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● CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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INTEREST GROUPS IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA:

FORM AND THEORY

At a conference of university students in Prague on December 18-19, a student named Muller, from the technical high school, demanded a complete reorganization of the Czechoslovak Youth Federation.

His view on the situation within the Youth Federation is not only significant for what it itself represents -- a critical reflection of student dissatisfactions -- but also as a paradigm of the political atmosphere within Czechoslovakia. That socialism inso facto can render the interests of the working class unanimous and homogeneous is no longer claimed even by the regime itself. Its ideological assumptions have lead the CSCP into the curious position that it must admit the existence of special interest antagonisms. Since 1960, that is, from the time of the proclamation of socialism, the basis for all economic contradictions is said to have been dissolved, and socialist production relations established. Thus, in view of the acknowledged social problems, Communist theoreticians are forced to admit that socialist economic relationships in themselves do not guarantee that conflicts of interest among particular groups of the population will not arise.

The reconciliation of differential group interests has lately confronted Czechoslovak ideologists and legal theorists with an issue of first class importance, irritated further by the introduction of the New System of Management. Since the economic and social issues are closely intertwined, solution of the first has stimulated discussion of new approaches to the second. Hitherto discussions on this second topic have been of a broad and generalized nature; therefore, Muller's speech stands in this context as a singular phenomenon, giving the problem tangible moment and relevance. He demanded the virtually unrestricted right to criticize regime policies and for representation in elected organs to express the peculiar interests of the student population.

Form

To judge from Muller's words, the Youth Federation would seem to be faced with imminent collapse. The Federation cannot fill the role of middleman between the student population and the government.

In fact, reality -- as Muller sees it -- is so divorced from socialist ideals that the Federation will not attempt to act the middleman; the students are demanding a qualitative change in its structure and activities, that is, that their opinions influence the formation of state policy, not merely remaining as the transmission belt from state to student. Said Muller:

The organization as a whole will have to be the representative of the views of the young people. It will have to have the support of its members or else it will be unable to exist.

Such a future organization will have to back up the views of its members in relation to the decision-making agencies. By our progressivity and through the achieved results, we must secure a position corresponding to our possibilities.(1)

In Muller's view, the only rational raison d'être of the Youth Federation lies in the fact that an otherwise heterogeneous group of people, united by their education and training, band together in a particular association to express the particular interests of that association, politically.

The present concept of the purpose and function of the CS Youth Federation presents a discrepancy. The Federation is a political organization without any possibility to act as such. The political nature of the Federation must not be limited to its profession of socialism and thus of the aims of the policy of the Party; it must express and stand by the true aims of the young people in respect to the ways selected by the Party in the realization of these aims. (2)

However much predominance Muller cedes to the leading role of the CSCP, representation of student interests must not stop even before opposing Party policy -- "in the loyal, academic sense of the word," of course. To defend its interests, the Federation must use all the forums of political action available within the state -- National Front, National Assembly, etc.

Muller's suggestions for the organizational reconstitution of the Federation demonstrates how fully his ideas draw on the theory of interest groups. First, he proposes that the organization be divided into two sections: one for students younger than 18 and one for higher university students and the employed. The second group should be further divided into a Federation of Industrial Youth, Federation of Agricultural Youth, and a Federation of University Youth. Thus, the united Federation of Federations would itself be composed of special interest groups, the center being only the coordinating organ, combining and enforcing their various demands.

(1) Muller's speech to the National Conference of University Students, Prague, 18-19 December 1965, Student, No.4, 1966, CS PS No.1756.

(2) Ibid.

Implicit in these explicit demands is a revision of Communist class theory. Muller's newly expanded Federation reflects the picture of the division of socialist society into the Working and Peasant classes, the two foundation classes of the society; but it would add a third -- the group of higher university students, or more simply, intellectuals. Muller seems to be aware of his challenge to accepted dogma because he says in justification: "The demand for an independent Federation of University Youth, separated from the other young people, is probably a psychological reaction to the rigid concept of a single organization." (emphasis added) Intellectuals have always formally been included in the body of the working class; so his proposal for a separate organ of young intellectuals is certainly a reaction to the rigid concept that intellectuals are bound in an uneasy alliance with a class whose interests and objectives are differentiated from their own -- Marxist doctrine to the contrary notwithstanding.

Theory

Muller's proposals owe much to a set of ideas on the theory of interest groups, discussed by a number of legal theorists. Most significant is the theoretical contribution of Michal Lakatos, a Slovak legal scholar of Hungarian origin, writing in Pravny Obzor. In a thorough analysis, Lakatos takes a page from American political theory and applies it to contemporary Czechoslovakia. He believes that the motive force of society, the source of all political progress and growth, is the conflict generated by the confrontation of dissimilar special interests. The resolution of these special interests is the dynamo, insuring that socialist society constantly improves its democratic forms. He repeatedly emphasizes that his view of the role of interest groups in Czechoslovakia conforms to the structure of grouping patterns. In essence he is saying that only the creation of a true consensus founded upon real interest can resolve the nation's social problems.

The often criticized problem of worker participation in the organs of self-government can only be deepened by action through non-state organs, expressed in terms of interest. In effect, his proposals would give National Committees, trade unions, etc. an actual democratic character, and participation in them would be the barometer of real self-interest:

This deepening of social action means, in essence, the establishment of socialist society on the principle of self-government, that is, the creation of such social relationships between the state and society where the political organs of society are not only formally but in fact their instrument, and where the interests of social groups are solved by democratic means.(3)

Lakatos is highly critical, not only of the Stalinist method of government direction but of its implicit political theory as well.

....the theoretical 'deification' of the state and its functions,

- (3) Lakatos, Michal, "On Certain Problems of the Structure of Our Political System," Pravny Obzor, No.1, 1965.

the glorification of its omnipotence, the overestimation of the possibilities of the use of force are typical manifestations of the 'understanding' of these questions from the standpoint of the dogmatic approach to the social structure of socialist statehood.

Although he accepts the Marxist division of society into two classes, he criticizes the neglect of investigation of the inevitable differentiation of intra-class groupings. The Stalinist variation of Marxism ignores the natural differences among groups and individuals, viewing them as vestiges of Capitalism. In attempting to unify the whole population around the so-called homogeneous "national interest," special divergencies are eliminated by the application of the "proper educational work." A rational harmonization of society proceeds from knowledge and acceptance of complex individual and group relations, "the functions of the various group interests... and their confrontation of interests."

One learns a great deal about the actual structure of group interests in Czechoslovakia from Lakatos' denomination and description of them. And one learns what, in his view, constitutes the legitimate basis of group interest and the proper relationship between interest groups and society.

We are able to differentiate our society according to various relationships; according to the relationship to the production process (workers in the state sector, cooperative sector, retail trade, etc.); according to the division of labor (workers in industry, agriculture, physical work, intellectuals); size of income; according to the participation in the management of society (managerial functions, Communists, non-Party members, production organizers); according to ethnic origins (members of the various nationalities); according to territorial division (inhabitants of various administrative units); according to biological origin (men, women); etc.

What Lakatos has in fact done is to describe any modern pluralistic Western industrial society, and he implies that. His demarcation of groups is consistent with their actual operation in society. He has thus not only made a contribution to political theory but to sociology as well. He is aware of the manner in which a contemporary society is composed of aggregates of individuals who participate in numerous interest groupings at any one time.

The harmonization of interests within and among collectives cannot be solved by the Party alone; in the end coordination is indissolubly tied to the electoral system. The Communist Party is in the broadest terms the root of Lakatos' critique; however, in his view the CSCP should be seen as the foundation organ of society, the highest embodiment of class unity, not the culminating informal instrument of state power. In the process of expressing his interests by his participation in organizations of communal objectives, the individual brings pressure not only upon the solution of interests

but even externally on the formation of state policy.

That the transmission of influence from below should act as a moderating influence on Party control of policy is at the heart of Lakatos' ideas. He includes the CP as only one of three institutions acting as basic coordinators of divergent interests: 1) Social organizations, including parties besides the Communist Party; 2) State; 3) CSCP. Apparently, Lakatos envisages the establishment of a truly representative National Front, but even more importantly he excludes the Party from state functions. Thus, by means of this balance of powers, of the correct definition and restriction of responsibility, he creates a political device to protect minority interests.

No other theorist has expressed himself as straightforwardly as Lakatos though his original insights have found pale reflection in higher and more influential quarters. For instance, Zdenek Mlynar, head of the legal department of the CC, writing in the December 1965 issue of the World Marxist Review, addressed himself to the democratization of Czechoslovak society on the basis of a harmonization of group interests. Unfortunately, Mlynar's article is a dialectical scramble, attempting at once to promote a more active participation of elected organs in the management of society and defense of Party direction. On balance, though, his emphasis falls upon the evolution of organs of self-government, subject to recall by the constituency. Still his ideological perplexity emerges from the following quotation:

As we see it, the representative bodies are the basic point at which the political line of the state is shaped... At this level, the policy of the Party is transformed into state policy obligatory under the laws for all other bodies and citizens.(4)

Dr. Mlynar perpetuates that irreconcilable contradiction, expressed most notably in the 1960 Constitution, that the National Assembly is the supreme organ of state authority and the Communist Party, the leading force of the society and state.

Despite his back-bending dialectic, this and a subsequent article(5) by the same author are permeated with interest group theory and its role in the development of Czechoslovak society and political thought.

National Committees

Increasing the participation of all representative organs is the burden of Mlynar's proposals: this includes institutions like the National Assembly and the trade unions. Yet, in the Theses for the Party's 13th congress and in the press during the last few months, there has been little attention paid to their strengthening. The National Committees, on the other hand, have been the recipients of

(4) Mlynar, Zdenek, "Problems of Political Leadership and the New Economic System," World Marxist Review, 13, 1965.

(5) Mlynar, Zdenek, "Citizen and Democracy," Praca, 25.1.1965.

much notice, for it has once again become apparent that centralized decision, extending to the remotest corner of local affairs, is not so viable as a governing method.

No other single institution in Czechoslovakia has suffered such a benighted fate as the National Committees, though as representatives of local affairs, they are examples of interest groups, par excellence. Mlynar admits that the cycle of decentralization-recentralization has played havoc with their capacities to administer local transport, industry, etc. A report from Radio Kosice of January 6 stated that workers had stopped traffic in protest against a breakdown of public transport. Evidence of this kind from press and radio testify to the unsturdy position of National Committees, especially local and district committees. The strengthening of their financial and representative structure has been decreed by the Party in the Congress Theses, and Premier Lenart has recently outlined the measures achieving, in the Party's view, this objective. It is not within the range of this paper to discuss his specific recommendations, (6) but in the present context, one contribution is especially noteworthy as representative of the pursuit for an autonomous organizational framework within which special interests are permitted expression.

E. Smutek, a functionary in the Liberec Regional National Committee, has written in Rude Pravo (7) that local committees have lacked continuity and perspective because they possess no financial independence. Since their budgets are disbursed primarily from centrally allocated funds channeled through the regional committees, the local organs can neither plan for future requirements nor collect funds for daily management of local services. Smutek proposes that local committees have the authority to levy taxes and disburse funds completely independently of higher authority. The primary requirement of the operation would be their "accountability." The committees would control both strings of the purse, intake and outlay. In effect, then, central control would consist only of auditing the books of local committees, and Smutek stipulates that besides this requirement, the local organs would be free to construct their own managerial and representative forms. Being economically self-sufficient their democratic autonomy would be guaranteed and minority interests protected.

Roots of the Debate

From the unceasing criticism of the limited extent of participation in the organs of self-government, one gathers that the regime finds it all but impossible to induce the working population to cooperate with the "institutions of social management." At the same time, there is much testimony of the meager possibilities for the expression of the popular will. Vladimir Blazek, a member of the philosophical faculty at Brno University, has defined the problem as the inevitable tension between man and his political system, regardless

(6) Rude Pravo, 12.2.66. An Analysis of Premier Lenart's speech is being prepared.

(7) Smutek, E. : On the Foundations of a Further Improvement of the Work of the National Committees," Rude Pravo, 28.1.1966.

of the type of ownership.(8) And though the regime has denied the existence of any alienation between the government and the people, it has acknowledged -- as mentioned above -- that the formation of "a socialist way of life" is not guaranteed by the automatic functioning of socialist production relations.(9) These apparent tensions have resulted in an attempt by the regime to discover a modus vivendi with group interest differentials. In the discussions preceding the 13th Congress, the Party is obviously seeking some more sophisticated means, consistent with its theoretical postulates, for recreating public consensus. The Theses formulate the problem in this way:

...We must not lose sight of the existence of classes, although they are not antagonistic and are gradually drawing closer. nevertheless they pass through a complicated process of differentiation in which there also become apparent differences of interest whose satisfaction must be taken into account.

A real solution for the diversity of group interests would involve the actual participation of the people in their government and the influence of the people on the creation of policy. Therefore, it cannot be said that the ideas of Lakatos and Mlynar and proposals of Muller and Smutek have developed in isolation from the problems enunciated by the Party itself.

Yet, undeniably, these problems have existed before for some time. The issue which lends these social problems real focus is the introduction of the New System of Management. As the title of Mlynar's article would indicate ("Problems of Political Leadership and the New Economic System"), he conceives of the development of the organs of economic and political government as largely parallel. (If this parallel evolution is the concern of high Party officials, it must certainly be the hope of wider circles of opinion.) Increased independence for the production components of the economy, integral to the NEM, has certainly induced discussion of the development of alternate centers of political influence. And, of course, it must be remembered that while the regime desires the strengthening of the National Committees from the economic point of view, they nevertheless represent institutions of elected government.

Lakatos possesses a different emphasis. He lays the economic failures at the door of the political system, stating that greater institutional self-government "is empirically apparent from the frequent shortcomings in the management of society, from the ineffectiveness of this management, in the coordination of planning of the socialist economy, ... etc.

It is moot whether social reform follows economic reform as a natural consequence, but it is certain that in the minds of even the orthodox, the two are indissolubly connected. It is also certain that considerable attention is already being paid to it and that there will be more in the future. The fact that this is so could in part be due to the traditional Czechoslovak experience, derived from the

(8) Blazek, Vladimir, Literarni Noviny, 20.11.65

(9) "Czechoslovak Party Congress Theses," Rude Pravo, 23.12.1965.

20 years of the First Republic of the intricacies of power relationships of democratic government?

Ideological Revision

At the bottom of the discussion of the role of interest groups is a reconstructed political theory. When Lakatos criticizes the Stalinist "deification" of the state apparatus, he is questioning not only the dogmatist method but the whole theoretical edifice as well. No Czechoslovak Communist has ever expressly stated that the implicit political theory, which has survived the death of Stalin, still governs the institutional arrangement of the state.

Since Communist political theory assumes -- like Hobbes -- that the state is composed of the sum of its parts, of its individuals, the absence of public consensus results in the atomization of society. Adam Schaff's theory of alienation under socialism derives from the isolation of the individual from the centers of political power. The individual has no field for uniting with others of like aim and recreating political initiative. Julius Strinka, the Slovak philosopher, has added that when society becomes atomized, responsibility and criticism become totally anonymous and ineffective.

Thus the paradoxical situation may arise that in a society which is bubbling over with criticism, in which criticism is even officially encouraged, no criticism actually exists.(10)

Lakatos has countered with a new theory, that society is composed of groups of special interest, that progress is determined by their responsible participation in government. Muller and Smutek have brought the theory to earth and offered it in concrete form so that the initiative of the individual, which the regime has long been trying to capture in vain, will be directed in the only viable way -- in the pursuit of his own self-interest.

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(10) Strinka, Julius, "Reticent Dogmatism and Revolutionary Dialectics," Kulturny Zivot, 26.11.1965.