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A Revolution in the Theory of Revolutions?

Zygmunt Bauman

ABSTRACT. The events of 1989 in the East-Central European belt of satellite communist regimes was a most fitting finale for the twentieth century, bound to be recorded in history as the age of revolutions. They changed the political map of the globe, affecting even parts ostensibly distant from the scene of the upheaval in ways which are yet far from being grasped in full. They are also certain to be scrutinized for the corrections they offer to our orthodox views of how revolutions come about and how they are conducted. This brief paper is concerned only with the second issue. It considers the extent to which the collapse of the communist regimes confirms or defies the extant theory of revolution. Given the limitations of time and space, the paper aims at no more than sketching a few preliminary suggestions.

Political and Systemic Revolutions

Among political revolutions genuinely systemic ones are relatively rare. All political revolutions involve a change in the way in which the style of political rule affects the politically administered social system. Systemic revolutions, in addition, entail a transformation of the system itself—a contrived, government-managed or at least government-initiated change of socio-economic structure, which takes off at a moment when the political revolution has been completed. The two concepts are, of course, liminal, two opposite ends of a continuum along which the known revolutions—all or almost all of which have been “mixed” cases—can be plotted.

Ideally and typically, revolution is “merely political” (or, rather, non-systemic) in so far as it “shakes off” a political regime that is dysfunctional in relation to a fully-fledged socio-economic system. Political revolution “emancipates” the system from its political constraints. Recent revolutions in Portugal, Spain, and Greece by and large belong to this category. They drove out oppressive dictatorial regimes, which were redundant from the point of view of fully-developed bourgeois societies capable of self-sustained reproduction, already fully formed and capable of sustaining a

democratic order. Though it normally takes an organized, even conspiratorial, minority to overcome the coercive government of the day, such a minority may be justly seen in the traditional way as an agent acting on behalf of certain well-established collective interests, an active and self-conscious vanguard of relatively integrated (economically and socially powerful, though politically disarmed) forces. Political revolutions of this kind simply remove an obstacle on the road already taken; they adjust the political dimension of the system to other economic and social dimensions. This was, indeed, the original view of the revolution: having matured, society has to shatter the oppressive and gratuitous constraints that impede its development. Revolutions which accompanied the advance of the capitalist order were instances of *bürgerliche Gesellschaften* shaking off already obsolete frames of absolutist and despotic states within which they gestated.¹

The recent anti-communist revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe come close to the other pole of the continuum. Paradoxically, they are like the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 rather than classic capitalist revolutions that brought an archaic political body into agreement with the socio-economic traits of a system. Recent anti-communist revolutions have been systemic revolutions: they must *dismantle* the extant system and *construct* one to replace it. True, they toppled old dictatorial or despotic political regimes as other revolutions have done, but there the similarity ends. A society capable of sustaining and reproducing itself without the perpetual and ubiquitous "wardenship" and "command" by political rulers (which is what *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* means) has yet to be constructed; the political stage of the revolution is only an act of site-clearing and condition-setting for building the system, a project that will have to be implemented under close political supervision and through state initiative.

A corollary of this situation is a contradiction that is yet to reveal the full scale of its impact on the future political history of post-communist Europe: the social forces which led to the downfall of communist powers (and so to the success of the political stage of the revolution) are not those which eventually will benefit from construction of the new system. Forces whose interest will gain from the working of the new system will need to be brought into existence.

One reason why even the most acute students of communist regimes were baffled and surprised by the sharply anti-communist direction of change prompted by gathering social dissent was that before the series of revolutions started there were few or no signs of organized social forces with interests pointing beyond the confines of the communist regime (as late as during the famous "Round-Table Conference" in Poland in 1989, there was no discussion about dismantling the planned economy or the wholesale privatization of ownership; and no major participant indicated that such matters would be put on the political agenda if circumstances were favourable). Indeed, as the Polish sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis (1988) observed, there were no "transformative" interests among large classes of Polish society—none of the articulated groups raised the issue of private ownership or objected to the principle of the command economy. According to Aleksander Smolar's succinct summary of the situation barely a year before the end of the communist rule, "the fundamental problem of a radical reform is the absence of any real social support" (Smolar, 1988). As I have indicated elsewhere, neither the major industry workers who formed the core of the Solidarity movement, nor the state-protected individual farmers, nor the few private entrepreneurs thriving on inanities of clumsy central planning wanted a change that would go significantly beyond essentially redistributive action (Bauman, 1988).

This was, let us emphasize, a normal picture of the state of social forces preceding any systemic revolution. Dissenting from the old system could not help but generate strains that exceeded the system's capacity for accommodation and thus pushed the crisis to the breaking point; but this effect resulted from couching reformers' demands in the language of the extant system. (In the case of communist regimes—more planning, more centralized distribution, reshuffling of resources within the justice system and thus facing the system with the output postulates the system was unable to meet.)² It is a constant attribute of systemic revolutions that the forces that destroy the *ancien régime* are not consciously interested in the kind of change which would eventually follow destruction; before the old powers are removed, the design of a new system exists at most as the vision of a select narrow intellectual elite, not as a platform of any massive popular movement.³

In other words, systemic revolution is not a result of mass mobilization of support for an alternative system. The first stage of the systemic revolution—the overthrow of the old rulers who hold to the past order of society—bears all the marks of the “systemic crisis,” (that is, of the system failing to generate the physical and moral resources needed for its reproduction), but does not, by itself, determine the alternative to the system that failed. The link between the failure of the old system and the required traits of the new ones is a political struggle between competing theories conceived and preached by intellectual schools. The nature of social forces that cause the downfall of an old regime is not a decisive factor in the choice between such theories. Nor does the hostility manifested by the opposing forces towards the old regime guarantee their support for the new one. The toppling of old rulers does not conjure up the “transformative interests” missing in the old regime.

Because of this double non sequitur, the survival of revolutionary alliance is the main issue any systemic revolution is likely to confront the morning after its political victory. The original revolutionary alliance, one that overwhelms the resistance of administrators of the *ancien régime*, does not normally reflect the unity of interests among dissenting forces. In fact, grievances which bring groups into political alliance united by opposition to the government of the day are usually highly differentiated and more often than not mutually incompatible. To reiterate, the persistent crises of the old regimes in Central and Eastern Europe concentrated diffuse grievances into a united revolutionary force. Such concentration (and unanimity in blaming the state for whatever drawbacks or injustices may be perceived) can follow the appearance of a major issue that appears to stand in the way of every demand (such as that of continuing the war in the Russia of 1917). In a totalitarian system such as a communist one, the tendency to a fusion of dissent is permanent. Aiming to regulate all aspects of social and economic activity, the state assumes explicit responsibility for every failing and all suffering. Grievances are authoritatively interpreted as malfunctionings of the state and automatically politicised.⁴ But would the opposing forces remain united after the fall of a communist state? Would such forces be similarly energized by the uncertain attractions of a future regime? Would they not rather oppose a change likely to invalidate the form of actions and political purposes they learned to pursue?

Chances of Democracy in Systemic Revolutions

Systemic revolutions must create the social forces in the name of which they embark on the thorough systemic transformation. In this lies their deepest paradox, and

also the danger to the democracy they intend to install. As Jerzy Szacki, a leading Polish sociologist, observed in April 1990:

... the basis for the victory of Western liberalism was the spontaneous development of economic relations. Today's Polish liberalism still remains a *doctrine* that is meant to provoke such a development in the first place—a doctrine the main inspiration for which has been the desire to exit from communism. In effect, today's Polish liberalism is strongly coloured by a "constructivism" which the classical liberal thinkers most energetically fought against (Szacki, 1990).

Unlike purely political revolutions, systemic ones do not end with chasing away the old rulers. The post-revolutionary state faces the awesome task of large-scale social engineering, prompting the formation of a new social structure which—whatever gains it may promise in the long run for everybody—will certainly shatter the familiar distribution of privileges and deprivations. The post-revolutionary state is likely, therefore, to give rise to discontents of its own and regroup inherited political alliances. It is unlikely, on the other hand, to secure from the start a majority of support for intended change. As it remains, however, an "active state" to a degree not drastically different from that of its predecessor, the post-revolutionary state cannot count on that parcelling out and self-dispersion of social dissent which is so easily attained in established, market-based democracies. It can, on the contrary, turn against itself the discontent its actions cannot help generating. For some time, it will continue to act as a "dissent-focusing" factor, and hence it will be difficult to effect systemic transformation while being guided by democratically-generated support for the new state's actions.

The consequences of revolution for post-communist regimes differ. What differentiated these regimes is the moment at which a given country joined the series of anti-communist revolutions, and the respective political and social characteristics at the moment of joining. The collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe was a serial process, and the state of the game so far significantly modified the conditions under which the next step was taken and its sociological significance.

Jean Baudrillard (1990) wrote recently of "un pouvoir s'effondrant presque sans violence, comme convaincu de son inexistence par le simple miroir des foules et de la rue." This powerful picture of power, deemed invincible, suddenly collapsing at the mere sight of the crowds refusing to leave the public square, "as if persuaded of its own non-existence," represents the endings of various communist states with varying precision. Certainly, for Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany it is more correct than for Poland, which triggered the series. For the several thousands in a carnival mood who gathered at Venceslav Square, or at the squares in Leipzig and Dresden, to be so swiftly and so thoroughly successful (there was not even a need for the public squares of Budapest to be physically occupied), the "non-existence" of the communist power had to be already convincingly demonstrated at the far end of the long and tortuous process of permanent Polish insurrection. People who filled Venceslav Square, much like those who came with rifles to chase them away, knew already what had been discovered by trial, error, and a lot of suffering.

Many factors combined to dismantle communism in Poland. It seems, however, that prominent among them was the protracted process of self-instruction in the self-management of society, which culminated in the relatively early "polonization" of the state vs. nation conflict after the military coup d'État of 1981. The process, and the event meant to stop it, put the relation between the state and society—that is, the role of the national state in perpetuating an oppressive regime as well

as the extent of change attainable within the frame of the national state—in an entirely new perspective and triggered ambitions that elsewhere looked more like idle daydreams. Gorbachev's decision to abandon the European satellites to their own resources and fate found Poland in a state sociologically very different from that of other countries which did not have similar experiences: Poland had a fully developed, articulated, and self-sustained alternative political force in the shape of a politically seasoned, powerful workers' union.

Thorstein Veblen once wrote of the "penalty for being in the lead;" indeed, the well-entrenched, confident, and politically skilled labour movement gave Poland the lead in dismantling the communist rule in Eastern Europe. Yet the very assets which secured that advantage may turn into a handicap when it comes to the construction of a stable liberal-democratic regime. Dissident intellectuals in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, with the help of students and unsettled urban youth, shook off their respective communist rulers without nation-wide political mobilization and with minimum application of massive political forces of their own, taking advantage of the blows delivered to the confidence and will to resist of their local rulers "by proxy"—by revelations made in the course of the Polish battles. In power, these intellectuals proceed to further, evidently less popular, stages of the revolution without the powerful and politically alert, defiantly independent mass movement breathing down their necks. They may, indeed, count on the apathy and lack of political skills of the population at large to help them round the first awkward corners of economic and political transformation, so that no violation of democracy would need to pave the road towards a stable liberal democracy of the future. This chance seems to be denied to Poland. After all, the workers of the largest industrial enterprises, least capable of entering the dreams of Europe and marked for extinction, were the very force that brought down communism (and became such a force through being moved then, as they still are, by the essentially "non-transformative" interests of better wages and better working and living conditions), but they are likely to be the first to experience the severest hardships of the economic transformation, such as the intensification of labour, the sharpening of work discipline, the loss of job security, and unemployment.

State-Administered Patronage

The distinctive feature of the systemic revolutions now taking place in Central and Eastern Europe is that the system being dismantled is one of state-administered patronage, that coercively imposed trade-offs between freedom and security. Under the rule of the patronage state, freedom of individual choice was permanently and severely curtailed, yet in exchange, less prepossessing aspects of freedom, such as individual responsibility for personal survival, success, and failure, were spared. To the strong, bold, and determined, the patronage state feels like a sinister rendition of the Weberian "iron cage;" yet, to many who are weak, shy, and lacking in will it may feel like shelter. While the end to the oppressive supervision by the agencies of the state and the opening up of space for individual initiative is a change likely to be warmly greeted by all, the removal of the safety net and the burdening of the individual with responsibility previously claimed by the state may arouse mixed feelings; it may also induce the past wards of state patronage to tune their antennae to populist promise of collective security, and make them into willing followers of any aspiring leader prepared to make such promises and lend his authority to popular suspicions about the dangers of unconstrained liberalism.

The tense period of the dismantling of a patronage state is ripe for complaints, Carlyle-style, against the "cash nexus" which replaces more friendly, comradely, relations between masters and those under them. The patronage Carlyle bewailed was, unlike that of the communist state, diffuse and unpolitical; the patronage engraved in popular habits and thought by the communist rule is state-centred and thoroughly political. It militates against the self-reliant individual and against the order of liberal democracy. Hence individuals ready for a self-reliant life oppose patronage. In the West, they tend today to buy themselves off welfare state services individually, (admittedly a considerably milder, and certainly a one-sided version of the communist, comprehensive style of state patronage), until the camp of the getaways reaches the critical mass enabling them to take a collective stand against the burden which the continuing existence of welfare institutions puts on them all. In post-communist Eastern Europe, with its middle classes mortally wounded and unlikely to recover vigour without the active patronage of the state, the prospects of a similar "buy-out" are remote. Looking to the state for guarantees of security (in private and business life alike) could be a habit which post-communist reconstruction may reinforce rather than uproot.

Political formulae articulated by anti-communist intellectuals in the East differ in how they balance individual freedom against state-administered distributional justice. One can explain the division by reference to controversial prospects of the state patronage heritage. But another factor seems to interfere, rooted not so much in the communist past as in the present of the "professional society," which, according to many contemporary commentators (such as Daniel Bell), the capitalist society becomes in its modern stage. From his thorough study of the mechanics of the contemporary Western type of professional society, Harold Perkin (1989) concludes that "the struggle between the public and private sector professions is the master conflict of professional society," and that "ostensibly class-based political parties" are "in reality large coalitions of diverse professional interests." Perkin suggests that the rivalry between two groups of professionals (two sections of the knowledge class) is grounded in the rift between genuinely incompatible interests. The rivalry is about resources, or rather about the principle of their distribution. Each section obviously prefers principles better geared to the skills it possesses. Thus the ideology of the free market appeals to the professional managers of great corporations and their allies because it protects them from the accusation they most fear, that they themselves are the major threat to competition and the freedom of the citizen.

Presenting themselves as the gallant knights of freedom expressed in market competition, professional managers conceal the fact that all competition drives out competitors and tends towards monopoly and thus hope to pass for guarantors of the freedom of choice and even of political liberty. Professionals of the public sector, on the other hand, prefer to argue

... in terms of social justice for every citizen, rather than self-interest of each profession; (as this argument is accepted), once a service becomes professionalized under public auspices, the professionals discover further needs to be met and problems to be solved and a host of reasons for extending their activities. Hence the self-generating expansion of the state in all the advanced countries.⁵

In Perkin's terms, the communist system can be seen as the domination of "public sector professionals" pushed to the radical extreme and secured with the help of the coercive resources of the state. The collapse of the communist system brings

post-communist societies closer to conditions prevalent in professional societies in the West. Dismantling the patronage state will need to be performed under those conditions and therefore will not be guided by its own logic alone. The moves explicable by reference to the leftovers of state patronage (or by reference to the opposition they arouse) will intertwine with political developments that can only be understood in terms of modern competition for resources between public and private sector professionals.

The patronage state offered poor services, yet did cut down on both gains and losses that might have resulted from individual decisions. The overall result was the diminution of risk (except for the area in which initiative was strictly off limits, that is in the space defined by the state as belonging to politics) and the development of economic skills and attitudes that provide little support in emergencies, where probabilities are even and outcomes of decisions uncertain. Behaviour proper to unrestrained market conditions was not learned even by private entrepreneurs and farmers as long as they were in a planned economy. Market competition may be too inclement for them. There is no necessary connection between private business and enthusiasm for the *laissez-faire* style of economic setting; an absence profusely demonstrated by the charges repeatedly raised by the Polish Peasant Party (and various political spokesmen vying for the votes of urban businessmen) against the government "that lacks economic policy."

Systemic Revolutions in the Postmodern Setting

By common agreement, the passage from a state-administered to a market economy based on business initiative requires the accumulation of private capital as much as the presence of business motivations. We know what they are from Weber's unsurpassed analysis of the motives instrumental in the rise of the capitalist system. Greed and the pursuit of profit, Weber insisted, have little to do with capitalism; unless restrained by rational calculation, they can hardly lead to a capitalist transformation—and they hardly ever did lead, though they were present in all known societies and reached the height of ruthlessness and intensity well before modern times. On the other hand, the ideologically induced trait of *this-worldly asceticism* had everything to do with the emergence of the capitalist order. That trait made capitalist accumulation and the passage to rationally calculated business both possible and inevitable (the original accumulation of capital was, according to Weber, an unanticipated consequence of religiously-induced self-denial coupled with the pursuit of workmanship as the mundane reflection of divine grace). "This-worldly asceticism" means first and foremost the *delay of gratification*, a suppression rather than a letting loose of the natural predisposition to quick gain and enjoyment, to self-indulgence and ostentatious consumption.

There are few puritans left now that post-communist societies are embarking on "primary capitalist accumulation." In fact, what enraged rebels about communist command economy, and what eventually brought communism down, was not the envious comparison with the successes of capitalist neighbours, but the enticing and alluring spectacle of the lavish consumption enjoyed under capitalist auspices. It was the post-modern, narcissistic culture of self-enhancement, self-enjoyment, instant gratification, and life defined in terms of consumer styles finally exposed the obsolescence of the "steel-output-per-head" philosophy stubbornly preached and practised under communism. It was this culture that delivered the last blow to abortive communist hopes of competition with capitalism. And it was the

overwhelming desire to share immediately in the delights of this post-modern world, not the wish to tread once more the tortuous road of nineteenth-century industrialization and modernization, that mobilized the massive dissent against communist oppression and inefficiency.

The post-modern challenge proved highly effective in speeding up the collapse of communism and assuring the triumph of the anti-communist revolution in its supremely important preliminary political stage. This asset may, however, turn into a serious handicap at the stage of systemic transformation, on two accounts: first, because of the relative scarcity of the puritan attitudes allegedly indispensable to primary capital accumulation; and second, because the high hopes from which the anticipatory trust put in the post-communist governments has been drawn, might be frustrated. Frustration may rebound with scapegoating, witch-hunting, and totalitarian intolerance. The resulting socio-psychological climate may prove fertile for the growth of hybrid political formations bearing little resemblance to the liberal-democratic hopes of the intellectual leaders of the revolution.

Central and Eastern European societies have victoriously accomplished their February revolution. The dangers of an October one are far from being excluded.

Conclusion

What I have tried to convey in the above comments is that it is too early for conclusions: the revolutionary process has started, but its destination and the direction it will take are uncertain. One is reminded of Winston Churchill's remark on the prospects of the war after the battle of El Alamein, "This is not the end. This is not even the beginning of the end. This is only the end of the beginning."

One may, however, risk the opinion that, if we carefully apply the knowledge gleaned from the experience of past revolutions, the recent events in Central and Eastern Europe seem a little less "unprecedented" than they are usually depicted (more often than not, we described these events as unprecedented because we failed abominably to predict their very possibility). The orthodox theory of revolution may indeed be doubly helpful in our attempts to interpret what has happened and to sketch possible scenarios of the future. It may indicate the affinities with at least some past revolutions which will alert us to the likelihood of certain consequences. And it may help to sort out circumstances which past revolutions never confronted, thus defining the extent of genuine "unprecedentedness" for which past experiences can offer no guidance.

A word of warning: historical memory may inform as well as disinform; in fact, it never does one thing without the other. In historical action, history is recapitulated: both reiterated and transformed, simultaneously constraining imagination and setting conditions for the praxis which is bound to break through constraints.

Notes

1. Certain concepts, like certain wines, do not travel. The concept of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* is one of them. In translation, it cannot but lose its unique semantic load: only in German does the "Bürger" stand simultaneously for the bourgeois and the citizen, stating matter-of-factly the intimate bond between social and political characteristics. This bond is lost in the "civil society" rendition of the term; it has been lost even more in recent East European faulty translations, which—having pared the concept to the bare bones of political rights—induced a dangerous tendency to overlook the mutual dependency between

political democracy and the presence of "Bürgertum," and with that the difference between tasks confronted by anti-communist revolutions and those once faced by capitalist ones.

2. Lenin (helped as he was by his readings of Lavrov and Tkachev) was the first revolutionary to re-forge this contradiction into the major constitutive principle of his strategy: deliberately, he used the anger of the peasant masses, arising from "non-transformative" interest in land and peace, as a battering ram to topple the old regime. Once in power, Lenin used the levers of government to impose systemic change which the mass movement that destroyed the old rule neither planned for nor desired.
3. In the highly informative and perceptive volume *Studia nad ladem społecznym* (Studies on the social order), 1990, a number of authors—Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski, Ryszard Turski, Tomasz Zukowski, and Winicjusz Narojek being most prominent among them—point in a variety of ways to the mechanisms of incorporation of essentially anti-systemic interests and cravings (like the pursuit of personal gain, "second economy," group and individual privileges, etc.) into the self-reproductive processes of the system; mechanisms which produced, on the one hand, the baffling lack of coordination between radicalism of public attitudes and conformism of private behaviour, and, on the other hand, the equally puzzling "insiderness" of action arising from motives which could not be logically squared with the existing order.
4. The dictatorship of needs and monopoly of the means and procedures of needs-satisfaction makes the communist state an obvious target for individual disaffection; but it also cannot but collectivize the vehicles of gratification. Here, the state is the agency to which complaints are addressed as naturally and matter-of-factly as have been the expectations of better life. Unlike in the democratic/market/consumer world of privatized choices, the sources of diffuse unhappiness are not themselves diffuse and cannot be kept undercover; they are publicly announced, conspicuous, and easy to locate. Admittedly, communist regimes excelled in stifling the flow of information and pushed to unknown heights the art of state secrecy, and yet they proved to be much less successful than market-oriented societies in dissipating and hiding their responsibility for socially produced ills, for the irrational consequences of rational decisions, and for the overall mismanagement of social processes. They even failed to hide the fact that they concealed information and thus stood accused, as of political crimes, of the kind of "cover-up" which market agencies of consumer society practise daily, effortlessly, and without attracting attention or causing a public outcry.
5. There are, according to Perkin, two possible renditions of the essentially identical "professional ideal" arising from the place occupied by learned experts in modern social figuration: "The object of the professionals manning the system is to justify the highest status and rewards they can attain by the social necessity and efficiency they claim for the service they perform. That on occasion the service is neither essential nor efficient is no obstacle to principle. It only needs to be thought so by those providing and receiving it. Justification by service to the clients and society lies at the root of the professional ideal" (1989: 360). The battle of ideas between market- and state-service principles is a squabble inside the family, a sibling rivalry.

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Biographical Note

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN is Professor of Sociology at Leeds University. ADDRESS: Department of Social Policy and Sociology, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2, 9JT, England.