

The Unplanned Society in the Postcommunist World

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A review of *The Unplanned Society: Poland During and After Communism*, edited, annotated and with introductions by Janine R. Wedel, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, pp. x+271, (cloth).

It is not surprising that a lot of what was written just before or during the collapse of communism looks obsolete today. The rate of change in the former communist countries has been so great, with an increasing number of unexpected factors coming into play, that most of the analyses, constructed *ad hoc* and with a great amount of sentimentality, are no longer applicable. Janine R. Wedel's book seems to be an exception. Although the essays which she included in her collection are uneven and some of them could certainly be dispensed with, the general idea behind them is not only interesting but also increasingly important in today's postcommunist world.

The book draws attention to those characteristics of Polish society which emerged as a by-product of a long exposure to totalitarian rule and which constituted partly a form of self-defence against, partly a requirement of, the unnaturalness of the system. Lack of respect for law, a widespread phenomenon in all former Soviet-bloc countries, is a case in point. To many people such an attitude was the only sensible one under communism because communist law, arbitrary and unjust, did not give citizens protection against the whims of the powers that be. The result was that people often had to ignore the law in their own self-interest, or when obeying it, acquired bad habits that are hardly compatible with the rule of law in a normal liberal-democratic system, which Poland now aspires to be. The effect of such processes was that alongside an official society, existing in propaganda and Communist Party documents, there developed another society: unplanned, spontaneous, often corrupt, with its own habits and rules. These were parasitic upon the official institutions and legal norms. Although perversely efficient, they were not divorced from commonsense, and gave rise to a form of pluralism. The agents and beneficiaries of this system included a vast majority of the population; peasants, workers, intellectuals, priests, public officials.

The question which immediately poses itself is: What will be the role of these phenomena in a new post-communist system? Wedel's book does not give a clear answer, but it would be unreasonable to expect one from a collection of pieces written by authors of different orientations, occupations, and experiences. The book suggests however, to its credit, for it is a plausible thesis - that this unplanned society is a fairly stable one, well-entrenched in people's mores, and likely to determine developments in the years to come.

Whether this is good or bad is a debatable point. I think two answers to this question should be discarded, though not without hesitation. The first one is given by liberals (in

the European sense of the word). They argue that the unplanned society that developed under communism is the expression of the spirit of freedom and entrepreneurship, and reflects a particularly valuable form of individual and collective experience: it shows how individual initiative can cope with and outsmart the dogmatism of bureaucrats and ideologies. The worst thing the Poles could do is to liquidate this society by imposing on it the artificial standards of a new democratic system, conceived by ideologues, political scientists, and enlightened government functionaries. Even the corruption that is said to exist in certain sectors of the society is on the whole a good thing. A respected and influential liberal columnist commenting on one of the most notorious frauds in recent years went as far as to suggest (half-seriously, of course) that the accused businessmen not only should not be prosecuted but given a Nobel Prize in economics for entrepreneurial ingenuity. In a less frivolous formulation, this amounts to the following argument: we cannot construct a modern liberal order from above, and the unplanned society is the only one that is rooted in people's real behavior; we should rely on these existing practices, including the bad ones, hoping that through spontaneous selection and adjustments a new society will finally replace the old one.

There is a lot of common sense in this argument, but the minuses seem to outweigh the pluses. First, among the existing practices there are many that not only are bad, but also destructive of liberal-democratic society. There is a danger that these may thwart the development of political and economic structures, and Poland - instead of becoming more and more like other Western countries - will come to resemble those hopelessly inefficient banana republics which combine a caricatured capitalism with socialistic policies, and political despotism with a populist democracy. The second counterargument is that the unplanned society cannot produce or provide a basis of the structures without which a democratic-capitalist society is unthinkable and which condition its existence. The spontaneous and self-corrective development will certainly not produce a legal framework that would guarantee a rule of law, at least not in the manner and at the rate that would be satisfactory in the light of the urgent needs of Polish citizens. Without this, there may persist, for a long period to come, an extremely demoralizing syndrome from which all postcommunist societies suffer: that profit-making must be always half-legal and that laws should not be treated seriously.

The second approach to the problem of the unplanned society does not seem convincing. This approach is taken by people who, although having different orientations, share a *homo sovieticus* hypothesis, that is, a theory that a single most important factor in Eastern Europe is the Soviet heritage in people's minds and forms of behavior. The Poles, they argue, may be politically free, communism may be a thing of the past, and the Soviet army may be gone from the Polish territory, but there is a Soviet soul in every Polish citizen. A *homo sovieticus* is a person who feels so much at home in half-legal situations that he cheats even when he is no longer forced to act illegally; who is so cunning and clever that he can survive under the most ruthless regime, yet is heavily dependent on the state and expects the state to protect him; who does not trust anyone and suspects that all institutions are run by mafias, yet does not like to take individual responsibility for his actions, etc. The unplanned society is thus a sick society, and will not transform itself spontaneously into the type of community that we encounter in Western Europe. It will always be a perverted form of that community because the forces which prevent such a

transformation from happening are not only not easily removable but also have a tendency to perpetuate themselves.

It would be hard to deny that Soviet Man exists and that his influence is powerful. I think, however, that this theory is untenable. Two arguments seem to carry a particular weight. First, the *homo sovieticus* hypothesis easily degenerates into empty moralism, and the statement that all Poles are sovietized becomes a cliché with little informative value. One can also add, turning this argument against those who raised it, that this type of clichéd thinking, with no attempt to make distinctions and qualifications and no constructive recommendations, is itself a symptom of intellectual poverty, that is, a symptom of the sovietized mind that knows only simplistic answers. The second argument is that a certain version of this hypothesis has already been refuted. The notion of the Soviet Man, originally formulated by Alexander Zinoviev, was meant to prove that the Soviet system changed people to such a degree that they accepted it and did not wish to have it replaced by any other system. In short, it was meant to prove that communism was infallible. Fortunately, facts have disproved this claim. The new version of the *homo sovieticus* theory is similar to the old. It claims that a new liberal democratic order is impossible in postcommunist societies, or at least, it will take a very long time to establish it. The fate of the old *homo sovieticus* theory should, however, make us skeptical about such a sweeping statement.

The rejection of these two approaches leads us to accept a conclusion which sounds discouragingly banal; the unplanned society - that still existing by-product of the system that has disappeared - is as much a help in building a new liberal democratic order as it is a hindrance; it is as much a triumph of individual and collective will over Communist social engineering as it is a monument of inefficiency, corruption, inertia, incompetence, lack of will, and other sad side-effects of Communist rule. To those who want to substantiate this conclusion, Wedel's book provides ample material: it records both the optimistic and the pessimistic expectations of people engaged in building a new Poland. And this roughly corresponds to the current state of mind of Polish society. If there is some hope, it lies precisely in this: avoiding both complacency and despair.