

'Perestroika' and the Challenge of Democracy

(Part 5 in a series)

The twin pillars of perestroika, according to Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, are radical economic reform and the "democratization" of Soviet society.

The economic side of perestroika—discussed in parts 2 and 3 of this series—represents a major overhaul of the entire Soviet system of production and distribution and a provocative challenge to prevailing Marxist theories of socialism. Similarly, democratization represents nothing less than a revolution in the existing Soviet political system and a challenge to certain traditional assumptions about democracy which have become part of Marxism-Leninism's acquired ideological legacy.

Although Gorbachev's economic reforms clearly modify certain socialist "principles" long held to be fundamental, democratization is, in some ways, an even more drastic departure from the political system which has prevailed in Soviet society for most of its existence.

Indeed, there is something both unsettling and exhilarating about the incessant emphasis on democratization articulated almost daily by Gorbachev and other CPSU leaders: unsettling because it obviously stems from a deep-seated critique of Soviet society's shortcomings in the realm of democracy; exhilarating because the CPSU seems determined to re-establish the link between socialism and democracy which had been seriously strained in the years since the working class first took power in 1917.

DEMOCRATIZING SOVIET LIFE

We have previously discussed the impact of "glasnost" (openness) on Soviet political and social life. But if democratization had gone no further than yet one more campaign for open debate and frank criticism—more wide-ranging and prolonged, perhaps, but still only a campaign—it would not yet constitute a revolutionary alteration in the Soviet Union's political culture. Socialist societies have had their periodic "self-criticism" and "hundred flowers" campaigns before; but, for the most part, these have been carefully orchestrated and of limited duration.

This time, however, something much more fundamental is being proposed. Glasnost is certainly a part of it. But Gorbachev's democratization goes far beyond a new policy of exposing malfeasance and debating public issues. Its ultimate aim is a whole new approach to individual rights and the rule of law more generally, genuinely free elections, and a climate in which previously circumscribed topics for public discussion—whether critiques of leaders, debates on policy, or new thinking on long-established socialist principles—will now be considered part of normal public discourse.

Aside from its direct political implications, this approach raises for reconsideration the traditional communist view of the relationship between bourgeois and proletarian democracy.

BOURGEOIS DEMOCRACY

Marxists have long emphasized—and correctly so—the distinct class bias and limitations of bourgeois democracy. The basic principle of bourgeois democracy is formal equality; that is, all individuals have the same legal rights. But bourgeois law does not—nor can it—take into account economic and social inequality and the inordinate real power which accrues to the holders of great wealth in determining the actual political, social and economic functioning of society. In this context, such democratic institutions

and processes as law, elections, individual political liberties, etc. all operate within definite class limitations.

Thus, the much-vaunted right of the people in bourgeois society to elect their public officials is qualitatively limited by two realities: the absence of a popular political check on economic decision-making by the owners of capital; and the enormous power of wealth to define the terms and control the terrain of popular elections. (These limits do not mean that the working class has no stake in the outcome of bourgeois elections or in engaging the bourgeoisie on the electoral terrain. Quite the contrary. The electoral process provides the working class with a means for restricting the bourgeoisie's political options and for beginning to develop its own political forms and initiative.)

Similarly, bourgeois democratic rights can and invariably are utilized by a deposed ruling class in the immediate aftermath of a revolution—a situation which the victorious revolutionary class ignores only at its peril. Thus Engels points out that "the proletariat needs the state...in order to hold down its adversaries." To which Lenin adds that after taking power, the working class must impose "a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists."

DOGMATIC APPLICATION

The thrust of Gorbachev's case for democratization does not take issue with these assessments of the limits and role of bourgeois democracy. Rather, what Gorbachev argues is that these quite legitimate theses on bourgeois democracy have been mechanically and dogmatically applied to developing socialist society. This has taken three forms.

One has been to downplay the significance of such matters as legal rights and elections *under socialism* as somehow suspect carry-overs from bourgeois democracy. A second has been to declare that socialism functions in a permanent state of political emergency requiring wartime restrictions in the political arena. And third has been the development of a framework equating political dissent and ideological nonconformity with "anti-Sovietism."

The hard truth Gorbachev is trying to drive home is that such views are actually distortions of Marxist theory and that the policies derived from them have had serious negative effects on socialism itself. "We profoundly realize now how much we lost in the past," says Gorbachev, "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. Some people have got nervous and warn us lest democracy should turn into chaos."

RULE OF LAW

A central and recurring theme in the campaign for democratization is the crucial importance of the rule of law. This emphasis is itself a telling indication of a somewhat casual approach to legality heretofore. In fact, what Gorbachev calls "legal nihilism" is the inevitable accompaniment to a system based on command methods, overcentralism and administration by injunction.

It is not hard to imagine the original justifications for viewing legality as a secondary consideration in implementing policy. Revolutions are, by definition, extra-legal, and revolutionaries become accustomed to making decisions less on the basis of legality than "political

necessity."

But it is also not hard to see how this entirely legitimate political concern can—and invariably does—turn into its opposite if left unchecked. After all, any leadership decision—including decisions on the self-perpetuation of leadership—may be deemed a "political necessity." And without collectively respected legal restrictions, enforceable rights of appeal, meaningful elections, etc., there is no mechanism for effectively challenging either political decisions or even patterns of corruption in leading bodies.

According to one leading Gorbachev supporter, Prof. Gavrill Popov, "In the years of the braking mechanism and stagnation (the latter portion of the Brezhnev period), law-enforcement bodies sometimes turned into bodies protecting the personal power of various local leaders."

Democratization has the capacity to unleash the human potential of socialism at a level never before approximated.

This is why Gorbachev declares that "democratization puts sharp emphasis on the observance of laws in our society." For when the observation of legality is widely understood to be a matter of convenience rather than a cornerstone of the socialist system—and when the decisions of the party leadership are projected as the infallible views of an infallible vanguard—sooner or later, socialism's capacity to grow, develop, shift course and correct itself cannot help but be undermined. What Gorbachev's critical summation of the Brezhnev period demonstrates is that this conclusion is not simply a theoretical proposition. It has been proven the hard way.

POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The problem, as Gorbachev notes, is not simply the existence of laws, but their observation. Most particularly, democratization requires an accountability to existing law *by all*—not simply by ordinary citizens but by public officials and party leaders. Does such an approach, which clearly places restraints on political leaders, replace working class politics with formal legality? This has often been the argument advanced on behalf of an operative political line which tends to view the observance of law—whether in a socialist society or a communist organization—as a somewhat selective matter.

But this cavalier approach to socialist legality conveniently drops out two fundamentally proletarian political principles. One is the absolute necessity for the "vanguard" to win the support of the masses for its politics. The other is that, unlike bourgeois law, socialist legality is the concentrated expression of proletarian social objectives.

Thus, freedom of expression, individual rights, a system of free elections, legal protections against the abuses of public officials are all a crucial line of defense by which the working class defends itself and socialism from commandism and arbitrariness. This, says Engels, is "the first condition of all freedom: that all officials should be responsible for all their official acts to every citizen before the ordinary courts and common law."

Clearly Gorbachev is not challenging the importance of centralism. Indeed, however much perestroika has captured the imagination of the Soviet masses, it appeared in political form as a "revolution from above"—the considered judgment of a new strain in Soviet communist leadership who became convinced that

radical economic reform and democratization were absolutely essential to the defense and further development of socialism.

But centralism detached from its democratic foundation has proven to be highly problematic. For one thing, it cultivates non-materialist assumptions of exclusive wisdom to those in leadership. For another, it opens the door to corruption, nepotism, cronyism and the almost inevitable tendency of those in leadership to view politics through the prism of their own subjective role in the system.

SOCIALIST ELECTIONS

The institutional cornerstone of that democratic foundation is a genuinely free election process. For it is only by way of such elections that the working class can impose political accountability on its leadership. By themselves, of course, elections do not guarantee democratic controls. An electorate kept in ignorance and deprived of a broad social vantage point exercises its political franchise in darkness. Similarly, a stage-managed electoral process with limited choices and totally predictable outcomes can hardly be deemed to be the kind of political check that will lead to accountability.

Ultimately, of course, an election is no more significant than the authority which accrues to the individual elected. Thus there can be no free election process unless the election itself is the socially recognized form through which questions of political power are settled.

Beyond the legal forms of democracy, however, is an indispensable ideological component, what CPSU Political Bureau member Alexander Yakovlev calls "the non-axiomatic character of social knowledge." Or, to put this another way: socialism must rid itself of a religious tendency to view its own laws of development as eternally fixed truths—and challenges to those "truths" as unacceptable heresy. "Many miscalculations could have been avoided," says Yakovlev, "if the structures of our society had been regarded—not only in word, but also in deed—as dynamic and developing, and not as frozen."

In this sense, democratization is not simply a "process" question. The corruption—ideological as well as material—characteristic of the stagnation perestroika is designed to overcome relies on both dogmatism and the absence of vital democratic forms for its survival. Thus, the dogmatic approach to theory—most particularly, that the prevailing institutions of socialism are the expression of unassailable Marxist-Leninist propositions—rules all challenges to the existing order of things as challenges to socialism itself. And in the absence of a democratic political culture, there is little recourse against such judgments—a state of affairs which exists not only in the minds of political philosophers but which, sad to say, appeared in the midst of socialist society.

Facing up to this reality squarely can, of course, be quite disconcerting to partisans of socialism. Nor can it be denied that the enemies of socialism will—as they already have—gleefully point to the current democratization process as proof that their longstanding negative judgments on Soviet society have now been confirmed out of the horse's mouth.

But this will only be a very temporary advantage for those seeking to make it such. For it is becoming increasingly apparent that the democratization of Soviet society—a process still in its earliest stages—has the capacity to unleash the human potential of socialist construction at a level never before approximated. And that will be a victory which will make the ideological embarrassments accompanying perestroika a minor footnote to the history of our time. □

(Next: The "new way of thinking" about war, peace and the international class struggle.)