. The Russians had forced the functionaries of reform into the role of collaborators. Organization of resistance was no longer on their agenda—only a demobilizing appeal to the masses not to lose faith in the leadership. It is too early to make out whether the Moscow Diktat has helped to demote the reformers around Dubcek from their heroes' pedestals, and hence to free the population from its illusions. For the time being at least the ideology of calm, order, and trust in the rulers has proved strong enough to discipline the masses.

2. Liberal Reformism

The contradictory nature of the post-Stalinist reforms, condensed in the programmatic formula of *democratic socialism*, was abruptly revealed in the Prague students' revolt of 1967. The protests of the students against the brutal police rule of the Novotny régime were limited for the most part to demands for constitutional guarantees and liberalization of the press. At the same time they apologized to the US ambassador in Prague for a demonstration by their North Vietnamese comrades, because the US flag had been torn down from the embassy.[2] The social content of the reform movement was articulated by intellectuals and students, and its practical self-definition reproduced classical liberalism. Its conception of *democratic socialism* was itself still affected by the Stalinist autonomy of the State machine from which it sought to free itself. The historically distorted idea which underlay the movement was that an étatistic, economist reduction of the socialist mode of production and exchange to an administrative collectivity had occurred; and that consequently the *principium individuationis* of the liberal phase of bourgeois society was unable to blossom in any material sense, but had been liquidated as a function of control. The syncretic global opinion that the revolutionary theory of the proletariat and still more its praxis sought to throttle the autonomous individual for the sake of the uniform collectivity, corresponded negatively to the pressing need of the reformist intelligentsia for socialism and 'individual freedom' to be compatible. It was seen as confirmed in practice by Stalinism and convergent theoretically with liberal ideology. In this conception there survived the capitalist separation of collective species and single individual—a separation which was the object of a philosophical critique in Marx's early writings that was fundamental in the formation of historical materialism. The reforms in Czechoslovakia aimed to top off

[2] Hans Magnus Enzensberger in Kursbuch 13, 1968, p. 106–7.

nationalized production with a liberal-democratic superstructure—a superstructure whose emancipatory content (freedom of the press, of opinion, of association) was wholly derived from a long-vanished phase in the formation of bourgeois society. In that phase of its historical dynamic, the institutionalized fiction of the autonomous, self-sufficient juridical person—embodiment of bourgeois individuality—revealed itself as a pure abstraction of the socially necessary outward appearance of commodity exchange, under cover of which the material power of the economic surplus held unrestricted sway. It is only Marx's strategic conception of a socialization of the means of production that can free the principle of bourgeois individualism from the purely abstract existence of the character-masks of commodity ownership, and liberate the competing wage-labourers from the social desolation of their atomism. But this idea has been transformed in the heads of Yugoslav and Czechoslovak philosophers of reform into, at best, the mutilated form of diluted existential, ontological or phenomenological versions of Marx's theory of alienation, and into the emasculated world-view of a 'humanistic image of man' supposedly enunciated by Marx. These theorists fail to understand that communism according to Marx Engels aims at the 'production of the form of exchange itself.'[3] This means that the present productive relations of abstract labour, which isolate private producers one from another, must be destroyed in the course of a socialization achieved through revolutionary struggle. They must be destroyed in order to make possible the 'collective mode of production' of direct producers, and finally that of the unconstrained 'association of free men'. The false notion that the new socialist mode of production should be propped up by the old liberal institutions generated the feeble idealism in theory and the blind revisionism in practice of the post-Stalinist reforms in Czechoslovakia.

The Czechoslovak reform movement's rational interest in liberalization was only able to express itself in the ideologically deformed conception of a restoration of 'republican' freedoms. It clothed itself in the worn garments of the petrified conceptual world of the liberal State, long since rendered repressive by the dynamic of neo-capitalist concentration. This conceptual world finds its legitimation in the bourgeois 'Realm of Ethics'—in those unrestricted social relations that correspond to the sphere of circulation of commodities, in which according to Marx 'Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham' hold sway. The diminution of free competition between property-owners of equal status and worth—a consequence of the monopolistic depersonalization of the market—has deprived the sphere of circulation of its power of ethical legitimation.[4] Historically, this has resulted in the structural transformation under neo-capitalism of the liberal, constitutional State into the authoritarian welfare State.

The ideology of the Prague reforms failed to achieve any awareness of the contradiction between the material base of a nationalized ownership of the means of production and a liberal superstructure. It was in the Hegelian sense badly and anachronistically idealistic, in so far as it

[3] Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, The German pp. 86ff.
[4] Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. I, pp. 175–6; also loc. cit pp. 84ff; Grundrisse pp. 153ff.

sought to combine two mutually incompatible historical moments—the new rational principle with the mature substance of the old ethic[5]. The post-Stalinist reforms in Czechoslovakia represented an ahistorical transference of the historically new, still undeveloped and étatistically distorted principle of the socialist mode of production onto the old and withered substance of bourgeois social relations.

3. Eastern Europe and World Revolution

The idealist liberalism of the intellectuals and students and the economic reformism of the technocrats at the head of Party and State reinforced each other. It was in no way coincidental that the reformers mobilized the universities and press of the country in January with the promise of political emancipation, in order to gain control of State power and carry through economic reorganization. For economic 'destalinization' was to be executed at the expense of the working class. The administratively hypostatized planning of the Novotny period had shown itself incapable of resolving the critical imbalances and stagnation of 1962–65. The reforming group which emerged in the course of intra-bureaucratic power-struggles in the party leadership drew the technocratic conclusions that two innovations were historically indispensable: 1. increased managerial autonomy, masking authoritarian control over the producers by an institutionalized ideology of participation, and 2. technological rationalization of the industrial machine, even at the cost of an extremely high level of unemployment. The decisive issue for them was the regulation and stabilization of market and price mechanisms. It is true that the State abolition of private ownership of the means of production was not in principle revoked; but it is evident that this policy led to a phenomenological, if not substantive assimilation to the bourgeois mode of production.

Ota Šik, leading theorist of the economic reforms in Czechoslovakia, even attempted to discredit the genuine Marxist theory of the disappearance of commodities and money in the period of economic transformation as a dispensable, ideal abstraction, tainted with the odium of Stalinism.[6] For Marx, however, the production of commodities, generalized socially via the exchange of capital and wage-labour, is from an analytical point of view inseparably linked with the phenomena of alienation and reification—i.e. with the fact that a particular mode of industrial production, though in theory created by men, in fact escapes conscious control by the producers and appears as a natural force. In the concept and in the reality of the commodity's monetary form there is crystallized the spontaneous contingency of a historical process which in theory can be consciously shaped by man.

The economic reformers thus implicitly abandoned essential tenets of the materialist *Critique of Political Economy* in their quest for a forcible reactivation of a stagnating technical progress in Czechoslovakia. Their own ruling interests drove them to throw overboard all practical reflection on the forward movement of the species towards its emancipation, or on the material liberation of production and its direct control

[5] See G. W. F. Hegel, Philosophy of Right, Para. 33.
[6] See Ota Šik, Plan und Markt im Sozialismus, Vienna 1967, p. 15 ff.

by the immediate producers. The power struggle involved in the inner-party conflict subsequently pushed the economic reformers to a tactical mobilization of intellectuals and students with their demands for political emancipation. It was predictable enough that this mobilization would in the end gain an independent dynamic of its own, which the reforming State functionaries would no longer be able to control. Moreover, the political liberalism of the intellectuals objectively corresponded to the partial reintroduction of anarchic elements into the bureaucratically administered market.

The most substantial result of political emancipation was the introduction of the liberal institutions of freedom of the press and freedom of opinion (even if this was restricted to a privileged few, and was carried out in a thoroughly authoritarian way). The students, struggling against police suppression or bureaucratic censorship of journalistic publication, and hence of any expression of their immediate needs, insisted upon this as the first imperative. The discussion that developed in the course of the political reforms debouched onto demands of a formally democratic character—plurality of parties in parliamentary representation and civic* freedoms of association—which concentrated liberal consciousness on the State machine, even if on a democratized one. However, the restoration of liberal freedom, (above all the right of association) generated a genuine dialectic; on the one hand these replace the goal of dictatorship of the proletariat by a bourgeois plurality of opinions and factions; but on the other hand they also allow the working class to organize itself freely and to recover the weapon of the strike. Having said this, it is of course true that one corner-stone of the theory of revolution put forward by Marx, Engels and Lenin—the doctrine of the withering away of the State, as the sole means whereby political freedoms can become concrete in a materialist sense—cannot be realized in isolation under conditions of historical co-existence with a heavily armed imperialist world environment. Yet it is nonetheless significant that the reformers volatilized this doctrine into the utopian abstraction of an (at best) regulatory notion of the classical theorists. Apart from the economic minimum of nationalized, but as yet in no way concretely *socialized*, productive forces, the historical and political consciousness of the post-Stalinist reforms was blind to the essential strategic and emancipatory aims of revolutionary socialism. These only survived in an ideologically distorted form. The image of the rational society; the withering away of commodities and of money; ultimately the withering away of the State, and the association in a democracy of *Soviets* of men no longer enclosed within one totalitarian system—these aims were once again bourgeoisified, i.e. reduced in the Kantian sense to merely regulatory notions, which one seeks to approach in a reformist approximation but which one can never wholly realize in the external social world.

It is thus abstractly correct to counterpose theoretically the central emancipatory theses of the revolutionary theory of the proletariat to

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* *Translator's note:* Hans-Jürgen Krahl in fact uses the term *republikanische Freiheiten* throughout this article, referring back to the ideals of the French Revolution and to the struggle in nineteenth centur-y Germany against the petty feudal principalities.

the ideology and policies of the reform movement. But it would nevertheless be concretely wrong to judge the latter directly thereby. To apply, from outside, the criteria of a socialist mode of production or of a political system of soviets to Eastern Europe ahistorically abstracting from the immanent development within them of an étatistic dictatorship over the proletariat, would be a moral postulate rather than a political judgement informed by historical reason. Stalinism for decades eradicated the idea of the revolutionary emancipation and dictatorship *of* the proletariat from the historical consciousness and political praxis of the European countries and Communist parties led by the USSR. The once-revolutionary policies of the USSR degenerated into *real-politik* and pragmatism, culminating in the conception of peaceful coexistence—that is, the renunciation of any revolutionary overthrow of neo-capitalism as a social form. Within the European 'socialist camp', this process has methodically excluded from consciousness the completely new context within which the historical reality of the world revolution has once again become immediate politics—the social-revolutionary liberation movements of the Third World, fighting at the periphery of neo-capitalist civilization. It has been correctly pointed out that the abstract presence of revolution (as it is made in exemplary fashion in Vietnam, and as it creates a socialist model in Cuba) has not only allowed the student movement in the West to identify the imperialist power-system of the neo-capitalist countries led by the USA, but also to distance itself from the Russian policy of compromise. The consequence of this has been a changed relationship between politics, protest and massacre, producing in the student movement a political ethic of intransigence. It is true that this morality, with its peculiar class origin, still oscillates between the bourgeois-revolutionary derivation of political actions from categorical moral principles and the proletarian-revolutionary constitution of a class morality through the mediation of the political demands of the struggle by its strategic aims. Yet it has been able to offer the first emancipatory alternative to the institutionalized categories of traditional politics in the West, which at best serve to articulate the restoration of capitalism since the Second World War.[7]

But where, as in Czechoslovakia, the social and practical conditions were lacking for a perception of this new possibility offered by a revolutionary world history, there was no alternative historical choice other than an orientation towards the liberal ideals of the bourgeois past. The reduction of the concept of a socialist society to that of a collectivized economy; the autonomy of the authoritarian State machine that was consolidated in the Stalinist period; and the abandonment of proletarian internationalism in favour of the policy of peaceful coexistence—all these combine to explain the general deformation of historical materialism. Under these conditions, the rational need for emancipation could discover no alternative consciousness to the ideology of liberalism. The first phase of liberation from Stalinism was itself both theoretically and practically disfigured by the birthmark of Stalinism. The first steps on the path of emancipation from Stalinism were accomplished above all as a 'summoning up of the dead of world

[7] Oskar Negt, und Protest, Politics.

history from their graves' (Marx). The fossilized liberalism of a long-vanished phase of bourgeois society characterized by competitive capitalism was resurrected in an attempt to institutionalize constitutional liberties.

4. Idealogy and Practice

The progress which the restoration of civic freedoms under the guise of intellectual privileges has brought with it should be judged objectively, in an immanent critique. If the liberal consciousness of the reform movement was the only objectively possible outward form for its historical will to emancipation from the ruling bureaucracy—then that liberalism should not be assessed as a bourgeois regression, especially since it has also destroyed the conception of a linear path to socialist society from the bureaucratic shell of Stalinist serfdom. The central problem here is that of the inauguration of qualitatively new societal contradictions, which contain a real emancipatory moment.

The recourse to the ideology of liberalism brought about a practical transformation of the constellation of superstructure and base, and thus a historical change in the content of the ideology. The premise for a systematic, critical and historical elucidation of this phenomenon is furnished by Herbert Marcuse's analysis of Soviet Marxism—given that the political constitution of the Soviet Union and its system of economic control are by and large shared by the socialist countries of Europe dependent on the Soviet Union. Marcuse in substance argues that the material basis of a simple nationalization of the apparatus of economic production and a bureaucratically centralized planned economy abolishes the dual ideological character which is proper to the capitalist State, mediated by a class society; but this abolition occurs in a manner that is itself ambiguous. The bourgeois constitutional State, according to Marx, 'compensates' for the generalized rule of a particular class by an ideology of universal and egalitarian legal norms, while at the same time there are factors inherent in this 'appearance of a common interest' which transcend and are even antagonistic to its material base. It is this dual nature of ideology as a true reflection of a false reality and false reflection of a true reality, the former substantiated as domination, the latter projected as a utopian vision, which is levelled off in the State system defined by *Soviet Marxism*.[8] ' . . . the State becomes, without intermediary factors, the direct political organization of the productive apparatus, the general manager of the nationalized economy, and the hypostatized collective interest. The functional differences between base and superstructure therefore tend to be obliterated: the latter is methodically and systematically assimilated with the base by depriving the superstructure of those functions which are transcendent and antagonistic to the base. This process, which establishes new foundations for social control, alters the very substance of ideology. The tension between idea and reality, between culture and civilization, between intellectual and material culture—a tension which was one of the driving forces behind Western civilization—is not solved but methodically reduced.'[9]

[8] Herbert Marcuse, Soviet Marxism, p. 120
[9] ibid, p. 124.

The functionalization and assimilation of superstructure and base in the framework of a hypostatized, bureaucratically planned economy—the Eastern variant of the one-dimensional society—thus removes the utopian, transcendent content from false social consciousness. One of the basic functions of the institutionalized superstructure of bourgeois society is to stabilize bourgeois rule: it achieves this precisely through its ability to integrate the system-transcending content of ideology, and to deflect it into the false track of religious projections, moral principles, and legal fictions. The de-substantialization of ideology in the State systems described in *Soviet Marxism*, however, eliminates the ideologically deformed dimension of emancipation from social consciousness, while at the same time it reveals the inability of those systems to cope with the non-regulated content of 'ideological transcendance'. At least it does this so long as there persists the fundamental contradiction between a common interest bureaucratically imposed by the State and the still unsatisfied particular interests of individuals: 'In the Soviet system, the 'general interest' is hypostatized in the State—an entity separate from the individual interests. To the extent that the latter are still unfulfilled and repelled by reality, they strive for ideological expression; and their force is the more explosive to the regime the more the new economic basis is propagandized as insuring the total liberation of man under communism. The fight against ideological transcendence thus becomes a life-and-death struggle for the regime. Within the ideological sphere, the centre of gravity shifts from philosophy to literature and art.'[10]

What Marcuse calls the 'danger-zone' of literary/aesthetic transcendence for the bureaucratized, centrally planned economy was strikingly confirmed by the history of the Prague reform movement and the leading role of intellectuals in it. It was no coincidence that the sphere of literature, even though furthest removed from the base, became the expression of emancipatory, reforming consciousness, for 'the more the base encroaches upon the ideology, manipulating and coordinating it with the established order, the more the ideological sphere which is remotest from the reality (art, philosophy), precisely because of its remoteness, becomes the last refuge for the opposition to this order.'[11] The literary origin of the political reform in Czechoslovakia was concentrated on the aesthetic liberation of Kafka from his socialist-realist exile. This was more than a purely literary affair, it was rather a political programme, as the 1963 Kafka Conference organized by Goldstücker demonstrated. Kafka's work served as the ciphered text of the liberal intellectuals' opposition to Stalinism. Irrespective of the theoretical adequacy of this interpretation of Kafka, they read between the lines of his work the experience of juridical alienation, of a bureaucratized legal sphere and machinery of State power bereft of any emancipatory dimension. The advance inaugurated by the reform movement and the intellectuals who were its main bearers—what was historically new within its old external form of liberal consciousness—was its attempt to reconstruct 'ideological transcendence' into constitutional guarantees for civic liberties. The latter do not achieve the necessary realization in a material sense of the emancipatory 'idea', but they are ideologies in the genuine,

[10] ibid, p. 127.
[11] ibid, p. 125.

that is domination-masking sense, as Engels defines it: 'The reflection of economic relations as legal principles is necessarily also a topsy-turvy one: it goes on without the person who is acting being conscious of it; the jurist imagines he is operating with *a priori* propositions, whereas they are really only economic reflexes; so everything is upside down. And it seems to me obvious that this inversion, which, so long as it remains unrecognized, forms what we call *ideological conception*, reacts in its turn upon the economic basis and may, within certain limits, modify it.'[12] Engels reduces ideology to the material function of reflection and the formalizing one of reciprocal interaction; he suppresses the transcendent moment of the ideological superstructure. The restructuring and institutionalization of liberal ideology in Czechoslovakia, undoubtedly had a domination-masking and stabilizing character; but it nevertheless also succeeded, by contrast with Stalinism, in reintroducing the tension between idea and reality, base and superstructure, and in thereby opening up a dimension of liberation, even if in a still distorted form. Moreover, on the material basis of nationalized production, ideological transcendence can no longer be integrated constitutionally to the same extent; it is structurally more explosive than in a mode of production organized on class lines. The experience precisely of the first days of the occupation in Czechoslovakia showed that in a country where the State has taken over the means of production, 'republican' liberties can once again provide the proletariat, in a historically quite new way, with the organizational conditions for the pursuit of a revolutionary class struggle *inside the socialist camp itself*. At the same time, it would be an illusion to assume that the structural possibility of a transformation of liberal ideology into socialist consciousness might have been achieved in the short term. The constitutional, parliamentary and nationalist fixations were too well anchored in the consciousness of the masses to be demolished from one day to the next by political struggle.

The possibility of emancipation which was inherent in the post-Stalinist changes in Czechoslovakia would certainly have run counter to the technocratic economic reformism of the ruling functionaries. The political emancipation first introduced for purely tactical reasons by Dubček and Šik could only have been carried through to the end by the masses *against* them, in the class struggle of the Czechoslovak proletariat for the conquest of political power in the State. The Soviet counter-revolution has put a violent end to the still contradictory possibility of carrying on the struggle for revolutionary liberation within the frontiers of the European socialist camp itself—provisionally.

[12] Friedrich Engels, Letter to Conrad Schmidt, October 27th 1890, Marx/Engels Selected Works, Vol. II, p. 494.