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## KOLAKOWSKI'S "THESES ON HOPE AND DESPAIR" (1)

Summary: The French dissident-Communist magazine Politique Aujourd'hui has published the full text of a penetrating analysis of the prospects for political change in Eastern Europe, which the exiled Polish philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, wrote for the review Kultura. In his "Theses on Hope and Despair" Kolakowski examines the arguments for holding that the present system of "despotic socialism," based on the Soviet model, is "unreformable" -- notably that bureaucratic repression (directed primarily against the working class) is a built-in feature of a hierarchical power system which controls all domestic sources of information, can prevent free discussion and the growth of political pluralism, and does not dare to take the risks inherent in "democratization." But, he goes on to argue, the inescapable contradictions of the system itself and the gap between dogmas and realities do nevertheless open up a perspective of gradual change toward a more tolerable social order -- provided the regimes are subjected to the steady pressures of a public aware of the possibilities of resistance to the status-quo.

Following is the full translation of an article by Leszek Kolakowski, entitled "In Stalin's Countries: Theses on Hope and Despair," which appeared in the July-August 1971 issue of the French dissident-Communist magazine Politique Aujourd'hui (Paris). The Polish original appeared in the Paris Kultura, No. 5-6, 1971. Footnotes, emphasis and sub-heads are those of Politique Aujourd'hui.

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Let us, in the first place, sum up the main arguments usually advanced by those who hold that the Communist social system, in its present form, is unreformable. The exponents of this thesis assert that the principal social function of this system is the maintenance of uncontrolled power, monopolized by the ruling apparatus: all institutional changes, which have already come about or which can be conceived, do not infringe upon this fundamental principle, to which all the political and economic actions of the rulers are subordinated. The monopoly of despotic power cannot be partially suppressed (this is almost a tautology since, by definition, a monopoly cannot be "partial"). None of the transformations which have occurred, or are conceivable within the framework of the system, is fundamental. All can be easily revoked, because they cannot be institutionalized without this leading to the destruction of the entire mechanism. The satisfaction of the basic aspirations of the working class and the intelligentsia is impossible within the limits defined by the principal function of the system. We are dealing with an organism entirely deprived of plasticity and self-regulatory devices. Only brutal and periodic catastrophes can bring about modifications which, except for superficial concessions and certain regroupings within the ruling cliques, leave no trace on the characteristic features of the whole. Stalinism, in the strict sense -- that is, the bloody and cruel tyranny of an individual -- was the most perfect material embodiment of the principles of the system: later transformations, and particularly the considerable relaxation of terrorism as practiced by the government, although important for the security of individuals, have not in any way changed the despotic nature of the regime, any more than they have limited specifically socialist forms of oppression and exploitation. The fundamental functions of this social system are directed against society, which finds itself deprived of any institutional form of self-defense: the only transformation which one can conceive of is that of a violent revolution. Such a revolution would have as its outcome -- according to the hopes of some -- a socialist society, in the sense defined by Marxist tradition (that is, social administration of the processes of production and distribution, implying a representative system), or -- according to the hopes of others -- transition to the Western model of capitalism which, in face of the economic and ideological failure of socialism, is thought to be the only trustworthy way of development.

Let us examine the principal characteristics of the Soviet model of socialism. According to some people, these are such as to nullify the hope of a partial, progressive "humanization," resulting from successive reforms. (We are dealing here with "structural" characteristics to be found in all countries with a regime based on the Soviet model.)

### "Democratization" Inconceivable

What is usually called the "democratization" of the system of government is inconceivable within this model. In fact, political despotism and the ruling apparatus's monopoly of the utilization of the means of production, of investments, of the use and distribution of the national income, are each conditioned by the other. The political monopoly which the ruling oligarchy maintains is based on its position as the only user and administrator of the means of production. This is why all real movement, however imperfect, in the direction of political democracy signifies a partial expropriation of the ruling class which, without being juridically the proprietor of the means of production, possesses all the privileges and rights of a collective owner. In this fundamental area, any impairment of the principle is only so in appearance: one can authorize the commissions of a Parliament, itself designated by the party apparatus, to debate the details of economic policy. The decisions, in any case, are taken by the same bodies which are not subject to any social control. Even if these decisions are far from the desires expressed in the discussions -- even if this fact is quite obvious -- this can have no importance: it cannot lead to the exertion of social pressure on these bodies, because information is subjected to severe control. Thus, all attempts at reform outlined by the economists are doomed to failure, because they tend to weaken appreciably the monopoly of economic decisions held by the ruling apparatus and threaten the latter with partial expropriation.

### Vicious Circle of Information

The natural tendency of the system is to constantly reduce the role of the experts, particularly with regard to economic, social and cultural policy. Expert circles are tolerated on the condition that they do not claim the right of decision. But, even in this purely consultative function, experience shows that they are tolerated with reluctance. So far as this is possible, they are liquidated or replaced by bodies whose members are chosen in accordance with the criterion of political docility. This is why blundering, the waste of social energy and material resources, and mediocrity are in a sense incorporated into the governmental mechanism and cannot be considered as temporary faults capable of being corrected.



In such a mechanism "purely technical" criteria, independent of the concern to maintain and strengthen the existing power [structure], cannot exercise any influence over the functioning of this [power mechanism].

Freedom of information -- an indispensable condition for the proper functioning of the economy, the educational system and culture -- is not conceivable without the collapse of the whole power system. Inevitably, a free circulation of information would destroy it within a short time. But, what is more, to envisage a "closed" system of information, that is, one available only to the rulers -- and that in proportion to their rank in the hierarchy of power -- is just as utopian. In other words, the rulers -- whatever illusions they may harbor about this -- even if they actively seek to get true information for their own use, would inevitably be badly, or falsely, informed; they would be the victims of their own lies. Certainly, the time has gone when Stalin could deal with unfavorable statistics by having the statisticians assassinated. Nevertheless, the suppression of the crudest type of misinformation does not change the fact that misinformation of the rulers is itself built into the mechanism. This is so for at least two reasons. In the first place, "closed" information is provided for the most part by those very persons who, on lower levels of the ruling apparatus, are responsible for the state of affairs about which they are informing their colleagues. In these conditions, to give unsatisfactory information means to denounce oneself: an attitude that one can hardly count on. The transmission of favorable information is rewarded, the transmission of unfavorable information leads to sanctions.

It goes without saying that this system naturally extends to the various categories of sources of information. Examples of sanctions imposed for the transmission of bad news are innumerable and known to all.

Secondly, in order to collect information on social life without any constraint, apart from the effort to reveal the true state of affairs, it would be necessary to build up a considerable organization, entirely free, liberated from any political servitude, having as its task to gather information, but not having the right to transmit it to the public.

Such an organization would be a strange and artificial phenomenon within the system; it would, moreover, constitute a political menace, because it would be, in principle, a body freed of "ideological" restrictions and servitudes. What is more, the mass of information thus gathered would ineluctably strengthen internal tension and conflicts in the upper echelons of the apparatus which is using it, since there can hardly be such a

thing as entirely innocent information, and items of true information about social life are immediately exploited by all the competing groups and cliques which aspire to higher positions, against those who at present occupy those posts. Thus, although the rule of self-deception and self-mystification seems at first sight an absurdity, it is in reality one of the self-defense mechanisms of the system. Certainly, the ruling groups sometimes pay for the lies which they themselves produce, but on the whole this is a risk worth running: in the long run, it is society which pays the greater part of the cost.

The fourth characteristic of socialism, in its present Soviet version, is the intellectual and moral degradation of the apparat which takes the most important decisions for the life of the country. This degradation is itself a mode of functioning of the political regime, and not the result of the good-will or ill-will of the rulers. This mechanism implies a strictly unilateral dependence within the hierarchy, arising from the principle of the monopoly of power. As in all despotic systems, the characteristics which favor individual careers (the traits of character which facilitate accession to the upper echelons of the hierarchy) are servility, a lack of the spirit of initiative, obedience to one's superiors, readiness to inform on others, and indifference to public opinion and public interests.

On the other hand, other traits become dangerous: the spirit of initiative, concern for the interests of all, respect for the criteria of truth, efficacy and public service without regard to the interests of the apparat. The mechanism of power thus engenders a natural counter-selection of the leading cadres, in all areas of the apparat and particularly of the party. The fourteen years of Gomulka's reign in Poland manifestly confirm this truth.

#### "The Invasion of the Bugs"

These years were marked above all by the systematic elimination of competent men, endowed with the spirit of initiative, in favor of mediocre, cowardly and servile individuals. The process begun in March 1968 (2) -- the massive promotion of ignorant persons, informers or downright scoundrels ("the invasion of the bugs," as the people of Warsaw called it) -- was merely the acceleration and intensification of phenomena already in existence for several years. As with all rules, there are exceptions to this one, but they are extremely rare. One can sometimes observe processes in the opposite direction

in times of crisis, but they do not change the natural tendency of the system which, by its nature, considers competence and the spirit of initiative to be suspect.

The various elements of the ruling machine are subjected to this process of counter-selection to different degrees; thus, in numerous areas of economic and industrial administration one can always find a considerable number of competent and courageous men who stubbornly beat their heads against the walls of indifference, fear and incompetence with which the party apparatus has surrounded itself. They are, however, much rarer in the apparatus itself, as well as in its political and propagandistic ramifications, where the principle of the selection of mediocrities has had its greatest victories.

Despotic forms of government necessarily produce the need for permanent, or at least periodic, aggression. That war is the grave of democracy, we have known for centuries. For the same reason, it is the ally of tyranny. In default of an external war, various forms of internal aggression, aimed at maintaining a constant state of menace and building up the psychosis of a beleaguered fortress -- even if this is in favor of the most artificial processes and against the most chimerical enemies -- fulfill similar functions. Repeated aggression against different groups of the population, chosen in accordance with the most diverse criteria, is not at all a result of madness, but a natural function of the power mechanism, which cannot do without mortal enemies allegedly lying in wait to exploit its slightest weakness. This is the only means it has to maintain, as it desires, its capacity for mobilizing social energies. It creates its own enemies and, in face of the resistance and hostility which this continued aggression provokes in those persecuted, it creates in effect an imaginary situation which serves precisely as a pretext for repression. The repressive system thus has a capacity for self-perpetuation, and acts of internal aggression engender the need for further such acts.

### Destroying All Social Links

This same characteristic of monopolistic power demands a continued effort for the atomization of society and the destruction of all forms of social life not prescribed by the ruling apparatus. Since social conflicts are not settled, but merely stifled by repression and dissimulated by ideological phraseology, the most diverse ways of expression are utilized: the most innocent forms of social organization can in effect, if they are not placed



under strict police surveillance, become transformed into centers of opposition. Hence the tendency to impose state control on ["étatiser"] all forms of social life; hence the constant pressure aimed at destroying all spontaneous social links and replacing them by restrictive pseudo-associations, the purpose of which is merely negative and destructive, and which represent only the interests of the ruling class. In fact, if the system needs enemies, it has a mortal fear of organized opposition. It wants to have only the enemies which it has itself designated as such, and which it will fight in conditions of its own choice. The natural need of despotism is to terrify individuals while depriving them of the means of organized resistance.

The penal legislation serves this need perfectly: it is, in fact, formulated in terms sufficiently confused and ambiguous that the greatest possible number of citizens may feel themselves guilty, and that the scale of actual penalties is not limited by strict juridical formulas, but can be the object of manipulation and arbitrary decisions on the part of the police and the Party.

The ruling apparatus does not dispose of a margin for maneuvering in the concession of rights to its citizens. Even supposing that it had the desire to do so, it could not expand these rights without risking suicide.

Experience teaches us, in fact, that concessions to democratic claims result in an increase of pressure. One observes the "snowball" phenomenon, threatening the whole political order. Social coercion is so great, the feeling of oppression and exploitation so powerful, that the least failure in the system of institutionalized violence, the slightest reforms promising to make it more flexible, immediately set in motion enormous reserves of latent hostility and discontent, and can end in an explosion, impossible to control. It is not at all surprising, then, that after a number of experiences, even the philanthropy of the rulers, supposing that it does exist, remains totally powerless to alleviate the economic and political servitude of the laboring masses.

Such are the principal reasons advanced in favor of the thesis -- which incidentally is in conformity with the spirit of Marxist tradition -- that the specifically socialist form of servitude cannot be partially suppressed or reduced through progressive reforms, but must be wiped out once and for all.

Now, my opinion is that this thesis is not correct, and that to defend it amounts to [adopting] an ideology of defeatism rather than a revolutionary appeal. I base my conviction on four general principles: first, we are never in a position to

define in advance the limits of the capacity for change [plasticité] of any social organization; and experience has not at all demonstrated that the despotic model of socialism is absolutely rigid. Secondly, the rigidity of a system depends in part on the degree to which the men who live within that system are convinced of its rigidity. Thirdly, the thesis which I am challenging is based on an ideology of "all or nothing," characteristic of men formed in the Marxist tradition; it is not in any way supported by historical experience. Fourthly, bureaucratic socialist despotism is pervaded by contradictory tendencies which it is incapable of bringing into any synthesis and which ineluctably weaken its coherence. These contradictions tend, moreover, to become exacerbated and not to diminish.

### Is Socialist Despotism Reformable?

The mechanisms which we have described, which appear to justify the idea that socialist despotism is unreformable, do in fact exist in this system; they have been observed more than once; the men who endure them can bear first-hand witness to them. They all reveal the spontaneous tendency of a mechanism whose fundamental forms of action are directed against the workers.

If bureaucratic power functions without any resistance on the part of society, all the phenomena which we have described will develop within it, in more and more pronounced forms, ending finally in the realization of Orwell's model. On the other hand, it does not follow from this analysis that one cannot oppose to these tendencies a resistance capable of limiting and weakening the action of these mechanisms, and leading, not to a perfect society, but to a form of social organization which would be both viable and more tolerable for its members. The reformist position would be absurd if it consisted in hoping for good will on the part of the exploiting class, the philanthropy of the repressive apparatus, or the automatic action of organizational mechanisms. It is not absurd if one conceives of it as an active resistance taking advantage of the natural contradictions of the system. All the characteristics of bureaucratic socialism prove unequivocally that [this system] has a constant tendency to develop forms of police government, to disintegrate and demoralize society. All these characteristics converge to make the daily life of the working population a veritable hell. In this regard, and in a more general manner, the same was true of the capitalist economy as Marx analyzed it. All the natural tendencies of this economy were not in any way the fruit of the imagination of Marx, who on the contrary based himself on minute observation of society. There did exist serious reasons for thinking that capitalism inevitably implied an increasing polarization of classes, the



absolute pauperization of the proletariat, a progressive fall in the rate of profits, anarchy, periodic crises of overproduction, massive unemployment, the disappearance of the middle classes; and that all reforms which could be conceived within the framework of the system were necessarily precarious because the fundamental laws arising from the ruthless search for surplus value, determining the whole process of production, could not be abolished within the system. The true meaning of these reforms lies in their political significance: to prepare the proletariat for struggle and to strengthen class solidarity, indispensable for the decisive battle. Marx obviously was aware of all the counter-tendencies which weakened the action of the laws of capitalist accumulation -- the most important, but not the only one, being the resistance of the working class. It was, however, impossible to measure quantitatively the strength of these tendencies and counter-tendencies in the future evolution of the system; that is why, even if these Marxist analyses were well-argued, the conviction that in the "last analysis," within this system, the laws of capitalism would prove stronger than the resistance of the exploited classes was rather the expression of an ideological attitude. The fact that the predictions regarding the degradation and pauperization of the proletariat, increasing anarchy of production and crises, have not finally been verified, is not the result of the philanthropy of the bourgeoisie and its moral transformation. It is the result of years of struggles and confrontations which obliged bourgeois society to recognize certain principles of social organization as necessary conditions for its own existence. Exploitation has not at all been suppressed, but it has been considerably limited in the advanced industrial countries, and the wealthy classes have consented to a limitation of their privileges in order to save what could be saved without leading to the destruction of established society.

#### Absolute Concentration of the Right of Decision

It is certain that analogies of this sort are not entirely satisfactory. One knows that socialist bureaucracy has learned the lessons of the defeats suffered by the bourgeoisie; it knows the defeats suffered by the bourgeoisie; it knows the danger of all freedom of association and information. This is why resistance to oppression and exploitation -- within the system of Soviet despotism -- takes place in the worst social conditions. No class of exploiters in history has ever had such extensive power at its disposal. But if this concentration [of power] is a source of strength, it also conceals weaknesses, as the whole post-Stalinist history of communism testifies.

In reality, the nature of the system demands the absolute concentration of the power of decision. This is why Stalin's power (and that of his local replicas) was the most perfect incarnation of the principles of despotic socialism. But if its restoration is at present inconceivable, it is because it is impossible to reconcile two needs of equal value for the ruling apparatus: unity and security. Conflicts within the apparatus cannot be institutionalized without threatening the whole system with ruin. In fact, institutionalization of this type would signify the legalization of factional activity within the party, which would differ very little from a plurality of parties. The groups, cliques and clans which emerge spontaneously as a result of the varying criteria of selection and relationships of interests, are nevertheless an inevitable product of social life. This is why absolute tyranny is the ideal of the autocrat, sufficiently limited intellectually and morally to be free of the embarrassment of any "abstract" principle, but sufficiently intelligent to be able to prevent any crystallization of groups within the apparatus (thanks to massacres and purges) and thus maintain his instrument of government in a state of permanent fluidity and fear. But this requirement is precisely incompatible with the need for security on the part of the apparatus, which -- no one will be surprised to learn -- does not wish to live in conditions such that any of its officials -- including members of the Secretariat and Politburo of the Party -- can at any moment, on a signal from the Chief, find themselves in the cellars of the police. Thus the transition from autocracy to oligarchy under the title of "collective leadership" was in the interests of the ruling clique. Evidently, oligarchy does not at all mean democratization, although it amounts to a considerable limitation of terrorist forms of government; moreover, it signifies a serious undermining of the stability of the power [structure] and its inevitable decentralization (which again is not synonymous with decentralization), and hence a strengthening of the position and an enlarging of the prerogatives of the local apparatuses. The central apparatus is no longer capable of remedying a latent process of faction-building, and this produces competing elements which weaken its efficacy. On the other hand, a resistance movement is more efficacious not when there is a high degree of oppression and terror, but on the contrary during periods of relative relaxation brought about by the disunity of the ruling apparatus (it is to Lenin that we owe this observation).

#### Ideology: An "Embarrassing Excrescence"

The present apparatuses are certainly not less sensitive to ideological shocks than was the Stalinist apparatus, which was shaken to its foundations after the moral obsolescence of its leader. But they are demoralized and afflicted by the chronic



malady of internal conflicts between rival groups. It is certainly in the interests of all these groups not to reveal the existence of these conflicts, but in this area dissimulation can never be total; it does operate at all within the police machine. The partial paralysis of the apparatus then becomes incurable, even while it undergoes successive improvements and relapses, because its stability depends on some independent factors, the effect of which is difficult to predict. In this regard, we may observe that the partial "de-Stalinization" of Stalinism, undertaken in response to the pressure of realities, set in motion the mechanism of the diminution [dégradation] of power; this mechanism made possible the efficacy of resistance. In other words, as long as the apparatus is stable and immune to political shocks, it can -- in general -- take no account of the discontent of the population. But as soon as it loses this stability, and has less fear of its boss and of its own police, it becomes instead afraid of society, of local or foreign bosses, of the working class, of the intelligentsia and even of little groups of intellectuals.

The second internal contradiction of bureaucratic socialism resides in the conflict between the necessity to effect radical changes in ideology and the incapacity to get rid of the burden of Stalinist-"Leninist" ideology. Unlike democratic political organisms, which can base their legitimacy on an appeal to the social consensus, despotism, being deprived of representative mechanisms, must necessarily have at its disposal some kind of ideological "system," however mediocre it may be, in order to maintain the apparent legitimacy of its existence. No state and no system of power can do without legitimation -- whether this is based on the divine character of hereditary monarchy or on free elections. In other cases legitimation takes on an ideological character; it is based on two pre-suppositions: first, the ruling party is the incarnation of the interests of the working class and of the whole nation; secondly, the State is a part of the great proletarian movement, which has strengthened its domination in certain parts of the world before extending it to other parts. In this system of power, ideology takes on a function completely different from that which it fulfils in democratic regimes, however lamentable may be the results of a confrontation between its principles and the reality. In the present socialist world, ideology is for the apparatus an embarrassing "excrescence," which one cannot, however, get rid of in any circumstances. The internationalist phraseology is indispensable to the Soviet overlords, because it is the only legitimation of their external domination. It is indispensable to the local rulers, who are obliged to justify both their own dependence and their own power.



"How Many Divisions Has the Pope?"

So it is that, for example, the Soviet leaders could entirely neglect the opinion of the non-ruling Communist parties: the truth is that they do not want to incite them to a real struggle for power, and splits which may take place within these parties or deviations from orthodoxy on their part matter little to [the Soviets] because they have no immediately tangible political impact. However, this is not in fact the case: if the Soviet leaders were to renounce, entirely and overtly, the existence of a Communist movement in the countries not subjected to the control of the USSR, they would have to abjure precisely those principles which justify this control. Thus, they become victims of their own ideology with all its absurdities. It is paradoxical that this ideology, in which practically the whole world has ceased to believe -- those who order it to be preached, those whose profession it is to propagate it, and those who must let themselves be imbued with it -- continue to be a question of life and death for the existence of the political system. This dead product, which is called Marxism-Leninism, still hinders the freedom of movement of the rulers. The persuasive value of this ideology is non-existent in the countries of the Soviet bloc, and the rulers know this perfectly well. This is why the propaganda makes less and less reference to it, and concentrates almost entirely on state interests and national interests. But this circumstance engenders a new contradiction within the system. As is known, beside the formal propaganda there exists in these countries an implicit propaganda which is sometimes much more important than the former. It is built up by an appeal to ideas or principles which cannot be formulated explicitly or directly in speeches or in the press, but which must be got over to the population. In the Soviet Union it is great-power chauvinism, the vainglory of ruling more or less directly over enormous regions of the globe. Imperialist ideology, as opposed to the official Marxism-Leninism, can register here a real success. But in the countries of people's democracy this implicit ideology is that -- propagated through various allusive procedures -- of fear of Soviet tanks. In this case, too, the ideology can register a certain success among the population: in order to convince men that the Russian bosses can massacre any protectorate whose obedience leaves something to be desired, there is no need of more subtle arguments. Up to a certain point the two types of non-explicit ideology -- at the center and on the periphery -- coincide in their efforts, but it would be political myopia to hope to base a durable domination

on this coincidence; not only because in both cases the implicit ideology is the negation of the official ideology, and not its complement, but also because it cannot achieve its objective -- temporary pacification -- except at the cost of mutual national xenophobia, continually kept up, which can be beneficial in times of tranquillity, but very dangerous in times of crisis.

However, if the ruling apparatus wishes to preserve contact -- even minimal contact -- with society, it has no other course of action.

Among the historic quips of Stalin, one is particularly celebrated: "How many divisions has the Pope?" The poverty of this question lays bare that of a political system which has lost everything except its divisions (which, I agree, isn't doing badly), which is incapable of believing in anything except its divisions, and even prides itself on this, as proof of its realistic spirit. This regime forgets that it was itself born of the Russian Revolution and of a triumph that was not only due to the strength of its divisions, but also to the moral decomposition of the Tsarist empire and its armies.

The ideological paralysis of bureaucratic socialism becomes ever more extensive and irreversible; successive campaigns and periodic conferences of party bodies dealing with the "ideological struggle" can indeed work out new methods of repression and terror: they are no longer able to offer society anything more than hollow phrases. All attempts to recover from this defeat take two directions -- [that of] nationalist phraseology or that of order and efficiency; the various factions form themselves around these slogans.

Nationalist phraseology finds its limits in an essential question: the real sovereignty of the nation.

#### Despotic Power and Economic Restraint

The second type of phraseology would be efficacious if it could present a realizable program, based on "technocratic" premises. But a "technocratic" program signifies the primacy of the criteria of productivity and technological progress over political values; as such, it can be implemented only on condition that the ruling apparatus renounces its power -- in other words, that it consents to a progressive expropriation of the "have" class [*la classe possédante*]. Here we touch upon a new internal contradiction of the power system: the one, frequently analyzed, exists between progress in productivity and technical development, on the one hand, and the system of political power, which constantly acts as a brake on this progress, on the other hand.

This contradiction had already been stressed by Marx with regard to capitalist production, but it had never manifested itself with such strength as in a system which, in principle, was set up in order to surmount it. All the characteristics of socialist despotism enumerated thus far constitute, for obvious reasons, powerful brakes on the progress of productivity and technological development. They reinforce the stagnation of the regime. However, technological development (if it is not limited to military technology alone) and even a rise in [public] consumption (despite certain political advantages which accrue from generalized poverty and the shortage of basic goods) are for various reasons in the interests of the ruling class. The more the general level of development rises, the more difficult it is to maximize the results in any particular sector of production -- and this applies to the military sector, considered as a separate branch. The aspirations of the population depend, to a large extent, on the comparison of their situation with that of highly developed countries -- a comparison which cannot be avoided, since it has now become impossible, for a number of reasons, to prevent completely the circulation of information. Thus, when consumption is stagnant, or even rising slightly, feelings of frustration and discontent can grow, without one ever being able to foresee when the explosive level will be reached. In a more general way, it is henceforth inconceivable that international competition can be avoided, even when it imposes unfavorable situations. Indeed, this competition is becoming more and more keen. Thus, when the leaders affirm their wish to ensure technical progress and an improvement in the material situation of the population, they are generally sincere. But these intentions are in contradiction with their desire to reinforce the monopoly of uncontrolled power in all fields of social life.

If there is no way out of this contradiction, that does not at all mean, as Isaac Deutscher seemed to hope, that the socialist system will "democratize" itself under the automatic pressure of technical progress. The contradiction between technological development and the system of political government and economic management can only become a factor of development if this contradiction finds expression in a social conflict: the conflict between all the social sectors which have an interest in maintaining the existing mechanism of exploitation, on the one hand, and the working class together with the intelligentsia -- in the first place the technical and administrative intelligentsia -- on the other.



### Independence Within Dependence

These contradictions are reinforced by another, which is due to the situation of the dependent countries of the Soviet empire. The ruling apparatus of these countries have an interest in maintaining this dependence as a guarantee of their own position; on the other hand, they have an interest in seeing this dependence lessened, in favor of their own freedom of decision. This situation engenders inescapable tensions within the political machine, and at the same time opens up a breach within which social pressure can be effectively exerted. National sovereignty is not a sufficient condition for the social emancipation of the working population; it is, however, obviously a necessary condition. It goes without saying that the fear of the "fraternal" cannons is justified, but it is deliberately whipped up in order to stifle -- in the name of "patriotism" -- the most timid demands; it is a means of convincing the nation of the absolute pointlessness of all effort [at resistance]. In reality, the objective of Poland, like that of other nations in the Soviet sphere, is not to provoke an armed conflict, but to exercise a constant pressure with a view to lessening a dependence which can be diminished only through this pressure. In this field, to reason according to the principle of "all or nothing" is wrong: accepting this principle means agreeing to this "nothing." Nobody can be so blind as to claim that there is no difference between the situation of Poland and that of Lithuania, or that the dependence of Poland has not changed at all between 1952 and 1957. Dependence and the absence of real sovereignty are thus a matter of degree, and these differences in degree are very important for the existence of a nation.

If the Polish nation resisted the attempts at Russification and Germanization during the period of annexation, it owes this mainly to its humanist intelligentsia and its teachers. If it had not possessed this intelligentsia, it would probably have met the same fate as the Lusatian (3) nation, which has indeed preserved its language, but which has no great chance of surviving, since it scarcely produces its own, original culture and its own intelligentsia. Poland, as a cultural entity, survived thanks to those who created, among other things, the Commission of National Education, (4) and those who continued this work through the teachers, writers, historians, philologists and philosophers of the 19th century; who, in spite of the conditions then prevailing, labored for the enrichment of the national cultural heritage. The Czech nation, which found itself on the verge of Germanization, also survived thanks to similar efforts by its intelligentsia in the 19th century.

### For Reformism

If I take my stand for the "reformist" idea, I do not at all mean by that that one can identify reformism with the employment of "legal" means, as opposed to "illegal" means. This distinction is really impossible in a situation in which it is not the law which decides on legality but the arbitrary interpretation of confused laws by the police and the party authorities. Where the rulers can, if they wish, arrest and condemn citizens for having possession of an "illegal" book, for holding a conversation within a small group on political subjects or for opinions expressed in a private letter, the notion of political legality no longer has any meaning. The best way of reacting against prosecutions for "crimes" of this sort is to commit them on a very large scale. If I speak of a reformist orientation, it is in the sense of a faith in the possibility of effective pressures that are partial and progressive, exerted in a long-term perspective, that is, the perspective of social and national liberation. Despotic socialism is not an absolutely rigid system; such systems do not exist. Signs of flexibility have appeared in the course of recent years in fields where formerly the official ideology reigned supreme: Party officials no longer claim to know more about medicine than the professors of medicine, even though they continue to know more about literature than the writers. But, in Poland, certain irreversible changes have come about, even in this field. The interference of official ideology is as insupportable as ever, but its area of activity has been restricted, especially if one thinks of the still recent period when state doctrine could with equal authority pronounce judgment on the width of trousers, the color of socks and the laws of genetics. Some may retort that this is a matter of the same kind of progress as the transition from slavery to feudalism. But we are faced here with a choice not between total decay and absolute perfection, but between consent to the process of decay and a continued effort to strengthen values and models which, once they have taken shape, are more difficult to chip away [*déduire*]. The cultural pogrom of 1968 provoked an enormous discouragement; yet it was a confrontation, certainly inevitable, but which took place in conditions chosen and imposed by the apparatus of repression.

We observe how through the world rigid orthodoxies are crumbling, bringing about the rejection of the rules, taboos, sacred values and beliefs which, until recently, seemed to be the absolute condition for their existence. It might seem that analogous with the changes taking place within the Church are pointless, since the Churches have at their disposal neither

police nor an army. However, the Churches also have lost their means of coercion under the pressure of cultural mutations; as for the police, they systematically delude themselves, as ever, about their omnipotence, and try to delude others, since they remain powerful only as long as people believe in their own power. In fact, under strong social pressures, the police are finally revealed as impotent, and the fear of those whose job is to inspire fear becomes greater than the fear of those they persecute.

#### A Slow Decay

Bureaucratic socialism has lost its ideological foundation. In spite of all the monstrosities of Stalinism, the Stalinist apparatus, at least in the countries of popular democracy, depended much more in its actions on ideological links with the system than do the present apparatuses. One would be tempted to think that a cynical apparatus, the members of which measure the gains of socialism by their own privileges and their careers, is more effective, checked by no restraints, because it is not exposed to ideological shocks, and is capable at will of sudden changes. But all that is not even a half-truth. An apparatus of that type can fail in face of a crisis; it is in no state to withstand a more serious test, and runs a greater risk of disintegration because of conflicts between cliques. But above all it is the very product of the historical obsolescence of the system which it serves. A system which no one defends in a disinterested way is doomed, said Victor Serge in a book on the "Okhrana" [the Tsarist secret police -- K.D.]. No policeman will believe such an affirmation until he has lost his job. Despotic socialism is dying that slow death described by Hegel: it appears unshaken, but it is sinking down into a heavy, numbing boredom, relieved only by a fear which finds an outlet in aggression. The disappearance of the ideology means for this system the loss of its raison d'être. In this respect certain modifications in phraseology are significant: Stalin was always uttering the word "liberty," at a time when tortures and massacres were commonplace throughout his empire; today, when the massacres have ceased, the word "liberty" is enough to put the whole police force on the alert. All these old-fashioned words -- "liberty," "independence," "law," "justice," "truth" -- become battle-slogans against bureaucratic tyranny. All that is precious and durable in the present culture of the nations dominated by this system persists in spite of it. The international Communist movement has ceased to exist. The idea of communism in its Soviet version is also no more.



It is probable that, if they had the freedom to choose, the majority of the Polish working class and intelligentsia would opt for socialism, as would the author of this article. For socialism -- that is to say for a sovereign national system which involves control by society over the utilization and development of the means of production and over the distribution of the national income, as well as over the political and administrative organization, working as an organ of society, and not as the master which rules over society in the guise of "serving" it. They would opt for an organism which presupposes freedom of information and communication, political pluralism and the plurality of forms of social property; respect for the ideas of truth, effectiveness and public interest; for the freedom of professional association, for an end to the arbitrary rule exercised by the political police and for a penal legislation the object of which is to defend society against anti-social behavior and not to transform all citizens into delinquents subject to blackmail.

The emergence of a movement in this direction depends to a large extent -- though not entirely -- on the belief of the public in the very possibility of such a movement. Given that the character of a society depends in part on the image that it has of itself, potentialities in the sphere of social transformations cannot lie in the objective facts alone, without relation to the awareness which people have of such possibilities. This is why those individuals who, in the countries of socialist despotism, can give rise to hope are also participants in a movement which can make this hope a reality -- to the extent to which, in the effort to understand oneself and one's society, there is a partial coincidence of subject and object.

#### Truths Which Should Be Restated

The belief that the present form of socialism is completely ossified, that it can be destroyed only by a powerful, single blow, and that no partial change can really effect change on the social level, can easily serve as a justification for opportunism and downright knavery. If this were so, no individual or collective initiative directed against the monstrosities of neo-Stalinist bureaucratism, no struggle to uphold respect for truth, competence, justice and reason, would have any meaning. If this were so, any individual act of baseness could be justified, since it could be interpreted simply as an element of the universal ignominy which is "temporarily" inevitable -- not the work of individuals but the product of the system. The principle of the unreformable character of the system can thus serve as an absolution granted in advance for cowardice and passivity. The fact that a large part of the Polish intelligentsia

have let themselves be convinced of the total rigidity of the shameful system under which they live is surely largely responsible for the passivity which they manifested at the time of the dramatic struggle undertaken by the Polish workers in December 1970.

The worst service one could possibly render to the cause of Polish independence and democracy is to propagate throughout society traditional anti-Russian stereotypes. The Russian nation, which has experienced the most frightful sufferings of modern history, continues to be used by its masters as a tool of their imperial policies. But it is itself a victim of these policies, much more than any other nation. In spite of the risks presented by nationalist ferments within the "sphere of influence," these nationalist feelings constitute an indispensable instrument for the maintenance of power by the most traditional methods, particularly in view of present decline in the real force of internationalist ideology. "Friendship among nations," according to official doctrine, boils down to drinking toasts to friendship and in the exchange of concert groups placed under police surveillance. True friendship between nations whose mutual mistrust and hostility have deep historical roots can only be born and grow through uncontrolled contacts and exchanges -- but this is precisely what the ruling strata fear above all. The anti-Russian nationalism of the Poles contributes, by provoking a natural reaction, to the strengthening of Great-Russian nationalism; it thus helps to prolong the servitude of both nations. It is painful to have to repeat truths which in the middle of the last century were commonplaces for the revolutionary democrats of the time. But they must be repeated as long as they are still valid. Those who, instead of contributing to the knowledge and understanding of the true national culture of Russia, propagate anti-Russian stereotypes in Poland, become willy-nilly defenders of the power which holds both nations in servitude.

In spite of the military power of the Soviet empire, and in spite of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the centrifugal tendencies within the "bloc" cannot be contained, and the corrosion of nationalism will continue to erode a structure which has lost the cement of ideology. To try to hasten this decomposition by arousing national hatreds could lead only to a massacre. We can ward off this frightful perspective only by giving new life to the traditional if outmoded idea of the brotherhood of nations united against the oppressors.

The internal contradictions of despotic socialism can always be resolved in two ways. Left to its own inertia, in silence and fear, this system will always try to settle its problems by procedures which strengthen repression instead of relaxing it, tighten the bonds instead of loosening them. The

extension of police methods of government is not the result of increased resistance but, on the contrary, the result of its absence. The flexibility of this social structure -- a flexibility the limits of which cannot be fixed in advance -- will manifest itself in re-Stalinization, if there is a lack of forces capable of opposing this. Only under the pressure of society can this flexibility manifest itself in a form more consistent with the needs of that society; that is the lesson which emerges unchallengeably from our experience. In the same way, those who think they can obtain tranquility at the price of small concessions are deluding themselves: the price to be paid will keep rising. Where today some apparently innocent flattery is enough, tomorrow they will have to pay for their tranquility by turning informer; today they can gain minor privileges simply by remaining silent, but tomorrow the price will be active participation.

The natural law of despotism is moral inflation: the distributor of goods demands ever higher prices -- if social pressures do not oblige him to cut them.

This perspective is far from being a happy one, but it has the merit of being more realistic than those which would have us wait for a miracle, for help from outside, or for the automatic self-repair of a social mechanism out of gear and left to its own inertia. The means of exerting pressure are available, and almost everyone can make use of them -- that is what matters. It would be sufficient to draw the consequences of the simplest precepts: those which forbid surrender to baseness, servility toward the ruler, seeking alms in exchange for one's abjection. Our own dignity entitles us to proclaim aloud the old words: "liberty," "justice" and "Poland."

Translated by Kevin Devlin

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- (1) This article was published in No. 5-6 of the review Kultura, Paris, 1971. The author, Leszek Kolakowski, was born in 1928. Having become a Communist during the occupation, he joined the youth movement (the Z.W.M.). Professor of Philosophy at Warsaw University after the war, assigned to research at the Philosophical Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, he devoted himself to the history of modern thought; in this connection he published a study of Spinoza and Christians Without a Church, his only work published in French (Gallimard, 1970). As a contributor to Po Prostu, weekly of the Communist youth and students, he participated actively in the beginnings of the struggle against Stalinism and in the Polish October; the journal was consequently one



of the first publications accused of "left-wing" revisionism" and then suppressed by Gomulka in October 1957. To mark the tenth anniversary of October 1956, Kolakowski issued a violent indictment against the policies of the P.U.W.P. He was then expelled from the party, and forbidden to teach -- though not to do research. He is at present teaching in Oxford University, to which he is temporarily attached.

- (2) On 8 March 1968 a student demonstration was brutally repressed in Warsaw. Other demonstrations followed, and led to a campaign of repression and purges directed against the intelligentsia, and notably against Jewish intellectuals.
- (3) The Lusatians, a Slav tribe inhabiting territories straddling Poland, Prussia and Bohemia, were subsequently absorbed by Bohemia and then by Saxony, becoming thoroughly Germanized.
- (4) The Commission of National Education, created in 1773 (the first partition of Poland) was the first ministry of public education in Europe.