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"POLITIQUE HEBDO" ON POLAND: "BLAME THE SYSTEM"

Summary: The "New Left" magazine Politique Hebdo, edited by the dissident French Communist Paul Noirot, has published three articles examining the pre-Christmas Polish crisis as the expression of a deeper malaise affecting other East European countries. The writers argue that it is the bureaucratic-authoritarian system which must be blamed, not the Gomulka leadership. They see the remedy in a development of genuine democracy -- but are not optimistic about it.

Politique Hebdo, the lively new-left weekly edited by the dissident Communist Paul Noirot, has greeted the year's end with its thirteenth number in a mood of buoyant militance. The keynote for this issue is set by the reaction of the "Politique" group of dissenting Communists, left-Catholics and assorted socialists (1) to the pre-Christmas disturbances which led to the change of regime in Poland.

(1) Politique Hebdo, which first appeared on 8 October 1970, is the weekly counterpart of the monthly Politique Aujourd'hui, launched in January 1969.

In significant contrast with the attitude of the French Communist Party, whose spokesmen deplored the mistakes of the Gomulka regime and its final repressive moves, while expressing solidarity with the new Polish leadership, Politique Hebdo is concerned with the deeper issues raised by the Polish crisis -- with the nature of the sociopolitical system, rather than with the merits or demerits of particular leaders.

The leading article by Gilbert Souchal, a member of the editorial board, opens with a paragraph of outspoken indictment:

How is one to describe the regime of a country where the demands of the workers can find expression only through uprisings; where these uprisings are suppressed, at the cost of dozens of dead and hundreds of wounded, by a police and militia allegedly representing the people; where journalists are willy-nilly reduced to reproducing official communiques, and their foreign colleagues are expelled to prevent them from testifying; where, one fine morning or evening workers learn from the radio that their wages have been frozen, the population learns that prices have raised by 10 to 20 per cent, and the nation learns that the head of state has been ousted by the real ruling group -- without the citizens having been at any time consulted, or even informed in advance? (2)

The Corruption of Power

Taking up a point also made by Italian Communist comment, Souchal stressed that nationalization of the major means of production was not, and could not be, enough to produce a socialist society. What was needed was also "the direct participation of the workers in the management of the economy, in the elaboration and implementation of political decisions." Neither was it enough to meet the problems revealed by the crisis by seeking a scapegoat, this time at the top in the person of Gomulka (nationalists, cosmopolitans, liberals, intellectuals, Jews and left- or right-wing revisionists having all been used for this purpose in the past). Nor, again, was

(2) Gilbert Souchal, "Quel socialisme?," Politique Hebdo, No. 13, 31 December 1970.

it enough for Gomulka's successor to pledge that the party would maintain closer links with the workers and the whole nation; after all, Gomulka had given much the same pledges 14 years earlier, after the Poznan riots had brought him to power, and --

The fact that the man of the Polish October, who at that time embodied all the hopes of his people, betrayed them all, and to such an extent, shows that the fundamental vice is to be found not on the level of individuals but on the level of the system.

How, then, is the system to be characterized? What precisely is wrong with it? The answer, it seems, lies in Acton's dictum about the corruption of power:

It is a system which, by a series of false assimilations, makes it a principle that working class equals party, that party equals central committee, that central committee equals Politburo, and thus leads to the concentration of power in the hands of a few if not, as a logical conclusion, in the hands of a single person. It is the system in which the party, reduced to its ruling group, transforms itself from means into end and becomes its own justification; in which [the party] is everything, [responsible for] decision, action and supervision...

It is the system of one-way "transmission belts" from top to bottom, whereby the social organizations -- and in the first place the trade unions -- have no other role than that of urging on [the workers], and where democracy at best does not go beyond the provision of information and a wealth of propaganda. It is the system of elections which are in fact designations, of censorship, of the "truth" being proclaimed in all spheres by those who think that they alone possess it.

In these conditions it is not necessary to invent provocations, hooligans and hired enemies of the regime in order to explain why anger led the insurgent crowds of workers in Gdansk, Gdynia and Szczecin first of all toward the party buildings. They were going toward the reality of power -- a power felt by them to be alien and oppressive.

Souchal dismisses the argument that these developments can be explained by Poland's deep-rooted economic problems, noting that these phenomena are not peculiar to Poland. Half a century after the Bolshevik Revolution, a quarter-century after 1945 "one finds everywhere [in Eastern Europe], in varying degrees, the same difficulties and the same failings." And they cannot be removed by technocratic measures and economic reforms, since "in these blocked societies the disease is political, and the remedy can only be of the same nature."

Not the Workers' State

Souchal's article is followed by another, signed jointly by Paul Galard and Alexandre Kopernik, which usefully complements it. (3) The two latter writers are concerned primarily with the socio-economic roots of the crisis; but they, too, reach similar political conclusions. Thus, in discussing the changes made under Gomulka, they write:

The reforms accomplished, although supported by the working class for various reasons (hope of an improvement in the standard of living, but also nationalist sentiments) fundamentally marked an advance of the technocratic element. Very rapidly the activity of the workers' councils, transformed into factory councils, was emptied of all content. The so-called period of limited stabilization in 1960-1965 is calm on the political level: the capital of trust which the Gomulka government enjoys with the population has not yet been completely squandered, and the Church is playing a moderating role.

Nevertheless, the crisis continues to manifest itself in a cyclical manner...

(3) Paul Galard and Alexandre Kopernik, "Le prix du sang dans 'l'économie de la lune'," Politique Hebdo, 31 December 1970, pp. 5-6.

The authors proceed to discuss, with a wealth of statistics, the causes and symptoms of this creeping crisis, touching upon such factors as the increasing technological lag compared with the West, planning mistakes, lack of balance between the various sectors of industry, hidden inflation, backward agriculture, and so on. But again they return to the political element, and to the fact that Poland is not alone in this:

Apart from the specific factors, the economic difficulties which Poland is experiencing and which have just exploded into crisis are not isolated phenomena. For this is a question of a particular example of a problem common to European socialist countries as a whole. All have undergone, some sooner and some later, a definite slowing down of their industrial expansion and a loss of efficiency.

It can thus be affirmed that, in addition to the specific factors, a role is played by structural factors developed, paradoxically, through the ambiguities of the reforms undertaken -- or simply sketched out, as in Poland -- with the precise aim of remedying these difficulties.

Incoherence and uncertainty in the implementation of economic reforms may be partially explained by such institutional factors as the conflict between technocrats and bureaucrats; but, again, the heart of the matter is elsewhere:

The essential rift revealed by the Polish events is that which has long existed in the socialist countries between the group of those who claim to represent the workers themselves. These [leadership] groups may be divided, they may on occasion appeal to this or that sector of the population, but this does not at all alter the fact that the very objectives of economic development, its criteria and the means to be used -- in short, the whole model of production and of life -- have been determined, almost from the first, without the participation of the

working masses. If today Cyrankiewicz must urge the workers to reflect that "the supreme interests of the state and of the nation" are also their interests, those of "each one" and of "each family" -- is it not precisely because this state is not that of the workers?

Limited Victory

A third article on the Polish crisis in this issue comes from the professional hand of Claude Angeli, a member of the Politique editorial board who is also on the staff of Le Nouvel Observateur. (4) This is essentially an able journalistic account of the crisis -- knowledgeable, but marked by a certain cynicism.

Noting that Gomulka has now been offered as a scapegoat to appease the rebellious workers of the Baltic towns and their supporters and admirers throughout Poland, Angeli declares: "It is a lot, and it is very little." A lot, he explains, because of the dimensions of this crisis in such an important socialist country; very little, because while Gomulka has gone, the system remains:

The precipitous departure of Gomulka is a victory for Poles who know that they cannot go too far, that the police always obey, and that the Soviet Army is encamped on their territory.

His account of the stages of the crisis and of the initial moves of the new Gierek regime is essentially straightforward, although the note of cynicism recurs when he remarks that "everything is being done to persuade Poles of the realism of the new ruling team and of the need for a national effort to rebuild the economy, in order to make Poland once more 'the gayest barracks in the socialist camp,' to use a formula of 1956." But in his concluding paragraph he takes a longer view:

Afterwards, the struggle for power will resume. Gierek is a strong man who will consolidate his power, but Moczar's "partisans" have not abandoned their ambitions. The alliance of the two "clans" is a fragile one, and the economic difficulties of Poland are far from being resolved. Account must also be taken of the "fraternal" countries.

Outside [Poland] the crisis of the "socialist camp" will continue to evolve. In the neighboring countries of the USSR as in Moscow. Some day it will be found that there is no longer a Gomulka left to be thrown as a sacrifice of appeasement to men who rebel in order that socialism may have a different face.

The important thing about these three articles is that they come from the Left -- from men whose opposition to "capitalism" and "socialism" gives them the right to criticize "socialism" when it does not wear a human face. And the French Communist Party, in turn, must take some account of such criticism when it appears in a magazine which within a short time has established itself as the leading voice of the Independent Left in France.

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