UNDERSTANDING THE “FOOTPRINT OF STATE SOCIALISM” IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPEAN POST-SOCIALISM

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Abstract: The paper outlines the debate on European state socialism as a social and political order. There are different attempts to obtain a better understanding of the core principles of this type of society and a continuing public debate on it. Following the end of the decade of the transition from “socialism to capitalism” we can observe a renewal in the debates on the “Ancient regime” and its heritage. There are different reasons for this phenomenon; these include new insights from the archives and the recent politics on history in post-socialist societies. The new “zeitgeist” following the world financial crisis of 2008 might be an additional reason. The issues that developed are discussions on the nature of state socialism, some hypotheses on the role of reformers within the changes to late socialism from the perspective of political science, and some assumptions on the methods adopted by former reform socialists after 1989.

Key words: nature of state socialism; socialist as actors of change; heritage of socialism; politics of history.

Introduction

Why is it necessary for political science to deal with state socialism, a system that became history more than two decades ago? What are the good reasons for that?

Another related question is: What is the difference between an historical view of history and a view from the perspective of political science? In my opinion the main difference consists in the fact that political science strives for a proper understanding of the functioning of present polities and politics. By contrast history seeks out historical events and turns and interpretations. We should not forget, however, that these interpretations of historical facts are in a sense inspired by present identities and interests as well.

1 The paper was completed for a lecture at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres in Vienna in January 2013. The first version of the lecture was given at the Aleksanteri Institute (Helsinki) in May 2011 when I held a research fellowship at this institute. I would like to thank the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the invitation to the seminar. The research fellowship at the Aleksanteri Institute was also very important, which gave me an opportunity to study the topic in depth, and where I received helpful comments on the lecture, especially the critical arguments of Muriel Blaive, Markku Kivinen, Katalin Miklosy, Margarita Balmaceda and Vesa Oittinen.
The first point relating to political science’s interest in former state socialism could be justified by the existence of clear “footprints”\(^2\) of state socialism in Eastern Europe. This apparently concerns real \textit{and} only imagined footprints: to list but three—the weakness of civil society in Eastern Europe; the economic difficulties after 1989 allegedly rooted in the previously nationalized economy; and, the overall influence of the old elites.

I have recently become interested in a particular footprint; namely, the post socialist legacy of reform socialism in the state parties of late socialism. In some countries this was weaker and in others it was stronger. I will return to the point of my interest after the introduction.

Another point could be that having a proper understanding of the political structure of the former society and how it functioned could be very helpful in grasping the general logic of a modern dictatorship anywhere. From the post-1989 changes it is clear that not only democracy but also dictatorships remained in the world of politics. State-socialist dictatorships were both lasting and stable so they could be an apt subject in the study of modern dictatorships.\(^3\)

The third point is that interpretations of history are used as an instrument in the ongoing political struggle. The “Politics of history” is a subject to found in both historical and political science analyses.

Fourthly, widespread post-socialist East European phenomena like nostalgia are not primarily produced by the influence of past experiences but by reflecting the present through a kind of utopia of the past. In his book on the nostalgic feelings for former Yugoslavia in present post-Yugoslavia Velikonja has detected that: “The Yugoslavia from the nostalgic discourse never existed. It is its utopian simulation, Yugoslavia as it should have been, a dreamland purified from all weaknesses and mistakes, a kind of socialist Cockaigne [or land of plenty: Schlaraffenland]” (2008, 133).

**Puzzling footprints – paradoxes as food for further thought**

Before gaining experience of a certain subject we often command a specific concept of it. This concept may be rooted in past mainstream theoretical discussions, in hegemonic ideology, or in public prejudices. It is important therefore to perceive the difference between our initial expectations and the ensuing empirical findings. In this regard \textit{the unexpected} is the most interesting. The—at least at first glance—\textit{paradoxical} observations are topics requiring a closer look. In paradoxes there are many signs of ideologies and prejudices.

There are a considerable number of paradoxes regarding both late socialism and post-socialism\(^4\). I will list only some of them in order to provide food for further thought:

\(^2\) I owe the term “footprint of state socialism” to David Lane. He has written several books and articles on this topic (see, for instance, D. Lane 2000 and 2006).


\(^4\) The term post-socialism was developed by ethnologists (See Hann 2002). I am among those who have adopted it for discussions in political science (Segert 2007).