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The Continuity of Backwardness

Backwardness and distance

The East’s position is commonly defined as backwardness, a concept that points to the lack of specific features characteristic of a modernized state or economy of a Western type (Gerschenkron, 1962; Janos, 1982; Chirot, 1989b; Schöpflin, 1993; Stokes, 1997). Throughout the centuries, Eastern Europe had been deprived of modern categories of political, social, and economic organization that were perceived as successfully implemented in Western Europe. In this vein, the political traditions with which Eastern Europe entered the contemporary period can be generally characterized as backward. This backwardness manifested itself in the significantly different relationship between state and society to what had evolved in Western Europe, in attitudes towards modernity and the definitions of modernity, as well as the demands that modernization makes on any society.¹

Endowed with a distinctively discriminatory leaning – especially for Easterners – backwardness is associated with belated political, economic, and social development. Moreover, the recent renaissance of this concept stresses the importance of historical fault-lines for understanding the current conflicts in Eastern Europe. This might be one reason for the fact that if backwardness is evoked as useful for analysis, it remains explicitly descriptive (Stokes, 1997).

The comparison between the backward East and the modern West comes down to a juxtaposition of two entities or systems, one being
stronger, richer, and more innovative, while the other is weaker, poorer, or dependent. As a consequence, modernization approaches have been keen to develop arguments for bridging this distance. They assumed that political change would come about as the central political and economic functions in Soviet-type societies would become more and more similar to Western-type societies (Lindblom, 1977). Others categorically denied this distance between East and West by arguing that totalitarian functionalism was eminently modern. It had only a totally negative social structure which negated personal freedom (Feher, 1995:61). In this vein, ‘it is unfounded and misleading to describe Soviet societies, after nearly seventy years of existence, as the embodiment of “backwardness” as against the West, alias modernity’.² Feher argued that regardless of its per capita production or the absence of democracy and capitalism, Soviet-type societies competed with the West on the very grounds of modernity which he identified as industrial logic, a universalizing telos and an apparently unstoppable and dynamic growth (Feher, 1995:61). However, several utopias (that of functionalism, of industrialization, of a complete subjection of the work-force to the command centre) show that Soviet functionalism is not ‘backwardness’ but an eminently modern and totally negative social structure.

For the Polish case, this seemingly paradoxical assessment allows us to identify two different realities of distance. On the one hand, before 1989 its objective institutional distance from the West was rather high as regards economic efficiency, political legitimation, and the eminence role of the elites in society (Szacki, 1995; Kersten, 1996). On the other hand, Poland was hardly distanced from the West at all in terms of its collective identity with Western civilization, its religious and moral values, and its desire for democracy and capitalism (Davies, 1981; Samsonowicz, 1995). In other words, distance was close to zero, as catching up with the West seemed so close. Although the constant reference in Poland to the superiority of the West intimates a subjective perception of backwardness, the double-bind situation is reinforced by an assumed confidence that it can be part of the West and can catch up quickly. Hence, distance has two interlinked ‘functions’, one of asymmetry and another one of symmetry. The balance sheet of the objective, institutional first reality highlights the great distance between Poland and the West, while the strong identification with the West points to only a small distance.

The standard arguments see the post-1989 discontinuities almost entirely in terms of a convergence of both realities of distance,