Moral Aspects of Economic Growth, and Other Essays

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Liberal Prospects under Soviet Socialism: A Comparative Historical Perspective

This chapter presents the text of the Inaugural Lecture for the W. Averell Harriman Lecture Series delivered at Columbia University on 15 November 1989, and repeated at Harvard with some minor changes on 8 February 1990. Thus the lecture antedates the formal collapse of the Soviet Union and other exciting historical events. Had such events not occurred, had there been a relatively peaceful transition toward a liberal capitalism with an improving standard of living for much of the population, the interpretation in this lecture would seem not only dated but absurd. Its main interest now, some ten years after it was first drafted, rests in the attempt to discern the forces favorable and opposed to the establishment of liberal democracy on the basis of both western and Asiatic experience.

At the outset a few words about comparative history may tell the reader what to expect and, perhaps more important, what not to expect in this essay. The procedure starts with an issue or problem, which I will state in just a moment. The next step is to search out other societies that have faced roughly the same problem and find out how they coped with it. Comparative history can suggest unexpected answers to familiar questions and, on occasion, show that accepted answers are very likely to be wrong. In this essay I present a substantial amount of comparative history, which I hope is intrinsically interesting as well as appropriate and useful. In emphasizing what not to expect, I will add that I have kept comments on recent and current events in the USSR to a minimum. While following and interpreting the rush of current events can be a serious and valuable intellectual task, it is also a highly specialized one. Neither comparative history in general nor this writer can bring to bear the up-to-the-minute knowledge this task requires.
I

The problem I wish to address here is this: Is there any prospect at all that the Soviet Union may acquire or develop the characteristics of a liberal democratic state? Even if one dismisses such a prospect as utter fantasy, in order to be intellectually responsible one has to have good reasons for the dismissal.

The key characteristic of liberal democracy for the purpose at hand is the existence of a legitimate and, to some extent, effective opposition. To put the point in somewhat different terms, ordinary citizens must have rights of remonstrance and criticism against unjust acts. The right and opportunity to complain is very important. It will remain so as long as human societies exist, because every human society necessarily imposes many frustrations on the wants and instincts of the individuals who make up the society. A great many of these frustrations are necessary to make any society work. In this sense they are just and necessary. Others are simply oppressive and repressive. The mere fact that some rules are necessary easily opens the door to oppressive rules and practices that the dominant authorities put in for their own special advantage. Hence the need for a legitimate opposition is a permanent one.

By no means are all social needs satisfied. Some are not even recognized for long periods of time. Many political systems have seemed to flourish even during the twentieth century without internal criticism or legitimate opposition. For that reason we can say that such an opposition clearly marks off liberal regimes from authoritarian and totalitarian ones. In Western democracies legitimate opposition has taken the form of openly organized and competing political parties. For us it is hard to conceive of legitimate opposition in any other form. Nevertheless for the time being it will be best to leave open the possibility that other forms might develop through a process of trial and error.

In assessing the prospects of liberal democracy in the USSR there is the strong risk of setting up an idealized model of Western democracy and then juxtaposing this model against the current workings of the Soviet regime to demonstrate from the lack of fit that liberal democracy is impossible there. I am conscious of this risk and wish to emphasize that the models of liberal democracy I have in mind are the actual working ones. One should keep in mind Churchill’s remark, “Democracy is the worst possible form of government—except for all the others.” In order to avoid a Western parochialism, in the next section I shall sketch some aspects of both Western and Asian institutional history that may enable
us to discern both obstacles to liberal-democratic development and ways of overcoming them. After that I shall discuss some general preconditions for liberal democratic rule and for any possible transition in the USSR.

To begin with Western developments, there are two general points worth making. First, revolutionary violence, and/or civil war, prepared the way for liberalism and later democracy in the three main centers where these institutions first grew up: England, France, and the United States. This violence severely weakened institutions and social groups opposed to these trends. After the execution of Charles I no English king tried to rule without Parliament. The French Revolution dealt a crippling blow to the monarchy and the aristocracy. In the United States the American Revolution put an end to what limited possibility there may have been for foreign domination. American social and political questions would not be decided in London. The Civil War was more significant in that it put an end to the possibility of a slave-owning plantation aristocracy as a crucial segment of the elite. In this connection it is also worth noticing that defeat in the Second World War played a very similar role in promoting liberal democratic regimes in West Germany, Italy, and Japan. The revival of parliamentary democracy since the war is not limited to these countries. It is not always an edifying spectacle. But under close examination no political system turns out to be edifying.

The bearing of these historical observations on the Soviet situation is reasonably clear. If violence on any large scale is necessary to uproot the Soviet elite, then there is almost no prospect for change. Conceivably such a crisis—or the threat of such a crisis—could galvanize a section of the bureaucracy to sacrifice many of its followers in order to create a new social order with new policies, as happened in Meiji Japan. Such a sequence of events is still speculative, though there have been hints pointing in this direction.

II

The second and from our standpoint more important aspect of the growth of Western democracy is the difficulty of creating a system of legitimate opposition. This difficulty I shall discuss with some comparative historical examples. After all, the very notion of a “loyal opposition”—to use a British expression—looks on the face of it like a contradiction in terms. How can one possibly be loyal to the powers that
be and at the same time oppose them? Putting the question this way highlights the central puzzle of a long historical process: how could opposition become legitimate, that is, politically and socially acceptable?

In England, as in other countries that have developed a system of legitimate opposition, the main line of political development has been from violent conflict over men and measures to negotiated settlement of the issues. The height of conflict in England occurred with the execution of the king in 1649. No subsequent British king attempted to rule without Parliament, as had Charles I. Thus regicide contributed to the creation of legitimate opposition. But by itself, killing the king was not enough. Many other things had to happen.

First of all, the passions and excitements of the Civil War and Glorious Revolution (1688) had to die down. Life had to become more boring before a civilized political order could begin to take hold. By the 1720s with the last flickerings of the Jacobite party, the excitement had died down.1

At about the same time legitimate political opposition started to take shape. As early as 1731 the expression “Opposition” had become current in contemporary writings.2 At this point and for a long time afterward Parliamentary opposition was a loose agglomeration of place-hunting factions that were out of power and rent by conflicting views and principles. On the other hand, their numbers and advocates outside Parliament included some brilliant speakers and writers who covered their somewhat sordid motives with intellectual éclat. In practice the Opposition at this stage does not appear to have had any other end in view than making trouble for Robert Walpole (d. 1745). As England’s first de facto prime minister, he had managed to put together a working government out of a set of turbulent magnates, in large measure through favors and corruption.3

This limitation of its objectives is very important in making Opposition legitimate. It was reasonably plain to all who cared to look that a motley body of place hunters had no real intentions of upsetting the political and social applecart. After all, members of the Opposition came from the same

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3Foord, Opposition, 154, 158. Plumb, Political Stability, is the main source for my comments on Walpole.
background and were part of the ruling class in a highly inequalitarian society. Furthermore an attempt to revive the passionate atmosphere of the Civil War would hardly have been popular at any level of society.

Over the years the members of Parliament developed an etiquette for limiting conflict. Once more, the fact that all of them came from the upper reaches of the social order and shared at least some measure of political responsibility as an elite within the governing class probably facilitated the creation of this etiquette. The first concrete sign of this emerging etiquette that I have come upon appeared in 1741 when the Opposition was tightening its ranks in a successful effort to oust Walpole. A major Opposition leader is described as having frowned on private friendships between political enemies, a clear indication that such friendships existed. In fact the same leader went on to say that amicable association between courtiers with any bloc of the Opposition aroused suspicion among other elements in the Opposition. Indeed contemporary evidence suggests that friendly relationships among political enemies were not uncommon. That is hardly surprising since political alignments in those days were continually changing. At the same time it was possible for a distinguished political leader to believe that such friendships threatened political purity and ought to be stopped.

Fortunately this attempt to create a social gulf between political enemies was a failure. During the rebellion of the American colonies, Lord North, who was trying to carry out King George III’s policy of military suppression, was frequently the target of caustic oratory by Burke, Fox, and others. But Lord North did not let such attacks get under his skin or at least pretended not to. Anecdotes collected after his death claim that his natural civility and good humor left him no enemies in the House of Commons. Even leaders of the Opposition counted on these qualities to the point where they frequently petitioned him as First Lord of the Treasury for little favors and indulgences for their friends and constituents. These Lord North readily granted when he could do so with propriety, acts which his opponents readily acknowledged.

Parliamentary business did not always proceed so smoothly. On occasions of high political excitement speakers on both sides were shouted down by their opponents. (Hooting at speakers still takes place today.) Toward the end of the American War of Independence tempers flared and several duels were arranged on account of “hard words” spoken in

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5 Ibid., 358.
debate. Though the presiding officers of both Houses did their best to prevent bloodshed there were two celebrated duels, one in 1779 and another in 1780. (Charles James Fox took part in the earlier one.) After the second duel there was a strong reaction in the House. If public questions were to be decided by the sword, said one speaker, free discussion would cease and Parliament would resemble a Polish diet. Another advised his fellow members bluntly to learn “better manners.” Evidently the members took this surge of disapproval to heart, for these violent episodes ceased.6

By the late eighteenth century, then, the Mother of Parliaments had put in place an etiquette for limiting violent factional conflict within its walls. Now that we have uncovered the way in which legitimate opposition became established, there is no need to attempt a synthesis of all the political maneuvers and other conditions that eventually resulted in the modern system of legitimate opposition. Instead I will end the discussion of the British example by calling attention to two themes: Parliamentary relations with the monarch, and the manipulation of elections.

In the eighteenth century, and of course for a long time afterward, the sticky point in politics was to persuade the monarch to accept as ministers the men Parliament believed to be appropriate under the circumstances. There was not a great deal of difficulty under Walpole because Walpole enjoyed the confidence of George II. Furthermore Walpole, unlike some of the other leaders of the day, knew which of George’s mistresses was the one to whom he should appeal in case of trouble. Under George III the situation was very different. His domestic life, it is claimed, was pure, and he was stubborn in defending his prerogative of choosing his own ministers. He was also quite lucky, as shown by the upsurge of electoral support for the Court in 1784, only a year after the final British defeat in the unpopular attempt to crush the American Revolution.7

If George III and other monarchs were lucky in not having to swallow too many unpalatable pills of the Opposition, their luck was supplemented by careful political manipulation. It is easy to forget just how effective this manipulation was, but the evidence for it is overwhelming. Between 1742 and 1830 the government always won general elections, mainly through the use of patronage.8 Eighty-eight years without losing an election is an odd record for the Mother of Parliaments, and longer than even the Bolsheviks can claim to date. As one looks back over the

6Ibid., 357–358.
7Ibid., 398–400.
8Richard Pares, King George III and the Politicians (Oxford, 1953), 196.
English record, what stands out is the role of corruption and good manners in establishing the legitimacy of opposition.

In the United States, our next example, during the period of patrician rule by the founding fathers, opposition was generally defined as malevolent factionalism. To be sure, one current of opinion associated with Madison regarded parties as an unavoidable evil that reflected human nature. Yet even there, party and faction were seen as evil, and the terms “party” and “faction” at times seemed interchangeable. When the Republicans were in power under President Jefferson, many of them spoke of their opponents, the Federalists, as incipient traitors.

According to Richard Hofstadter, this situation changed rapidly during the lifetime of Martin Van Buren (1782–1862), who was president from 1837 to 1841.9 The old patriciate had been men of substance (and intellectual distinction) for whom politics was both an avocation and an obligation. By Van Buren’s time this social type had died out. Professional politicians, men like Van Buren who devoted their whole lives to politics, replaced them. Many were lawyers accustomed to pressing cases against their opponents. Such partisanship was, however, both temporary and narrowly focused.

Both as lawyers and as politicians they were accustomed to rubbing shoulders with opponents around the courthouse and on other social occasions. The lawyer’s loyalty was to the legal profession and the courts rather than to a particular cause or client. These changes in the social role and situation of the politician made it easier to encapsulate hostilities and to treat political opponents as men who might at some time be useful allies, and with whom it would be prudent as well as pleasant to remain on good terms personally. These changes in the politician’s role and social context were important in creating a climate of acceptance for political parties and other aspects of the specifically American variant of legitimate opposition.

There are two more cases that require at least brief consideration. They are important because they are Asian rather than Western. One comes from contemporary Japan. The other comes from Imperial China, mainly the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). The Japanese case is a success story, and the Chinese one a failure. To the extent that it is possible to explain both with a set of handmade intellectual tools fashioned mainly from Western historical experience, we may have greater confidence that we are asking

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the right questions for understanding any society, including the Soviet Union.

One consequence of Japan's defeat in World War II and the subsequent American occupation was the grant to the lower house of the Diet of law-making powers. These powers were similar to those possessed by the House of Representatives in the United States. The consequences at first were nearly catastrophic. They were sufficiently serious to make Western observers dubious about the prospects of democracy ever taking root on Japanese soil. Two apparently irreconcilable blocs formed in the Diet. One was the Liberal Democratic Party, actually a conservative group whose base was farmers and businessmen. It possessed around two-thirds of the seats and, by using questionable parliamentary techniques, could force through legislation sought by a generally conservative cabinet and bureaucracy. The Japanese Socialist Party was the opposition and commanded roughly the remaining third of the seats. It was a leftist party, based in the trade unions, that also appealed to critical intellectuals freed by Japan's defeat from the stifling authoritarian chauvinism of the war and prewar years. The Socialists suspected the conservatives of trying to reintroduce the old regime. The conservatives saw the Socialists as a Marxist-liberal Trojan horse out to undermine the bases of traditional Japanese society. To me it seems probable that both suspicions were basically correct. Because the Socialists could not hope to carry through their program in the Diet, they adopted tactics of confrontation and obstruction to prevent the Diet from passing conservative legislation. The conservatives responded to confrontation with similar acts of their own. The situation deteriorated to the point of physical battles between members of the Diet. By 1960 the Diet seemed close to paralysis.

Instead of disintegrating, however, the Diet pulled itself together in a process analogous to that which took place in the United States and earlier in England. Confrontational politics frightened a good many members of the Diet. Both conservatives and Socialists began to seek each other out to search for issues on which they might agree. This they did secretly at first, meeting in tea houses and geisha houses. Later they did so openly by bringing to life the Diet's system of committees which had lain dormant and unused during the period of confrontation. In the committees both sides learned the limits of what they could hope to accomplish or prevent and how to compromise for the sake of achieving their objectives. By working together each side learned what would wash with its opponents and what would not. Mutual respect put in an appearance. Together the members of the Diet were creating through trial and error a new social
role for themselves with a new set of sanctions and expectations. Their emphasis was on compromise and the acceptance of opposition as a legitimate aspect of governing. Simultaneously the opposition muted its demands for an overhaul of the whole society. By the 1970s a new situation had come into existence. Though still precarious and showing signs of creating its own new problems, such as sharply increasing government deficits due to the decline of conservative influence, the new situation showed much promise for the future.10

The Chinese Empire throughout its long history had a special governmental institution, the Censorate, especially charged with some of the functions modern Westerners associate with legitimate opposition.11 As a working institution the Censorate can be traced back at least as far as the first imperial dynasty, the Ch’in (221–207 B.C.), which unified the country by force of arms. The idea of criticizing a ruler and remonstrating with him if he ignored or damaged the people’s welfare is very prominent in the surviving texts of the predynastic classical philosophers Confucius (ca. 551–479 B.C.) and Mencius (ca. 372–288 B.C.).

The main functions of legitimate opposition in the Chinese Empire were (1) remonstrance with and criticism of higher officials, including, in theory and occasionally in practice, the emperor himself and (2) surveillance in the sense of seeing to it that the emperor’s decrees were carried out in practice by local officials, and (3) of keeping track of popular needs and sentiments. It would be hard to maintain that keeping track of popular needs was an important task all the time. Still, “good” and powerful emperors generally decreed a local remission of taxes when they learned about a bad harvest or natural disaster. After all it was good policy to limit hunger, discontent, and riots. A “bad” emperor with an empty treasury—which might not be altogether the emperor’s fault, though concubines and palaces ran into money—would refuse to remit taxes and insist on building new and more magnificent palaces. This he would do against the advice of officials who were telling him the people were starving.

The main weapon that put some teeth in the function of legitimate opposition in the Chinese empire was impeachment. Naturally the weapon could not be used against the emperor himself. Changing em-

10 The material on Japan comes from Ellis S. Krauss et al., eds., Conflict in Japan (Honolulu, 1984), 243–293.
11 For this section I have drawn mainly on Charles O. Hucker, The Censorial System of Ming China (Stanford, 1966).
perors required violence in the form of a rebellion. (There were, however, several of these in Chinese imperial history including one at the beginning and another at the end of the Ming dynasty.) Though the functions of remonstrance and surveillance were sometimes separate, they tended to fuse, and they were fused under the Ming. As the way of changing emperors by rebellion makes plain, the Chinese conception of opposition lacked one feature that has become prominent in the West only recently. As a working autocracy China lacked any notion of a “responsible” opposition that could be expected to step in and govern with a somewhat different program and a somewhat different set of people. Too overt and consistent opposition implied serious risks to life and limb. About all an embryo opposition could do was wait for the reigning emperor to die and hope for the best from the next one.

The Censorate worked well under a “good” emperor when it was hardly necessary. Under a “bad” emperor it was almost completely ineffective. Either the emperor disregarded its findings and admonitions or punished severely those who reported matters about which he did not care to learn. At least that was the case under the Ming and probably other dynasties as well. In that sense the Censorate was a failure, and the reason is not far to seek. The Censorate, like other bodies of scholar-officials, had no political base outside the imperial system. Or perhaps one should say almost no political base. When an imperial system began to disintegrate from misrule, popular discontent due to economic hardships, and finally the threat of rebellion and/or foreign conquest, large segments of scholar officialdom would withdraw allegiance because the reigning emperor had lost the Mandate of Heaven. Then they might support one or more candidates for the throne. The emperor, in other words, could not govern without the support of his officials. But this withdrawal of support was a weapon of last resort in a situation of general collapse. In the meantime the emperor could dispose of individual officials as he chose.

III

Let us now examine some of the possible implications for Soviet politics that this historical tour d’horizon suggests. In what follows I shall attempt to do two things at once: extract some broad generalizations from the historical material and comment on some aspects of Soviet affairs in the light of these generalizations. According to strict academic logic one is expected to draw the generalizations first and then show their application.
In my judgment that is a caricature of scientific method, as well as a dependable recipe for boring readers.

Stalinism of the late 1930s rather obviously represents an extreme variant of the malevolent factionalism and bitter infighting among political leaders just described in English, American, and Japanese developments. It was fortunate for many Soviet citizens that in the end Stalin did not turn out to be immortal. Thus the brute historical facts of Stalinism and tsarism apparently confront us with the question: how can one create a system of legitimate opposition for the first time?

The historical record shows that the problem is far from new. Other states have done it. Nevertheless to create a system of legitimate opposition for the first time is a long, difficult task in which the participants are by no means sure of what they are doing or want to do. Once one state has created such a system, however, others can copy and adapt it. Indeed, within limits, the system can be exported to a society with very different traditions and a very different culture.

Two factors are evidently important in establishing a viable system of legitimate opposition. The leaders of the more important political groups or movements must have, or develop, the sense that they are in the same boat, to sink or swim together. To put the point in slightly different language, most leaders have to recognize that circumstances force them to get along or revert to political paralysis and then anarchy. I say “most leaders” because there is usually political space to let a few intransigents cry their wares in the wilderness. On the other hand, if more than a few of the leaders are intransigents and are forced to remain that way for fear that others will outbid them for popular approval, the result could be situations like those in Lebanon and Northern Ireland.

The other factor is the development of social contacts among the contestants that are, or can be made, distinct from the business of resolving partisan issues. Shared experiences based on social class or professional and economic occupation can aid such social contacts. Alcohol can lubricate them despite the well-known fact that alcohol releases aggressive tendencies. Perhaps alcohol works because it also encourages indiscretion. In any case the effect of these social contacts is to defuse partisan intensity, encourage congeniality and even mutual respect, all of which increase the prospect of what William Graham Sumner used to call “antagonistic cooperation.” He thought that that was the only kind of human cooperation worth discussing.

Finally it is possible to set up a system of legitimate opposition de novo and by royal decree, at least if it corresponds to widely respected ethical
traditions, as was the case in Confucian China. Favorable and deep-rooted ethical traditions like those of Confucian China were, on the other hand, not enough. Indeed they were politically worthless when serious conflict occurred. In this sense a system set up only by royal decree and dependent on royal favor just will not work. If there is to be effective criticism of royal power, the critics must have a social and political base independent of that power. Shifting the scene for a moment to Europe under Western feudalism, we see that such was the situation of the great and often turbulent nobles of those centuries. Despite all the turmoil and bloodshed they caused, modern Western freedoms owe a great debt to these nobles.

IV

Now that we have extracted what we can from the brief historical case studies of legitimate opposition, I will mention four kinds of economic and social conditions widely believed to favor democratic and liberal regimes. (The number four is of course somewhat arbitrary.) It will not do to consider these conditions as preconditions or prerequisites for liberal democracy, because there are liberal democracies that have managed to survive without one or more of these conditions. Nevertheless if we find that two or more of them are absent or weakly developed in a specific case, then the prospects of democracy are dim in that country.

The first condition is a wide diffusion of property among the population. This wide diffusion is important because it provides a social base for independence from the government, as well as from other organized groups in the society. The rise of modern industry and of big government has greatly narrowed the diffusion of property in almost all of the advanced areas of the world. Industrial workers have jobs rather than property. So do white-collar workers and even an increasing number of professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and natural scientists who work in and for large firms or the government. To some extent skill has replaced property as a source of independence. A person with the right skills has a high degree of independence from the employer of the moment. Nobody can take away a skill in the way it is possible to take away property. On the other hand, a skill can become useless very quickly because of technological change. In a socialist society without individual property in the means of production, skill becomes just about the only source of independence. As far as I am aware, no one has yet done a monographic study of this situation in the USSR.
Along with a fairly wide diffusion of property, and now skill, one usually thinks of an economy in tolerable working order as generally necessary for democracy. This second condition is obvious enough to require very little comment. An economic system that deprives a substantial part of the population of its sources of livelihood, such as through unemployment in the case of wage earners and the loss of property in land by farmers and peasants, will cause a great deal of suffering and bitterness. At some point there will be a loss of political allegiance.

There remain two more conditions: (1) The society needs a homogeneous population in which the same culture is widely shared. One can turn this one around by asserting that strong religious differences and ethnic loyalties make trouble for liberal democracies. It has become obvious that they are already creating serious difficulties in the Soviet Union. (2) Political issues in a democracy cannot be too highly charged or too divisive. They cannot become matters of life and death or, more accurately, matters that arouse intense moral passion. Santayana caught the essence of this point through exaggeration when he observed that in a democracy all political questions have to be trivial questions. Are the issues facing the top Soviet leadership in any sense trivial?

There is an obvious subjective element here. What is a highly charged issue, say a tax on salt, in one society may be a trivial matter in another. The emotional charge of an issue depends on social context and cultural traditions. Political agitators can do a great deal to increase the charge. On the other hand, it is very difficult to defuse an issue after popular excitement has been aroused. In the case of the Soviet Union today this is rather obvious. The leadership in order to survive needs to make life both more boring and more satisfactory for the mass of the population. That is precisely what is not happening.

With the major conditions affecting the growth of liberal democracy before us we may now examine in somewhat more detail how some of them apply to the Soviet Union. You may recall that the first one had to do with the wide distribution of property and the growth of a professional class, or in somewhat looser language, of a bourgeoisie. In discussing the rise of democracies in general one can claim with only slight exaggeration: no bourgeoisie, no democracy.

To what extent does this apply to the USSR? A distinguished authority
reports that in 1959—that is, in Khrushchev’s time—there were only 5.5 million Soviet citizens with higher education. By 1986 there were 24 million. Within the group with higher education the “bourgeois” core would be those labelled “scientific workers” in the official Soviet figures. The number of these scientific workers rose from 1.5 million in 1950 to 15 million in 1986.12 These are quite impressive increases even if we have to remember that any increase looks big when the starting-point is small.

Some qualitative observations may help to make sense of these figures. First, the entire educated elite is ultimately dependent on the state, though the factor of skill must mitigate that dependence in a way difficult to generalize. In addition the generational difference within the elite may be the most significant fissure. On the one hand, there are the old bureaucrats who want to sit with folded hands and take life easy, as an old Soviet saying has it. Then there is the younger, better educated group that takes many of its cues and tastes from advanced Western societies, especially the United States.

To bring about a democratic and liberal transformation the economy must of course be in reasonably good working order. That is hardly the case in the Soviet Union now. Consumer supplies are short and the lines waiting for them very long. Such is the situation more than seventy years after the revolution and more than forty years after the end of a devastating war. It is not easy to see just how perestroika is expected to correct this situation. But it is not hard to see what has to be done and that so doing will create a host of powerful enemies for Gorbachev or any leader with a serious commitment to economic reform. It will be necessary to set up a series of positive incentives and negative sanctions to put ginger into economic administrators. Subsidies will have to be sharply reduced. Plant managers will have to stop taking last year’s targets with a minimal increase for the current year as their basis for their operations. They will have to innovate and improve the quality of their products. The same kind of ginger will have to be applied to workers. Absenteeism will have to be reduced, and discipline improved. Above all they will need better machines to work with, the main key to raising the productivity of labor.

In a phrase, Schumpeter’s “gale of destruction” will have to sweep through the Soviet economy. The gale can get its force either from the acts of economic planners or from letting loose the forces of the market,

or some uneasy combination of the two. But gales are destructive. No one wants to be exposed to their force. When, or rather if, the gale begins to whistle, all sorts of administrators and workers can be expected to come forth with all sorts of reasons why their special preserve of economic turf should be spared the rigors of reform.

If the economic situation is unfavorable, the ethnic and cultural one is scarcely any better. The Soviet Union is far from a culturally homogeneous society. There are numerous national minorities with cultures very different from the dominant Russian one. Unlike the situation in the United States, most but not all minorities inhabit a distinct territory in the form of a republic. The separate territory can encourage nationalist and separatist movements. Clearly there is quite a bit of political tinder in the national republics. Socialism has not quenched it. However, a Hapsburg policy may in this case succeed. Barring an overall crisis the Russians may continue to stay in control as long as each national minority gets angry about a different issue at a different time. They are divided already. So all one has to do is rule.

VI

This review of the conditions necessary for, or favorable to, liberal democracy and their applicability to current Soviet conditions leads to quite pessimistic conclusions. Still it would be a mistake to end the discussion here. Important political trends do not necessarily cease to work themselves out just because they encounter obstacles. The trend toward the unacknowledged goal of some variant of liberal democracy shows enough momentum to make worthwhile an assessment of some problems in any attempt at transition.

The best way to begin such an estimate of these admittedly formidable problems is with a reminder: there has never been anywhere such a thing as democratic socialism firmly in power. When democratic socialists (or perhaps better, social democrats) gained power temporarily through the ballot box, their commitment to democracy, along with other considerations too complex to summarize here, has limited the changes they were willing to make in the social fabric and therefore enabled their opponents to defeat them. Where Leninist socialists have come to power by revolution or civil war, even if they began with some commitments to democracy, they found it necessary to discard such commitments or twist them into new shapes. Leninist parties were minority parties committed
to a complete overhaul of the society they had conquered. To control and later to mobilize the population they had to create from unpromising sources a series of huge bureaucratic apparatuses. Roughly speaking, administrators, propagandists, and policemen made up the apparatus as a whole. The striking and intriguing feature of the Soviet case right now is the clear awareness in high political circles that this bureaucratic mobilization has performed its historical task and has become obsolete. By now the bureaucracy so created has turned into a major threat to the welfare of the Soviet population as well as to the international standing of the USSR.

After this reminder the first question to ask is “who, if anybody, wants liberal democracy in the Soviet Union?” Though there is little solid information on this point, the most likely answer is that nobody wants it for its own sake except a few intellectuals. In general, people have not wanted democracy for its own sake or out of commitment to a political ideal. For the most part those who have actively sought democracy—in the literal sense of rule by the populace—have wanted it as a device to increase their share in political rule and weaken the power and authority of those who actually rule. Democracy has been a weapon of the poor and the many against the few and the well-to-do ever since it surfaced in ancient Athens. The liberal component, where it has existed, was an attempt to gain protection against arbitrary acts by either the poor and many, or the dominant few.

Can one find anything in the current Soviet scene that at least resonates with liberal notions of protection against arbitrary acts by rulers as well as ruled? The obvious answer is yes. Plans and statements of intention have been appearing in the press at an astonishing rate. They are welcome to anyone with a strong moral commitment to liberal ways of resolving social problems. The fact that they sound promising from this standpoint provides no justification by itself for the “crack-pot realism” that would dismiss these statements as mere window dressing.

Glasnost, or openness and candor, a very old Russian tradition, is of course the most familiar aspect of current Soviet democratic aspirations. Since events tumble after one another so rapidly in the USSR, it is impossible to do them justice here. I can only say that they not only seem extraordinary but are extraordinary to both scholars and journalists.

Aside from the fact that candor and openness is an old tradition among educated Russians, appearing in almost every nineteenth-century novel, and as a result therefore seems to be independent of any political system, there is only one other observation I can offer. From a comparative his-
torical standpoint the enthusiasm for things Western, now loosely associated with glasnost and Gorbachev, is a phase that a segment of the educated elite in various parts of the world frequently has gone through at some time. Here we may recall the early Meiji oligarchs who took Herbert Spencer seriously, or Sun Yat-sen’s blend of Marxism, democracy, and nationalism, or reformist efforts offered by the educated elites of Bengal. To a modern skeptical eye these phases look rather like a case of the intellectual measles. Even so, Gorbachev’s bold attempts to apply glasnost to all parts of the USSR do stand out as a new historical phenomenon. The novelty appears in Gorbachev’s political agility and astuteness, bolstered by a liberal-democratic emphasis among many of his supporters. He is trying to use democracy to draw the teeth of a sclerotic bureaucracy. Differences and quarrels we can expect to see, but in a brief essay we cannot discuss them.

Gorbachev is on record as being opposed to a Western type of multi-party democracy. Though he almost certainly means what he says, it would be unwise to take his statement literally. If he, or anyone else, wants to make socialism more efficient and more humane, where can they turn except to the Western tradition? There is much talk now about giving the masses a greater voice in economic and political affairs. Much of this talk may be pure eyewash. We have heard it all before. One has to ask “whose masses” and “what are they expected to want?” Nevertheless it would not be surprising to find some populist and democratic appeals used to chip the rust off some bureaucratic machines.

What would a socialist version of liberal democracy look like? We could work out an answer, I suggest, by extending current trends toward their logical conclusion and by taking seriously the democratic aspects of their own tradition. Self-criticism is a good example. In the Stalin era the press was full of self-criticism in the form of articles attacking maladministration and abuse. The targets of criticism, as well as the style and tactics, were chosen at the center in accord with an overall plan of political agitation. Stalin himself probably made many of the decisions. Many current complaints are still in line with a general program. But now they give the impression of far greater spontaneity, as if little people were really letting off steam about local grievances that reflect structural failures in the Soviet system.

Rather than elaborate on this theme any further I will proceed at once to the main danger. It is this: as the old controls are slackened, popular demands on the regime are practically certain to rise. De Tocqueville in a famous passage on the beginnings of the French Revolution caught the
essence of this process: “The evil suffered patiently as inevitable seems unendurable as soon as one conceives the idea of escaping from it. All of the abuses that have been removed seem only to delineate better those that remain and to make one’s feelings more bitter. The evil, it is true, has become less, but one’s sensibility is more acute.”

To be more specific, if consumer demands do not find more satisfaction and do lead to noticeable public disorder, then Gorbachev may have to give way to a “strong man” (or himself become such a figure) in order to effect some version of neo-Stalinist policies.

Neither socialist democracy nor a new socialist dictator, however, seems to be the most probable outcome. It is rather more likely that after much sound and quite a bit of fury there will be little real reform. At some point down this road a leader could proclaim the victory of perestroika and argue that there is no need for any more of it. Or he could just let the campaign die out and drop the expression down the memory hole. Then the old system could continue lurching and limping along with a bit of new public-relations decoration.

That outcome would be a tragedy, not only for Gorbachev but for the rest of the world too. Gorbachev begins to look like a leader of the last cavalry charge of humane yet secular rationalism in a world dominated by anti-rationalism and chauvinist religious fundamentalism. Perhaps he will turn out to be the last flare-up from the ashes of the Enlightenment. But if the flame goes out, how many people are there now who would notice the difference?

By late 1997 the prospects for an effective liberal regime had hardly become more encouraging. To be sure there are positive changes since Stalinist times. Russian leaders no longer resolve major political issues by shooting or jailing opponents. From time to time there also appear signs of a lively intellectual life including opposition to the authorities of the day. However, this encouraging aspect seems precarious. In the cultural sphere there is also a negative trend, noticeable too in other former Leninist societies: a passionate thirst among young elites for the most stultifying hedonism so prominent in Western popular culture. Thus these supposedly liberal features, on inspection, begin to look like symptoms of fragility rather than incipient democratic growth. Instead of autocratic decisions, the new “veto” democracy legitimates a regime of no decisions—or perhaps just enough decisions with sufficient rhetoric to gull the World Bank. This form of political paralysis is by no means confined to Russia. But there it produces widespread suffering. Large segments of the population find themselves caught

with the worst features of both worlds, capitalist and socialist. They have lost the rudimentary social supports of socialism. In return they have gotten inflation, arrears of wages and salaries whose purchasing power may be pathetic, and substantial unemployment. Sheer despair and the absence of any persuasive alternative could prevent the situation from becoming explosive.