Stalinism Revisited

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According to Franz Schurman, a revolutionary breakthrough makes a return to the status quo ante impossible. Otto Kirchheimer, in his seminal article “Confining Conditions and Revolutionary Breakthroughs,” adds substantially to Schurman’s definition noting that a revolutionary breakthrough may occur with the “old data” remaining, “though absorbed in a new context and thereby deprived of its confining nature.” I take his point to be that while all social change is partial, some social change is decisive in radically revising who authoritatively defines the institutions of power at all levels of society. Successful revolutions insure that the “old data,” e.g., former elites, institutions, and ideologies, when not liquidated, are “privatized” by the “new data.”

The immediate question, then, is what did Stalinist revolutionaries in Eastern Europe face in 1948? What did the “old data,” the confining conditions and the status quo consist of? And, of course, what were the character defining features and consequences of revolutionary breakthroughs in that area?

One must begin by respecting the substantial differences between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. One could spend countless hours arguing over these differences, or, more likely, invidiously juxtaposing the positive features of the former with the negative features of the latter, or one could simplify by comparing a Rechtstaat with a Patrimonial state. I won’t do even that, because for my purposes the similarities between the two empires (and the Russian) are more important than their differences. All three empires subordinated and minimized individual identity in favor of collective identities—voluntary association to absolute hierarchies, and rejected political integration based on citizenship roles to political domination based on elite status.
More specifically, the region possessed a certain *gestalt*, a composite of the following elements, which is not to say that each country possessed each feature, or in equal measure. There were monarchies, often imported in genuinely neocolonial fashion; armies, in most cases ineffectively controlled by civilian governments; governments undisciplined by an independent public for the simple reason that none existed, or if they did were disorganized to the point of being easily manipulated, or fragile enough to be ignored.

There were ethnic groups, categoric in nature. Ethnicity was whole, not a role, an essence, not a dimension of one’s identity. Ethnic groups occupied particular niches—some privileged, others pariahs—in an invidious but complementary division of ethnic labor. And of course, there were peasants, in Marx’s vivid imagery, “sacks of potatoes,” subject to taxation, conscription, coercion, and contempt laced with a touch of elite fear. These masses of peasants made up the quasi-national social ghetto in each country; what appeared to be an almost non-biodegradable bit of “old data” confronting any serious agent of social change.

Finally, the political elites of the area usually borrowed status from outside their own culture revealing not only their sense of cultural inferiority but also their effective disconnection from any source of organized indigenous socio-political power. “Limbo” political elites, contemptuous of their own, and held in contempt by those they aped; and consequently, unable and unlikely to generate enough power to successfully oppose external opponents.

This then was the *gestalt*, the “old data” confronting Stalinist revolutionaries in Eastern Europe. To this general pattern, and to all the genuinely diverse, singular configurations that deviated from this Eastern European *gestalt*, Stalin responded in a unique manner. He authorized and authored a set of geographically contiguous replica regimes throughout the area, regimes that duplicated the features of his own Soviet regime. Stalin and his Eastern European loyal retainers created “castle” regimes in each country, regimes based on “distance,” “difference,” and “dominance.”

Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe created political “moats” between themselves and their societies. They distanced themselves by employing political violence of a distinct type, Terror. Its point was to minimize contact with the “old data,” thereby reducing the likelihood of the
“old data” contaminating or infiltrating the “castle,” itself, the guarded space within which novel revolutionary beliefs, institutions, and practices were to be articulated, initiated, and ultimately generalized.

The emphasis on difference complemented the one on distance and served much the same purpose, i.e., to prevent backsliding and identification with the “old data,” whether they were family ties, religious, cultural, or even to some extent languages. The point was not only to emphasize the differences between the “new data” and the “old” but also to concretize those differences. Learn Russian, even marry a Russian, identify with the Soviet Union not your own “bourgeois-peasant-aristocratic” country, and of course enjoy the privileges of being a dominant “castle” elite. After all, castles are not just fortresses; they are, as one eminent student of Norman history notes, “residential fortresses,” within which members of the New Class lived well (unless or until they were liquidated).

Dominance was ideally achieved by negating any and all real or potential points of political opposition. Revolutionary breakthroughs are distinct, precisely because their perspective is social not narrowly political, because they destroy institutions, not only elites, and because they address (often in a paranoid fashion) the potential for, not just the reality of, opposition. The agent of these breakthroughs was the secret police whose goal was fear and obedience, not persuasion and legitimacy. As for the social scope and ruthless quality of Stalinist revolutionary breakthroughs one has only to look at collectivization.

Within the bloc the exception to the Stalinist *gestalt* was Poland. Undoubtedly, the social, cultural, and perhaps most importantly, psychological origins of Poland’s uniqueness were in the Western Territories. If Yalta “made” Eastern Europe Stalinist, Tehran “unmade” it. At the end of World War II, over five million young, unmarried, tough Polish males moved, aptly enough, west, into the former German territories. In those frontier environs not yet subject to the neo-traditional rule of either the Communist Party or the Roman Catholic Church, a new “protestant” culture of rugged individualism was nurtured and matured, one that would be the core of Solidarity.

In addition to this unique development, the peasantry was not effectively collectivized, nor was the Roman Catholic Church “deprived of its confining nature.” Consequently, the breakthrough in Poland was indecisive. Poland was a “Bukharinite” experiment that failed.
Politically, the Stalinist revolutionary “castle” definition and projection of power accomplished the following: the elimination of monarchies, the subversion of the military’s professional integrity and national purpose, the destruction of all but heterocephalous and heteronomous political parties, and, with one exception, the negation of an autonomous, let alone independent, political role for Roman Catholic Churches.

Socially, collectivization (not industrialization) stands out as the signature feature of Stalinist revolutionary breakthroughs. Following the Soviet example, Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe murderously “mashed” their peasant sacks of potatoes thereby making impossible a return to the status quo ante. Peasants didn’t disappear; peasant society did! With collectivization Stalinist revolutionaries had broken through what other change oriented regimes had been broken by; namely, the “old data” peasant society and its accompanying institutions, elites, beliefs, and practices.

Ethnicity’s place in these countries was primarily affected by World War II, though Stalin manipulated ethnicity in a number of countries to serve his imperial design of maximizing allegiance to, and dependence on, Moscow Centre.

Institutionally, the feature of Stalinist breakthroughs with the longest half-life was the elimination of the quasi-public domains in these countries and the neutering of the state as the official locus of political life. The Party destroyed, absorbed, and substituted for both the state and public: cadres ruled, subjects obeyed, citizens disappeared.

Internationally, the tendency of East European elites to look externally for sources of prestige, identity, and power continued in the formal sense but underwent a radical shift in political geography from West to East. The Soviet ideological reference was reinforced by a Soviet presence in the armies, parties, economies, and even families of East European regimes.

The most peculiar feature of Stalinist rule was its unintentional reinforcement of pre-communist political culture. Stalinist rule destroyed the institutional, ideological, and elite “old data,” but its “castle format” and modus operandi insured that the culture it meant to destroy was reinforced. In crucial respects Stalinist regimes were quite familiar to East European societies and the latter reacted to them in a predictable way.
The “distance,” “difference,” and “dominance” so sought after by Stalinist regimes essentially, if not practically, absolutized the suspicion, opposition, and disconnection between Party and society. I say Party because the state, as already noted, lacked both independent status and power, making the idea of State Socialism nonsense. In effect, Stalinist regimes created “ghetto” societies, populations that feared and avoided “trouble,” i.e., anything political. The social and personal device used to deflect regime attention, reduce regime suspicion, and shield one’s own inner thoughts was dissimulation. Dissimulation permitted a master–slave relation of dominance and obedience to operate practically on a routine basis.

The Party’s negative evaluation of existing society combined with the built-in ambivalence typical of a Leninist party towards its ideal constituency, the working class, along with the Soviet demand for near uniformity and loyalty meant that East European Stalinist parties were more an extension of the Soviet polity towards which they were deferential than their own societies which they treated in a decidedly uncivil manner.

The Stalinist unintentional reinforcement of the “old data” affected the economic realm as well. The Stalinist emphasis on “storming” was antithetical to methodical rational economic production and acquisition, and ran counter to an understanding of time as an impersonal continuous measure and discipline. Instead, “storming” was consistent with a peasant mode of economic activity, and a corresponding sense of time as urgent harvesting activity followed by kavehane-like passivity.

Stalinist breakthrough regimes were obviously not the only experience Eastern Europe had with Leninist rule. Khrushchev and Brezhnev brought substantial development changes to their regimes’ internal organization, to regime-society relations, societies that themselves had changed in major ways.

Khrushchev’s regime and its counterparts in Eastern Europe had two notable features. The Khrushchevian ideological conclusion that class war was no longer the defining feature of regime-society relations was momentous. In the long run it marked (as Mao correctly noted) the beginning of the end of Leninist rule in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and its neotraditional routinization. Politically, and in line with his ideological innovation, Khrushchev did succeed in ending the Terror and making the secret police a part of, rather than apart from,
the Party. But he failed in his political-ideological attempt to square the cadre–citizen circle with his notions of party and state of the whole people. The emergence during the Khrushchevian era of political organizations purportedly representing a newly participant society and party aktiv were, to borrow a phrase from the Irish singer, Mary Black, "looked at closely, counterfeit mostly." Khrushchev's changes were substantial, not essential. Predictably, the cadres opposed any dilution of their power and Brezhnev's coup was a testimony to their success. Parties throughout the region maintained their monopoly of political rule, definition, and space.

With all predictable and significant variations a new political gestalt, Brezhnevian neotraditionalism, emerged in Eastern Europe consisting of the ideological rejection of class war, the subordination and integration of the secret police within the Party, and the success of the Party cadres in maintaining their superior status. In the 1980s all East European regimes were debilitated by the absence of any heroic task to justify and discipline their claim to political superiority. The consequence was institutional corruption marked by varying degrees of nepotism and the disaggregation of parties into coteries of "big men" leaders and "small boy" clients; the most remarkable contemporary instance of formerly charismatic parties undergoing neotraditional routinization. Regime "parasites" treated their economies and Western aid as "booty," and created "scavenger" societies whose major feature was personalism, egos largely unrestrained by external discipline, conscience, or transcendent beliefs. During the last two decades of Leninist rule, communist parties exercised a "lazy monopoly" over amoral societies.

Consequently, with the region wide collapse of Leninist regimes, due largely to Gorbachev's radical attempt to relativize the Party's and the Soviet Union's political status, I could not find any political, any socio-political, any psychological, and certainly not any ethical identity at the mass level to initiate, organize, lead, let alone institutionalize anything like a liberal market democracy. I fully expected Eastern Europe to be the site of wildcat ethnic violence, demagogues, social suspicion, and counterfeit democratic states weakly connected to fragmented societies, mimicking and depending on the West.

I was wrong. Fortunately, for my own ego's sake, for the right reason. A number of critics were quick and correct to point out that the
“colonels, cardinals, and demagogues” I expected to politically pre-
dominate in the post-communist period failed in good measure to ap-
pear. However, the question is why? In the concluding pages of my article, “The Leninist Legacy,” I pointedly asked whether in light of the cumulative negative Leninist legacies—Stalinist, Khrushchevian, and Brezhnevian—there was any “…point of leverage, critical mass of civic effort—political, cultural and economic—that can add its weight to civic forces in Eastern Europe and check the increasing frustration, desperation, fragmentation and anger that will lead to country and re-
gion wide violence?” My answer was yes, Western Europe! If Western Europe were to “adopt” Eastern Europe the negative outcome I fore-
saw could be avoided. And that is precisely what happened. The EU “adopted” Eastern Europe.

In his book, Neoiogabia, the Romanian social theorist Dobroge-
anu-Gherea somewhat whimsically suggested that the best thing that could happen to Romania would to become a French province. Well, with admission to the EU (“France”) “Romania” (Eastern Europe) did just that! Still, one should ask how decisive the “Western” civic breakthrough has been? The current absence of an anti-Western inter-
national ideology centered in a powerful country that appeals to and resonates with the ethnic, social, cultural, religious, and psychologi-
cal realities of the eastern part of Europe makes it impossible to say. Should a novel, unexpected anti-Fukuyama like development occur in the future, the best way to prevent Eastern Europe from rejecting its newly acquired Western identity is to prevent it now from becoming an EU ghetto.