The Limits of CIVILITY

In the wake of Eastern Europe, much of the Western Left has placed its faith in the new citizens’ movements of the East. Paul Hirst finds the enthusiasm misplaced. There is no romantic alternative, he argues, to the dull necessity of building a Western political system with contending parties.

The dissolution of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Communist Party’s monopoly of power in the Soviet Union has opened up the necessity to think afresh about the political and constitutional future of those countries. This necessity is no less real in the West than in the East.

At the same time we have no ready-made answers to guide that thinking. Marxism offers no guide; it has spurned concrete political and constitutional debate in an obsession with building a socialist society. The dominant Western concept for analysing actually existing socialism, ‘totalitarianism’, is now obsolete, as the political structures which it attempted to capture have dissolved. Western liberal-democratic theory cannot analyse the complex processes of transition to new political regimes, as it offers a political ideal that is nowhere accomplished in Eastern Europe and which is, at best, the goal of some of the reformers in those countries. The political thinking developed by the democratic oppositions in the satellite states of Eastern Europe may appear to be more of a guide. Yet, as I shall try to show, it too is obsolete; shaped by the experience of resistance, it offers no adequate political model once the states dependent on Soviet power have collapsed.

This theoretical vacuum is matched by the ambiguity and uncertainty of political conditions in Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union in particular is threatened by dissolution and political chaos. This is an exceptional situation without historical precedent, and one which leads to complex and contradictory political responses. The Gorbachev leadership, for example, has tried to move in two apparently contradictory directions at the same time. It has attempted
to turn the Union into a real federation of self-governing republics based on a new treaty. It has also created an executive presidency that it hopes will prevent the secession of republics and contain conflict by ruling by emergency decree. In neither the Soviet Union nor in the ex-satellite republics is it clear that ‘democratisation’ will solve the political problems they face. Indeed, in the Soviet Union greater democracy may simply create the political mechanisms for intense social conflict and national fragmentation.

This is a difficult situation for the Western Left to comprehend. In retreat from fundamental socialism, it has staked its political future on the advocacy of the democratisation of both state and civil society in the west. It has hailed the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe as offering the hope of democratic renewal and removing the antagonistic structures of the Cold War that inhibited radical reform in the West. The euphoria of the revolutions is already over, and new and harsh political realities confront the reformers in the East. The Western Left has quickly to comprehend these realities if it is not to be seduced by its own illusions. The Cold War is at an end, but this does not mean we are on the verge of a new era of peace and international harmony. Developments in Eastern Europe could well result in an altogether more complex and threatening situation.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 the West was still involved in the second Cold War that began with the invasion of Afghanistan in 1978. No serious Western observer imagined that in five years the monopoly of the Communist Party over Soviet politics would be for all practical purposes broken, that there would be intractable conflicts between democratically elected governments in the constituent republics of the USSR and Moscow, and that the full extent of Soviet economic failure would be publicly accepted by the party. In 1988 no serious Western observer could have predicted the revolutions of 1989, which destroyed the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. The same is true of even the most acute members of the East European opposition.

Some Western thinkers had long indulged the hope of Soviet collapse: many had portrayed the Soviet Union as an inefficient and ramshackle command economy; but the Communist Party’s iron grip on political power remained an inescapable fact. In practice, the West had to deal with the Soviet system as a going concern, to attempt openly to subvert Soviet power was to court the edge of the nuclear abyss. In 1956, in 1968, and even after Afghanistan, Western governments were forced to practise realpolitik. So in a different way were the oppositions in Eastern Europe. They were forced after 1968 to treat Soviet domination as a fact, to work within the constraints and contradictions of Soviet rule. Until the very last gasp of Soviet power the opposition was forced to accept that the partition of the world effected at Yalta in 1945 was irreversible but, given that, they sought to exploit Soviet weakness. The opposition began to act ‘as if’ Poland, for example, was a free country, thereby attempting to undermine state power up to but not beyond the point where it would provoke a fatal crisis of the regime.

How did the party’s grip loosen? From the 1920s until the 1980s official Soviet writers presented the construction of socialism in the USSR as a story of uninterrupted economic and social progress. Soviet socialism built an industrial society by brutal and ruthless methods, but it brought the USSR to the brink of modernity, where comparisons with and expectations of competing with the West became appropriate. At this point its failure became apparent and inescapable; a system created by ‘primary socialist accumulation’ and the continuous expansion of heavy and defence industry reached inherent limits of organisation that imposed declining returns. Soviet industry expanded by the extensive exploitation of natural resources and labour reserves, growth by ever more lavish squandering of inputs. By the 1970s the limits of such extensive accumulation had been reached.

However, despite the inefficiency of the Soviet economy there was no reason why the Soviet leadership should have accepted either the reality of failure or the need for reform. The Soviet Union could have embarked on a course of continued confrontation with the West and an aggressive foreign policy, imposing sacrifices on its citizens in the course of containing enemies without. What prevented this neo-stalinist policy emerging is a matter for conjecture. Part of the answer is that by the mid-1950s nuclear deterrence had removed the option of policy of wholesale rather than piecemeal and proxy confrontation with the West. Soviet military expansion was in large part the attempt to match the West in the numbers and sophistication of nuclear weapons. This brought no advantage, only a stalemate. A reckless policy of confrontation was checked by the fear of a nuclear exchange should a crisis get out of hand.

The effects of this militarisation in the Brezhnev years was to reinforce economic retrogression. Given the inefficiency of the Soviet economy, military expansion forced an ever greater burden on the civilian sector, consuming between 25% and 30% of GDP. The drive for nuclear parity brought with it a resolute Western response, an arms race whose costs the Western economies could bear far more easily. Soviet leaders therefore faced an escapable crisis by the mid-1980s—accelerating military expenditure that neither brought ‘security’ nor the means of diversion from domestic ills through foreign confrontation. Stalemate was purchased at an ever higher price. Western leaders like President Reagan and Mrs Thatcher were clearly prepared to sustain the arms race to levels where the USSR could not compete.

The West ‘won’ the Cold War, but only because the Soviet leadership possessed the rationality to give way. At first this surrender to the needs of internal reform and external peace was cautious and conducted through leninist rhetoric. Mikhail Gorbachev came to power as a reformer committed to renewing the Soviet system so that it could become more efficient and preserve its grip on power. The aim was threefold—to lessen international tension and reduce the burden of arms spending, and to make Soviet institutions work efficiently but without relinquishing the party’s monopoly on power. Glasnost was to permit the
flow of information and discussion in order to breathe life into official policy making, undoing the illusions and lies that passed for official thought in the Brezhnev era. Perestroika was to restore legality, to recreate inner-party democracy, and to combat corruption and incompetence in the bureaucracy. But—as Gorbachev’s own book Perestroika shows—not to abandon leninism. Gorbachev still relied on the illusion that the leninist state could be renewed, that a ‘true’ efficient communism was possible. In the first stages of reform he was far from abandoning the leading role of the Communist Party or the basic structures of the command economy; on the contrary, these were to be rebuilt by honest communists who could both speak freely and act within the law.

Slowly, but inexorably the agenda of reform was shifted in response to the realities of the Soviet crisis and the effects of freer public debate. His regime has been driven to radicalism because it permitted a measure of objectivity to enter into the debate about the true nature and future of Soviet society. Gorbachev was driven toward a more radical foreign policy by the desperate need for accommodation with the West. A lasting peace was impossible while the Soviets retained the option of containing reform in Eastern Europe through force. The Soviet Union thus at first left its satellite governments in Eastern Europe to their own devices, leaving them to make what accommodation with their peoples that they could—a process that led to what Timothy Garton Ash called ‘refolution’, (ie, a blend of reform from within and revolution from without the state), a phenomenon evident in Hungary and Poland, absent in the GDR and Czechoslovakia where the existing elites staged a last-ditch defence. ‘Refolution’ became revolution once the Soviet government made it clear that it would not back militant repression by force. Collapse followed swiftly, because fear of military force vanished once Moscow refused to play the role of gendarme which Russia had exercised in Eastern Europe since the 19th century. The revolutions occurred, not because the opposition could seize power through an internal dynamic—it was weak in the GDR and in Czechoslovakia, and on the verge of failure in Poland—but because Moscow aban-
doned the satellite parties and left them neither the means nor the will to resist.

Is the Soviet Union too passing from reform into 'refolution' and, finally, in the not too distant future, into dissolution? It has certainly passed to 'refolution'. It has become evident even to cautious reformers that an adequate program of economic change cannot be achieved without radical political change. The economic renewal of the Soviet Union requires the decentralisation of economic decision-making, the autonomy of enterprises, the creation of alternative sources of investment. This involves the dissolution of the economic control of the 'ministries', autonomy for the republics, privatisation, the creation of a 'hard' currency, the ending of the state monopoly of foreign trade, and the creation of capital markets. This is simply incompatible with the party's monopoly of power and it requires the separation of party and state. Once this is accomplished the party cannot refuse genuinely free elections, multi-party competition, and the sovereign autonomy of the republics. The Soviet system is at the edge of what can be attained by 'refolution', and is currently hesitating. Reform has come too late to be an orderly process, and was never possible within the existing constitution once the national aspirations and antagonisms, so long suppressed by the centre, could be given expression.

However, the possibility and the success of the necessary economic changes remains in doubt. If Soviet political institutions are inexorably transformed and yet the economy fails to begin to deliver some measure of prosperity, then the prospects for a relatively stable transition to a new social system are bleak. The Soviet system cannot cope with an open conflict between the centre and the republics, with conflicting agendas for reform, with defections from the Union, and with mass unemployment and poverty.

Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland are in the process of constructing Western style parliamentary democratic states and market economies. The new leaderships recruited from the democratic and anti-communist opposition see this dual process as an essential pre-condition for removing the objective foundation of the postwar Soviet system. Political pluralism and the winding up of the economy are politically essential if the sources of the monopoly of power by the party are to be eliminated, even if they bring in train conflict and economic dislocation.

Nevertheless, some elements of the new political elites in both Czechoslovakia and Poland have tried to cling to a source of legitimacy that had force in opposition as a basis for avoiding conflict in the new transitional period. That is, they are preying on the rhetoric of 'civil society' and the idea of a united 'citizens' movement standing above the traditional party-political divisions. Elements in both Civic Forum/Public Against Violence in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland have, until as recently as the early summer of 1990, hoped that these movements could remain majority coalitions, sustained by popular citizens' initiatives at the base.

One should remember that this experience of opposition was entirely novel, and that the advocates of resistance through 'civil society' were responsible for a remarkable innovation in political strategy. Havel, Michnik and others preached non-violent resistance and Solidarity was able to practise it on a social scale in Poland after 1980. By not contesting political power, by building parallel structures, by mixing dialogue and resistance, the opposition in Poland was able to build a base of power beyond the reach of state repression. Martial law in Poland could suppress opposition and drive it underground, but not eliminate it. As a strategy for resistance, for creating opposition to communist attempts to pulverise political alternatives, it worked—up to a point. This experience was formative of the new political elites, as resisters. It in no way equipped them for power.

'Civil society' made sense in the context of the communist regime's attempts to monopolise all social life and culture. It drew on sources of autonomy the regimes could not crush except at the price of wrecking their own compromises essential to the survival of their power—like the concordat with the Church in Poland or, less effectively, their formal subscription to the Helsinki accords. However, therein lies the great weakness of the appeal to 'civil society'. Once social life is not monopolised, once independent political, cultural, educational and other institutions have the space in which to emerge, then the basis for the homogeneity of the forces united in opposition to the illegitimate communist state dissolves. Civil society, in another sense, opens up a field of potential conflict and competition between the forces hitherto brought together by a repressive state, and which hitherto possessed a common interest in helping each other to survive.

Yet a new solidarity cannot emerge without the institutions for some new form of political co-operation. To appeal to the old solidarity, to the old unity of 'civil society' is to try to recreate a political experience whose conditions are past. The appeal is credible to those who voice it because political parties are as yet prototypical and social interests are still incoherent, and not yet institutionally defined. Yet the process of political definition of the opposing groups cannot long be avoided if new source of stability are to be introduced into the system. These sources will not spring from the old 'civil society' and they cannot recreate the old 'solidarity'.

The new societies of Eastern Europe will not quickly create the civil society of Western Europe. But they must quickly create the forms of political stability characteristic of Western Europe, that is, parties that define clear political alternatives and act as a political check one upon the other. Without such explicit expression and containment of political conflicts, the antagonisms that are emerging cannot be deflected by normal political processes of opposition, bargaining and compromise. These antagonisms are powerful—national and regional differences, the divergent interests of city and countryside, and of workers in large and inefficient socialist enterprises versus the economic modernisers.
'Civil society' is not homogenous, and clinging to the political myth of its homogeneity fostered by the experience of opposition will probably do the opposite of what is intended, that is, accelerate the conflict between certain interest groups and the state. Only the creation of a party system and the building up of a political culture that accepts competition within democratic norms can secure the transition to the Western representative democracy. This will be difficult if economic success and consumer prosperity do not come relatively quickly. If they do not---and that is the most likely outcome—then political stability may be threatened. Social interests may become increasingly antagonistic and political forces increasingly polarised. This is a real threat if the previous constraints of the authoritarian regime cannot be quickly replaced by a system of institutionalised pluralist conflict and a stable party system. In this context constitutional questions are of the utmost importance. The state must be strengthened both as a means of protecting citizens' rights through constitutional guarantees and an independent judiciary, and as a means of preserving political order through the constitutional defence of the power to govern. In central Europe this balancing act may just prove possible.

The advocates of 'civil society' and an overarching 'citizens' movement' are seeking to delay this process of formation of a party system in the interests of short-term political harmony. They are seeking a democratic depoliticisation through a unified majoritarian rule of a citizens' bloc over and against the aim of political containment through a Western style party system. The theory of 'civil society' developed on the liberal Left. It has found Western advocates on the Left; those who, like John Keane, seek the renewal of Western democracy through citizens' and social movements. The East European advocates of 'civil society' like Vaclav Havel and Adam Michnik were non-violent and anti-authoritarian radicals. Yet the idea of a majoritarian bloc, building a mass base of support and containing the parties, could well develop in an altogether less libertarian direction.

'Civil society' as a homogeneous political force is an idea at variance with modern mass democracy

The collapse of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe has in effect restored the 'cordon sanitaire' the Western states created against the USSR in the 1920s. That zone of economically and militarily weak states, governed predominantly by fragile dictatorships, constituted a source of weakness rather than strength. The precise conditions of the 1930s are unlikely to be repeated, but a zone of weak states on the border of an unstable and dissolving Soviet regime outside the Western security system, offers multiple sources of conflict.

Even the most encouraging scenario is fraught with problems. The successful incorporation of the Eastern states into the Western economic, military and political order will inevitably push the 'West' towards the Soviet border. It would then face the Soviet world on a new frontier and one which gives both the USA and EC a real interest in the political future of the area which was the core of the Soviet Empire. A USSR that achieved the transition to democracy and economic renewal would pose no great threat. An unstable and dissolving USSR is a real menace to the West, if the West has to think of a frontier that begins in Poland. For that reason, the West has an immediate interest not only in the states of Eastern Europe, but in the political future of the USSR. Whether the Union will survive, and if so, how, are questions not only for Moscow but for Brussels and Washington.

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