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Rett R. Ludwikowski

## Glasnost as a Conservative Revolution

THE ORIGIN OF THE IDEA of a "conservative revolution" is not clear. The term was used by the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal to describe a counter-movement to the intellectual upheaval of Renaissance and Reformation. Hermann Rauchning reexamined this idea in his book *The Conservative Revolution*<sup>1</sup> in which he portrayed German Nazism as a counter-movement to the nihilistic Revolution that originated during the intellectual upheaval of the sixteenth century and unveiled itself in political form through the French and Russian revolutions.<sup>2</sup> Rauchning did not deny the material or the intellectual achievements of the revolutionary movements. He wrote:

Beyond question, both sides of this one great revolution, which may justly be described as a process of human liberation, have had their salutary effects and will continue to have them. It is neither possible nor desirable that this revolutionary emancipation should be eliminated from the history of mankind. If, nevertheless, groups of us in all countries set ourselves against this revolutionary current, attempting to stem it, such primitive motives should be not imputed to us as a desire to return to the Middle Ages and to reintroduce moral and political serfdom.<sup>3</sup>

Rauchning claimed that revolutions albeit they set out to burst oppressive limitations, brought also undesirable and destructive side effects. These side effects have to be eliminated by counter-movements which he referred to as "revolutions of reconstruction" or "conservative revolutions."

In the late seventies the term "conservative revolution" became popular in Poland

through historians who reexamined the legacy of the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> These effects yielded a fascination with such self-contradictory notions as "ahistorical historicism" or "realistic utopia."<sup>5</sup> The term "conservative revolution" was used also to describe the message of the famous film *Danton* by the Polish director Wajda. It was commented that the French Revolution was, in fact, presented by Wajda as a metaphor of the conservative revolution of Polish Solidarity. Rafael Krawczyk wrote:

West European socialists wanted to see Solidarity as their ideological child. This view survived longer than Solidarity itself. In 1982, Andrzej Wajda, a well known Polish film director with an international reputation, presented in Paris a first-night performance of his new picture 'Danton.' His work had been sponsored by the ruling French Socialist Party. France's President, Francois Mitterand, left the theater immediately after the performance refusing to comment. Surprisingly to all socialists, Wajda's view of the French Revolution appeared entirely conservative. In a historic contestation between Danton and Robespierre, Wajda took the side of Danton putting in his mouth explicit condemnation of the revolutionary rule of terror.<sup>6</sup>

It was often argued that terror was an unnecessary by-product of the Revolution and that, in fact, the Revolution preserved the imperial position of France. Using the same

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controversial term to portray Polish Solidarity Krawczyk concluded, "if Solidarity has been a 'revolutionary challenge' to the system called 'the real socialism,' it has been at the same time the first 'conservative revolution' in the world's history."<sup>7</sup> Quite recently the application of this term was extended to *glasnost* and *perestroika* which were portrayed, on the one hand, as "revolutionary" in comparison to the stagnation of Brezhnev's era. On the other hand, they were depicted as "conservative" in the sense of "transformation from within" which could solidify and preserve the power of the Communist Party elite. In his report of June 28, 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev declared:

The basic question facing us, delegates to the 19th All-Union Party Conference, is how to further the *revolutionary restructuring* launched in our country on the initiative and *under the leadership of the Party* and to make it irreversible.<sup>8</sup>

To call the current Soviet reconstruction plan a "conservative revolution" provokes a number of questions. Is *glasnost* going to "preserve" the pillars of the socialist system and protect it from collapse? Is it truly revolutionary? What is a conservative revolution? Is not the very idea self-contradictory?

#### "Preservative" Effects of *Glasnost*

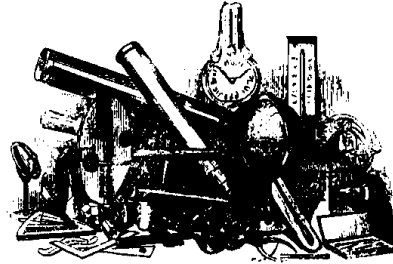
*Glasnost* is defined by Russian-English dictionaries as publicity or openness. *Glasnyi* means "open," "public." Both the Western and the Soviet press characterize *glasnost* as a policy of change that replaced a policy of stagnation typical of the Brezhnev era. The student of socialist law and politics who wants to find out what really changed in socialist domestic and foreign policy will, however, experience some difficulty.

"Socialism," argues Professor Leslaw Paga of the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland, "is a transitory period from capitalism to . . . capitalism."<sup>9</sup>

Passing along the streets of Polish cities,

one can easily notice large inscriptions on the walls of houses: "Proletarians of all countries, forgive me—Karl Marx."<sup>10</sup>

If we were to assess *glasnost* from the thousands of similar inscriptions, leaflets and statements we would have to acknowledge that its most striking characteristic is open *criticism* of communism.<sup>11</sup> In an article entitled "Sources" in *Novy Mir* even Lenin comes under criticism for abolishing private property and creating a system of forced labor camps.<sup>12</sup> A recent article in *Pravda*, mostly a compilation of letters from readers, leveled serious charges against former



Kremlin officials like Suslov and Brezhnev.<sup>13</sup>

This is an important reflection that should be borne in the minds of those who admire the changes of the *glasnost* era. The real change rests in the possibility of discussing problems that were for decades prohibited topics in the socialist countries. Unfortunately this change is limited to criticism of key elements of the socialist economy and social life, with current politics remaining an almost 'taboo' topic. The Western observer, impressed with this change, often confuses this "criticism from within" with "reform from within" and is inclined to forget that the core of the totalitarian system is still unchanged. He forgets that the mere possibility of exposing the distresses of the system from within does not change the system *ipso facto*. It has, however, new international implications that have to be carefully analyzed in the West.

The leaders have begun to notice that restructuring the system is a tremendous task. They have found that a successful *pere-*

*stroika* requires time, funds, patience and public support, and the Soviet leadership has run short of these goods. In the past, their predecessors had tried to conceal the symptoms of internal crisis. To stifle criticism and subordinate the populace of communist countries to the dictatorship of the party, the leaders used several techniques that have been employed interchangeably: the strategy of terror used most effectively by Stalin, the appealing promise of economic success through communism used by Stalin's successors, and the ideological or nationalist euphoria that was exploited during the post-revolutionary era and World War II. None of these strategies can be used as successfully as before. Ideological or nationalist clichés do not appeal to people who want to live on the level of civilized societies. Terror is still effective, but its blatant application does not fit the liberal disguise of Gorbachev's leadership during the *glasnost* period, and *glasnost* is a prerequisite to Soviet relations with the West. It has become obvious to the Soviet leaders that without cooperation and technology from the West, the economies of the bloc countries will deteriorate further, just at the time when Western economies are on the mend. Continuation of "detente and cooperation" seems to be viewed by the Soviet leaders as the *condition sine qua non* of *perestroika*. *Glasnost* is the price paid for the successful restructuring of the socialist economy.

Admittedly, *glasnost* has dramatically changed the way of life of people in the Soviet Union. Henry Kissinger commented after his visit to the Soviet Union:

The seediness of the accommodations had not changed, nor the backwardness of what in the West are considered life's amenities. One remains amazed that a country subsidizing on so marginal a standard of living should conduct so assertive a global policy. Yet the surface impression of stagnation was misleading. There is clearly unprecedented ferment underneath the gloomy surface of wintry Moscow. The new leadership is different. It displays a vigor, dynamism and flexibility inconceivable ten years ago.<sup>14</sup>

Even those experts on Soviet domestic policy who believe in the seriousness of the reform program admit that liberalization is only a by-product of *perestroika*, and the achievements of *glasnost* should be checked carefully. "The purpose of that reform is not to spur democracy or freedom; it is to encourage efficiency and industrial progress, hence to make the Soviet Union more powerful."<sup>15</sup>

So far the "preservative" effects of *glasnost* and *perestroika* are not highly visible. *Glasnost* undermines rather than enhances the foundation of the socialist system. Public discussion of the distresses of communism reveals that in spite of the attempt at reforming the system, Soviet politics in the early 1990s will be shaped by economic crisis, and the Soviet bloc will face unprecedented shortages of energy, capital, and food. For the first time it is clear, even to the people living within the communist structure, that in spite of the efforts of the Soviet leadership, the technological gap between the socialist economies and the other industrialized countries will increase. The communist paradise promised by Khrushchev will not come true.

The reforms have already endangered the position of the middle ranks of the Party bureaucracy and have resulted in the considerable conservative reaction within the Communist Party. Undoubtedly, the economic distresses will further stagnate the standard of living and cause a decline in the growth rate of mass consumption. *Glasnost* will shatter the chance of hindering the economic slowdown and the growing gap between the rulers and the ruled. Watchful Western commentators often warn that full-fledged *glasnost* may open a Pandora's box of social distress and result in more serious social turbulence than the Hungarian events of 1956, the "Prague Spring" of 1968, or the Polish Solidarity crisis of the 1980s. The 1987 Polish referendum, the 1988 strikes, the reports on public dissatisfaction with the Communist leadership in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the development of the nationalist and ethnic movements in the Soviet Republics, and the most recent revolt against

communism in China confirm the seriousness of this danger.<sup>16</sup>

The deteriorating economies of satellite countries will make the bonds between the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe less and less profitable. Obviously Moscow's relations with its satellites in the last few years are highly political in nature. These military and political determinants of the Soviet interest in the Eastern Europe buffer zones will probably remain constant, but the future will show to what extent the Soviet Union will be able to afford costly commitments in this region. Economic decay may erode Moscow's dominance in the Soviet bloc as well as Soviet involvement in risky and expensive international ventures.<sup>17</sup> The Soviet troop pullout from Afghanistan confirms these prognoses.

Internal turbulence and a decline in Russian nationalism combined with an increasingly anti-Russian nationalism in the non-Russian regions<sup>18</sup> may force the regime to follow Poland's example and seek military leaders who would be able to deal with the situation. It is possible that the isolated Party may experiment with military coups, and the regime may relapse into a modified Stalinist form of dictatorship, which proved suitable in a state of emergency but useless in the face of serious and permanent social and economic problems.

Instead of "conservation" the West can expect destabilization of the system and a sort of zigzag policy with typical strategies based on both calculated and some irrational motives. The failures of Reykjavik-type meetings might be followed by successful summits, and the friendly relationships and disarmament gestures may be intertwined with incidents as dangerous as the shooting down of the Korean airliner or the ramming of American ships on the Black Sea by Soviet warships. The policy of liberalization and democratization might be replaced by the reign of terror similar to China's crack-down.

#### *Glasnost as a "Revolution"*

Even the most enthusiastic commentators on Gorbachev's attempt at restructuring the

Soviet economy admit that the system does not show many "revolutionary" signs of a quick economic recovery. Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* are being tested in an atmosphere which resembles more the Sisyphian Labors than the noisy hurrah-enthusiasm of the Khrushchev era.<sup>19</sup> The situation stands as follows:

The Soviet system has forever destroyed the so-called collective mentality, which was supposed to be a basic component of Communist political culture.

The crisis within Communist ideology is irreversible. The belief of the masses in Marxism-Leninism cannot be reconstructed, yet socialist leaders will not give up obsolete dogmas because they do not know how to function without them.

The ideological crisis has undermined the rudiments of Communist morality and corroded all Marxist-Leninist values, including the key dogma of common ownership.

The moral and ideological crisis has killed all healthy incentives among workers and managers.

The double standard of morality, together with massive economic dislocations, has created a black market and corruption, which have been tolerated for so long that they are now irrevocably integrated in the way of life of Communist countries.

The need to create a relatively open party elite forced the party to build a system of "negative selection" that promotes compliant, conformable "yes" men who care far more about their careers than about the system of Communist values.

The lack of competence, and accountability, and widespread corruption on the part of decision-makers, are incompatible with the basic principles of economic efficiency.

The lack of information, coordination, and proper control over the implementation of productive decisions, coupled with a form of decentralization that is more apparent than real, cripple the socialist system's central planning and decision-making effort. These factors also work against the attempts to introduce market mechanisms into the socialist system. The combination of central planning and a market economy, totalitarian power of the party and the socialist democ-

racy resembles the woman who is only "half pregnant." This kind of reform may result in the creation (using Kolakowski's expression) of a sort of "boiling ice."

The concept of "socialist pluralism" is meaningless when combined with control by the Party. The recognition of opposition within socialism should not be confused with pluralism. The attempt to put "western" and "socialist" pluralism on the same footing



reminds one of the argument that "slaves and their owners are equal because all of them have two legs, two hands, and one head."

The functioning of the double legislative body composed of the huge Congress and the smaller but still bicameral nucleus organ (Central Executive Committee or Supreme Soviet) had been well tested in the twenties and thirties. These Congresses of several thousand delegates, handicapped by their size, were typically more responsive to the party rhetoric. They were organized carefully in advance and held in an atmosphere encouraging no dissenting debate. Recent signs suggested that the new Soviet Congress would be something more than a huge manifestation of support for the Party. The Congress, however, followed the well-anticipated Gorbachev scenario.

The modified system did not introduce elements of political pluralism. The Constitution guarantees that one-third of the deputies are elected from the all-union social organizations controlled by the Communist

Party. The remaining two-thirds of the candidates are nominated by labor collectives, and there are no indications that the majority of them will not be selected from the Party-controlled electorate. In this situation the new USSR Supreme Soviet might accept only nominal dissent and be in fact an institution with the same profile as the old Supreme Soviet which was called to applaud the party's decisions.

The evolution of the electoral system should be watched carefully. So far, multi-seat electoral districts have been introduced only in local elections and the experience of other socialist countries shows that they are not "ipso facto" a guarantee of democratization of the electoral process. Double and multiple nominations were theoretically possible under the old electoral Soviet laws. In practice however, candidates or the organizations that nominated them dropped their names when alternative names were submitted and single candidates ran for each seat uncontested. Without public control of the election process the slogan "free elections" is meaningless in light of the socialist record.

The nomination of Gorbachev to the position of President of the Supreme Soviet enhanced his power under the new constitutional law. This law limits the tenure of this position to ten years (two five-year successive terms) but extends the functions of the President to head of state, who chairs the powerful Defense Council and names candidates to the posts of chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, USSR general prosecutor, chairman of the USSR Supreme Court, and also chooses other high officials. The combination of the position of General Secretary of the Party with the Presidency and the announced combination of the equivalent positions on the local level hardly can favor the announced reversion of power to the soviets.<sup>20</sup>

The new law raised great concern especially in the Northern Republics of the Soviet Union. The widely heralded, yet vaguely implemented shift of power from the party to the legislature was accompanied by restrictions on public demonstrations and the freedom of association.<sup>21</sup>

It is worth repeating after Andrei Sakharov that "the West should be genuinely interested in the success of *perestroika* and interested in supporting it," yet he observes that so far "this is *perestroika* only from above."<sup>22</sup>

The changes in the communist way of life are visible but *by no means revolutionary*. The massacre on Tiananmen Square in Beijing followed by a wave of arrests proved that the West should not be deluded by the symptoms of liberalization and democratization. At least the core of the system remains unchanged. It can be characterized by several main traits.

First, the existence of an official ideology which sometimes causes leaders to act, but serves at other times to disguise the cynicism of the ruling elite and to rationalize actions that in fact are uncoordinated and ineffectual.

Second, control by a single party, which is represented as a mass organization, but is in fact an elitist structure that co-opts into its top ranks individuals who are conformable to and compliant with the official party line. The party is headed by a small group of activists and often by a single autocrat (although not as omnipotent as Stalin) who is presented as the charismatic leader of a nation, a class, or even all mankind. The party is able to survive for a comparatively long period of time because its lower ranks are relatively open and ready to accept anyone who blindly follows party orders.

Third, operation of the party through a party bureaucracy and various intermediary associations devoted to the ruling elite. These numerous cadres, subordinate to top party leaders, help to maintain military control over the country, as well as monopoly control of all economic activity and of all means of communication and education.

Fourth, the use of an extremely widespread system of police control which helps to keep individuals obedient and almost completely deprived of an independent personal life. The domination of society by the state and the minimization of the private and individual sphere are not limited by law.



Rather, the law serves only to enhance the power of the ruling elite. The extended penetration of all spheres of social life by the state—including the ethical, religious, economic, and legal—distinguishes this system from all other dictatorships and autocratic regimes.<sup>23</sup>

The system has created its own "vicious circle," without its key ingredients, ideological rhetoric, bureaucracy, the party centralized leadership, the system of police control, the system cannot function; but with them, no reform is possible. These key ingredients can be crushed but not reformed. They are an inseparable part of the system.

The above observations bring us to several conclusions:

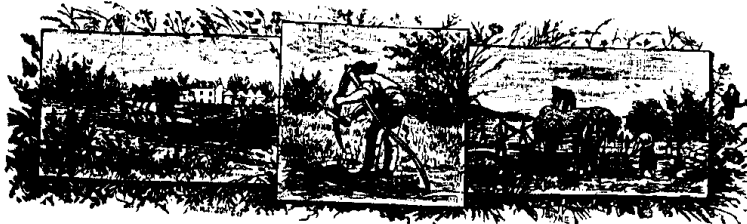
First of all, although this author does not have a great liking for definitional disputes he admits his almost instinctive aversion to showy but gimcrack plays on words. The concept of "conservative revolution" is self-contradictory and has never proven to be true. Revolutions do not change all elements of the existing reality, and all social transformations have some "preservative" consequences. In this sense the Great Socialist Revolution extended the authoritarian model of power in Russia, and the French Revolution revitalized and prolonged the life of the French monarchy which would be restored after the Napoleon era. The exposition of "preservative" elements of revolu-

tionary change is as confusing as the exposition of elements of socialism in "national socialism." Conservatism is a negation of revolution. A revolutionary world is a world of destruction, emotions, and irrational hopes. A conservative world is one of prudence, peace and reasonable compromise. Revolutions often promise a rapid liberation from present oppression and misery. Conservatism promises continuity and reasonable progress. Conservatism may be anti-revolutionary but it cannot be *ipso facto* revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. It has to be clearly observed that the concept of a "conservative revolution" is alien to a conservative mind and has always been challenged from a conservative point of view.

Secondly, the movement of Polish Solidarity is neither revolutionary or conservative. On the contrary, the leadership of the movement has tried to avoid as strongly as possible any violent challenge to the system; on the other hand, the movement is oriented toward change, not toward the preservation of the foundations of the establishment. *Solidarity* is neither conservative or liberal. As

share of political power, but not one seeking to limit political power in the name of individual freedom. It is a movement aiming not so much at the separation of economics from politics, but rather at the democratization of politico-economic decision making. It is a democratic movement, but it can hardly be called liberal, because it opposes authoritarian bureaucratic collectivism not in the name of individualistic values, but in the name of a democratic collectivism of the masses. It wants to *divide* political power, but it is not sufficiently aware of the desirability of *limiting* the scope of all political power, including democracy. In this sense we can even say that the political thinking of the leaders of Solidarity (not to mention that of its ordinary members) is contaminated to some extent by the spirit of socialist totalitarianism—in spite of their verbal condemnations of all kinds of totalitarian power.<sup>24</sup>

The "round table accords" in Poland confirmed the readiness of Solidarity to reach agreement with the Party to avert crisis. The accords and the recent elections proved a co-existence in Poland of totalitarian and demo-



Andrzej Walicki wrote,

*Solidarity* is a product of socialism. It might be furiously critical of socialism on the conscious level, but it is deeply socialist on the unconscious level—if by socialism we mean egalitarianism and collectivism; the primacy of politics over economics, cancelling the objective laws of the market; belief that political power can and should regulate everything in social life—in this sense, belief in an unlimited political power.

If all these things characterize socialism, then *Solidarity* must be seen as a socialist mass movement, one striving for at least a

cratic forces. In voting for Solidarity the voters voted for the democratic program of reforms of the organization which was portrayed as anti-totalitarian and anti-revolutionary. The Solidarnosc Civic Committee's Election Program reads:

Why do we say "yes" to elections? We ask everyone to participate in the elections because we see what Poland can gain by having independent representatives in the Diet and the Senate. . . . Participation does not mean closing our eyes or granting legitimacy to the non-democratic political system prevailing in our country. It reflects the



desire to change that system in an evolutionary way, using parliamentary mechanisms."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, we also tried to prove that *glasnost* is not a "conservative revolution." *Glasnost* is a distress signal within the system. Being "revolutionary" it is more destructive than "protective" of the system. If *glasnost* were "conservative" it could not be revolutionary.

At the end of his book Hermann Rauchning wrote about German Nazism, "Thus it was a mistake to propose to make a conservative revolution. What we want and what we failed to achieve, and what will be the aim of the peace to come, is the *end of the revolution*."<sup>7</sup> This conclusion ideally fits the *glasnost* era. The leaders of this movement must realize that a "conservative revolution" is not the solution to their ills. What their people really want and clearly need is the *end of the socialist revolution*.

1. Hermann Rauchning, *The Conservative Revolution* (New York: Putnam, 1941).
2. *Ibid.*, 50-62.
3. *Ibid.*, 53.
4. It was often used by the historians who followed the well-known Polish historian of ideas Jan Baszkiewicz. Baszkiewicz wrote *Historia Francji* [History of France] (Warsaw, 1974); *Robespierre* (Wroclaw, 1976), *Canton* (Warsaw, 1978).
5. This author strongly opposed this tendency in his review of W. Karpinski and M. Krol's book *Sylwetki Polityczne XIXw.* [Political Figures of the Nineteenth Century] (Cracow, 1974), review in 3 *Kwartainik, Historyczny* [Historical Quarterly] (1975), 669-674.
6. Professor Rafael Krawczyk is a Bradley Scholar at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C. The quotation is from his unpublished paper, *Conservative*

*Reflections on Eastern Europe* (1988), 3.

7. *Ibid.*, 10.

8. Report by Mikhail Gorbachev, in: *Documents and Materials*, (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1988), 5. Emphasis added.

9. Leslaw Paga, unpublished lecture at the Catholic University of America, Department of Economics, April 15, 1988.

10. See Rett R. Ludwikowski, *The Crisis of Communism: Its Meaning, Origins and Phases* (Washington: Pergamon, 1986), vii.

11. *Przegląd Tygodniowy* (March 1988).

12. "Even Lenin Now Comes under Criticism," *Washington Post*, 7 June 1988.

13. "Article *Pravda* Assesses Difficulties for Gorbachev," *Washington Post*, 8 June 1988.

14. *Newsweek*, 2 March 1987, 39.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See *Washington Post* 20 November 1987, 1 December 1987, 224-226; February 1988; see also "Multiple Ethnic Conflicts Challenging Gorbachev," *Washington Post*, 29 February 1988, A1, A12.

17. See Marshall Goldman, *USSR in Crisis: The Failure of an Economic System* (New York: Norton, 1983, xi).

18. See "Reports on Growth of Ethnic Nationalism in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia," *Newsweek*, 29 February 1988, 39.

19. See Rett R. Ludwikowski, "Gorbachev and His Reform," *Modern Age* (Spring 1986), 120-130.

20. "Changes to Enhance Democracy" (Moscow: TASS, 22 October 1988).

21. See, "Angry Estonians to Discuss Changes in Constitution," *Washington Post*, 4 November 1988.

22. "Sakharov Sees Threat to Soviet Reform," *Washington Post*, 8 November 1988; "Sakharov's Fears," *Washington Post*, 7 November 1988.

23. See Rett R. Ludwikowski, "Introduction" to Victor A. Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1989, xix-xx).

24. "Liberalism in Poland" *Critical Review* (Winter 1988), 8-9.

25. *Solidarnosc News*, no. 133, May 1-15, 1989.

26. Rauchning, *Conservative Revolution*, 280.

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