



## The future of socialism in Eastern Europe

Michael Burawoy

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# *The Future of Socialism in Eastern Europe\**

*Michael Burawoy*

While Imre Pozsgay and Rezso Nyers<sup>1</sup> were threatening to split the Hungarian Communist Party at a meeting in the town of Keszket, at the high-class Berkeley City Club the future of socialism in Eastern Europe was being debated. This architectural landmark of California, designed by the famous Julia Morgan, had readied its magnificent Olympic size marble swimming pool to drown our memories of socialism. Assembled in this unlikely venue were mainly academics with a sprinkling of Hungarians - Social Democrats, Free Democrats, journalists, émigrés, thoroughly independent intellectuals and entrepreneurs pursuing their joint ventures. There was a lighter and less flamboyant sprinkling of Poles, Bulgarians and Yugoslavs. If the size of the audience was any indication, something important was happening - here or Eastern Europe one wasn't sure. But what?

At the front facing the audience were the panelists - an American political scientist, a Hungarian Free Democrat and a Polish sociologist. Our political scientist harangued the crowd with his claim that civic freedom was a greater threat to Leninist regimes than ethnic mobilization. It was a difficult claim to sustain after peaceful Soviet elections and with Soviet tanks still on the streets of Tbilisi. Regardless of this he charged ahead. Then it was the turn of the sociologist, who proclaimed Poland post-socialist. Electoral reform and the marketization of the economy were lifting the shackles of communism from Poland's back. What would come next, what this

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post-socialism was, he didn't exactly know. Leaving the past behind seemed most important. And then it was the turn of the Free Democrat, who spoke of the coming of democracy in Hungary, like the second coming of Christ. Hungary was destined to become like Germany or Austria. The end of communism seemed as natural as was its permanence just a year ago. The expanding opposition and the burgeoning social movements made changes irreversible.

This astounding unreality met its nemesis in the afternoon when a distinguished economist treated us to a few figures about the real world - within which Hungary with its escalating debt has to survive. Market euphoria gave way to a dim understanding that for a small country like Hungary to project itself into the international market dominated by giants would only court economic disaster and, with it, political catastrophe. So commentators painted scenarios of Latin American style dictatorship: from corporatism to Peronism.

But socialism? We heard nothing about that. Forget it. That's already history. Long since buried, along with the working class. But to bury the past we have to have short memories, memories that don't even go back eight years to the first true working class revolt in history - the Polish Solidarity movement. Yes, socialism, if we may call it that, was imposed on Eastern Europe but it nevertheless did create a distinctive, powerful working class. It created a working class that no longer understood the meaning of persistent unemployment, that had access to basic medical care, social services, cheap housing. However hard life was, a certain minimal security of existence was guaranteed. People did not starve however deprived of formal political representation.

Socialism created a working class which was cynical, always ready to criticize socialism for not living up to its ideals. But let us not confuse the criticism of reality for the criticism of ideals. Working class ideals of social, economic and physical security were firmly planted by a regime that continually proclaimed itself as representative of the working class. It is in terms of these promises that workers express hostility to bureaucratic ineptitude, waste, injustice, corruption and inefficiency. Thus, if there was socialism anywhere, they said, then it was in East Germany where production was efficient, where apartments were affordable and spacious, where wages were not so low as to require *maszek*<sup>2</sup> work, where the pension of the enterprise director was the same as the janitor's. That Hungary fell short, and horribly so was, to be sure, due to the system, to socialism, to the party. But one shouldn't mistake this for any attachment to

capitalism or even democracy. The ideals workers embrace are antithetical to capitalism and they know it. Workers mean what they say when they wearily repeat that "Socialism is fine in theory but it doesn't work in practice." That's not a call for capitalism.

To be sure in the beginning (beginning with the 1968 reforms) the market opened up opportunities for workers in the second economy, to build their own houses, to earn extra income from their plots, to sell their skills, to participate in GMKS.<sup>3</sup> For considerable effort and at great cost to individual health and family life, people were able to improve their standard of living, to buy consumer goods, from stereos to cars, from television sets to videos. All this extra effort presupposed an open market in consumer goods made available by international loans. Such a consumer driven economy might make up for some of the inadequacies of the state sector but it did not rectify its problems.

Once hooked on the market bait, the line was drawn in with workers at its end. It began with inflation so that workers had to work harder and harder to maintain the same standard of living. Social benefits lagged behind increases in the cost of living and so increasingly workers and peasants were thrown back on family resources. Then followed an income tax, introduced almost overnight. Oh, yes, there was a lot of public discussion but what did that change? In the first year incomes would be increased so that no one noticed they were being taxed. But in subsequent years? And what about taxes on GMK and other extra work? Abundance remained but at a cost: prices increased by 30% a year. Workers found themselves expending more and more effort to maintain a falling standard of living. They had been running up the down escalator. In the beginning they had been able to battle forward and upward but now the escalator has so accelerated that they are piling up at the bottom.

From there they see that some are perched on top of the escalator, however precariously. The doctors, the furriers, the entrepreneurs and the traders hide behind the shutters of their multi-storied homes. The steelworkers in Dunaujvaros, in Ozd and Miskolc - once the heroes of socialism - know only too well what the market means and indeed what it may mean. Who now enrolls in the technical high schools for heavy industry - not the sons but the daughters of steelworkers, desperate to get any certificate for subsequent employment. The secret and the promise of reforms are out. They mean deteriorating conditions of life, an intensified scramble for existence. Un-

employment looms heavily - something unimaginable just two years ago. Who said markets would bring freedom?

A political party means nothing to them if its economic program will dramatize inequality and pit worker against worker. The Hungarian government knows this or it would not have prevaricated over the closure of Ozd. The socialist government knows what it has created - a working class that will tolerate only so much insecurity. Hungary is neither England nor the US where closing down a steel mill is as natural as eating paprikas csirke, where workers and capitalists alike accept the logic of profit, of the marketplace. In state socialist Hungary, enterprise shut-downs court a battle between classes - a potentially bloody dénouement.

So why the astounding lack of realism on the part of our three panelists? Political scientists, of course, usually have their heads in the clouds or in the corridors of power. They are not interested in the power of the governed but in the decisions of the governors. They are devotees of visible not silent power. They are easily surprised by upheavals, particularly class upheavals. Being rabidly anti-communist they possess a trained incapacity to recognize classes in their own "free societies" and by extension in the "communist world" as well. They will go to any length to deny class, adopting in its stead such categories as citizen, civil society, state, corporatism, ethnicity or nationalism.

But why the unholy alliance between our American political scientist on the one side and the Polish sociologist and the Free Democrat<sup>4</sup> on the other? Is it because by adopting Western categories they will feel more Western, more anti-communist? Living in patently class societies surely they know better. From the sociologist we hear that the inspiration of Solidarity came from independent intellectuals and the Vatican. Really? Two weeks earlier he defended the thesis that Poland is a peasant society, presenting this as the only alternative to Poland understood as a nation of intellectuals. Even the communists have it worked out better with their two and a half classes.<sup>5</sup>

What sociological wand is this that has caused the working class to disappear from the Polish social structure? What revisionist history is this that blots out the self-creation of Solidarity by its members whether in Gdansk or Szczecin, whether in the Nova Huta steelworks, the Ursus tractor factory, or the textile mills of Lodz, whether over the confrontation in Bydgoszcz, or the resistance of Silesian miners. Have we already forgotten who Solidarity's leaders were? Walesa, Gwiazda, Bujak, Jurczyk, Rulewski, Kowalewski were all

from the working class. From the beginning Solidarity had a very uneasy relationship to independent intellectuals. If they inspired, they inspired from the rear.

From the Free Democrat, we hear that workers are silent because they are frightened. Frightened? What of the unsung proletarian heroes of 1956, of 1968, of 1970, 1976, and 1980? Were they frightened? Has our Free Democrat repressed his excommunication into the working class, where he was isolated because he was a Budapest intellectual? Is it not possible that intellectuals have interests at odds with the working class? Is it not possible that this revisionist history of Solidarity as inspired by intellectuals is also an expression of such a class interest? Can one be surprised that within the ranks of Solidarity there is now mounting momentum against the leadership, cosying up with the Polish government around the table with its army of independent intellectuals?

In Hungary the Free Democrats and the Social Democrats conduct their debates over the heads of the working class as if its interests were a mere appendage of their own. Nothing could be further from the truth. Workers are not flocking to the opposition because they are more interested in their daily bread and fair compensation for their labors. Debate, typewriters, newspapers, democracy mean little to them if they don't give them greater control over their own lives, if they don't mean, for example, independent trade unions for them. Independent trade unions exist for scientists and intellectuals - but their independence is effectively independence from the working class. After all too many unions will interfere with the free play of the market.

Still our Free Democrat thinks it is only a matter of time before workers will overcome their fear and see the light. He cannot conceive of the working class with interests fundamentally opposed to his own. Here are two classes both opposed to the party state but also opposed to each other, having different agendas for the future. Our Free Democrat should take more seriously his joke about workers' reaction to the multiplication of parties, "Now we will have to pay for seven party chiefs not just one." This is not just passive cynicism; it bares the seeds of a distinct class consciousness. Today it expresses itself as negativity, tomorrow perhaps as positivity, a commitment to an alternative vision of the future. And the day after?

Yes, the working class is silent. As of yet, it has not made its aspirations felt in political terms. It occasionally expresses its resentment in outbreaks of strikes. Even that is new. When Solidarity took

to the streets and paralyzed the Polish economy, Hungarian workers shuddered. Those lazy Poles, they think they will get meat on their table by striking. We Hungarians know that meat only comes from hard work. That was true in 1981 but now hard work brings less and less meat. As the second economy dries up or is taxed out of existence, as inflation empties their pockets earlier and earlier each month, Hungarian workers might begin to wonder how to express their anger. To be sure there is no Workers' Defense Committee, or Rabotnick, or the unifying language of Catholicism but workers can create their own solidarity. It wouldn't be the first time in history. Working class revolts have occurred with remarkable regularity in Eastern Europe, to be precise every twelve years: 1956, 1968, 1980. 1992 is barely three years off. A weak and divided state is an invitation to rumblings from below.

Neither Free Democrats nor Social Democrats, neither Polish sociologists nor American political scientists can bury socialism. In the final analysis only workers can do that and they may not want to. This may be the end of socialism but it may also be the beginning! It certainly won't be decided in the Berkeley City Club.

#### NOTES

1. To avoid a split in the Party the leading position of General Secretary gave way to a four member Presidential Council in June of 1989. Pozsgay and Nyers are both members.
2. Work in the informal economy.
3. Self-organized worker collectives.
4. The Free Democrats are an opposition party, comprised mainly of intellectuals, that is committed to Western-style parliamentary democracy and the resurrection of the market.
5. The two and a half classes are peasants, workers, and the social stratum of intellectuals.