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CZECHOSLOVAK YOUTH: THE MALADY AND A REMEDY

Everyone agrees that Czechoslovak youth has become unmanageable; everyone agrees that there is antagonism between fathers and sons. Older comrades are shaking their heads in disappointment and wagging their fingers in admonition. Sociological studies indicate that youth prefers informal to formal organization, and it yields to organization only very reluctantly. The statistics themselves, according to commentators, conceal a great deal of inspirationless and formalistic participation in the youth movement. Moreover, even among the element who are committed to the Czechoslovak Union of Youth (CSM), it is apparent that their political objectives have little in common with aims and policies of their mentors. For the Party, the problem lies simply in its inability to organize youth, for if they cannot be controlled they cannot be directed. And if the younger generation remains undirected, they represent an indigestible substance, unamenable to the leadership for mobilization in the attainment of Communist objectives, in spite of the agreement that in general youth is socialist in its orientation.

The opinion polls, conducted by sociologists among university students and working youths, reveal that not much less than one half of the people between 15-24 are politically neutral, and that quite as many, when questioned, had not given a thought to joining the Party. Although the children of the working class and intellectuals are the politically most active, these two classes also show the greatest degree of political neutrality. As a generality, it can be said that the youth movement draws most of its membership from the stratum of students and intellectuals, and the two ideologically fundamental classes within the Communist society -- workers and farmers -- are severely under-represented. Of the working class, only a quarter belong to the CSM, and even a smaller percentage of the farmers.⁽¹⁾ Yet, the core of the issue -- for the Party, at least -- is not demonstrated alone by the degree of passivity, but equally by the discontent among those committed to political engagement.

(1) Lidova Democracie, "Films and Books Have the Greatest Influence on Youth," 15.4.66 and M. Schneider, Zivot Strany, "Students and the Party," No. 6/1966.

Although the youth movement has little political influence of its own, not even over its own organizational structure much less on Party policy, its membership contributes to the public chorus of dissatisfaction with Party policy. At the December National Conference of University Students, Jiri Mueller, a student delegate from Prague expressed his frustration with the impotence of the official youth organizations.(2) The obvious sensitivity of the issues involved and the radical nature of his proposals delayed publication of his speech for nearly two months. His demand for a federal re-construction of the CSM, an open political forum for the discussion of conflicting views, and finally -- and most radically -- the participation of youth organizations in the formation of Party policy, represents a partial articulation of the sources of youthful discontent.

Yet, in spite of Mueller's critique, the vast corpus of opinion remains inarticulate and passive. Without attempting to glorify vagrancy and drunkenness with the halo of social revolt, and especially based on the evidence offered by the Czechoslovak press, the "revolt of youth" expresses itself often just by simple public disobedience. The refuge of much inarticulate dissatisfaction also takes the form of silence. And there is also much evidence that the young have responded to political instruction in the schools with uncompromising and silent rejection, with indifference and apathy.

The creative individual, not surprisingly, makes Socialist Realism the focus of his discontent. In poetry and prose, expressionism has replaced lyricism, and in the arts realism has given way to abstraction.

Fathers and Sons

There is remarkable unanimity in the enumeration of the causes and effects of the alienation of the younger generation. (The word "alienation" is not always used to characterize the conflict of generations because this is a descriptive term usually reserved for capitalist societies. For the commentator conscious of his terminology, "separation" is used or sometimes simply "conflict of generations.") Michal Chorvath has written in Kulturny Zivot (3):

Many convinced and conscientious socialists say that young people are apathetic to socialism and to the intellectual world concept as such, reject the socialist as well as any

(2) Jiri Mueller's speech to the National Conference of University Students, Prague, 18-19 December 1965, published in Student, No. 4/1966, Czechoslovak Press Survey, No. 1756.

(3) Chorvath, Michal, "The Revolt of Youth?," Kulturny Zivot, 29.4.66, Czechoslovak Press Survey, No. 1787. (Chorvath is a prominent member of the Husak group of Slovak writers.)

other world concept, do not want to work in the youth organizations and Party organizations and have no sense of responsibility toward socialist society. On top of all this they reject the socialist realistic art and any realistic art as such and turn to some kind of aesthetic romanticism and anarchism.

Apart from the moral appraisal of these aspects, is it true? I believe that roughly speaking it is a fact.

Regardless of Chorvath's bias, which is strictly revisionist, and his alarmist appraisal of the problem, few would actually disagree with his assessment, though as he says they may value the moral aspects otherwise. Moreover, no one would dissent from Chorvath's judgment that youth has been profoundly disturbed by the difference between socialist theory and socialist reality. For instance, the educational system -- neither teachers nor curricula -- does not attempt to answer the disturbing questions suggested by socialist reality itself. Discussion is often barren and irrelevant, for dissent is not usually tolerated. The aims of education have had little relation with the opportunities available after the student has left school. Time magazine quoted one Czechoslovak student to the effect that he had been offered a job as a night watchman.(4) He said, "We have the best-educated night watchmen in the world." This has led to the unenviable predicament of having more trained people than jobs to occupy them, or at least, an unwillingness to replace unqualified personnel with trained graduates. And Czechoslovakia plans to reduce the number of students admitted to schools of higher education.

Although the Party had known that much of contemporary youth was politically neutral or indifferent, the "Party Talks to Youth" program, which sent high-ranking Party members to the young people to engage them in debate, found that the younger generation was very well informed. This gave rise to the belief that youth were not apolitical in the strictest sense of the word. Indeed, they have specific political attitudes but are indifferent to CP policy. Jiri Lokoutka, writing in Rude Pravo, stated that "...the present generation leads a politically non-active life in a society which it did not help to create directly or indirectly."(5)

And no analysis would be complete without an acknowledgment of the undiminished effects of Stalinism. The "society which it did not help to create" was born of Stalin's policies and implemented by his imitators. Lokoutka adds that people who have experience of the "cult" era understand the "indignation of young people." The connecting cord between this generation and the past one has been cut by this issue, and all attempts to bridge this separation flounder on this issue. Explicitly or implicitly, the shock upon youth of the revelations on Stalinism is not denied.

(4) Time "The Uninfected in East Europe," 6.4.66.

(5) Lokoutka Jiri, "Youth and Politics," Rude Pravo, 8.4.66, Czechoslovak Press Survey, No. 1784.

The Solution

Even if it is true that the various explanations offered for the crisis of youth are distinguished from one another only in their emphasis, this difference of degree profoundly affects the character of the solutions which are intended to ameliorate the problem. If after some hesitation the Party has come to face the central issues (education, Stalinism, decline of the family, etc.), it has not confronted the possible solutions with an equal degree of realism. Michal Chorvath suggests that the Party advanced only partial measures which attempt to cure the ailment by treating the symptoms.

Chorvath considers all the explanations, like education, the decline of the family, the softness of youth, bourgeois influences, and finds them lacking in terms of full analysis of youth's malaise. In spite of his statement, quoted above, that the younger generation is apathetic to socialism, he qualifies this statement with the generalization that youth is not opposed to socialism as such, just to the way in which it is practiced in Czechoslovakia. Chorvath's qualification is not novel. It is parallel to the concept that youth is not really apolitical, merely indifferent to socialist practice. Chorvath's virtue lies in his forthrightness not his novelty, and he rejects statements which do not touch the heart of the matter, like the following one by President Novotny: "The President also mentioned the need to devote due care to young. They should not be left to believe that there were more setbacks in the past development than successes, as quite the opposite is true..." (6) Chorvath would also deny the contention made by Presidium candidate-member Martin Vaculik that Western influences have disoriented youth with a false conception of the capitalist world. Were it not that the socialist reality has been only schematically explained to them, their value systems would not have been warped. For Chorvath, the emphasis on educational work is nothing more than a tree in the forest of petrified ideas, which draws attention from the central issue -- namely, ideological stagnation. The absence of creative Marxist thought has also disturbed others besides Chorvath, but no one before him has seen this as an explanation for the revolt of youth, and certainly no one else has described it in such alarmist terms which includes an implied threat to the stability of the regime.

Other writers have suggested that Stalinism and ideological stagnation are nourished on one other. Chorvath has implied that the revelations of the Stalinist period and lack of radical re-appraisal of the conceptual assumptions of Stalinism have produced a "violent" alienation of youth. In a comparatively long historical exegesis, he finds "a striking resemblance between the situation in current socialist literature... and that in bourgeois literature and culture after the Great French Revolution... in the Romantic movement of the young." As in the Soviet Union after October 1917,

(6) A. Novotny in a speech to a trade union delegation; quoted by Ceteka 27.4.66.

the French Revolution was transmogrified into political despotism. European Romanticism was the reaction of the young to political reaction across Europe. In present-day Czechoslovakia the revolution betrayed has produced a vacuum of faith; the younger generation has lost its belief in the future.

Is not their indignation, loss of confidence, pessimism, rather a disappointment because today they do not find enough socialism at home, enough human socialist relations, sufficient opportunities for making use of their education and for asserting their opinions? Are they not angry about the older generation because, to their taste, socialism requires 'a historically too long time' for its implementation? In deed! This must be so.

What Chorvath is saying is that the response of youth during the 19th century and today are alike in their opposition to the prevailing political dogmas. The substantial difference between the historical analogies lies primarily in the fact that, while Romanticism was a movement of thousands, contemporary youth numbers millions among its dissatisfied adherents. Chorvath's meaning is clear: the potential strength of a reaction against the political order could constitute a grave threat to the arcanum imperii.

Will youth revert to capitalism? According to Chorvath, they will not; they will re-establish socialism. "Re-establish" is used advisedly, for it is apparent that Chorvath intends to say that socialism is not what is now being practiced in Czechoslovakia.

What needs to be changed? Chorvath suggests a policy based on three points: first, socialist democracy must be developed and strengthened. From the author's entire attitude, it is clear that he intends democracy to convey the most liberal meaning; second, a policy of peace as the basis for the building of society. Considering how loudly the peaceful intentions of the Communist states are trumpeted, Chorvath obviously means that in reality, the greatest efforts are not being exerted to achieve detente. He specifically states that one must be prepared to talk with one's enemies. Chorvath's third condition seems at first glance somewhat alien to his argument, namely, the limitless perspective of space research, initiated by the Soviet Union.

This third idea can be viewed as an appeal to the enthusiasm of youth in the conquering of new frontiers. Yet, at the same time his reference to the USSR carries the notion that, one has to promote what is new from the Soviet Union and reject its official orthodoxy. He is opposed to everything which smacks of dogmatism, and his formulation suggests that the acceptance of the Moscow line will inevitably be rejected by the younger generation. Relations with the USSR should, therefore, be placed on firmer ground, emphasizing its role as scientific pioneer.

The outstanding question still remains: where does youth stand and where will it proceed? The younger generation stands in the eye of the storm while opinion rages around it. Few critics reproach the young people for their dissatisfaction; all are aware of the shortcomings. To coin a phrase, the future belongs to youth, but that future will in large measure depend upon the nature and extent of the reforms of society undertaken by the generation in power.

S. Riveles

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