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Forward From "Who Gets What, When, How"

Professor Cohen's important and original paper is the most serious attempt thus far to describe and illuminate an important dimension of Soviet political life which has long been apparent to informed Soviet citizens and sensitive foreign observers alike: the cleavage between those who wish changes in their society to render it freer, more just, and more capable of satisfying the material and spiritual needs of its peoples, and those who prefer to leave well enough alone. The neglect of this dimension in our scholarly literature is all the more remarkable when we recall how prominently it figures in our conversations and popular writings about current developments. By way of *samokritika* it behooves me to confess that we political scientists are largely to blame, and it is no accident that the corrective is being supplied by a political scientist who also works as a historian.

The dominant trend in the study of Soviet politics over the last fifteen or twenty years has been to assimilate it to the general discipline of political science, which has sought, increasingly since the beginning of the century, to "get behind" such simple truths as the conservative-reformist dichotomy in order to discover more complex truths about the interplay of interests, the articulation, aggregation, and processing of demands, the characteristics of elites, the political attitudes of different social groups, the structure of bureaucratic conflict, and so forth. This trend, I hasten to add, has in my view been generally desirable, and it has yielded considerable illumination; and I do not repent my own modest contributions to it. But it has its drawbacks, one of which is the tendency to ignore, or even scorn, conventional and simple truths, without seriously inquiring into their validity or considering that they *may* be more important, in the sense of structuring political action, than the more complex and recondite phenomena which we choose to study.

Having said this, let me immediately qualify it, and this constitutes my first comment on Professor Cohen's views.¹ Reasserting simple truths is not necessarily claiming that they are the only ones that matter. Of course, Cohen does not argue that all significant cleavages in the Soviet polity can be subsumed under the conservative-reformist conflict, and indeed the difficulties of doing so become abundantly apparent when one looks at particular cases, especially those for which relatively extensive information is available. For example, the opposition of educationists, scientists, and factory managers—which evidently contributed to the dilution of Khrushchev's educational reorganization proposals in

1. Some of the points made in these comments are argued more fully in T. H. Rigby, Archie Brown, and Peter Reddaway, eds., *Authority, Power and Policy in the U.S.S.R.* (London: Macmillan, forthcoming), chapter 1. Because of space limitations, arguments in the present essay are stated baldly and contrasts are drawn sharply. Moreover, there is no discussion of the growth of *technocratically* motivated and executed change in both East and West, which, as my colleague Dr. Robert F. Miller has pointed out to me, tends to blur some of the comparisons made here and to raise new problems about the reformist-conservative dichotomy.

1958—can scarcely be seen as *either* a conservative *or* a reformist front.² Public discussion of the issue, like the similarly organized discussions of other questions under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, revealed a multidimensional diversity of views, evidently reflecting the interests and concerns of different sections of society; it would be artificial to reduce these differences to reflection of a conservative-reformist continuum.³ This suggests that insofar as such “group” pressures influence policy, they do so by way of “conflict among a complex set of cross-cutting and shifting alliances of persons with divergent interests,” as Jerry Hough has put it.⁴ Moreover, if we suppose, with Paul Cocks, that Soviet policy flows not only from the clash of interest groups at intermediate levels but also from “factional politics and leadership conflict at the top,”⁵ we cannot easily demonstrate that a classification of leaders into “reformers” and “conservatives” makes more sense of what we know or can surmise about their policy positions than do, for example, their competition for resources, their institutional or local affiliations, or their personal ambitions, rivalries, and coalitions. To make such points is not to deny the importance of the conservative-reformist dichotomy, but to argue that, in attempting to map its manifestations, we must constantly be aware of other independent lines of cleavage, with which we must expect it to intersect in a complex, shifting, and sometimes contradictory way.

In positing an independent role for subjective—that is, attitudinal, ideological, psychological, and moral—factors, Cohen’s discussion of the conservative-reformist dichotomy challenges an assumption long common to both Marxism and to the mainstream of Western political and social science, namely, that, in general, political behavior is best explained in terms of the objective situation of groups and individuals in society or its political subsystem. Or in Harold Lasswell’s classic phrase, politics is basically about “who gets what, when, how.” In recent years, the explanatory adequacy of interest has suffered a considerable buffeting from the intellectual winds released by the “student revolution” of the late 1960s in the United States and Western Europe and by the events in Czechoslovakia; and it is somewhat ironic that it is precisely in this period that this explanation has threatened to become orthodoxy in Sovietology. As usual, we lag behind intellectual developments in general, and Professor Cohen’s paper, although seemingly “conservative” in its thrust, deals in fact a timely blow for the “reform” of our assumptions.

The structuring of politics around a polarity of forces is a phenomenon common enough in history, and the objective and subjective bases of such polarities have been as varied as those of patricians and plebeians, Blues and Greens, Guelphs and Ghibellines, and Whigs and Tories. But it is only in modern times

2. See Joel J. Schwartz and William R. Keech, “Group Influence and the Policy Process in the Soviet Union,” *American Political Science Review*, 62, no. 3 (September 1968): 840–51.

3. The best collection of studies illustrating the multidimensional character of differences in policy advocacy is still H. Gordon Skilling and Franklyn Griffiths, eds., *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

4. Jerry F. Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 23.

5. Paul Cocks, “The Policy Process and Bureaucratic Politics,” in Paul Cocks, Robert V. Daniels, and Nancy Whittier Heer, eds., *The Dynamics of Soviet Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 162.

that the characteristic political polarity has become the conservative-reformist one, no doubt owing to the great acceleration of socioeconomic change, which has made the *adaptation* of social arrangements, and not just their *maintenance*, a constant concern of government. The contrary but complementary demands of adaptation and maintenance have typically evoked a political symbiosis of forces supporting the status quo and those supporting innovation. This is manifest in the party systems of nearly all modern democracies and is epitomized by the British concept of "Her Majesty's Opposition." The symbiosis of complementary opposites, moreover, is apparent within parties as well as between them. The innovative forces tend to be dominated not by revolutionaries, who seek to sweep everything away, but by reformers, with a commitment to maintaining at least aspects of the existing order and seeking its improvement by piecemeal, if sometimes far-reaching, changes. The forces of the status quo, on the other hand, tend to be controlled not by reactionaries, who set their faces against any change and seek to reverse them when they occur, but by conservatives, who perceive that the existing order can best be maintained by improving it. It is important to realize that, contrary to some assumptions, this tendency toward "convergence" is no novelty in Western politics. After all, it was over a century ago that the British Conservatives, and not the Liberals, enfranchised the working class.

In this respect, Russia and the Soviet Union exhibit a sharp contrast: the forces defending the status quo have been dominated by reactionaries, not by conservatives, and those promoting change have been dominated by revolutionaries, not by reformers. The historical reasons for this have been discussed frequently and need not be rehearsed here. The conservative mode of maintaining by improving had the upper hand only during brief periods of weakness following the Crimean War and the 1905 Revolution. (The aftermath of Stalin's death presents a partial analogy, but this contains another dimension which I shall consider presently.) Characteristically, the greatest conservative leader of imperial Russia, P. A. Stolypin, was brought low by the joint efforts of reactionary and revolutionary extremists. The perpetuation of elements of Russian prerevolutionary political culture is perhaps partly responsible for the rigidity of the Soviet system, the relative strength of the reactionary as opposed to the conservative mode among defenders of the status quo, and the system's sluggishness in developing institutional devices which would allow conservative and reformist forces to compete effectively and in so doing to make their complementary contributions to society as a whole. Consequently—and this is admittedly a matter on which specialists may disagree—the Soviet Union continues to compare unfavorably with capitalist democracies in its capacity to meet simultaneously the demands of maintenance and adaptation to economic and technological change.

As I have indicated, however, there is another dimension to this problem, and it is one that raises difficult questions about how to define and identify "conservatism" and "reformism" in the Soviet context. In the capitalist West—for reasons deriving from particular economic, political, and ideological circumstances—changing the status quo has historically meant changing it in the direction of greater freedom, greater equality before the law and defense against official arbitrariness, the entrenchment and extension of rights, more effective political representation of nonelites, and a wider extension to them of the benefits of economic progress. This remains the case, even if there have always been critics to argue that gains in one of these directions may mean losses in another (espe-

cially freedom versus equality), and some would now hold that further changes of this nature are likely to prove counterproductive.

The situation, however, is quite different in a revolutionary despotism such as post-1917 Russia. Under Lenin as well as Stalin, change from preexisting conditions usually entailed the reduction of freedom and rights, weaker defenses against official arbitrariness, diminution of effective representation of nonelites and their maintenance at low economic consumption levels in the interests of goals formulated by the elite, even if such changes were imposed in the name of future achievement of their opposites. How then are we to classify retreats from these innovations, especially if they involve—as they frequently do—the preservation of elements of prior conditions or their restoration? Are such retreats considered conservatism or reform? This problem underlies the notorious inconsistencies and disagreement among scholars in defining “Left” and “Right” in established Soviet-type systems. A simple illustration may be in order: When Stalin relented in 1935 and conceded to the peasants their private plots, was this a victory for reformism (improving the existing system in the interests of the masses) or for conservatism (retaining elements of traditional peasant agriculture)? This is not simply a historical or semantic question, because it has many contemporary analogies whose evaluation bears on how the direction of sociopolitical change in the USSR is interpreted. In regard to the peasants, how does one explain the most recent developments in rural housing policy which reversed the previous trend of urban-type settlements, evidently with the interests of the private agricultural sector in mind?⁶ This may surely be characterized *both* as conservatism (preserving the old) *and* reformism (protecting peasant rights and conditions against attack from above).

The same, however, may be said about several of the changes which Professor Cohen cites as manifesting the conservatism of the Brezhnev regime as opposed to Khrushchev’s reformism. “Stability of cadres,” for example, which applies not just to the summit but to intermediate levels of Soviet officialdom, certainly has its conservative aspects. Insofar as it affords officials some security against arbitrary dismissal by their leaders, however, it must also be seen as a long overdue reform of Stalinist practices that were perpetuated under Khrushchev, and one which, if continued and extended, could have a beneficial influence on the conditions of life in the USSR. The same may be said of “law and order.” It has frequently been pointed out that a distinctive combination of arbitrariness and anarchy was one of the most salient features of the Stalinist system. To the extent that they have sought to rule more through law, to insist on due process, and to foster consistency in administration (and they have still far to go in these respects), the present leadership has pushed the reform of Stalinism further than Khrushchev did. It was he, after all, who enacted the “anti-parasite” laws, reintroduced the death penalty for “economic crimes,” and set up the extrajudicial “comradely courts.”

It might be argued that the definitional problem I have been discussing can be resolved by dividing Soviet history into a revolutionary phase (say up to the 1930s)—in which the basic features of the new society were established—and a

6. See “Chem vyzvano novoe napravlenie v sel'skom stroitel'stve,” *Radio Svoboda: Issledovatel'skii biulleten'*, no. 42 (October 20, 1978).

postrevolutionary phase—when efforts to preserve or change these features corresponded with “conservatism” and “reformism,” respectively, as these are understood in the West. But this is inadequate, as a further glance at the given examples makes clear. In Communist systems, the sequence reaction-conservatism-reformism-revolution is less a polar continuum than a circle, with reaction and revolution converging on one side and conservatism and reformism converging on the other. Revolutionary transformism at the expense of the rights, freedoms, and security of the population did not cease with the 1930s. Besides fostering genuine reforms, Khrushchev also engaged in transformism, through the policies referred to above and through other measures, such as his campaign against religion, his later assaults on the peasant private sector, and his arbitrarily imposed technical and administrative panaceas. As long as the Soviet Union is ruled by an elite which is not controlled by the ruled and retains some dedication to “building communism,” the likelihood of such further bouts of revolutionary transformism remains, and therewith the threat to genuine conservatism and genuine reformism.

For what such simplifications are worth, I would characterize the Khrushchev era as one of reformism merging into conservatism on one side and revolutionary transformism on the other; and the Brezhnev era as one of conservatism merging into reformism on one side and reaction on the other. Like Professor Cohen, I think the change offers better prospects for reformism in the future, but, judging from past experience, unqualified optimism is scarcely warranted.