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"PRIMITIVE EGALITARIANISM" VS. "NEO-ELITISM"

Summary: A discussion in the Polish press on the issue of egalitarianism under socialism has given rise to the expression of two opposing points of view: (a) the "radical" assertion that income differentiation is, at best, a necessary evil under socialism which must steadily decrease; (b) the "modernizing" point of view that income differentiation is indispensable for economic growth. The discussion is illustrative of the broader debate on the issue in many "socialist" countries, but must also be related to the intra-Party conflict in Poland.

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One potentially positive result of the generally destructive purge campaign in Poland in 1968 has been the opening up of discussion on a wide range of issues connected, more or less directly, with the "model" of socialism. During the height of the purge last spring, a pseudo-revolutionary, "leftist" (and, one suspected, usually demagogic) approach to these issues went almost unchallenged in the Polish press, a barometer of the strength of the radical (or pseudo-radical) forces grouped around Mieczyslaw Moczar's Partisan faction who sought to put an end to the perceived "half-measures" characteristic of Gomulka's rule since 1956 and, ultimately, to undermine the First Secretary's position. Yet the Partisans' aims were not realized in 1968; parallel to the waning of their drive for power last summer, the arguments of the "radicals" on substantive issues began to be opposed and rejected publicly. Previous papers in this series have examined this phenomenon in terms of the issues of economic policy, technocracy, and Party history.¹ This paper will review a

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1. See Antoni Marek, "Revisionism in the Economy or the Economy of Revisionism," Polish Background Report/23, Radio Free Europe Research, 6 August 1968; Marek, "Economic Problems in the Pre-Congress Discussion," Polish Background Report/30, RFER, 16 October 1968; A. Ross Johnson, "Social Conflicts in an Early 'Socialist' Society," Polish Background Report/6, RFER, 21 March 1969; Johnson, "Notes on an Historical Discussion; the Role of the KPP," Polish Background Report/5, RFER, 20 March 1969.

discussion, still in progress, on the issue of egalitarianism.

The "radical" position on this issue, which was stated ad nauseam in the Polish press last spring, was repeated by Juliusz Waclawek (an editor of Trybuna Ludu) at a conference last June, a selective account of which was published in the October issue of Miesiecznik Literacki. According to Waclawek, income differentiation had begun to increase in Poland since about 1960. This trend was to be deplored because of its effect on both social and economic policy; it signified a phenomenon contrary to the egalitarian ideals of socialism, while at the same time unnecessarily raising the consumption expectations and thus pressure for higher wages on the part of the population as a whole -- a alleged obstacle to economic growth.

One speaker was possibly right when he alleged that the overall sum representing the extra earnings of those who are paid at a better, privileged rate is not very great, and therefore -- from a purely economic point of view -- the spreading of that difference equally among all wage earners would not give much benefit to the latter. However, the harm lies here in a fact which is often overlooked by the economists. The formation of a privileged group or social class, which, by its elevated standard of living, is noticed by the masses, no matter how small that privileged group might be, must in effect lead not only to social dissatisfaction, but also to a lessening in the modesty of the demands made by broad spheres of the community, to the premature awakening of their appetites for the satisfaction of these hitherto unconsidered needs. It incites a degree of widespread competition aimed at gaining a bigger share of the material goods, money and privileges. This amounts to having the amassing of private riches once more become the individual's goal in life -- which means simply a reversion to a bourgeois system of values and a bourgeois outlook and provides fertile ground for the ideological diversion of the imperialists, as well as for the actions of reactionary members of the social right-wing at home. It is only natural that a man who has reached the top limit so far as material possessions and accumulated capital accessible in a socialist system are concerned, will look around to see where to invest that capital, so that it would accrue at the best possible rates of interest, and that he will look forward to a higher top limit, and such a top limit exists only in a capitalist system. All this creates trends toward either direct reversal to capitalism, or else an indirect reversal -- through the introduction of respective "corrections" in our economic system, corrections which raise the ceiling of incomes and broaden the scope of private enterprise.

The trend to further growth of differences in the scale of earnings is extremely harmful, not only from the political, but also from the economic point of view. The very existence of social groups whose members receive high incomes causes immediate and widespread pressure from all the lower income groups for higher wages and starts a crazy spiral of wage increases chasing price increases.

Such a development could result only in the "rebirth of capitalist relations," as allegedly shown by the Yugoslav example.

The strongest opposition to these views was voiced by Jan Glowczyk, editor-in-chief of Zycie Gospodarcze; while the discussion took place in June, his views certainly could not have appeared in print at that point. Glowczyk disputed Wacławek's picture of increasing wage differentiation in Poland in recent years. While granting that certain differences in the wage structure were too great, he emphasized that it would be very difficult to raise the lowest wages and that a differentiated wage structure was an indispensable stimulus for economic growth. In his view, social ideals and economic realities could come into conflict under "socialism"; the first had to be modified by the imperatives of the second.

Some of Glowczyk's views were shared by Jan Danecki, a sociologist and member of the Miesiecznik Literacki editorial board, who chaired the discussion. He stated frankly that the line of reasoning advanced by Wacławek could be [and was being?] misused for demagogic purposes.

[One trend demands the] total, instantaneous implementation of the slogans for full equality, notwithstanding the actual possibilities. I do not think that it is just to minimize . . . the dangers connected with this trend. I think, furthermore, that the attempt to interpret Marx's theories in such way as presented here by Mr. Wacławek sounds, not only to my own ears but also to others, rather unrealistic, and therefore I fear that this interpretation would, in effect, discourage rather than encourage attempts to realize egalitarian principles. In my opinion, spreading overzealous slogans about equality in actual practice causes even more harmful results. Demanding the immediate satisfaction of needs which have not yet ripened to the point where they must be met only incites demagogic moods and creates additional political tensions.

Yet Danecki took an essentially middle-of-the-road position; he also criticized what he termed the opposite, extremist approach to the question of "neo-elitism." He accused the weekly Polityka of propagating that tendency -- only one of the many charges against that publication

in 1968 which, at one point, apparently almost led to its being closed down.²

After an interval of some four months, Wacławek's arguments were challenged even more sharply in Polityka (8 February 1969) by editor Andrzej Wróblewski -- a precursor of the discussion on technocracy³ and, like that discussion, an offensive rather than defensive step, indicating how much Polityka's political position had improved since mid-1968. Wróblewski defended the economic necessity of the existing income spread and defended a continuous increase in consumption aspirations as a necessary motive force of social and economic progress. He accused Wacławek of propagating the "imported" concept that all consumption desires were negative, making it clear elsewhere that Wacławek was being accused on this issue of "Maoism." His objection to Wacławek's views were formulated most succinctly in a subsequent issue of Polityka (8 March 1969), where he replied to readers' comments on his article.

I maintain that the consumption aspirations of all the people must precede the possibility of their fulfillment, for this is a motive force of progress. This is the fundamental difference between J. Wacławek and myself. My opponent maintains that, for the benefit of social harmony, it is necessary to deprive people of examples of abundant consumption and thus restrain human appetites. I don't disagree with J. Wacławek that it is necessary to increase collective consumption; I emphasize only that that cannot be the only, or even the main, way of assuring a socialist society of the benefits of the good life.

Wróblewski was, in turn, fiercely denounced for his article, initially not by Wacławek himself but by Ryszard Turski, writing in Argumenty (2 March 1969). Defending Wacławek's approach, Turski accused Wróblewski of defending inequality under socialism. The comparison between Wacławek's views and Maoism was held to be a "provocation." More important, Turski expanded his criticism to include Polityka in general, accusing it of playing a leading role in the "neo-elitist offensive." He concluded with the charge that it was not "left-wing Communism" (the label often applied to the "radicals'" views by their opponents, with reference to Lenin's Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder) but "inequality" which was a danger to socialism, coupling this with a renewed criticism of the period of the "small stabilization" in Poland.

A rejoinder by Wacławek himself was printed in the April 12 issue of Polityka; he took Wróblewski to task for "insinuation" and

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2. See A. Ross Johnson, "The Polityka Controversy," Polish Background Report/21, RFER, 8 July 1968.
 3. See Polish Background Report/6, RFER, 21 March 1969.

a "slandorous alteration of my views." Wacławek then restated his position on "equality," maintaining that the pursuit of material wealth could not become a goal unto itself under socialism, that consumption aspirations should not be raised before they could be satisfied because this would increase social tensions, and that socialism could result only if the material standard of society as a whole increased roughly at the same pace. Granting that income differentiation prior to 1956 in Poland had been excessively narrow, Wacławek continued:

The maximum inflation of the role of [material] incentives and elimination of limits on material differentiation became a standard slogan of the revisionist current in the economy, supported by certain interested social groups who propagated the illusion that everyone would profit from further [income] differentiation. At the root of this illusion is an elementary ignorance of economic relations: the fact that, given a certain individual consumption fund, material incentives can, by their very nature, embrace only an insignificant part of society. Indeed, the larger the differentiation, the smaller the part of society they can embrace.

The tendency toward greater income differentiation had to be opposed, Wacławek continued; this meant prohibiting any increase in higher incomes, while raising lower ones.

Wacławek's article was accompanied by a rejoinder from Wroblewski who, significantly, responded not in his own name but in the name of the Polityka editorial staff. Noting that the polemic had become too heated to be continued in its present form, Wroblewski called on his opponent to return to reality; refuge was often taken in quotations from the Marxist-Leninist classics, he noted, in order to avoid discussion of present-day problems. He noted the folly of fearing excessive consumption aspirations of the average present-day Pole:

... Wacławek fears that excessive incomes will generate excessive appetites. Perhaps with reference to a Greek millionaire, who wants a three-masted yacht in place of a two-masted one, such fears are justified. But 95 per cent of Poles dream of an apartment, a comfortable vacation, and a modest automobile, and it would be nonsense to restrain those dreams for fear that, as soon as someone gets an apartment, he will begin to dream of his own swimming pool.

In short, Wacławek had indulged in utopian fantasies having little to do with Polish reality.

It seems to me that one of Waclawek's main errors is that he isolates the formation of national income from its distribution. If this year we begin to reward mailmen and weavers the most, and engineers and professors the least, we can be sure that next year the [national] income will be smaller, in the following year still smaller, and after five years disastrously small, and then even a reversal of the proportions will not give the professor higher pay than the mailman had, for there won't be anything left to distribute. Is it possible responsibly to maintain that a reduction of material interest will not result in a reduction of labor productivity? Would it be possible to pursue a socialist social policy with ever decreasing, instead of increasing, funds for that purpose? Comrade Waclawek, retract your words about propagating illusions and turn your glance to the real situation of our country -- the lack of skilled workers, technicians, and engineers, the efforts at selective industrial development, the efforts to compete with highly industrialized countries, the task of an eight-per cent growth of national income yearly, the burning need of increasing apartment, school, hospital, and communal construction. Theoreticians can help us, but they cannot build socialism.

Conclusion

The polemics outlined above represent a useful exposition of the two major points of view on the issue of "egalitarianism" in an internal debate now in progress in most Communist countries. The point of view expressed by Waclawek is the more utopian, ideologically-oriented view, the one closer to the spirit of the Marxist-Leninist classics, but one subject to demagogic misuse by conservative or neo-Stalinist politicians. The point of view espoused in the debate within the PUWP by Wroblewski, on the other hand, recognizes the incompatibility of the utopianism of the "classics" with the task of modernizing a semi-industrial society. This point of view was recently expressed well by a Hungarian journalist, treating the problem in the context of the Hungarian NEM:

[The workers] want to know how unequal income is compatible with socialism and how progress can be claimed when the socialist state increases rather than reduces the differences in the workers' material situations. They fail to see that distribution according to work involves both equality and inequality. There is equality because exploitation has disappeared. . . . But since workers' qualifications, industry and education vary and the conditions and requirements of different kinds of work are not identical, it would be unjust and contrary to socialist objectives if these inequalities were

disregarded and goods were distributed equally among the hardworking and the lazy, the trained and the untrained, those who work under conditions hazardous to their health and those who do not. Such egalitarianism would understandably discourage all those whose hard work, knowledge, and skill offer society more and better things.⁴

While illustrative of a more general debate, the polemics treated above are directly related to the intra-Party political conflict in Poland. The discussion supplies additional evidence that Polityka (in contrast to the situation in the first part of 1968) is resisting strongly the ideological attacks against it and has itself taken the offensive on certain issues. The ideological "radicals" in the Party, who last year linked their future with that of the Partisan faction, have suffered a severe setback, yet they have by no means been silenced.

A. Ross Johnson

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(The workers) want to know how unequal income is compatible with socialism and how progress can be claimed when the socialist state increases rather than reduces the differences in the workers' material situations. They ask: why?

4. Edit Soter, "Socialist Distribution or Egalitarianism," Nepszabadsag, 26 January 1969, translated in Hungarian Press Survey No. 1987, RFER, 28 February 1969.

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