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Is The Soviet Union an "Economic Democracy"?
by Paul Mojzes

Soviet officialdom has a tendency to glorify all aspects of Soviet policies and practices. Many non-Soviet observers find many faults with the Soviet Union in regard to civil and political rights but tend to grant that in the socio-economic sphere the Soviets made great strides. One may cite the general security from criminal attack, beautiful parks and monuments, opportunity for work in a full-employment economy, existence of child care centers which enables women to enjoy full access to employment, free education, and health care, inexpensive books and cultural performances of great quality, and so forth. The Soviets frequently make claims that many of the social blights of capitalist societies have been permanently eliminated in their society: no more slums, beggars, prostitutes, unemployed, exploited workers. They claim wholesome recreation, steadfast promotion of peace, and optimal opportunities for students. These are described as fruits of an economic democracy—the basis of true human liberty and development.

There is some truth in these claims but after several visits to the Soviet Union this writer found great discrepancies between these claims and real conditions of life in the Soviet Union. The claim that economic democracy is being practiced are unfounded, I believe, and I will attempt to demonstrate this by means of observations from my 1984 visit to the U.S.S.R.

One aspect of Karl Marx's legacy was a sober analysis of existing societies in the hope to emancipate concrete human beings from various forms
of oppression, exploitation, and alienation. He applied it, of course, to capitalist societies because they were the societal form which he knew. He coined the maxim that "freedom of each individual is a precondition for freedom of all." Out of this concern he critiqued existing labor relations, laws, religion, family and sexual relations, government, the press, and so forth. One may assume that he would have welcomed anyone's frank observations in regard to social maladjustments not only in capitalist but also in socialist societies, which indeed, need the benefit of honest analysis as much as capitalist societies do.

I am reluctant to add to the huge amount of criticism of the Soviet Union which may be misused by all kinds of cold warriors in order to hurl both justified and unjustified invectives at the Soviet Union, but such an honest critique of problem areas in the Soviet Union is particularly necessary when one realizes the Soviet's unwillingness to examine their own serious deformities caused by their social policies except in the most vague manner and using the most inocuous issues (e.g. admission that many are plagued with alcoholism or calling disaffected youth "hooligans").

This essay is not an attempt at a theoretical structural analysis but will be a review of some observations from my recent trip to the Soviet Union, my fifth in less than a decade.

Immediately upon arrival to the hotel in Moscow as three of us took a stroll to stretch our legs we were approached by about seven or eight boys and one girl about fifteen years old with skateboards under arms (the latest teen "craze"). They were quite curious about America. One boy, the son of a policeman, was unusually inquisitive. His questions were mostly about the latest rock music; which are the best groups and lead singers? Is it
true that Michael Jackson is blind? etc. He bemoaned the impossibility of hearing such music on the radio and the difficulty of obtaining either records or tapes or information on musicians.

Later he volunteered that they are taught next to nothing about the U.S.A. in schools, except that Americans intend to destroy them. Was this true, he inquired. They queried us about the purpose of our visit. We told them that we were a group of professors who came to dialogue with Soviet professors and members of the Soviet Peace Committee. Very quickly he shot back, "Don't believe them. They will lie to you." The others nodded consent. None of them seemed the least bit concerned when policemen or other uniformed personnel walked by and, indeed, no one ever interfered with our conversations. Later they escorted us to the hotel, regretting that as Soviet citizens they were unable to walk into Hotel "Cosmos".

Thus, right on arrival we met with some rather alienated youth who seem to have been neither very afraid of the authorities nor shown much trust in their government. They complained that due to Reagan's policies the Soviet Union stepped up its militarization. No longer would they be able to postpone their military service until graduation from the university, they said, but when their age group is conscripted in a few years all of them would have to interrupt their education to go for an extended stint in the army. One of them told of his brother who just returned from the army lost all interest in continuing his education which used to be his intent before he went to the army.

Evidences of militarism can be seen and heard frequently on TV and radio. Naturally the armed forces are portrayed as defenders against potential aggressors. Mass media portrays the imperialists as the enemy.
It seems that China rather than the more publicly vilified U.S.A., is considered by the average citizen the gravest threat. In conversations one can detect fear and revulsion, often of a racist nature, over against the Chinese. At a restaurant in the hotel in Novosibirsk a group of pediatricians, all women, had a party celebrating the annual Physician's Day. A few of us were spontaneously invited to join them at the table (Novosibirsk and Tbilisi afforded much more spontaneous contacts with people than Moscow or Leningrad). One of the physicians shared with me her great concerns over her son who served at the Chinese border. She stated that she cried every day for a year and half hoping he would return alive in about six months. Whether such fears are based on real casualties of the border conflict or whether they are part of the public psychosis is hard to tell, but the perceptions seem to be held widely and the anxiety is real.

I have seen no evidence that there are organized attempts to deal with such and similar personal fears and traumas. One of the few institutions which still assists people in that respect are the churches, but even there there seems to be a reluctance to help. While waiting at the reception desk of the Leningrad Theological Academy for one of the Orthodox professors I witnessed a distraught elderly woman who came with a letter attesting the death of her son. She requested a memorial mass for her thirty-year old son, who had committed suicide by flinging himself out of a window, due to an employment related problem. She sobbed and sought assistance in her request. The door man, who seemed to be a government agent rather than a church employed receptionist, treated her harshly, in no way acceding to her requests, sending her off by telling her to get still another document and return back in about a week. Is there anyone who can lend a sympathetic ear
to such a person in trouble?

The satisfaction of consumer needs is poor and is done by means of a double economic system. The state stores are crowded, seemed to have a bit more variety of goods (in Novosibirsk we actually shopped in a supermarket imported from Italy where Pepsi Cola was the item in greatest demand). The second sector of the economy is the private one, both the legitimate and the black market one. The legitimate mainly consists of food items and folk craft sold by farmers, some of whom travel incredibly great distances to sell their wares at high prices (e.g. Uzbeks in Novosibirsk selling spices). At the market in Novosibirsk I queried some women who were selling chickens at the equivalent of $5.00 a pound (in state stores one could see chickens at about $3.50 a pound) what they would do if they did not sell them, as there seemed to be a few buyers. They all laughed and said they had no such worries, that they merely drop the prices by the afternoon. It simply does not happen that they do not sell what they bring to the market.

More intriguing is the black market. While I did not try to make a "scientific" estimate, it seemed that in the larger cities one in ten or one in twenty wore blue jeans, all imported, none legally. Foreigners get frequently approached mostly by younger people with the request to exchange dollars, sell digital watches, fashionable clothing (most in demand seem to be designer jeans and Levi's; my Lees were in no demand!) rock n' roll, university or similarly lettered T-shirts, and prestigious sports wear (e.g. Adidas). The price of such clothing can be tenfold or more of what one may pay for it in the U.S.A. Aside whether such demands are evidences of decadence among some segments of Soviet populations, as some interpreters may assert, there is still a great gap between consumer supply and demands, which is partially satisfied by means of illegal, but seemingly tolerated black market. The
black marketeers do take precautions not to be caught. If caught a Soviet citizen does have recourse to bribe a policeman. A student who was caught in a hotel coming out of a Finnish tourist's room where she had gone to buy a velour shirt was harassed by the police and told that if she commits another such infraction she will be forced to leave Leningrad (and thereby her studies) and return to her hometown. She stated that the policeman would not have taken her into the police station if she had 50 rubles on her, because they are reputedly on the take. It is my impression that the average Soviet citizen, in order to satisfy some of his or her needs, frequently has to resort to illegal and unethical transactions, including bribe, black marketing, nepotism, connections and exchange of favors, all of which weaken the moral fiber of the population.

One of the sharp criticisms of capitalists societies by Communists is that prostitution arises out of unmet economic needs of women. The Soviet Union attempted to curtail prostitution legally and socially. Many jobs became available to women and most women do work or study. However, my impression is that it is thriving, at least in cities like Leningrad. In the evenings hotels are inundated by willing females, not all of whom request money for quick sex. These are mostly young women who either seem to have jobs or are students. What makes them so eager for adventure, mostly with foreigners? The motives probably vary. Perhaps escape from the drudgery of existence in the glitter of hotel night life, perhaps hope of catching a husband who could help her emigrate, but for many it means complementing meager incomes by means of gifts, expensive entertaining (by Soviet standards), and monetary payments. Thus the Soviet Union does not escape the dilemma of sex for sale. What the regime has done is to prevent the most odious aspects of a "meat-market" scene, though the supply of willing females seemed to be
greater than the demand, thereby creating sharp competition among the women for the attention of the men, leading to rather direct approaches to the men by the women.

Perhaps the gravest fault of the Soviet system, one which strikes at the legitimation of socialism in the USSR itself is the failure to fulfill the promise that the workers will cease to be exploited. One cannot go into details in this essay to enumerate the ways in which the Soviet working class has little participation in decision making and how the surplus of the laborer's work is expropriated by the new ruling class.1 Because of the totalitarian nature of the regime and clever manipulation of the workers telling them that the Soviet state is run for the workers' benefit, the Soviet workers have few ways in which to register their revolt against these exploitive conditions. The most readily available manner of expressing the recognition that their work is not for their own benefit is the incredible shabbiness of most products. I witnessed a city bus in Leningrad from which an entire window pane fell and broke into million pieces without either the bus stopping or anyone on the street taking more than a momentary glance. Even the prestigious Akademgorodok ("Academic City" - a brain trust) near Novosibirsk is very poorly constructed and the hygienic conditions in the restaurants rest rooms were such that I had to leave the rest room in the greatest of haste.

In hotel "Moscow" in Leningrad there is a large contingent of construction workers from Finland who are given very privileged monetary rewards (and tax cuts in Finland making it possible to earn triple of what they would earn at home) to do steel construction for foundations of the more ambitious building

1A superb study, as yet untranslated into English, has been published in Yugoslavia by Zagorka Golubović, Staljinizam i socijalizam (Belgrade: Filozofske studije, 1982) in which she conclusively proves that a counter-revolution took place under Stalin by which all power has been expropriated from the working class and whereby the Soviet Union's socio-economic system has been brought to a pre-capitalist stage.
projects. When asked why they rather than Soviet workers were employed on these jobs they replied simply, "they don't know how to do it." And, indeed, some of the most prestigious hotels in the USSR were built by foreigners. Could it really be that Soviet engineers and workers are incapable of this type of work? Or are Soviet workers so disinterested in working well that they cannot be depended upon so that precious foreign currency has to be spent on Finish workers? The Finish workers, by the way, seemed very alienated and prone to massive drunkenness as well as not very wholesome recreative activities. Is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union uninterested in the well-being of foreign workers, when it seems to be interested in the well-being of workers under capitalism? In what way are the Soviets better than the capitalists (as the Finish workers' are well paid in comparison with the Soviet workers) since the capitalists are also supplying the economic needs of workers? Karl Marx could write many essays on alienated labor if he were to visit the Soviet Union!

The living conditions of many people are deplorable. Farm houses in Siberia were tiny, old, wooden structures strongly resembling the shacks in which many blacks live in the South, yet the weather conditions in Siberia are much more inclement. In Tbilisi, in the immediate vicinity of the downtown Hotel "Adjaria," there are wooden shacks covered with tin or tar paper roofs held down by rocks or wooden planks, which have not changed an iota since I saw them on my first visit there in 1977. The only difference in 1984 was that some of them had cars parked in the tiny court yards, again comparable to the psychology of poverty evidenced so often in urban areas of the United States where some people buy fancy cars without being able to afford basic necessities of life. Many of the new dwellings, some of which are high rises, never get completed and yet they already start crumbling.
The cement powderises, entire chunks of buildings fall off, walls crack, ceilings and floors warp, elevators and plumbing do not work, and so forth. Occasionally, though, such unattractive building may hide a nicely furnished apartment, as was the case with a family which I visited in Novosibirsk. Generally my impression is that housing is a great problem despite a huge building program. Apartments are small, too crowded, rare, and hard to get, though they are inexpensive by American standards.

The saddest and most disturbing experience which I had, was with student housing. I had the opportunity to visit some students at one of the three dormitories of the Geological School of Leningrad University. The building was in a central location in one of the buildings built during tsarist times in what must have once been a very nice neighborhood. From the outside the building did not look bad, but the interior was not repaired or painted in decades. Most of the rooms did not have the original doors but very flimsy plywood doors that could hardly be closed or secured. Three students live per small room on field beds or cots. The furnishings were terribly sparse. There was only one chair in the room. The students had no glasses out of which we could share the bottle of wine, but came up with a few cracked cups with no handles. They wore the same clothing during the period when I met them and seemed to have no more than a single change of clothing. There was no running water in the room—and as I was to discover to my consternation, no running water in the men's room. These future university educated citizens of the Soviet Union used a men's room in which the toilets were not separated by a partition, none of the bowls had toilet seats, and in each of them was a massive pile of human feces which could not be flushed down for absence of water. Huge piles of soiled torn newspaper was all about, into which one had to step, as they knew that throwing paper into the toilet would clog the
pipes when eventually the feces would be flushed down with buckets of water. Even more cruel is the situation in the winter. The room had no radiator or heater. In the winter the students told me the wind would sweep snow through the cracks in the window frame and they would sit in their rooms in overcoats and boots, and freeze. But, that the nice thing about this life, they said, was the sense of community; when one had no food one could go next door and share whatever was available and vice versa. They were curious how American students live and were somewhat surprised that I considered their living conditions bad. They did say that this was the worst dorm of the Geological School; the best one was the one housing foreign students!

During vacations students have an obligation to work on a collective farm, where living conditions are still worse. This group of students was assigned to work in August and September on a potato farm near Novgorod. They lived in a two room barrack with about hundred males and one hundred females in each room, respectively. There was no running water, and in September it would already be so cold that the well would freeze up. Only most primitive tools were used to dig the potatoes; practically by hand. Male students were paid more than the females with the rationale that they were physically stronger and could produce more, but otherwise all would be paid the same thereby having no incentive to work. One said he did not work but goofed off saying that the pay in any case was the same! This work at the kolhoz is considered obligatory, being regarded as the students' way to pay off their duty to society for receiving a free education.

The last day of our visit "Intourist," the Soviet travel agency,
organized a big farewell party at a fancy restaurant, for foreigners only. Champagne and vodka, caviar and other exotic foods were served in unlimited quantities as the folk dancers and later a rock band entertained. The contrast of the students' living conditions and this feast, so similar to the many other feasts organized both by government and church authorities in which I participated, was sickening to anyone's moral sensibilities. The gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" in the Soviet Union seems to be no smaller than elsewhere. The workers and the students seem to be the "have-nots." But most of them do not complain for the "haves" keep telling them that this is their country and that the government is their government and that things will become better.

Things do get better slowly in this huge country where caution and stability characterize life. And the Soviet people still find recourse to their time tested approach to life: suffering and patience, both of which seems an inexhaustable natural resource of the people!