

04.03.2010 - Revisiting the 1989's "revolutions"... - Part 3

A first group could be expressed and in certain context accepted in a capitalist society ; but they indicate a very high level of social expectations of the population : that would be and has been quite conflicting with the dominant liberal trends in the post 1989 kind of capitalism : wages protected from inflation and full payment of the days of strike, reduction in the retirement age (50 for women !) ; pensions to reflect working life; good universal healthcare; an increase in the number of school and nursery places for the children of working mothers; three year's paid maternity leave ; increased support for those forced to travel far to work...

A second group of requests are recognised rights in western democracies but not in all capitalist societies, and in general they have been refused in the post 1989 European countries in the factories owned by... foreign capital : the possibility to build free trade unions and to have the right to strike. These requests were, of course, also conflicting with the former "socialist" regime's rules; but not with socialists ideas as such in general... Both in Yugoslavia in the 1960s and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, trade unions tended to win autonomy ? which was later repressed by the party in power like all autonomous movements when they became a danger for the political monopole of power. And, in Poland, the communist regime had to accept (in September 1980) the demand for free trade-union : the preparation and meeting of its congress in two phases in September 1981 was legal...

A third group of demands were linked with specificities of the regime : the demand that factory management be selected on the basis of competence and not of the party membership ; an end to privileges for the police and party apparatchiks; and an end to 'voluntary' Saturday working...

The fourth group of demands could be put forward in a capitalist society, but rarely accepted : the demand of access to the mass media for all; the publication of the strikers' demands in the mass media; freedom of access to information about the economy...

But the main demands would be in essence much conflicting with a capitalist logics: they ask for the involvement of the whole population in the debate on the economic situation and the reform to answer to the crisis ...

This was even more expressed as a global orientation, in the program adopted at the

democratic impressive congress organised one year later. Obviously different currents and conflicting views were expressed which reflects a normal democratic and massive assembly which took the dynamics of a quasi political "constituent assembly". What kind of society did it want to establish ?

The simple presentation of the 21 demands already stress the sharp contrasts between the social expectations for social protection and gains and democratic control on economic decisions of those millions of workers in strike in 1980 and the content of the 1989's shock therapy and privatisations. The fact that the 21 demands did not ask for privatisations ? but the opposite logics, is rarely said.

As is rarely quoted the Congress adopted program. It was not a marginal issue : first the workers had win a legality and therefore could really organize the congress democratically not at all in a clandestine way : as international observers could see, a social and political second power within the whole society was already functioning. A political and social program for the whole society was elaborate during several days in the two sessions of September 1981 by several hundreds of delegates under the control of 80% of the organized Polish labour force : direct socially managed TV broadcast permitted to watch the debates of the congress within the factories in the whole Poland ; the rank and file workers were democratically controlling their delegates...

But what was adopted by that significant democratic congress ? How is it related to 1989 ? Let us look at Wikipedia's article on Solidarity in English, for instance. It presents the whole Polish events as led by "anti-soviet" currents and the Church ? and as the beginning of "anti-communist revolutions" in 1989 and concludes : "Solidarity's influence led to the intensification and spread of anti-communist ideals and movements throughout the countries of the Eastern Bloc, weakening their communist governments". The defeat of the "communist" candidates in 1989 elections in Poland "sparked off a succession of peaceful anti-communist revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe known as the Revolutions of 1989 (Jesie? Ludów)." Is not that the dominant presentation still done of Solidarnosc ? Without a single quotation of those supposed "anti-communist ideals". Nothing about the 21 demands. Nothing about the program of the congress...

In France all those documents have been produced and a broad movement of solidarity and direct links developed among left trade-unionists in the 1980s. That is probably why the Wikipedia's article in French on the same topics, is quite different, because it quotes the documents adopted by Solidarity's congress in September 1981 and says : the

project was to establish « a self managed Republic » adding that "the congress demand a democratic and self-managed reform at whole levels of decision making, a new social and economic order which will articulate plan and self management with market » . The article comments that this was « a deepening of the positions elaborate since autumn 1980 by the Inter-factory strike committee », proclaiming that « we are for a worker, progressive socialism, an egalitarian and harmonious development of Poland, collectively determined by the whole of the labour force's world (...) a social order which would be authentically worker and socialist" ...

The threat of a Soviet intervention was central at that time. And that is why even, most people were "happy" that the dynamics was stopped by a Polish General ! On the 13th of December 1981 General Wojciech Jaruzelski, backed by the 'Military Council for National Salvation', declared that Poland was under martial law. Mobilising the army and security services, he took control of the TV and radio and unleashed the hated internal police and motorised riot police to break up unauthorised meetings. Military tribunals sentenced thousands of trade unionists for up to three years in prison.

But the repression gave a different strength to those among the intellectual advisers who wanted to use the strength of the social movement to get rid of the system, suppress all dynamics of self management and reduce Solidarnosc to a classical trade union in a market economy... After such repression from a "communist" party, the ideological strength of the Church and of real anti-communist projects increase with the demobilisation (in spite of some strikes and anger).

After the law of amnesty, the second half of the 1980s opened the road towards a compromise with the ruling party which was losing members and any capacity to rule ? he was looking to protect some political power and the links with the Gorbachev Soviet Union, and leave room to economic reforms... The high level of self organisation and democratic revolution had been broken. Under Gorbachev's pressure, a "Round table" was organised with a legalisation of a much weaker Solidarnosc. The first free elections were a defeat for the ruling party.

And huge "financial" pressures and negotiations were at stakes behind the scene. The national debt in various foreign banks and governments reached in 1989 an amount of US\$42.3 billion (64,8 % of GDP) ...

The "Balcerowicz plan" ? also called shock therapy was adopted at the end of 1989 with the following acts

1. Act on Financial Economy Within State-owned Companies, which allowed for state-owned businesses to declare bankruptcy and ended the fiction by which companies were able to exist even if their effectiveness and accountability was close to none.
2. Act on Banking Law, which forbade financing the state budget deficit by the national central bank and forbade the issue of new currency.
3. Act on Credits, which abolished the preferential laws on credits for state-owned companies and tied interest rates to inflation.
4. Act on Taxation of Excessive Wage Rise, introducing the so-called popiwiek tax limiting the wage increase in state-owned companies in order to limit hyperinflation.
5. Act on New Rules of Taxation, introducing common taxation for all companies and abolishing special taxes that could previously have been applied to private companies through means of administrative decision.
6. Act on Economic Activity of Foreign Investors, allowing foreign companies and private people to invest in Poland and export their profits abroad.
7. Act on Foreign Currencies, introducing internal exchangeability of the z?oty and abolishing the state monopoly in international trade.
8. Act on Customs Law, creating a uniform customs rate for all companies.
9. Act on Employment, regulating the duties of unemployment agencies.

An additionnal point was « offered » to Solidarnosc :

10. Act on Special Circumstances Under Which a Worker Could be Laid Off, protecting the workers of state firms from being fired in large numbers and guaranteeing unemployment grants and severance pay.

In late December the plan was approved by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF granted Poland with a stabilization fund of US\$1 billion and an additional stand-by credit of US\$720 million. Following this the World Bank granted Poland additional credits for modernization of exports of Polish goods and food products. Western governments followed then and paid off about 50% of the sum of debt capital and all cumulated interest rates to 2001.

One can compare programs and procedures. 1989 appears much more like a social « liberal » counter-revolution than the continuity of Solidarnosc congress.

In 1981, more than 80% of the work force was unionised and Solidarnosc had about ten million members. In 2008, those who are in trade unions make up no more than 11% of the workers, according to official figures provided by trade union organisations. During the process of privatisation trade union leaders were often introduced into the administration

councils ? on an individual level ? where they were linked to the employers. This corruption and integration into the processes of privatisation undermined the ground of the trade unions. The loss of resources and the bankruptcy of big enterprises producing huge unemployment (when Poland became member of the UE in 2004 the unemployment rate was nearly 18%), the difficulties of daily living and the absence of trade unions in businesses run by foreign capital did the rest.

There is therefore a close link between the social discontinuities between 1980-1981 and 1989 and the total different dynamic of "reforms".

From the Prague's autumn of worker councils to the Velvet revolution : continuity, or antipodes ?

The scenario is slightly different for Czekoslovakia, but the essence of the stake and of conflicting interpretation is the same.

The economic and political reforms proposed in 1965-1968 in Czechoslovakia by the reformist leader Dubcek and the economist Ota Sik, supported by a whole wing of the communist party was very similar to the one implemented in Hungary at that time : the purpose of the reform was to introduce stimulant to increase the efficiency of the production (quality and productivity). But the proposed means were mainly based on a partial extension of market and decentralisation of decision-making process increasing the responsibility of managers (and their increasing income according to market results) against a too vertical and authoritarian form of soviet planning. Such reforms did not introduce workers rights for self-management.

That is why up to the Prague's spring, the Czechoslovak workers had not felt great enthusiasm for the Ota Sik and Dubcek's economic reforms : their effect would be to increase inequalities (through more market competition) and social insecurity (through the power and material incentive given to directors to push them to reduce production costs including labour cost). The ideology of socialism recognizes the workers as the creative source of wealth, not as a commodity which price was a "cost" to be reduced. They were supposed to be "owner" of the factories ? which would mean a responsible actor involved in the democratic and pluralistic elaboration of criteria of economic efficiency and mechanisms aimed at reducing wastes and material costs : that was exactly the demands that the Polish workers expressed in 1980.

In the process of debate of the reforms just before 1968, a part of the communists and of trade unionists have proposed a new law increasing workers rights of establishing organs

of self-management of the factories, electing directors, deciding on the organisation of the productive process and on the distribution of the results. But that had been pushed aside ? or slightly reduced ? by the Ota Sik reforms. And the liberalisation from above had in turn stimulated unexpected movements and demands from below in the whole society : in all sister countries ruling parties were afraid of contagion. The Prague's Spring was also an immense international gathering in favour of a "socialism with human face" ... The Soviet intervention aimed to stop all that.

But it produced the opposite. And this is never said in TV broadcasts and dominant analysis on those events. The reality, is that during the Autumn 1968, in nearly 200 factories, more than 800.000 workers reacted to the Warsaw Pact's invasion and Soviet propaganda (which claimed that the Red Army was sent to Czechoslovakia to defend socialism) in establishing workers councils encouraged by a broad part of the communists and trade-unionists in favour of a self managed socialism.

The movement spread and organized its first national conference in January 1969 ? six months after the arrival of the tanks! In March there were 500 councils. It had become a massive political movement by its own coordination and through the support received by youth and intellectuals, among which were many members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CCP) itself. Workers councils were often supported or even launched by factory cells of the CCP and of the trade union (ROH) which at that time emancipated itself from the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. Their leaders were often elected at the head of the councils. A new project of law was elaborated and presented to the government ? still at the time led by the reformist leader Alexander Dubcek. Such proposals were both backed by hundreds of occupied factories and by the part of the CCP resisting the occupation and organizing clandestine meetings.

But that project of law on factories was given too much power to workers councils and certainly frightening for the Dubcek wing looking for compromises with the Kremlin. The proposed law was taken in account ? which indicates how much it was still difficult simply to impose its censorship (like the Polish regime had first to give legitimacy to the demands for free trade union and permit the congress to be organized in 1981...). But the government introduced changes and reduced the rights given to the workers, to become closer to the Ota Sik and Hungarian's kind of reforms...

After some months the dynamic of the workers councils had been broken by pressures and direct repression. Real "normalisation" began...

Nearly twenty years after the Velvet revolution of 1989, the debate about the Prague's

Spring began to reappear in the Czech Republic. It was particularly re-launched by the republication at the end of 2007 of two contradictory standpoints expressed immediately after the Soviet intervention, in December 1968, by Milan Kundera and by Vaclav Havel. Both prestigious and well known writers had challenged the former regimes censorship before 1968. The first one acted out of his communist convictions while the second did it as a liberal anticommunist. Vaclav Havel kept his anticommunist and democratic standpoint through his involvement in the resistance to the Soviet occupation within the "Charter 77" (built in 1977 to resist the Soviet « normalisation » it was a front where communist and anticommunist democrats could fight together for human rights) and became the first president of the new Czechoslovakia and then of the Czech Republic. Milan Kundera lost the Marxist convictions he had in 1968. But it is not important here, because the stand points he expressed at that time are quoted and still supported in the present period and debated by other communists : Jaroslav Sabata is one of them. In 1968, he was leading the left current within the Czech Communist party which gave a radical support to self-managed socialist democracy and the Worker councils.

Presenting the present renewal of the controversy, Jacques Rupnik writes that for Vaclav Havel, the Spring 1968's conquests (abolition of censorship, individual freedoms) "only re-established what existed 30 years before and what is still the basis of democratic countries in general". This point of view can also lead to consider the Velvet Revolution as a success variant of the Prague Spring democratic movement (repressed by the communist regime whereas the Velvet revolution could get rid of it). But Vaclav Havel's position to-day is closer to a second trend : to deny any significant consistency to the 1968 events because of their socialist aims. The repression is then stressed as the only possible issue : there was, there is no possible third way.

Milan's Kundera's view, on the contrary, stresses that as Jacques Rupnic summarizes "despite having been a defeat, the Prague Spring retains its universal significance as a first attempt at finding a route between the eastern and western models, a way of reconciling socialism and democracy".

The (still) communist intellectual Jaroslav Sabata quoted recently and shared the former Kundera's judgment in a more radical way : "The Czechoslovak Autumn is probably much more important than the Czechoslovak Spring. [...] Socialism, the logic of which is to identify itself with freedom and democracy, cannot but create a kind of freedom and democracy that the world has never known."

Such a movement and self-organisation was a danger for all ruling CPs wanting to keep



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the monopole of political power, even if they opposed the Soviet domination... The workers councils' movement could embrace all demands against censorship, individual and collective freedoms. But it was also stressing the contradictions or limits of all those who support the slogan "socialism with human face" but "forget" the fundamental socialist aims : the suppression of relationships of domination within economy permitting a radical subordination of economic choices as all key human choices, to a democratic system to be invented... This was contradicting both systems of the bi-polar world...