

# The Democratization of Socialism: 'Glasnost'

(4th in a series)

To speak of the democratization of socialism in the Soviet Union as though the USSR is only now beginning to move from darkness to dawn clearly does an injustice to the democratic accomplishments socialism has already achieved.

Simply by breaking the stranglehold of capitalism which permits the concentrated wealth of a handful to shape society's economic and political life, socialism has already brought a more advanced expression of democracy into human affairs. Even with the serious problems and contradictions currently being discussed, the Soviet Union has shown that it is possible to construct a system in which the well-being of the people is the collective responsibility of society as a whole.

Nevertheless, both in conception and content, the process of socialist democratization now underway in the USSR highlights how Soviet democracy has been heretofore incomplete. "Prior to perestroika," argues an article in the Soviet magazine *New Times* (#42, 1987), "something else passed for democracy—complete uniformity of political choice, implicit obedience to the leadership and social vigor directed exclusively at approving adopted decisions."

Harsh words, to be sure. But certainly not the first time they have been expressed. The new element, of course, is that such assertions are now coming out of the Soviet Union itself—and not just from "dissidents" but from people at the highest levels of responsibility whose credentials as defenders of socialism are unimpeachable.

It would be unseemly to deny that all this is somewhat embarrassing for those of us who, in defending socialism, either dismissed or gave insufficient thought to the problems posed by the underdeveloped side of Soviet democracy. Beyond embarrassment, however, is a sense of relief that a burden has at last been lifted—not simply from the defenders of socialism, but from socialism itself.

## LACK OF DEMOCRACY

For what becomes clear in examining the "stagnation" period of the late seventies and early eighties is that the lack of a democratic political culture was a major factor contributing to the developing crisis in Soviet economic and social life. It is a theme to which Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev returns again and again, declaring in a speech to the party's Central Committee February 17:

"We profoundly realize now how much we lost in the past when we failed to fully master—in theory, and much more so in practice—the entire fruitfulness of Lenin's ideas, intentions and practical recommendations related to Soviet socialist democracy. This should be emphasized, comrades, for to this day we meet those who recoil at the scope of the processes of democratization.... There are still many attempts to squeeze glasnost and democracy into convenient limits, to rein in the press and act without reckoning with public opinion."

The response to democratization is itself a telling commentary on how sweeping a political and ideological change is underway. Among many there is a feeling of exhilaration frequently laced with the fear that a still-powerful "they" will, sooner or later, attempt to put the democratic genie back in the bottle. Others frame their trepidations by warning that democratization is propelling the nation toward anarchy.

These responses are not surprising. Gorbachev's reconceptualization of Soviet democracy represents a revolutionary departure from the norms of Soviet political life which have prevailed for more than half a century. It is a revolution

with three main elements: "glasnost"—the policy of openness and democratic discussion and debate; legality—uncompromisingly adhering to and upholding the rule of law; and the direct empowerment of the masses through elections in which questions of real power are settled.

## GLASNOST—THE DRIVING FORCE

Of these, the driving force so far has been glasnost. Reflecting the pent-up frustrations of writers, artists and intellectuals who have long labored within the confines of officially sanctioned information and ideas, Soviet media and the arts have gone through a spectacular explosion in the past several years.

Once forbidden topics—drug addiction, police brutality, official corruption, alcoholism—are now reported on and discussed with terrifying candor. News of plane crashes and industrial accidents—once ruled out of bounds as embarrassments to socialism—are now considered "news" and are not confined to official statements.

## Openness should be the norm in the existence and functioning of society.

The significance of this point was underscored by Soviet academician Vitaly Goldansky, who points out, "It is not that there are more disasters, but that there is more honest and frank information about them and, had there been such openness before, there would be less negligence and fewer disasters today." (*New Times*, #18, 1987.)

With the exception of explicit military questions, no subject seems to be beyond debate and/or exposure. Thus one may find in the pages of *Novy Mir* a heated exchange criticizing "the project of the century"—a plan to divert Siberian rivers southward in order to provide irrigation for presently arid lands—as a "large-scale ecological and economic crime."

Breaking new ground, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, newspaper of the Young Communist League, carries (November 11) a major exposé on psychiatric abuse. Charging that "psychiatric science and practice have long ago been shut off from openness by a high and solid fence," the article cites examples of "lawlessness" in diagnoses. In one case, says the paper, bribed doctors sent a Leningrad woman to a mental hospital after she criticized the management of her factory for indifference to workers' needs. The head of her trade union joined the attack, asserting "she reads too much Marxist-Leninist literature." Six weeks after the article appeared, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet adopted a new code of legal rights for mental patients in which patients and their families can sue for release.

*Moscow News* runs a debate between advocates and opponents of nuclear power, while a letter to the editor in the same paper argues that in addition to "a right to work," Soviet citizens should have "a right not to work."

## OPENNESS IN THE ARTS

Artistic glasnost has, if anything, been even more daring and innovative. The broad ideological tone of what some bemoan as an unwarranted permissiveness was captured by the CPSU's official theoretical journal, *Kommunist*.

"The mightier the Soviet state became," the journal said in an editorial last fall, "the more cowardly, mistrustful and often suspicious were the departments and

official organs in charge of culture.... They did not seem to care that the Soviet audience started to show a certain mistrust of their 'spiritual food.' It did not seem to matter that people were not bothering to attend theaters and exhibitions."

As the taboos of the past crumble before a dazzling onslaught of previously banned works, experimental styles, bold incursions into socially volatile subject matter and political controversy, no one can say that Soviet art today is dying for lack of an audience. The circulation of *Novy Mir*, which has just begun publishing Boris Pasternak's long-banned "Dr. Zhivago," has zoomed from 500,000 to 1.15 million in less than a year. A first-time-ever exhibition of paintings by Marc Chagall—hardly an apostle of socialist realism—found thousands lining up at dawn before the Pushkin Museum in hopes of gaining entrance by mid-afternoon.

Films interred in the catacombs of the Ministry of Culture for decades are being dusted off and shown to curious audiences, who find many of them startlingly tame. Among them are works which never saw the light of day because "banned" actors played feature roles. Similarly "banned" historical personages—such as Bukharin, Trotsky and Kamenev—now stride across the stage in provocative plays exploring Bolshevik history. At the same time, Stalin has become less a distinct historical personality than a symbolic frame of reference for intellectual conformity, illegality, political suppression and dogmatism.

What emerges from this cultural explosion is the unfortunately novel perception that audiences have the right to arrive as their own judgments as to the aesthetic, political and philosophical worth of a wide range of artistic experiences.

## BASIS FOR PERESTROIKA

Beyond introducing a breath of fresh air into Soviet intellectual and social life, glasnost is seen by the CPSU leadership—Gorbachev in particular—as the indispensable underpinning for perestroika. For without an independent and critical press, indeed absent an intellectual climate which views independence of thought as a virtue, the social forces who have little enthusiasm for restructuring will find ways to smother it. For without glasnost, the struggle against arbitrary

decision-making, self-serving assessments and all tendencies which suffocate the initiative of the masses will be disarmed.

"One of the silently held beliefs of some administrators," writes Professor Anatoly Butenko, "is to monopolize information, to make a secret of their administrative activities and to deprive the people they govern of the most basic knowledge in their field." This situation, says Butenko, inevitably serves to reproduce the existing relations since it leaves the managers as the sole judges and decision-makers on all matters. As a result, he concludes, it becomes "impossible for the managed to assess, let alone dispute, the decisions of the managers."

## LIMITS TO GLASNOST

Are there limits to glasnost? Obviously, there are. But is that the principal issue at stake at this juncture of perestroika? The answer to that is itself a matter of the most profound political consequence.

Clearly there are those in the Soviet Union who find glasnost distressing and believe that it has gone far enough. Not only have they been conditioned to view non-conformity with suspicion and disagreement with received wisdom as a sign of ideological unreliability; many have more material interests they are defending.

For the privileges and perquisites of power under the old system were not minor. But the price paid for tolerating them is not limited to the moral corruption they generate. They are at the very core of the stagnation which brought Soviet socialism to the brink of a society-wide economic and social crisis.

This is why Gorbachev poses the question in a somewhat different fashion. To him, the issue is not so much limits on glasnost as it is to create a political culture in which openness is the norm and departures from it are viewed as the extraordinary or aberrational.

"Openness is a normal state of society," Gorbachev has declared. "Without openness we won't be able to accomplish anything. Glasnost, criticism and self-criticism permeated with concern for the common cause are of direct relevance to the health and moral atmosphere of society. The preservation of this atmosphere, which includes democracy, glasnost, criticism and openness, sound judgments and responsible debate, all this should be the norm in the existence and functioning of society." □

(Next: Rule of law and elections.)

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