



EAST EUROPEAN AND SOVIET STUDIES

■ B E R G

EQUALITY AND INEQUALITY IN EASTERN EUROPE



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Equality and Inequality in Eastern Europe

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Introduction

Pierre Kende

This book, the fruit of a collective effort, is intended to contribute to a better understanding of the East European societies which, for nearly forty years, have had Communist regimes claiming to be living examples of the Soviet version of socialism. The documents and analyses presented relate to the economic, social and political fields but, in a sense, they are all part of political science in so far as the purpose of the latter is to understand how systems function. The central question which the book attempts to answer is whether, in the area under review, socialist ambitions have borne fruit in the fields of distribution and social equality, and how these results compare with the contemporary evolution of Western societies.

The aim of this book is scientific. Firstly, and above everything else, it has no political thesis to peddle (not least because its contributors are not all of the same political persuasion). Secondly, the authors, who come from several disciplines, have scrutinised with maximum respect and minimum prejudice the unadorned, raw facts (in so far as they can be said to exist). They did not wish to prove either that particular inequalities exist in Eastern Europe, or that there are none. Their intention was to study the empirical data and to relate them to the social policies pursued by Communist regimes, taking into account the economic context of recent decades and the constraints operating within such systems.

A priori, such an enquiry can be conducted in one of two ways. Either one adopts a monographic approach in which, after studying the problems country by country, one draws conclusions, relating all of them in the form of a synthesis, or one breaks the subject down into thematic chapters each of which reaches its own conclusions. The first approach was particularly tempting since each of the contributors had, to various degrees, his or her favourite country (for some their native country, for others the one they had come to know best). However, we opted for the second method which

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appeared more logical considering the diversity of skills and pre-occupations. It was also decided that, geographically, the scope of the study would be limited to East-Central Europe: Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and, in less detail, East Germany. This selection was imposed on us by the eminently practical consideration that, of all the Soviet-type countries, these are the ones on which we have the most abundant and least controversial empirical data.

In this connection, let us say a few words about our sources. They are all 'official' in the sense that they were published in the country concerned. However, it is necessary to distinguish between two levels of officialness. The first is that of government publications, of which the *Statistical Yearbooks* are a typical example. The second is that of works or articles presenting the methodology or the results of individual or team research. Although it is true that, as a general rule, East European research is supervised by the political authorities, it does not follow that all the conclusions reached bear an official seal of approval. In the fields which interest us, particularly the topics of income redistribution, education and social structure — including mobility — much original and otherwise unpublished data were retrieved from published research of this kind. In other words, if the present book provides information which contrasts sharply with the well-known barrenness of Soviet socio-economic statistics, it is above all thanks to East European scholars and to the authorities of certain countries (notably Hungary and Poland) who have understood that a modern country cannot be run in a fog of incomplete information. Even so, this process still has a long way to go. At present, the study of East European data still requires much circumspection and must, sometimes, come to a halt when confronted with gaps in the information.¹

The authors of the present book have all participated in a multi-disciplinary research seminar which first of all, between 1978 and 1980, functioned according to a formula of free association, and then, from 1980 to 1982, as a body connected with the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*.² It is appropriate at this point to express our thanks, on the one hand, to the CNRS for its financial support, and on the other to the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* and the *Centre d'Etudes Economiques* of the

1. The problem of sources will be discussed in greater detail in the first three chapters of the book.

2. Research project no. 636.

Ecole Normale Supérieure, for their hospitality. We must also add that, without the publisher's determined support, the present book would probably never have been written.

Is Socialism Egalitarian?

As the East European societies considered here belong to a system which has an explicit social goal and as we tend to judge them in relation to it, let us start by highlighting the aims and principles which enable us to understand the Soviet experience in the area of equality and thereby to evaluate the resemblance between the initial goal and the results achieved.

On a very general level, which needs some qualification as we will see later, Marxism favours equality. Indeed, socialism of a Marxist-Leninist inspiration — which, in this particular respect, is in no way different from the Marxism of Marx himself — attempts to put an end to the differences which result in the creation of deep and ineradicable inequalities between groups of individuals.

It is necessary from the outset to stress the word 'groups' in the above proposition. Regarding individual inequalities — within an otherwise homogeneous social category — Marxism as a doctrine has nothing to say. This is because, according to its particular approach which is based on an historical 'macro' and not a sociological 'micro' approach, what counts are class differences, or the division of labour in relation to class affiliation. Of course, there are other differences, racial, sexual and so on, but they only have significance for Marxist theory to the extent that they cast light on a particular aspect of the fundamental division. That division, which materializes through class antagonism, leads us to the even more fundamental fact that mankind is divided into owners and non-owners. In other words, the major cleavage, the only inequality which Marxism is automatically interested in, is that introduced by ownership.

If we now consider the egalitarian socialist ambition (as defined above) in the context of European history, it becomes clear that it arose as a consequence of the inroads and conquests made by the bourgeoisie, as the *Communist Manifesto* proclaimed as early as 1847. Were not the revolutions led by the rising bourgeoisie directed against all kinds of privileges which generated legally-sanctioned inequalities and which were, therefore, contrary to the

yearning for civil equality and prejudicial to the realisation of the free interplay of abilities? Certainly, in the eyes of Marx and Marxists, bourgeois discourse on equality was nothing but the 'ideological' expression, the juridico-philosophical packaging, of their ('class') interests in the struggle they were leading against the old order. But this struggle opened up a valuable novelty — the formal equality of citizens before the law — which could only facilitate the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed. In a way, the ethic of equality, this bourgeois rationalisation, is essential to the socialist struggle as it enables it to denounce the persistence, even the aggravation, of social inequalities under the veneer of civil equality.

By opposing 'real equality' to 'formal equality' it would appear that Marxist doctrine has committed itself to the postulate of equality. However, we should not put trust in appearances. Redefined in this way, the postulate of equality has no other objective than to take advantage of a weakness in the opponent's position. Its function is propagandistic rather than normative. Its sole aim is to expose the hidden hypocrisy of formal equality and call for it to be superseded. Besides, we can note that in Marxist thought the only inequality which matters — that of conditions — is synonymous with 'class society'. Consequently, equality is defined by the abolition of classes. It has no other conceptual content. Cleared of its polemical aspects, 'real equality' relates to a state of affairs in which there no longer exists any fundamental cleavage, whether of ownership, class, or whatever, nor any qualitative differences likely to bring about the subordination of an entire category of human beings. The enumeration of differences such as those between town and country, intellectual and manual labour, etc., is the only positive approach to equality in Marxist literature.

In short, Marxist socialism is not especially attached to egalitarian commitments since it analyses social reality in terms which show equality, however understood, to be simply a by-product. On this particular point, Marx and Lenin are wholly in agreement and, long before the socialist revolution was on the agenda, they relentlessly attacked those who preached egalitarianism under the influence of bourgeois or petty bourgeois radicalism (this term being particularly defamatory in the mouths of Marxists). In the minds of Marx and his disciples, equality is not the purpose of socialist action, nor is it its favoured yardstick. The equalisation of conditions must emerge completely naturally from the radical, structural transform-

ations that the socialist revolution is destined to achieve. This does not mean that Marxists are insensitive to inequalities, only that they regard them as a consequence of the capitalist or pre-capitalist order. Thus, real equality will be the consequence of the setting up of socialist structures.

Before pursuing our enquiry any further, let us make a few brief remarks on the scholarly and practical value of this doctrine. In the decisive field of political action, its realism is indisputable and deserves some praise. By refusing to make equality a criterion of socialism, it leaves a large degree of tactical freedom to those responsible for implementing its programme. Such freedom is invaluable in the face of virulent egalitarian aspirations amongst those who sympathize with revolutionary action. It is very useful to the leaders of the revolution to be able to assert, in all good conscience, that socialism is not 'egalitarian'.

It is true that, psychologically, this position is not quite so easy to defend and maintain. What a doctrine says literally is one thing, the way in which it is interpreted is another. The vast majority of those who adopt the socialist programme are expecting it to bring about a social order 'of equals', not only in the abstract, in the forbidding language of 'structures', but also in real life. In a way, even the hands of the revolutionary leaders are tied. Since they are the ones who decide on everything, it is up to them to draw the 'natural' — egalitarian — conclusions from the structural upheavals which have occurred.

Finally, from the point of view of historical analysis, it is necessary to make one more observation. In the actual experience of twentieth-century Europe — and we are referring here to capitalist Europe — the line of separation drawn by Marxism between the 'formal' and the 'real' is not as clear as the followers of the doctrine would wish. It has certainly been possible to take many steps towards greater 'real' equality under cover of State intervention, without suppressing the fundamental institution of capitalist society, namely private ownership. To take only one example, all historical statistics bear witness to the fact that the living conditions of the working-class population have grown closer to those of the middle classes in terms of the distribution of quantifiable material and cultural benefits as well as in access to managerial positions and channels of social promotion.³ Far from marking a contrast with

3. As far as France is concerned, see in particular the works by Jean Fourastié.

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'formal equality', this narrowing has occurred primarily under the impact of political democracy, that is to say the extension of civil rights. While it is true that this development has not put an end to class divisions and other qualitative differences, it has softened them considerably.

There are two reasons why this historical experience has relevance to revolutionary socialism, whether or not it claims to be Marxist-Leninist. Firstly, it brings into question some of its theoretical foundations. Is the abolition of ownership the *sine qua non* — the only — condition for the setting up of a more egalitarian society? Has 'real' equality nothing to do with 'formal' equality? Secondly, the historical process we are referring to emphasises the complexity of the phenomena linked with the promotion of 'real equality'. Without doubt, this complexity lies within the very nature of the concept of equality.⁴ But what is more particularly of interest to us here is the difficulty for modern, democratic and Welfare States to give an unequivocal (or even, for a large majority, 'acceptable') definition of the desirable level of equality, and then to make that level compatible with other socially approved imperatives, while simultaneously respecting its different aspects. In this connection, we will limit ourselves to citing, in no particular order, just a few of the common dilemmas of social policy — who should bear the cost of pensions, of family benefits, and at what rate? or regarding fiscal policies — what should be taxed? to what extent? how can one avoid disincentives to activities one wishes to promote? how can the excessive taxation of harmful products like tobacco be reconciled with the principle of relative tax reductions on popular consumer goods? etc. These welfare quandaries, that many Marxists have chosen for such a long time to ignore or to interpret in a biased way, nonetheless prefigure the problems which the socialist State will be faced with as soon as it emerges from its initial enthusiasms — or its initial ecstasies. There can be no real equality, nor even any progress towards it, without taking into account, on the one hand

4. In this connection, may we quote Julien Freund's excellent philosophical definition: 'If things are equal in a determined relationship, they can be different or unequal in another relationship. Therefore, there could not be equality without some presupposition, the latter being the chosen determined relationship. Other relationships are therefore possible, in which the same beings or things would not be equal. It follows that there is no unique or exclusive relationship according to which a set of objects or all possible equalities could be exhaustively considered. If such is the case, equality is only one of the possible presuppositions which determine the various relationships in which a set of objects can be studied.' (J. Freund, "Justice et Egalité", *Les Etudes Philosophiques*, 2, 1973, pp. 165-6).

the contributions of people, and on the other the benefits distributed, recovered and redistributed (by the economy as much as by the State). From this point of view the socialist State, whether it likes it or not, has to make the same judgements as the Western-type interventionist State. As a consequence, it is faced with the same dilemmas, except that it is not always aware of them with the desirable degree of clarity. As we note on several occasions in this book, its shortcomings are to be found in its accounts.

Specific Equality or Overall Equality?

This issue is so vital that it is necessary to pause, if only briefly, for an explanation. Strictly speaking, equality in conditions cannot exist objectively; it can exist only in relation to a system of accounting or, more precisely, to a valorisation which applies to the entire costs and benefits distributed in the economy. Why? Because 'real conditions' for each individual are composed of a multitude of heterogeneous elements which remain immeasurable so long as they are not assigned a 'value' — even if only a conventional one. With respect to goods appropriated (used, consumed) by people, the price system achieves the valorisation. For the time being, let us leave aside how this is achieved. Even benefits in kind, distributed without anything in exchange, have an implicit price, namely that which the distributing agent agrees to pay out (as salaries for instance) in order to acquire them. For certain benefits in kind, such as housing, the implicit price is even more complex because, as far as the valorisation by the parties involved is concerned, what counts is the use value (according to location, comfort, etc.) rather than the nominal cost of acquiring them.

It is perfectly obvious that before comparing the living conditions of two individuals, or of two families, it is necessary to have a scale of values making it possible to add up everything they 'have' (at their disposal) and, possibly, even what they lack. A conventional scale is better than nothing, but this is not to say that all scales are worth the same, far from it! In order for the comparison to make any sense, the reference prices cannot be 'arbitrary'. They must reflect either the satisfactions provided (this is difficult, as we know, even in an ideal market where the consumer is 'king'), or the socially justified cost for each item (which is more in the domain of the possible).

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Before considering whether East European economies, administered according to the Marxist–Leninist–Stalinist recipe, possess a scale of comparable costs of this kind, let us make a final digression in order to specify definitively what it is that has to be measured. In all the foregoing, the ‘real condition’ of individuals has been presented as if it were only the product of an addition (two kilos of meat + a semi-detached house in the suburbs + the education of a young child, etc.). In reality, the total thus obtained is also the product of an exchange, at least for working people, comprising the time of work and preparation, the effort they must make to be hired, paid, entitled to benefits, promoted, etc. Strictly speaking, the condition of a working person — for the sake of brevity we will leave aside all non-working people as well as the problem of dependants — presents itself as a fraction, of which the numerator is made up of the sum of the benefits enjoyed, and the denominator, of the sum of the costs personally expended. This latter term is of course expressed by a physical aggregate (time, effort, humiliations suffered, etc.) and not by a money aggregate.

It is out of the question here to propose an algebraic formula for studying living standards since, to our knowledge, no theorist has ever devised one. Identifying the need for such a formula, as we have just done, is not simply pedantry. Its importance lies in stimulating our critical functions in a way that underlines the difficulty of attaining the goal of real equality and helps us realise that one should not speak lightly of a matter as intricate as that of equalising living conditions. To put it more simply, the fact that two individuals earn the same salary does not mean that they have comparable living conditions.

This is the reason why contemporary research on living standards does not content itself with data related to money earnings and the consumer expenses of households, but endeavours to give a precise presentation and interpretation of these data, taking into account other relevant factors in the evaluation of the quality of life of a given social category. This is also what we have tried to achieve in this volume. For this reason the chapters on remuneration and the distribution of resources are supplemented by detailed information on housing, the way enterprises function, social mobility, and finally the access which various social categories enjoy to certain rights, civil or cultural. Needless to say, there are as many approaches as there are new insights on East European reality. Whereas it is possible to sum them up individually, any attempt to

create a unified synthesis runs precisely into the conceptual difficulty which we have stated.

However, going back to the problem of comparing costs, the question raised concerns the usefulness — the relevance — of data quantified in money terms which, as the reader will notice, represent by far the majority of data analysed in this study. In other words, the problem is one of the comparability of the money incomes of the population in all the countries in the region under review which, whatever we might think, represent two-thirds to three-quarters of the resources put at their disposal.

The normal reaction of the Western reader when faced with a set of figures in, for example, American dollars, is to assume that one dollar equals one dollar, whatever the table in which it appears. It should be pointed out that, in the case of East European data, this reaction is not the norm. It is based on the particular experience of the market economy which has accustomed us to the idea that, behind the exchange of goods for a certain amount of money (or vice versa), there occurs a kind of dynamic equalising which produces 'normal' reaction so that, in the absence of cheating or swindling, one dollar is worth one dollar. In addition, it is this which makes it possible to say that by earning \$10,000, one earns twice as much as a person whose salary is \$5,000. It is from this basis that one can go on to make more subtle, qualitative as it were, comparisons.

The evidence that such equations are valid only so long as this phenomenon of equalising occurs beforehand, has to be accepted. Is this also the case in Soviet-type economic systems? Seemingly yes, since people are hired for a remuneration fixed in money terms and spend the money thus earned in shops, on service vouchers (canteen, railway, etc.), or else on the black market. But, in this connection, an initial observation is already necessary. In the various channels of distribution, prices are not the same for the same service or for the same object sold. They can be significantly different, not only according to the point of sale, but also according to the status of the buyer. Secondly, in order for there to be a process of equalisation — it would be even more accurate to talk about 'socialisation' of the exchange value — it is not enough that the price is officially displayed and thereby 'socially' accepted. This socialisation is apparent only so long as it is not proven that, especially on the black market, the same price would prevail between the parties concerned, even in the absence of any administra-

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tive constraint. It is notorious that, everywhere in Eastern Europe, it is the contrary which happens every day. Each time there is a black market, the socialisation of the price determined by the State is shown to be false. And even without any demonstration of this tendency, such phenomena as shortages and queues — or more precisely, the persistence of supply shortages and the length of queues — show convincingly enough that the prices displayed are nominal. Consequently, so are the comparisons of standards of living made on the basis of such prices.

At this point we are faced with a paradox which we could also call an irony of history. It has just been established that the socialisation of values is a necessary condition enabling a State, of whatever type, reasonably to contemplate measures leading to equal conditions. This at least, is the case in a civilisation such as ours with a highly developed division of labour and an extreme diversity of elements, material or otherwise, which make up everyone's life. What, then, do we observe in connection with the two systems? The capitalist system, which *a priori* has no plans for equalisation — at least as regards the intentions entertained by its leading actors, namely the entrepreneurs (it may be that this proposition too should be revised!), — does have to its credit the generalising of the exchange value, providing it with a unit of account which can give a meaning to attempts aimed at bringing real conditions closer together. On the other hand, owing to the very fact that it rejects the market as a privileged instrument of communication between actors in the economy, Soviet-type socialism of Marxist inspiration also lacks an instrument of account which could provide a basis for its natural tendency to achieve a narrowing of conditions. Of course, this statement has limitations on both sides. To say that capitalist economies have a tool for equalisation at their disposal does not mean to suggest that they are naturally inclined to make use of it (which, however, does not exclude that they may do so as a result of social pressure or for ideological reasons). As for Soviet-type socialism, nothing, other than the economic and functional constraints dealt with in chapter 11, prevents it from promoting equality in a specific way, area by area. In other words, we must not stretch the meaning of our paradox too far.