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Two Faces of Socialism? Czechoslovakia and Cuba

The expression “socialism” appears throughout history and to the present day in various contexts, in different countries and continents. Unfortunately this terminology could be misleading, making it seem that all forms of socialism are one and the same. Are there, in fact, significant differences between the Latin American and European versions of socialism, or are the two comparable?

DEFINING SOCIALISM

The term “socialism” can refer to several related things and it has been used differently in different times and places by very diverse groups. There is an accordance between them in the roots, however, which we can find in the struggle of the working class of the nineteenth and twentieth century for a society in which equality would be guaranteed and where the economic system would serve the whole society and not only a small part of it.

Socialism designates a social and economic doctrine, as well as a political movement inspired by this doctrine and the system that arises by the application of this doctrine in society. In some cases, it also designates a state and for some groups (Marxists) it means one of the stages of the evolution of society.

In many countries in contemporary Europe, political parties named “socialist” occupy an important position, forming the government or constituting an important opposition party.

Centrism is a common concept: they advocate state ownership or control of the fundamental means of production and distribution of wealth. The transformation of the existing capitalist society is to be achieved by peaceful, democratic and parliamentary means, respecting personal ownership and human rights and liberties.

For many inhabitants of Europe, however, socialism relates to communism. This is because in Central and Eastern Europe the political system was changed from democracy to “people’s democracy” or socialism (usually it also was reflected in the name of the state) after World War II, under the rule of the Soviet Union. This change was forced, did not respect the principles of democracy and was made by the Communist Party of the country.

1. Life in Communist Countries in Europe

Although each of the Communist countries had its own specifics, there are some common features that were shared by all of them. These are: a centrally planned economy, a Marxist-Leninist ideology, single-party rule and restrictions on individual freedom.

To get a better understanding into the life in these countries we will take as an example Czechoslovakia, where in 1948 the Communist Party gained power by a coup d’état and introduced a totalitarian regime with the assistance of the USSR that lasted until the end of the 1980s.

1. NATIONALISATION

According to communist doctrine, socialism is the transition-period in the evolution of a society that succeeds capitalism and precedes communism. Therefore all should serve

the installation of a classless society of abundance and freedom, in which all people enjoy equal social and economic status.

But forty years of experience have shown that the goal was rather to keep the power and to obtain economic benefits for a small group of people who were leading the ruling Communist Party.

One of the tools to achieve equality was the nationalisation of private property. Factories, lands, stores, but also buildings and flats were expropriated without compensation.

By nationalisation the whole economy was put into the fist of the state, which established a centrally planned economy. The plan (made always for a five-year period) was prepared mostly by officers who often created it following coefficients and not real needs and possibilities. It was an inflexible system that led on one hand to a shortage of goods and on the other to their excess.

2. CENTRALLY PLANNED EMPLOYMENT

The state guaranteed social security to the whole population (except those whom the regime set outside the society): each inhabitant was guaranteed free education and medical assistance, as well as (nominal) employment.

This also had a negative impact on the personal profile as well as on the morale of the people. For example, as education and employment were planned by the state, it meant that the schools allowed for each specialisation a certain number of students for which the state could guarantee employment. Thus the possibility of free choice for an area of studies (and sometimes also of the grade of education) and later of the employer was limited.

The artificial maintenance of employment of the whole population caused moral decadence, because the work that could be done by one person was sometimes carried out by many, because everyone had to have a job even though there was not enough work for so many people.

For most employees, the salary was fixed and by making more effort it could be increased only slightly, which often also influenced the employee’s morale negatively. The communist economy guaranteed for the majority of the population everything that is necessary for life, but giving no possibility to acquire more.

If we consider that Czechoslovakia was one of the most economically developed countries in Europe before 1948, we have to acknowledge that communism meant for the majority of the population an aggravation of the living standard. Naturally this did not touch the leaders of the Communist Party, who had special access to everything and whose living standard was incomparable with that of the ordinary people.

3. IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

From a political point of view, political institutions were formally maintained (parliament and government), but in the Constitution the leading position of the Communist Party was fixed, which gave it a complete and unchallenged power.

In Czechoslovakia, for example, for an apparent maintenance of the pluralistic system there were three parties, but the elections were predetermined in such a way that these parties gained each time a previously fixed number of deputies, the names of whom had to be approved by the Communist Party.

Another hallmark of the communist states was the mandatory involvement of the mass of the population in political life. Many had to join the Communist Party in the hope of a normal life or a possibility of progress in one's career.

Children and youth enrolled in the only existing youth organisation, also controlled by the Party. Following these controls and castigations, participation in state elections was almost full and total.

The Marxist-Leninist ideology limited the human personality to the pure material part. Religion was considered an enemy of humankind, which led to its persecution. Although outwardly freedom of religion was declared, all religious activities except the official ones (liturgy) were prohibited, monasteries were closed, and many bishops, priests and monks were imprisoned.

Many practising Christians were also jailed. Later on the regime confined itself to considering them unreliable, so they could not work in the field of education and could not hold directorial positions.

The ideology of the state was present in every field of common and professional life. It began with the schools of all grades: apart from the obligatory political classes, textbooks in most subjects contained highly ideological content.

It continued through the mass media: all newspapers, television and broadcasts were controlled by the Communist Party. Also in art, there was severe censorship, and those who did not accept Party regulations were excluded from the official art.

And it ended with the public space: inside and outside of buildings there were wall-gazettes and billboards with texts like "*Lenin lives forever!*" or "*With the Soviet Union forever and never otherwise!*"

4. PERSECUTION

The persecution and control did not concern only the Church. In some sense, everyone was watched. The *Security Service* (_TB) officially had in every office, factory or company its own agent who was delegated to control and inform about the employees.

Also individuals were forced to inform the _TB about the people in their neighbourhood, about their activities and thoughts. This constant control and persecution of "enemies of the regime" led to distrust and fear, as the methods of interrogation and jail were often marked by torture and sometimes even death.

Those who openly disagreed with the regime were persecuted in different ways. The most simple and in the last period the most frequent was to make unpleasant the life of the individual and of her or his family.

It took the form of following, frequent examination of the flat by the police, bugging the telephone, or by making impossible the studies of the children in higher education. Another means was to discharge or to let intellectuals be employed only in manual work (university professors working as stokers).

In graver cases arrest, torture and even execution followed, and mainly in the fifties abductions were not rare either.

Restrictions on individual freedom were present also in the area of travelling to foreign countries. At the beginning, this was completely forbidden; later on trips to other socialist countries were permitted. To non-socialist countries only a fixed number of people from each region could travel each year. The number and the people were decided by the Security Service.

II. Socialism in Latin America

Although the highest number of states with communist regimes was in Europe, this phenomenon did not bypass Latin America either. Here its main base, still today resisting inner and outer pressures, is Cuba, led by Fidel CASTRO.

1. THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

Even though it was a closely attached satellite state of the USSR from 1968 until the end of the eighties, the original direction of the Cuban revolution (1952–68) was very different. Originally, it tried to introduce its own model of social arrangements and to avoid dependency on the great world powers, first of all the United States. Therefore it gained a big response and excitement in the countries of Latin America as well as among the youth of Europe.

After 1959, when Fidel CASTRO and the Cuban revolution came to power through partisan warfare, it made some very important steps to enforce its intentions. In the framework of agricultural reform, the fields of the landlords were nationalised and the properties of American, British and other foreign companies were expropriated.

This, together with the strong anti-American propaganda of the revolution, caused the imposition of a blockade on commerce with Cuba by the United States. As a consequence, Cuba began a close economic cooperation with the Soviet Union, which later on expanded also to the field of politics and military.

After the nationalisation of the property of international corporations, the possessions of Cuban businesspeople were expropriated, and in 1961 CASTRO openly declared the building of socialism.

In accordance with this orientation, new social and economic reforms began which strengthened the role of the state. There was also a campaign for literacy, whose aim, however, was not only teaching the population how to write and read but also to spread propaganda of Marxism and militant anti-Americanism.

CASTRO considered the Cuban revolution so successful that he tried to "export" it and to install it also in other Latin American countries. He delivered weapons and provided training and economic help to guerrillas in Venezuela, Colombia, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The international and economic policy of the regime led to a total collapse of the economy, which obliged CASTRO in 1968 to resign his independent policy and his own idea of the revolution. Therefore, in this period he accepted the political and economic model dictated by the USSR and integrated Cuba into the group of Communist countries.

Cuban family businesses and the property of small farmers were nationalised. The leading position of the Communist Party in the state was ensured by the Constitution. The economy was planned for five-year periods.

The grade of interference of the state into the life of the citizens increased to such an extent that some of the laws reached bizarre forms (e.g. a law against laziness). The level of poverty and a regime that has persecuted every manifestation of criticism have caused a massive illegal emigration of Cubans.

2. REFORMS IN CUBA

In the eighties, Fidel CASTRO denied the reforms of Mikhail GORBACHEV, but the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet economy affected the very weak economy of Cuba dramatically.



If CASTRO wanted to save his regime from a total economic bankruptcy, he had to accept some reforms which were not in accordance with the principles of Communism. Therefore he allowed, for example, the running of private restaurants, carrying out different types of services, and owning foreign currency (earlier it was castigated by many years of prison).

Recently he started to support the expansion of tourism. As a result of all these reforms, the economic situation has improved slightly, but its price was letting go in a certain way of the principle of equality. The difference between the group who has access to the profits from the tourism sector and the one who does not have is deepening.

3. OTHER COUNTRIES IN LATIN AMERICA

Apart from Cuba, there appeared various forms of socialism in Latin America (e.g. in Nicaragua, Chile, Bolivia, Guatemala, Peru, etc.) Some of them even declared themselves as "the third way, between capitalism and socialism." Unlike in Europe, most of these had their roots in the grave economic and difficult political situations of their respective countries, and in the low living standard of large parts of the population.

For their formation, it was also important that the economy (and often the politics as well) of these countries were depending on American capital to a high degree. So the socialists promised that nationalisation would bring not only social justice, but also independence from the United States.

The incapability to resolve economic problems in the short term, the strong anti-American policy, and the fear of Marxism that they inspired, mostly led to quick ends for these governments.

SOCIALISM IN LATIN AMERICA AND EUROPE

Comparing socialism in different regions, we find that it cannot be classified only according to its belonging to one continent or another. There are some characteristics that are typical for a specific continent, for Europe or Latin America, but there are also others that are intercontinental because they are bound to a certain definition of the term "socialism".

Similarities thus exist, yet there seems to be a major difference between Latin American-type socialism and the European cases. This key difference between the Cuban case (as well as other socialist experiments in Latin America) is that there revolutionary movements mostly overthrew dictatorships and then implemented an alternative model. It was a matter of domestic politics. In the cases of most Central and Eastern European countries, however, communism was imposed from outside.

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Lucas VEIRA SAND

Putting Recent Argentine Economic History into Context

"Send this loaded galleon to Seville,
dispatch that steamer to Southampton,
pay the debt!"

When walking Buenos Aires' downtown streets on a busy Friday morning, it is not hard to hear businesspeople talking about Latin America (L.A.) and Western Europe (W.E.) being worlds apart, with different histories, cultures and — of course — living standards. But I believe W.E. and L.A., though not always on the same track, are economically integrated, as they became five hundred years ago.

AN EVERLASTING SOURCE OF RESOURCES

As it is known, in the XVIth century huge changes were touching human life in many spheres, e.g. sciences, arts, politics, economics, theology. The European arrival on the American continent was not just a colourful tale about two big groups of cultures meeting.

In the economic sphere, it became the miracle of finding an "everlasting source of resources" for the starving W.E. economy. The circumlocution of Africa was being achieved almost at the same time.

The Middle Age and its feudal mode were amidst decay: new land property relations (France and England), a renewed fluid commerce based on harbours (Italy), an increasing role of banks (mainly German and Flemish) and a new social stratification had been taking place since the XIVth century, just to mention some phenomena.

Modern expansion machinery had now been developed, while the new land was to provide its fuel through colonialist relations. The development economy of W.E. required precious metals and now a new continent was able to provide such wealth.

Exceeding three times the total reserves in Europe, 185.000 kilograms of gold and 16.000.000 of silver arrived just to Seville harbour between 1503 and 1660 (not including the immeasurable traffic).

Spain, whose sword left more than 60,000,000 native people dead in a couple of centuries, was sunk into debt due to luxury and a yet unproductive economy. Hence, the fresh wealth quickly spread by the rest of W.E., the creditor.

INDEPENDENCE AND INFLUENCE

After L.A. countries gained political independence during the XIXth century, their new dominant classes pursued a cultural model based on some of the North. The United States of America became a model for many countries in the region.

In the case of Argentina, a few European countries embodied that model. Strong historical ties to Spain are visible. Britain used to monopolise commerce: raw materials were exported to Southampton or Liverpool to be manufactured and resold. Taking a glance at XIXth century Buenos Aires architecture, different aesthetic styles may be observed, each related to a certain paradigm.

Focusing now on recent history, popular alternatives to traditionally North-oriented governments went about winning a larger space in civil society in L.A. by the early seventies. A