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# Ordinary STALINISM

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Democratic Centralism and the  
Question of Communist Political Development

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RONALD TIERSKY



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Question of Communist Political  
Development

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## Preface

This essay on communist political development began as a chapter in Heinz Timmermann, *Die kommunistischen Parteien Südeuropas* (1979), which compared the ideology and practice of internal party organization—"democratic centralism"—in various Latin American communist parties. The subject deserving deeper consideration, I then set to investigate more thoroughly to what extent democratic centralism, an old ideological warhorse once again a focus of controversy because of "Eurocommunism," was really the main issue of communist party internal politics, at least in West European communism.

The respective fortunes of French and Italian communism over the past decade have failed to trick only the most clairvoyant observers. The stronger Italian Communist Party (PCI) has been kept out of the Italian government yet has prospered electorally, while the weaker French Communist Party (PCF) first entered then quickly exited the government, in the process losing a considerable part of both its organizational base and political influence. These French and Italian surprises confirm that luck in politics remains full of ironies, and that even virtue requires skill and persistence in order to prevail.

Overall, Eurocommunism's relegation to the famous dustbin of history should not dispense scholars from further serious thinking about communism in Western Europe. In fact the 1980s are already more decisive for West European communism than were the 1970s: trends are finally coming to unmistakable fruition and the force of circumstance is more compelling than ever. *Survival*, *decline*, and the potential for *development* are today as much achieved conclusions as they were processes ten years ago.

To study democratic centralism is a powerful focus for the complex issues of West European communism's political development. Furthermore, as my initial paper had shown, the crucial and most durable problem of democratic centralism is the question of *factions*—meaning communism's historically morbid fear of the consequences of internal party factionalism for communist identity and purpose. In following up the evident connection between

communism's formal prohibition of factions and generic communist monolithism, I was drawn gradually to consider communism in general, communism "as such." A new and broader premise emerged in my thinking, and this essay was reconceptualized so as to ultimately interpret democratic centralism as a reading of the general dilemma of communist political development, East and West. John Dewey's maxim—"In any experiment of thinking, premises emerge only as conclusions become manifest"—was once again validated.

One particular influence in working out my argument deserves comment in this preface. As I began to see the possibility of using a study of democratic centralism to speak about communism in general, I encountered the French edition of Alexander Zinoviev's essay *Le Communisme comme réalité* (1981). *The Reality of Communism* (English translation, 1984) is a sociological account by the author of earlier brilliant, rambling satires of orthodox communist politics and cultural life. The originality of Zinoviev's satires—*The Yawning Heights* (1979), *The Radiant Future* (1980), and *Homo Sovieticus* (1982)—had already deeply impressed and perplexed the academic students of communism. Whatever confusion Zinoviev sowed, it was clear that, if Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* epitomized the tragedy of "high Stalinist" totalitarianism, then Zinoviev's books dissected the absurd farce of contemporary "ordinary Stalinist" communism.

None the less, Zinoviev's marvelous insight into what I call "ordinary Stalinism" remained largely inaccessible for scholarly purposes until *The Reality of Communism* appeared. Abounding in paradoxes and problematic assertions, Zinoviev's analysis beyond all its defects was for me powerful reinforcement of several lines of my own argument: (1) the continuing importance of ideology, rightly understood, in communist politics; (2) the centrality of the theme of "unity" and the struggle against "faction" in orthodox communism (compare Zinoviev's study of the "communitarian reflex" in communist society); and (3) the hypothesis that, barring some unforeseeable (and hence unanalyzable) cataclysm, Soviet-type regimes will either decay or can develop, not through some unwilling embrace of an alien model, but "on the basis of Communism itself" (Zinoviev, 1984, p. 259).

This radical conclusion, though contrary to much received wisdom (and hope), seems to me a profound realism; at the same time my own views, unlike Zinoviev's, cannot be mistaken for any sort of apology for Soviet communism. Zinoviev sees communist

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development resulting from "the struggle for the blessings of civilization" (ibid.). By this he means, it seems, an eventual fracturing of political regimentation as a secondary consequence of society's desire for a higher standard of living and convenience. My study, which focuses on the communist *party*, reaches a conclusion which may seem comparable, yet it implies fundamental differences of premise and approach. Most important, I find—in democratic centralism—evidence for *autonomous political developmental potentialities* on the basis of communism itself. How my understanding differs from Zinoviev's, as well as from the so-called "interest group theory of communist politics," will be a recurring theme. In any case, this book ends in no flat or simplistic forecast of a liberalization of communist politics; the realm of wishful thinking is not my territory.

I want to thank Heinz Timmermann for suggesting my original paper, and I want also to acknowledge a large intellectual debt to Pierre Hassner in the present matters over many years. I would like to thank Eusebio Mujal-Leon, Kevin Devlin and Piotr Sztompka for discussions and other help in this work, and also to thank Jack Hayward, George Kateb, Howard Machin, Angelo Panebianco and William Taubman for valuable comments on the manuscript. I have also a special debt to acknowledge during two years at The Bologna Center to my friend Stefano Zamagni. Readers should assume, as always, that an author is solely responsible for his book.

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PART ONE

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**The History and Theory  
of Ordinary Stalinism**

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# 1

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## *Introduction: On Communist Political Development*

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### **The Historical Deadlock of Communist Political Development**

Let us begin by revising a cliché. Marx was correct—but prematurely, and not in the sense he intended—to describe communism in his 1848 manifesto as “a specter haunting Europe.”

Communist revolutions occurred much later than Marx originally had expected. (Bell quotes Marx writing to Dr. Kugelmann at the end of 1857, “I am working like mad all through the nights at putting my economic studies together so that I may at least have the outlines clear before the deluge comes”: Bell, 1976; p. 371.) The communist revolutions also took place elsewhere than Marx had predicted, and their results, as one well imagines, were not what he calculated and desired.

None the less, communism indeed has been a specter haunting Europe. It now rules in Eastern Europe and, after long menacing Western Europe from within, threatens the rest of Europe today, from the East, with finlandization, destruction, or both.

Yet at the same time communism today, ruling not only in the Soviet Union and half of Europe, but also in China, Indochina, and Cuba, is doubly haunted in its turn: first, by a profound disillusionment worldwide of communism’s original hopes; and secondly, by an internal “constitution” whose incapacity for self-reform prevents changes necessary to the adaptation and even the survival of communist states. In consequence, communism today is just as much the prey of its own reformers and revolutionaries as old Europe in 1848 was of its liberals and communists.

In communist party-states nearly all the post-Stalin regimes, despite certain signs of flexibility, remain essentially machines of

political repression. Such regimes are widely despised by populations whose discontent is manifested, as the situations permit, either in spontaneous enthusiasm for unexpected revolutionary surges (Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland in 1980—and even, albeit in a paradoxical or perverse sense, the 1960s Cultural Revolution in China) or else in a generalized apathy whose quietism and submission is often interpreted as a form of political legitimacy. The equivocalness of this legitimacy is continuously attested by a stream of emigrations and political defections—which can suddenly become torrents, as was demonstrated again a few years ago by the mass flight from communist Cuba or the recent sharp increase in emigration from East to West Germany.

It would surely be mistaken to assert that communist regimes have failed to satisfy all groups, classes, and strata in their societies. But even given communism's visible successes—to begin with, the assured provision of basic decencies to the mass of society—the closed borders of communist states imply a unique message of political and human despair. In this sense communism is a historic failure against whose continuing developmental deadlock one must read the significance of such internal challenges as the "Polish August" and Eurocommunism.

### **Poland: The Meaning of *Solidarity***

Solidarity was a free trade union. In both theory and practice it was revolutionary in that simple fact. For one thing, communism has always meant, going back to Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, the idea that trade unions are an adjunct to the communist party's political action. Left to themselves, trade unions would always, Lenin said, be contented with "bread and butter." Party control of the trade unions was thus a requirement of organizing the struggle for revolution. It was, so to speak, merely a matter of getting the division of labor straight, and of holding the unions to what otherwise they would fail to accomplish: instilling a revolutionary, anti-capitalist consciousness in the workers they represented.

For another thing, Solidarity's political wildfire constituted a flat rejection not simply of communist ideology, but also of the gap between communist ideology and the humiliating reality of communist societies. In short, the "Polish August" organized by Solidarity *had to be revolutionary* because, in itself, it was *intrinsically* so.

Fervid expectations were generated in the Polish August that the

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historical deadlock of communist political development had finally been broken, at least in one country. International opinion in early 1981 agreed with Polish optimism: it was believed generally that, despite the Soviet Union's major interest in prolonging Poland's conformism and foreign policy subservience, the price of Soviet military intervention—in Russian blood and Russian treasure, as well as in political costs to pay elsewhere—had simply risen too high. The Polish people's resistance appeared indomitable. What is more, the Polish Communist Party (that is, the Polish United Workers' party, or PUWP) itself had badly disintegrated. For a time, as party insiders admitted here and there to foreign leaders and journalists, the PUWP simply lost its cohesion as an organization. Solidarity, on the other hand, in only a few months' time enrolled almost the entire Polish workforce in its ranks. Tens of thousands of deserting Communist Party members also joined the free union, some certainly simply to turn their coats, but others in an act of true freedom whose goal was to help overthrow the communist regime.

To the extent that any mass organization ever actually "embodies" individuals in a collective identity and ever actually expresses the will of its membership, Solidarity was true to its name. For months Solidarity in effect *was* Polish society, whose strongest political wishes it enunciated.

Few observers thus foresaw or even believed possible Solidarity's sudden, crushing defeat—not by Soviet troops either, but by a local military-secret police counterrevolutionary action—and the relative lack of resistance against the Polish December coup in 1981. Whatever the mechanisms of Solidarity's internal collapse—political naiveté and a lack of proper contingency planning, a lack of courage at the top in the face of extreme danger, or rather the effects of a finally inescapable set of geopolitical and strategic facts of life that have decimated Polish dreams more than once in history—the Jaruzelski counterrevolutionary coup amounted to a *de jure* restoration of the Polish Communist Party's authority. The PUWP's subsequent retraction of most of what had been conceded in the Gdańsk Protocol and on other occasions bitterly disappointed the hopes that Poland had fought its way off the dead-end path of Soviet-controlled political development.

Solidarity had seemed an irresistible force, a massive structure thrown up on a social base of tremendous enthusiasm and courage. At its zenith it was in fact a free, self-governing organization. Moreover, it had unique external support in its struggle against the communist hierarchy: the influence of the Polish Catholic Church,

traditionally semi-autonomous in a communist society where a majority are believers; the mutual reinforcement of political liberty and religious liberty in Solidarity's program; and, finally, the historical connection between Catholicism and national independence in Polish history.<sup>1</sup> In short, a free trade union and a powerful Catholic Church constituted a formidable combination of anti-Sovietism and anti-communism

The Polish counterrevolution, with its successful dissolution of Solidarity and political containment of the church, has gone far to reestablish a grim judgment within the international community concerning the nature of orthodox, Soviet-modeled communism and its possibilities of development. First, the judgment was reaffirmed that communist orthodoxy not only seeks but requires isolation. "Iron curtain" politics, in other words, are a necessity rather than an option in communist political systems. And one could even say that hermetically sealed borders are a *defining* characteristic of communist states—Yugoslavia, from this point of view, is rightfully considered no longer a communist state properly speaking—just as a tightly closed organizational network is a defining characteristic of orthodox nonruling communist parties.

In May 1984 the Polish leader General Jaruzelski signed a fifteen-year economic agreement binding Poland more tightly into the Soviet political orbit in exchange for Soviet economic assistance. Beyond the facts of the matter, the deeper significance of the agreement was to reaffirm the connection between isolation and orthodox communist identity. The Soviet leader Chernenko reasserted Moscow's argument that the broadening of Polish economic ties with the West in the 1970s had contributed to the rise of the Solidarity movement and its challenge to communist rule. Thus the new agreement was not limited to economic benefits, but would constitute "dependable protection against the attempts of imperialism to use trade and economic levers for subversive political purposes" (*New York Times*, 5 May 1984, p. 1).

The lesson of the "Polish August" from this perspective seems to be that communist orthodoxy is intrinsically threatened by external contact. External contact, in other words, is one possible path to the development or significant reform of communist orthodoxy. In the Polish case, as Solidarity's experience shows, the result (or in another sense the alternative) is revolution. Thus to the extent isolation can be maintained or reimposed, and if revolutions can be prevented or overturned, the future of communist politics can consist only in secondary refinements of a monolithic regime whose

intrinsic tendency, however much it is weakened with the passage of time, remains the totalitarian control of society. Communist political structures, from this point of view, cannot significantly develop or be genuinely reformed from within. Communist regimes can only be contained on the exterior, overthrown from within, or left to degenerate over the Keynesian long run, in which case the issue of communist development does not much concern the rest of the world other than as a frustration or a danger. The argument I offer in this study—even though it may be unpopular to search out the case for communism's political development—is to show from historical studies that such conclusions are either unjustifiably exaggerated or, on a reading of initially disparate forms of evidence I put together, simply wrong.

### **The Importance of Democratic Centralism**

The main contention of this book is that the *internal organization* of communism, correctly understood, can be read as the problem of its political development generally speaking. The focus of my study is "democratic centralism," the internal organizational or "constitutional" doctrine of what I later will call "ordinary Stalinism."

Democratic centralism is, of course, a time-worn communist ideological dogma. Too often it has been taken to be no more than an ideological *slogan*, a sort of doctrinal figleaf manipulated by orthodox ideological high priests to hide (poorly) a political regime of ubiquitous coercion. The persistent tendency, even among scholars, to underestimate or to misread the significance of democratic centralism in communist politics historically is all the more remarkable in that communists themselves, and even their adversaries, have always said that what distinguishes communism from all other types of politics is a unique *organizational* ideology and practice. In explaining, for example, how communism differs from other versions of socialist aspiration (social democracy or "direct action"), and how communism differs from other forms of totalitarian politics (nazism), this is of particular relevance.

In the last decade, however, a good deal of newsprint and some serious books have once again taken up the issue of democratic centralism. This rediscussion of an old problem was provoked initially by the rise and fall of Eurocommunism—in which the reform of democratic centralism was a key issue—but its larger context is the continuing general disintegration of communism as a

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coherent international ideological and organizational power. An initial contribution of this study will thus be to explain what appears at first as a paradox: that democratic centralism should become once again a central issue of communist development as communism's international appeal struggles to survive.

This issue, however, is but a part of a larger initial paradox which derives from what some writers on political development choose to call the "effectiveness" of communist politics (Huntington, 1968), meaning the enhanced capacity of communist governments to survive and to govern, compared to other types of regime. The paradox here is that *it is precisely the anomalous "effectiveness" of communist government which has brought its development to a historical deadlock.*

"A particular type of society," Alexander Zinoviev writes, "contains in itself internal restrictions on that society's potential" (1984, p. 41). Differences in the very capacity for development from within, it is safe to say, result in considerable measure from the way societies are constituted and structured. And this means ultimately that differences in the capacity for self-generated development are intrinsic in the values upon which societies govern themselves or are governed by self-coopting elites. Zinoviev's books have demonstrated, in this regard, the anomalous effectiveness of communist politics. He depicts a system deadlocked and frustrated as a natural consequence of what it is, a system in which few care any longer about the ideology's grand promises, but in which nearly all none the less think and behave "orthodox," that is, according to the ideology's "practical rules." As he says: "The practical ideology of a society is an aggregate of special rules and behavioral skills which people apply in situations which are intrinsically important" (Zinoviev, 1984, p. 231).

Zinoviev's method, whether in his satires or even in his more recent straightforward sociology, is basically to present us with a *characterization* of communist society. What needs to be further studied and elaborated are the answers to the questions *why* and *how*: what logic or principles underlie the political habits of ordinary Stalinism? Why are they what they are? How did they come to be?

I will try to argue compellingly that democratic centralism—understood as it really has worked in communist politics rather than as a merely hypocritical ideological slogan—is the "practical ideology" of orthodox communist behavior. The prodigious effect of democratic centralism in producing generic, that is, "typical," communist thinking and behavior can be shown, it seems to me, to be a

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major explanation of the anomalous effectiveness of communist politics. Thus the "problem" of democratic centralism, stated in its fullest form, can be read as communism's self-imposed developmental limits and a key to the general historical deadlock of communist political development. In essence we will have found a new way to analyze, within communism's own terms, the internal struggle between orthodoxy and reform for communism's political and moral soul.

### **Michels's Law and Kirchheimer's Rule**

It is worth specifying immediately that, up to a certain point, the oppressive character of communist organizational life created by democratic centralism is no more than the classic dilemma of internal party oligarchy analyzed in such rich detail by Robert Michels already before World War I (see Michels, 1962). As Michels first formulated his famous "iron law of oligarchy";

It is organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy.

*All parties internally are oligarchical in nature, in other words. And if the "problem" of democratic centralism were no more than some extreme or even eccentric form of Michels's law, I would be writing another book. The point, however, is precisely that democratic centralism, as it really is, is a unique form of organization, whose political consequences extend far beyond the realm of oligarchy into the deepest recesses of politics' capacity to repress and to oppress. Indeed, not even an early participant with remarkable powers of insight could have predicted what democratic centralism would come to be, and how it would be used: Antonio Gramsci wrote that the history of a political party involves "a whole series of problems, much less simple ones than Robert Michels dealt with." This is certainly true, but Gramsci had in mind not the difference between the routine of oligarchy and the horrors of totalitarianism, but rather the need for a larger context:*

The history of a party, in other words, must be the history of a particular social group. But this group is not isolated; it has



friends, allies, opponents and enemies. Only from the complex picture of social and State life (often even with international ramifications) will emerge the history of a certain party. It can therefore be said that to write the history of a party means in fact to write the general history of a country from a monographic point of view, in order to bring out a characteristic aspect. (Gramsci, 1957, pp. 148-9)

I can only endorse Gramsci's further inference, "That is why one's conception of what a party is and ought to be results from the way in which one writes the history of a party."

Gramsci, in prison from 1926 on, cannot be criticized for his inability to witness the devastating apotheosis of democratic centralism (although Kautsky, already in 1918, had some inkling of what was coming in the Soviet experiment: "The absolute rule of the bureaucracy has its foundation in the hypothesis of rule without end," quoted in Salvadori, 1979, p. 262). Yet whereas Gramsci did understand the significance of different possible forms of party internal organization—that is, that there was more to say than to repeat Michels's law—others more recently, as I mentioned above, have tended to deemphasize or else ignore completely the significance of a certain ideology and practice of organization. This is the "policy" point of view, which tends to see only the factors of power, interest, and technology in decision-making, and to isolate these from their political cultural context. Particularly in the explanation of foreign policy such analysis will often rest on the conceptual and methodological shortcut of assuming complete cynicism (the contrary error—complete fanaticism—used to be dominant) as the outlook of communist decision-makers.

In sum, neither Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" nor the assumption of absolute cynicism can be the main postulate of a study of what Alexander Zinoviev implies in the phrase "the reality of communism." At the same time, however, one must avoid the homologous fallacy of assuming that communism's uniqueness or originality as a form of politics means that it is totally untainted, totally untouched by the outside world. Throughout the study we will trace out this issue in detail; but here we need to establish the point of view from which the analysis can be conducted, a point of view based in what I am going to call "Kirchheimer's rule."

The late Otto Kirchheimer, one of the prescient scholars of modern party politics, concluded the following rule concerning the relation between parties and party systems: "[the] forms of compe-