The Origin of Soviet Political Pathology*

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ABSTRACT

The totalitarianism that characterized Soviet society for half a century had its source in the philosophical premise of Marxism that economic and social history is based upon objective facts and that these facts are obvious matters. It follows that the group that is entitled to exercise political power consists of those who know what these facts are; but as disagreements arise within that group, knowledge of the truth must ultimately be lodged in one person, whose pronouncements on any subject must then be accepted as correct. Conversely, the institutions of a free society rest on the belief that facts are elusive; uncertainty must therefore be tolerated.

As Soviet society begins to reshape itself, under the impetus of perestroika and in the atmosphere of glasnost, it seems important to achieve a clear understanding of what the sources of its problems have been. A rigorous analysis of the past may reveal not only negative lessons—what is to be avoided—but also positive ones, those that offer better possibilities for the future.

Perhaps the most common explanation for the misfortunes in the development of Soviet society has been "Stalinism." Stalin, it is argued, was a paranoid, cruel, and vain individual; once he attained dominance over the Communist Party, he was ruthless enough to murder all his opponents—sometimes after a show trial, sometimes not—and to stamp out every vestige of opposition to him both outside and inside the Party, and he then proceeded to create the infamous "cult of personality," in which his every word was proclaimed to be the infallible pronouncement of a genius. His ignorance and errors became state policy. Many of those who advocate this explanation point to the supposed differences between Stalin and Lenin. The latter was more intellectual, less suspicious; had he remained alive and at the head of the Party, Soviet history would have been very different.

Yet this explanation is not satisfactory, on several grounds. First, it attributes far too much historical importance to the personal characteristics of a single individual. Second, it overlooks the many similarities between Lenin and Stalin. Lenin's dominance within the Party was no less than Stalin's; and it was Lenin, after all, who dissolved the Constituent Assembly (because his Bolshevik faction did not have a majority in it), who destroyed all the opposition parties, and who authorized the...
establishment of the Cheka, the forerunner of the NKVD and the KGB. Thirdly, it fails to explain why Stalin’s successors—until Mikhail Gorbachev—behaved in much the same way that Stalin did, or at least failed to make any major changes in the structure of Soviet society. (Similarly, it fails to explain why Communist parties acted the same way everywhere when they came to power, whether they were under Stalin’s control or not.) Finally, this explanation does not clarify what enabled Stalin to do what he did. Whatever his personal characteristics may have been, why was he allowed to rise to a position of such power (despite the warnings about his personality that Lenin gave in his “testament”)? What was it that permitted such “distortions” to occur?

Marx’s Science

The answer, I submit, lies in a fundamental philosophical premise of Marxism. The reason that Lenin and then Stalin were able to assert such tremendous power is that they and their colleagues were faithful Marxists. Their actions, and those of their successors, far from being distortions, were logical corollaries of this fundamental premise, which pervades the entire body of Marx’s work, though only the briefest summary of it can be given here.

The premise in question has two parts, and it can be simply stated: Economic and social history is based upon objective facts, and objective facts are obvious matters.

This premise has been recognized before, under various names. One of these is “materialism”; the belief that the social world, like the physical, is to be explained not by “ideas” but by “objective reality.” Another is “science.” Marx—like many others, then and now—believed that science was the discovery of objective facts; and he further believed that he was developing a science of history: the gathering and ordering of the objective facts that described and explained the evolution of economic and social organization.

It is important to understand that “objective reality” did not consist merely of physical objects that can be perceived by the senses, as the word “materialism” might suggest. In his preface to The German Ideology, Marx wrote: “Once upon a time an honest fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this idea out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious idea, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water.” Of course, he was being sarcastic. What he was suggesting was that not only is water an objective fact, but so is the law of gravity.

But the laws of nature do not refer to any particular, concretely observed objects. Water, for example, is water whether it is in the Black Sea or a bathtub. Similarly, the law of gravity applies to all objects, regardless of their size, shape, color, composition, location, or other attributes. In other words, a law is a statement about one