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## Painting Socialism

Eyes were riveted to the reports of the momentous strike that had broken out in the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk, Poland on August 14, 1980. A burgeoning underground movement of intellectuals and workers, organized against the party-state, had been developing for some years. It suddenly burst into the open. Long-time labor activist Lech Wałęsa scaled the fence into the shipyards to lead the public negotiations with the government. Since the strikers wouldn't go to Warsaw, so serious was this threat that the Deputy Prime Minister came to the strikers. He capitulated to the demands of the workers in the hope that the strike would be snuffed out and the strike leaders could then be repressed. That's how it had happened in the past, but not this time. The strikers held firm and their actions spread across the shipyards and into other industries. *Solidarność* quickly became a class-wide national movement that sought to build an autonomous civil society under working-class leadership, but without attacking the state directly. This was both a pragmatic decision for fear of courting a military intervention by the USSR, as had happened in Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968, and a political decision based on the belief that any engagement with the state would compromise the movement. As Jadwiga Staniszkis (1984) wrote, this Polish revolution was a “self-limiting revolution.”

I prepared to go to Poland, reading everything I could, learning Polish and securing leave. But academic life has its own rhythm that bears little relation to the world beyond. By the time I was ready to go, General Jaruzelski had declared martial law (December 13, 1981), and *Solidarność* went underground. My chance to study the first societal-wide working-class revolt in history had evaporated, but my interest in Eastern Europe was irreversible. It was then that I had the good fortune to meet the dissident Hungarian sociologist Iván Szelényi, author with George Konrád of *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* – one of the great theoretical treatises on state socialism, which would profoundly shape my own understanding. Iván had recently been recruited to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where I was also headed in the expectation that my career at Berkeley was about to be terminated with the denial of tenure.

Hearing of my interest in Eastern Europe, Iván spontaneously invited me to join him and his wife in their return to Hungary. He had been in exile in Australia since 1976. The summer of 1982 would be his first homecoming. I gratefully and enthusiastically accepted. This first visit behind the “iron curtain” proved to be a most exhilarating experience – ten days that shook my life. In Hungary I discovered a thriving socialism and, with it, a thriving sociology. Despite our opposed views of Marxism, I had much in common with a lively cohort of young sociologists interested in labor markets and work organization, and in the famous Hungarian economic reforms.

Polish Solidarity presented a major anomaly to a Marxist understanding of the world: the revolutionary movement of the working class was supposed to happen under capitalism, not state socialism. History throws up lots of surprises for Marxism and this was one I was determined to pursue. With Poland blocked off as a research site, and with the help of Iván and his colleagues, I set about planning fieldwork in Hungary. The puzzle became more complicated. If before the question was “why did

the first working-class revolution take place in Eastern Europe?” now it had an additional level, why did it take place in Poland and not in Hungary, especially given the dramatic, albeit short-lived, 1956 revolt in Hungary? I naturally turned to the politics of production and asked two questions: first, what was the distinctive feature of socialist production and second, what was the class consciousness of its workers.

I needed to enter the hidden abode of the socialist workplace – one of the most protected sites of state socialism, off limits to almost any researcher, let alone a sociologist from the US. In 1983 I took off for Hungary for six months, ready to take intensive language lessons and hoping to find work in some factory. As it turned out, learning Hungarian proved to be far harder than acquiring work, which – with the help of friends – I found in a champagne factory on a collective farm and in a small textile shop on an agricultural cooperative. Getting a job in Hungary’s industrial heartland proved to be more challenging. It was only through the ingenuity of fellow Hungarian sociologist János Lukács that I was able to land a job the following summer of 1984 in a machine shop in Eger’s Csepel Auto factory, producing gearboxes for the famous Ikarus buses.

The technology was the same as I had operated at Allis, and Haraszti had operated at Red Star. We were all paid on a piece rate system. At Csepel Auto, however, we did not work at Haraszti’s level of intensity. When I arrived in 1984 the early experiments in economic reform had passed and Red Star had actually disappeared. I became focused on comparing my experiences at Csepel Auto with Allis-Chalmers. We were running similar machines and paid on a piece rate system, but there were some crucial differences.

At Csepel *employment* was guaranteed but not *earnings*, whereas the reverse held at Allis – earning guarantees without employment security. At Csepel we received a pay that corresponded to how much we produced as

individuals. If a machine broke down or there was a shortage of materials, our wages suffered. At Allis our wages might also suffer, but there was an acceptable minimum below which wages did not fall. The difference in the piece rate system explained how Haraszti found himself running two machines at once – at Red Star that was the norm required for a living wage. If managers at Allis had cut the piece rates in two – doubled the work intensity – we would simply have worked to rule and received the minimum wage.

Most surprising, however, was that production at Csepel seemed more organized than at Allis, refuting conventional wisdom that capitalist firms were more efficient than socialist firms. As a mark of inefficiency, unfinished engines piled up in the aisles at Allis – the sort of thing you'd expect in a stereotypical socialist factory, but this did not happen at Csepel. More generally, at Csepel there was a more flexible work organization, an adaptation to the shortage economy – shortages of materials and personnel, unreliable machinery and so forth – that characterized the socialist economy just as surpluses and lay-offs characterize the capitalist economy. We see how the different economies – market versus administered – led to different conditions of production and different modes of regulation – that is, different regimes of production: hegemonic versus bureaucratic.

But this didn't explain why workers were more likely to engage in revolutionary action under state socialism than under advanced capitalism. To explore this question I investigated the conditions at the heart of the socialist working class – in the Lenin Steel Works (LKM), at that time the biggest steel complex in Hungary. For me to enter the Lenin Steel Works was nothing short of a miracle – once again made possible by the elaborate networking and negotiation of my colleague and collaborator, János Lukács.

Concerned to impress me but also to keep an eye on me, the managers at Lenin Steel Works installed me at the heart

of production – tending the great 80-ton converter where molten pig iron is turned into steel under high-pressure oxygen at a temperature of 1,700 degrees centigrade. I was a member of the October Revolution Socialist Brigade – a brigade of furnace men who shoveled in the alloys and tested the quality of the steel. Although this job was more dangerous than any of my previous ones – an overhead crane could tip and drop molten steel on my head and I would be burnt alive – I, at least, could not easily endanger the lives of others. It was a relief to be working in the same brigade week in week out, even though I never got used to the shift rotation every three days.

The Combined Steel Works – as it was called – had been equipped with the latest technologies from Sweden, Japan, and Austria, but they did not always work well together. Here was another reason why the immediate labor process required flexible organization: to adapt to the misaligned technologies. Management, however, would not give up its authority, continually appropriating control from the shop floor, often with disastrous results.

During the period 1985–88, I worked at LKM for about a year altogether, exploring not just the organization of work but the consciousness of workers. Unlike capitalism, where exploitation was invisible to workers, managers, and capitalists alike, state socialism made it visible for all to see, orchestrated through the combined agency of management, trade union, and party, all extensions of the state at the point of production. The party, supported by management and trade union, organized rituals of collective affirmation. On one such occasion they collectively condemned our interim report that emphasized the key role of the shop floor operators and the problematic intervention of management. We were told to do the research again and we happily complied, only to come up with the same conclusions.

One of my favorite moments emerged during an extra, unpaid “communist” (Saturday) shift to clean up the steel mill in preparation for the visit of the Prime Minister.

We were ordered to paint the “slag drawer” in a bright yellow and green. This struck us as a rather absurd task, given the metallic dust that settled everywhere. Orders are orders, but I could only find a black paintbrush. So I started to paint our shovels – the most important equipment of the furnace man – black. The supervisor came roaring over, asking me what the hell I was doing. Mustering up as much innocence as I could, I declared that I was building socialism. My fellow workers from the October Revolution Socialist Brigade cracked up, but the supervisor was furious. Then the brigade jokerster – called ET because years of drinking made him look like ET, his skin bulging and sagging under his eyes – piped up, “Misi, Misi. You are not *building* socialism, you are *painting* socialism, and *black* at that.”

“Painting socialism” was a metaphor for the party-state declaring socialism to be just, egalitarian, and efficient when workers experienced the opposite – injustice, inequality, and inefficiency. Workers held the party-state accountable for failing to live up to its own ideology. In turning the values of socialism against actually existing socialism, workers were, despite themselves, announcing a commitment to socialism and its goals. Or so I thought. When socialism dissolved in 1989 I was expecting – wishful thinking as it turned out – workers to mobilize for an alternative democratic socialism. There were small groups who tried to resuscitate the worker councils of 1956, but for the most part workers had given up on socialism, thinking that only capitalism could solve the irrationalities of the shortage economy, not realizing that capitalism comes with its own irrationalities.

Throughout my time in Hungary, I was bent on explaining why you might get a working-class movement like *Solidarność* in state socialism but not in advanced capitalism. Here my explanation followed a Marxist analysis of the relationship between work organization (relations in production) and the system of planning (relations of production). Under state socialism, the

central appropriation and redistribution of surplus led to a shortage economy and, thus, requiring relative autonomy in the workplace. However, this same *bureaucratic regime* also required ideological justification, a process of *legitimation* that became the mainspring of the critique of state socialism – a critique that could spill over into collective organization, and thereby invite political repression. Production under advanced capitalism does not require legitimation because exploitation is hidden and the hegemonic regime of production organizes consent to the rule of management without direct intervention of the state. Capitalism is a peculiar mode of production in that the economy operates with relative autonomy from the external realm of politics. Legitimacy is necessary not to reproduce the relations of production but to forestall or contain mobilized challenges to the social order that are actually few and far between.

But why did the Solidarity Movement appear in Poland and not in Hungary? In both places exploitation was transparent, requiring legitimation that led to the questioning of socialism on its own terms. In both economies, shortages called forth autonomous initiative from workers. So where did the difference lie? Here I was compelled to look beyond the workplace to understand the conditions under which class consciousness forged in production gave rise to class formation, how class *in* itself became a class *for* itself. In Poland there was an embryonic civil society, protected by the Roman Catholic Church, that allowed workers to develop a collective dissenting voice, whereas Hungary's embryonic civil society was dominated by a market economy, or what was called a *second economy*, through which workers advanced their individual interests through second jobs and cooperatives. They became socialist entrepreneurs rather than an organized political force. In this way I tried to explain the instability of state socialism, and why opposition to state socialism might take the form of a social movement in Poland rather than Hungary.

My research led me to criticism of both social science and Marxism. Social scientists, economists, political scientists, and sociologists, were guilty of a false comparison – comparing an idealized version of capitalism with the dysfunctional realities of state socialism. American sociology had condemned “communism’s” undemocratic ways, its inefficiencies and mendacities, on the implicit and unexamined assumption that advanced capitalism is democratic, efficient, and transparent. If the latter deviated from the ideal, this was of minor importance, easily ironed out. Postwar sociology had become an anti-communist crusade that celebrated the US as the promised land and condemned the Soviet Union and China as totalitarian enemies. My intention, and that of others, was to rectify the balance by comparing like with like – production in capitalism with production under socialism. Furthermore, it was important to see how ideology played a different role in the two systems and, above all, not to mistake ideology for sociology.

Marxism was guilty of the reverse sin. *Soviet* Marxism was a crude ideology designed to create an illusory view of state socialism by obscuring its class character and its irrationalities while *Western* Marxism too easily dismissed the Soviet Union and its satellites as a form of statism (or capitalism) unrelated to socialism. Western Marxists thereby avoided dealing with the realities of state socialism; instead they postulated a utopian *idealization* of socialism against the dystopian *realities* of capitalism. I opposed this creation of an unexplicated socialist utopia with which to condemn capitalism, and instead committed myself to exploring actually existing socialism as a sometimes monstrous and always unsatisfactory form of society, riddled with its own contradictions. To its detriment, Marxism rarely probed this extraordinary attempt to build socialism on earth, preferring to leave it in heaven. However, to be a science is to confront and deal with inconvenient truths.