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The Political Forms of Modern Society by Claude Lefort

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WILLIAM P. FULLER V*

THE POLITICAL FORMS OF MODERN SOCIETY. By CLAUDE LEFORT (J.B. Thompson ed.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. 1986.

For over one hundred years now, intellectuals throughout the world have wrestled with that now well-established and increasingly eclectic ideology: Marxism. Today the reality of Marxist/Communist ideology as manifest in the Eastern Bloc certainly merits discussion.

One individual who has examined Marxism as it has been applied in the Soviet Union is Claude Lefort. Lefort is one of the leading social and political theorists in France. The author, a socialist himself, started a small but influential left wing society, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, in the early fifties. The group published a number of journals during its tenure which dealt with subjects similar to that in the text. Not surprisingly, experience of this type has furthered the author's reputation as an eminent scholar on the issue of politics and society.

The Political Forms of Modern Society is an anthology of Lefort's work, spanning a time period of nearly forty years from the end of World War II to 1981. Several of the works contained in this special collection, designed for the English speaking reader, have only become available to a wide audience for the first time.

There are two topics in *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, which are the focus of the entire book. The first concerns the evolution of the Soviet Union from a revolutionary state to a totalitarian society. The second involves a discussion of the role and import of human rights both in Western and Eastern Bloc countries.

I. THE SOVIET UNION FROM REVOLUTIONARY STATE TO TOTALITARIAN REGIME

In the first section of *The Political Forms of Modern Society* Lefort depicts the tragic political chronology which lead to the defeat of the Bolsheviks (i.e., Lenin and Trotsky) and the victory of the reactionary bureaucrat as personified by Josef Stalin.

For Lefort, Lenin represents the archetypal revolutionary. Lenin was a man who combined a practical fluency in political theory with an overarching concern for the oppressed masses, and

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who could utilize both elements to help fashion a new society. Stalin on the other hand was a reincarnated Ghengis Khan, a sinister, incredibly dangerous functionary who was the antithesis of Lenin. In the end of course it was Stalin who would prevail.

In a simplistic sense, Stalin's accession to power may be attributed to the revolutionary left's failure "to adapt the politics of revolutionary Russia to the difficult circumstances of a capitalist world undergoing reconsolidation."¹ In other words, the Bolsheviks failed to comprehend that revolutionary idealism had to give way to practicality. Thus, by the time Stalin became a key player in the Soviet political structure, "no one could block the ebbing tide" of revolutionary idealism.² It was increasingly apparent that the revolutionary left could only succeed in the context of a revolutionary upsurge "based on a strategy of aggression and a direct appeal to the masses."³ It would take Stalin to install a dictatorship of the proletariat and lead all of Russia to the Socialist nirvana.

On a more subtle level, however, one should question what it was that prevented the very organization which toppled Tsarist Russia from defeating one man and his embryonic historical destiny. For it is apparent that Lenin had been well aware of the danger Stalin posed.⁴ But Lenin, who was by then gravely ill, was no longer capable of defeating Stalin by himself. It would have taken a personality such as Leon Trotsky to accomplish the special task of neutralizing Stalin. Unfortunately, however, the far left under the aegis of conciliation refused to recognize any "programmatic differences" with the growing Stalinist bureaucracy.⁵ Trotsky in fact said in reference to his future nemesis and executioner: "[w]hat separates us is incomparably less than what unites us."⁶ Thus, one reason for the failure of the far left was that at a critical moment, it chose, as did Chamberlain, to follow a course of appeasement with an individual who was unarguably deranged.

Another reason for the Bolshevik's failure according to Lefort can be found in the very nature of the Bolshevik party itself. Before the revolution, the Bolsheviks had lived in closed circles in order to maintain security and effective organization. While this "climate was

¹ C. Lefort, *The Contradiction of Trotsky*, in *The Political Forms of Modern Society* 35 (J.B. Thompson ed. 1986).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* at 36.

⁴ *Id.* at 39.

⁵ *Id.* at 43.

⁶ *Id.*

favorable to centralization,” it was not favorable to the genesis of democratic socialism.⁷ Moreover, as the first few years of the revolution sped by, the left only became increasingly anti-proletarian and anti-democratic.⁸ As a result, the revolutionary vanguard failed to maintain the support of the proletariat. This point is exemplified by the action at Kronstadt where a worker uprising was ruthlessly crushed by the government with the full support of Trotsky and his ilk. Kronstadt represents for Lefort “the tragic moment of Bolshevism.”⁹ After Kronstadt, there could be no support for the far left since by alienating itself from the people, it had long since cut itself off from power.¹⁰

Upon defeating the Bolshevik faction of the Communist Party, the bureaucrats were now set to direct the proletariat “according to its higher interests and against its immediate interests.”¹¹ That is to say Stalin was poised to crush the individual in the name of state interest.

At the outset of Stalin’s rise to power it was hoped that “the reign of the bureaucracy was purely transitory and would inevitably collapse before the only two historical possibilities: capitalism and socialism.”¹² This hope, of course, has never materialized.

In the beginning, “[t]otalitarianism in the USSR was justified in principle, even in the eyes of the factions that it decimated, by the function that it played in ruthlessly sacrificing their interests to the cohesion of the bureaucracy as a whole.”¹³ In a short time the new socio/political apparatus “had become a world force whose historical cohesion was apparent to all.”¹⁴ By “cohesion” Lefort is referring to the consolidation of the divergent elements of the communist party through the use of terror. By conjoining these contradictory elements, totalitarianism had found yet another touchstone for its place in political history. Now Stalin was able to free himself from the masses, subordinate the means of production and the bureaucratic apparatus to himself, and in so doing, spawn the new economy.¹⁵

⁷ *Id.* at 46.

⁸ *Id.* at 48.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* at 49.

¹² *Id.* at 51.

¹³ C. Lefort, *Totalitarianism Without Stalin*, in *The Political Forms of Modern Society* 56 (J.B. Thompson ed. 1986).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 58.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 64.

Lefort appears to argue despite his misgivings that perhaps bureaucratization and its "iron discipline" were necessary to "weld together" the dissimilar elements of Soviet society and create a modern industrial state.¹⁶ Lefort goes so far as to proclaim that without the use of terror, the creation of this bureaucracy was inconceivable.¹⁷ The purges were necessary to fuse every stratum of society into an industrialized whole.¹⁸ Terror was the price for economic growth.¹⁹

If there is one point that must be made here, it is that Lefort's analysis concerning the need for cohesion as a requisite for industrialization is oversimplified. As do many thinkers of a leftist inclination, Lefort is too easily convinced of the necessity of linking terror with the advancement of the Soviet agenda. Also, is it safe to say that the deaths and forced incarceration of literally millions of people is justified by the creation of the present Soviet economy? This is an economy which one should note is a great disappointment. It seems incredibly callous to say that so many lives could be worth the price of creating any kind of economic structure.

One other error to which Lefort falls prey, results from his perception of the leftist elements of the party before the consolidation of Stalin's power. Lefort asserts that Lenin was the great revolutionary whose main concern was the masses. In this regard, Lefort is entirely correct. But he fails to mention the fact that Lenin remained true to the proletariat while the rest of the radical left did not. It was, after all, Lenin who initiated the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921 to help boost the foundering Soviet economy. Although the NEP allowed free enterprise, Lenin felt that the policy was necessary to save the very people for whom he cared so deeply. The point here is that by economic and political necessity, a portion of the left felt compelled to retreat from revolutionary idealism to simple practicality. Thus, not all of the left was separated from the people. It was only the far left, the ideological dogmatists, who became isolated.

Still, the real failure of the revolution was not of the extreme left but of the more moderate left under the leadership of Lenin. Emblematic of this contention is Lenin's failure to consolidate power and neutralize factions on either extreme of the political equation

¹⁶ *Id.* at 68.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 69.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 70.

in the Russia of the early 1920's. The extreme left by contrast failed by necessity because they were ill-equipped as mere ideologues to make the dream a reality. And so, pragmatism trampled idealism and terror ruled the day. In less than thirty years, the Soviet Union emerged as the second most powerful nation on earth, but at an unspeakable cost.

It is ironic that Stalin himself was eventually sacrificed posthumously to the collective interest by later incarnations of the Soviet regime.²⁰ The official criticism of Stalin began only a very short time after his death. As much as the ultimate bureaucrat has been pilloried, however, his bureaucracy still stands unchecked. As Lefort wrote, the Soviet government "may bury its dead skin in the Kremlin crypt and cover its new body with alluring finery, but totalitarian it was and totalitarian it remains."²¹

II. HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICS

Another issue of great concern to Lefort is the role and the value of human rights in modern society. Lefort begins this analysis by questioning whether or not human rights issues belong in the sphere of the political.²² He begins with a discussion of human rights in the Soviet state.

Historically, communists have often condemned "the bourgeois notion of human rights."²³ This reaction may be due to the fact that in the socialist state, a person's "individuality must be dissolved in a good body politic, the Soviet people or party."²⁴ This makes added sense in a totalitarian system, since it alone controls "all forms of socialization and all modes of activity."²⁵ The totalitarian state must quell any opinion which may be seen as a sign that social life is external to power, that there is an otherness in the social sphere.²⁶ In the socialist state it is not individual rights that are violated when people are condemned for holding the wrong opinions, it is merely that the state is attempting to "reduce public thought and speech to its pole"²⁷

²⁰ *Id.* at 84.

²¹ *Id.* at 75.

²² C. Lefort, *Politics and Human Rights*, in *The Political Forms of Modern Society* 239 (J.B. Thompson ed. 1986).

²³ *Id.* at 240.

²⁴ *Id.* at 246.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.* at 252.

²⁷ *Id.* at 251.

In recent years Marxist states have been forced to take a more cautious tack with regard to human rights.²⁸ Human rights issues have now come to embody the struggle against oppression in socialist states.²⁹ The brave defiance of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Anatoly Scharansky demonstrate this point. Contrary to popular perception, however, the dissidents have generally made an effort to separate themselves from politics by merely demanding a recognition of human rights rather than the overthrow of the existing regime.³⁰ In other words, Soviet dissidents have followed a policy of attempting to separate human rights from the political sphere. While this may be the case, it is nevertheless true that human rights are inextricably tied to politics. Once they become antithetical to the programs of the existing regime, politics generally come into play.³¹ These rights are indeed connected "with a general conception of society . . . which totalitarianism directly negates."³² What can be plainly seen in the dissident movement, then, is an unarticulated attempt to destroy the totalitarian model of socialism in favor of a system which recognizes individual rights.³³

Lefort next criticizes the international left wing reaction to the human rights movement. He condemns the liberal extreme for concluding that the denial of human rights in totalitarian systems represents merely an arbitrary excess of bureaucratic power.³⁴ He also condemns "the ease with which the communists combine criticism of the treatment of the Soviet dissidents with defense of a regime presented as 'positive in an overall sense.'"³⁵ For Lefort, the modality of any rigorous analysis must concern whether "certain coercive methods of government were deduced, or being deduced, from the need to preserve a political system-'socialism'-or whether they were and still are going beyond such needs."³⁶ The author posits this line of inquiry in order to attack those who deny the relation of human rights and politics so that they may avoid questioning the very legitimacy of the Soviet state.³⁷

²⁸ *Id.* at 240.

²⁹ *Id.* at 240-41.

³⁰ *Id.* at 241.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.* at 242.

³⁴ *Id.* at 243.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.* at 244.

³⁷ *Id.*

Lefort, however, is not merely content to criticize the Soviet Union and its intellectual allies. He also utilizes the subject of human rights to criticize the democracies of the West. Lefort begins by re-examining Karl Marx's critique of Western democracies as discussed in his early work, *On the Jewish Question*.

Marx was convinced that in the democracies of his time, the protection of fundamental liberties "served only to provide a cover for the dissociation of individuals in society and separation between this atomized society and the political community."³⁸ Liberty and equality were the "limits within which each individual [could] act without harming others . . . It [was] the question of the liberty of man regarded as an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself."³⁹ Moreover, the right to property was "the right to enjoy one's fortune and to dispose of it as one will; without regard for other men and independently of society. It is the right of self-interest . . . It leads every man to see in other men, not the realization, but rather the limitation of his own liberty."⁴⁰ Finally, security was merely a concept which assured the state of its inherent egoism.⁴¹

Given the time frame in which these criticisms were made, they are not without foundation. The Western democracies of 1843 were hardly bastions of enlightened liberalism. The United States, for example, was suffering under the evils of slavery. It is no surprise then that Marx was so critical. But at present, Marx's analysis can no longer endure intellectual examination. Lefort acknowledges that Marx's view has been undermined by the reality of totalitarianism.⁴² This is because totalitarianism "is built on the ruin of the rights of man."⁴³ In other words, not only is man no longer free to acquire property at the expense of others, he is not even free to enjoy liberation from the bondage of property because he simply has no rights at all. He can find shelter at neither extreme.

This reality is not, of course, what Marx intended. In fact, Marx merely hoped to "emancipate" the individual from the political sphere in order to make the individual his own master.⁴⁴ Marx would surely never contend that totalitarianism provides the for-

³⁸ *Id.* at 245.

³⁹ K. Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader* 42 (R.C. Tucker ed. 1978).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.* at 43.

⁴² Lefort, *supra* note 22, at 246.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 247.

mula for "human emancipation."⁴⁵ It is thus ironic that in many present day socialist states, the "political sphere" is at its apex.⁴⁶

Despite this view, however, Lefort is convinced that even the relatively liberal democracies of the present day are not above exacting scrutiny. Individuals have been separated from one another rather than connected, resulting in Marx's "restricted individual."⁴⁷ The ascendance of individualism and the resulting decay of the social and political fabric illustrates this point. Moreover, Lefort seems to imply that human rights are often used as subtle instruments of the state to keep the masses in check by creating a perception of equality. As with many political theorists, however, Lefort offers no solutions.

III. CONCLUSION

The Political Forms of Modern Society is a book which is well worth reading if only for the questions it evokes. Lefort has produced a lifetime of work which helps us to understand the historical and political role of the bureaucracy in creating the totalitarian system in the USSR and the rest of the Eastern bloc. This work is also critical because it asserts the relevance and the need for human rights in societies of all political forms.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 248.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 249.