NEWS FROM NOWHERE

TV Stalinism

It's hard to know what's really going on in the Soviet Union from the news reports. Just how stable and secure is Gorbachev's position? Since the historic Party Congress in July it looks more secure than it was.

Journalists claim that even delegates were surprised at how much support there was, but then maybe that’s just journalists trying to cover for the misinformation in their earlier reports which suggested Gorbachev would get a very hard time from both ‘conservative’ and ‘radicals’ alike, whoever the hell they are supposed to be.

Journalism has this inbuilt narrative-corrector which seems to be able to connect often wildly inaccurate reports together into a seamless flow of non-history. Journalism is certainly not the ‘first draft of history’ as journalists are sometimes fond of calling it. More like a surreal movie script written against an externally impending deadline. An viescript, moreover, which sometimes ends up being cast, shot and edited right back again - but more about that in a moment.

Getting back to Gorbachev; it sometimes seems like he might at any moment be airbrushed out of history, black fedora hat and all. At other moments he seems like he will be the first marxist-leninist to have his Collected Works issued by Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow as a compilation video tape.

The electronic news media mediate seemingly everything these days, including stalinist and post-stalinist political practice. Gorbachev seems to have been the first stalinist to realise this and change his political practice accordingly - which may be precisely what his post-stalinism consists of. Glasnost is a stalinist theory about the means and ends of a free media.

As Patrick Cockburn points out in his fascinating book Getting Russia Wrong, the Soviet Union has changed in many ways since Stalin’s time. Urban population has risen from 56 million before the war to 180 million, and 97% of them own a TV. Many Russians no longer have rural roots, they have urban aerials. Things have also changed since Khrushchev’s time.

Hans Erzenberger wrote a moving tribute to Khrushchev and Gorbachev in the ‘New Europe’ issue of Granta, where he spoke of both as master improvisors of tactical withdrawal. All the same, Gorbachev’s glasnost is a little different from Khrushchev’s thaw. The benefits of the thaw were high culture figures such as the poet Yevtushenko. The heroes of glasnost are pop media figures for a mass audience: filmmakers, editors, TV hosts.

Both Khrushchev and Gorbachev are examples of media-literate stalinists, going way beyond Lenin’s What is to be Done? When the missile ‘gap’ ran heavily against him, by the order of 200 to 4, Khrushchev covered the gap with his mouth, not least in his famous “we will bury you” remark. He said that from some farm in Arkansas on an American tour, and probably meant it as a double message to play both sides of the iron curtain. Khrushchev played up to the image of the bad and dangerous ‘other’ in the American media; Gorbachev uses the media to dispel it. Politic interviews in Time magazine, not thumping his shoe on the UN table. Same media tactic; different messages, same effect.

Last June, at a time when his position and policies at home seemed very much under threat, Gorbachev managed to use his US tour as a double-sided advertising campaign, aimed at selling perestroika (and Gorbachev) to the Americans through the American TV coverage and simultaneously selling American market-driven consumerism (and Gorbachev) to the Soviet Union live via satellite.

The ideological vector in both directions appeared to be mediated by the image of Gorbachev, alternately a stern firm statesman and a back-slapping flesh-pressing media celebrity. Gorbachev is playing ‘our’ media as skilfully as his own. A performance which appears not so much stage-managed as choreographed.

One of the most trenchant marxist critics of the mediated society, Guy Debord, summed it all up in a title: The Society of the Spectacle. Whereas for Hegel, ‘that which is rational is real and that which is real is rational’, for Debord the real fate of the enlightenment turned mediated media spectacle is: ‘that which appears is good and that which is good appears’.

Ironically, Gorbachev seems to have taken this to heart, not as a criticism of the media but as a tactic for using it in political struggle. Which is why his Collected Works will be a set of gold-embossed, maroon vinyl hard-bound video tapes, complete with his picture in the frontispiece, smiling and waving that black fedora - and that’s no joke.

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