THE POLISH OCTOBER: TWENTY YEARS AFTER

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Note from the Editors: This is the text of the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Lecture, which was delivered by Professor Brus on 7 December 1976 at the London School of Economics. Professor Brus was awarded the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize for 1976 for his book *Socialist Ownership and Political Systems*. We take this opportunity to recall that Isaac Deutscher died ten years ago, in August 1967, and to say how keenly we continue to feel his loss, both personally and also in terms of the contribution he would have made to the understanding of the developments which have occurred in these years, particularly in the Communist world.

Isaac Deutscher grew up in the Polish revolutionary movement, and it is therefore particularly appropriate to commemorate his life and work with a discussion of the Polish October of 1956. Deutscher always retained, it should be noted, a special relationship with his native country: his Polish correspondence of 1956, for example, is only a particular illustration of his continuing interest. But the subject of my lecture is not only of relevance because of Deutscher's Polish origins; even more it is one with which Deutscher remained fascinated: the 'unfinished revolution'. This was the task which the Polish October attempted to accomplish: to eliminate the political and social degeneration which Stalinism had brought about and to begin to construct a society in which power becomes embodied within the working people. Naturally, for all of us today in the socialist movement this remains a central problem and concern.

The term 'Polish October' as used here describes not so much the changes which were made at the top of the Party leadership on 19-21 October 1956 (at the VIII Plenum of the Polish Workers' Party which brought Gomulka back to power) as the broad political movement which had been steadily gaining momentum during the years after Stalin's death and which reached a high point in October 1956. For many reasons this movement was not, nor could it be, one with a detailed programme and defined methods of action. It grew in response to political events and changes; in the absence of any official channels of communication the

October movement could not become politically homogeneous and at some stage included also two currents outside its mainstream: on the one hand there were those who were either totally opposed to socialism or were completely disillusioned by the practices of the previous decade, and who saw in the anti-Stalinist upsurge the opportunity for overthrowing socialism along with Stalinism. The second group were those who wished to remove the obvious abuses of power but who were reluctant to go beyond this and who simply wanted to weather the storm. Nevertheless, the heart of the Polish October, and the image it deservedly acquired within and outside Poland, was that of a movement for ***socialist renewal:*** its overriding ideas were the elimination of political totalitarianism based upon mass terror and corrupting privileges; dissociation from foreign domination; the end of compulsory collectivisation; and the rejection of bureaucratic centralism. Previous practice was thus being wholly rejected as not only contradicting the socialist vision of a humanist society based upon social ownership but also as generating gross economic inefficiencies, which made rapid economic growth possible only at the expense of widespread misery. The objectives, therefore, were to democratise the state (involving a strict adherence to civil rights and the evolution of a political pluralism which in the first instance might have to be limited to intra-party pluralism) and at the grass roots level to introduce a system of industrial relations whose emphasis was especially upon the role of workers' councils and the democratisation of trade unions. Economic reform was to be consistent with political reform: a centrally planned economy with a built-in regulated market mechanism (to use my own terminology) capable of fulfilling two purposes: providing an effective basis for macro-economic planning, and offering sufficient scope for genuine economic decision-making by the workers' councils.

Leaving aside the assessment of these and other objectives it is clear that the October movement went beyond the framework of East European socialism not only as it existed under Stalin but also as envisaged in the official de-Stalinisation in the USSR and elsewhere. The 20th Congress of the CPSU had greatly encouraged developments in Poland but only in certain ways: the establishment had been weakened, and pressures from below increased. What the 20th Congress did not do was to provide an ideological inspiration; the wave of socialist renewal went far beyond what may be called official intentions and in this sense it properly earned itself the label of revisionist. In this important respect there were obviously close resemblances between the Polish and the Hungarian developments.

Another important difference between the Polish (and Hungarian) movement and the official de-Stalinisation measures which came out of the 20th and the 22nd Congresses of the CPSU was that the former was developing into a mass movement. In Poland while the movement was

articulated by intellectuals, mostly from within the Communist Party, it undoubtedly gained support from manual workers. There was not only the shattering impact of the Poznan revolt in 1956 but there was also a more widespread support for general political and economic reforms, and in some industrial enterprises there was the spontaneous establishment of workers' councils. One must, of course, be conscious that hindsight can sometimes exaggerate and mislead. In some areas where the movement for change was more pronounced (in Warsaw above all, but also in certain of the new industrial centres) the intellectuals-workers' alliance functioned quite well, despite the barrage of hard-line propaganda, directed especially against the intellectuals and against the economic reform as allegedly anti-egalitarian. But in other regions which lacked revolutionary or radical traditions, as in the proletarian centre of Upper Silesia, the response from the workers was negligible. As for the peasantry direct political action was difficult to discover, although there was a mass de-collectivisation drive (90 per cent of the then existing agricultural cooperatives were dissolved); as well as a vigorous support (as among other social groups) for the national aspects of the October movement.

At the same time the 'Polish October' exhibited certain features which distinguished it from parallel developments in Hungary. In Poland the movement succeeded in penetrating the upper echelons of the Party apparatus, the army and even of the security forces. It is possible that these are some of the reasons why events turned out differently in the two countries. Gomulka was elevated as a sort of symbol of past miseries as well as of the struggle for a Socialist renewal. In an attempt to identify the progressive, democratic wing in the actual or potential leadership of the Party and to develop popular backing in its support, the 'Polish October' tried to bring about an internal transformation of the Party itself and thereby create the conditions for radical change. In this important respect the Polish October was a precursor to the much larger and more successful movement in Czechoslovakia a decade later. It is this aspect of the politics of Eastern Europe that is regarded by some commentators (for example Leszek Kolakowski) as the most important characteristic of the *revisionist* current; and whether the possibilities still exist, or not, of transforming the Communist Parties from within is regarded by them as the decisive factor in the situation. It is precisely their denial of this possibility that has led them to the point where they consider East European revisionism a thing of the past.

Whatever our attitude to the question just posed, we must note that the attempt in Poland in 1956 at a genuine reform though the transformation of the Party failed. Unlike the Hungarian revolution, drowned in blood by a ruthless display of Soviet military strength, the Polish October was halted and then reversed by internal conservative forces, supported, of course, by the leadership of the Soviet Union and of other countries in the

Eastern bloc. Gomulka's ascent to power had all the appearance of victory and was welcomed as such by the great majority of the population and by most of the active members of the renewal movement. In fact, however, this was the beginning of the end; there began a gradual but consistent reversal which finally brought the Polish system in most, but not all respects, into line with other East European countries.

It is not possible to analyse in detail the reasons for failure. Two interconnected factors are normally adduced as an explanation: the external factor, the attitudes and policies of the Soviet Union, and internally, the reaction set up by the vested interests of the political élites. What I should like to emphasise here, however, is the less frequently discussed factor of the excessive optimism of the movement itself. The belief seemed to be widely held that all that was needed was an awareness of Stalinist 'distortions', and they would then be rectified as a result of mass support from below for the renewal of socialism.

The dilemmas of a socialism which has not only been imposed by a tiny minority under foreign dominance but which also, in the course of the first decade of its existence, has proved essentially correct many of the most virulent anticommunist predictions and warnings—have not been fully appreciated by the proponents of democratic socialist renaissance. In effect the revisionists were caught in a sort of cross-fire between the two groups mentioned before: they needed mass-support for genuine change, but they were afraid of playing into the hands of anti-socialists quite often of an extremely obscurantist and chauvinistic kind; this made them more inclined to compromise with the guardians of the 'unity of the party'. In turn this allowed the conservatives of the establishment to de-fuse the pressures and even to absorb some of the rebellious activists back into their own fold. The Hungarian experience bitterly underlined some of the important truths in this situation, and in particular how difficult it is to get ordinary people to accept the distinction between 'bad' and 'good' socialism when for a decade they had been exposed to crimes and absurdities committed in the name of socialism.

All this is not to say that the democratic transformation of East European socialism was irrevocably doomed from the outset. Even the Polish attempt threw up many positive factors, and the later Czechoslovak movement—which had absorbed many of the lessons of both the Polish and the Hungarian experience—must have been judged as being irresistible internally. Otherwise the resort to military invasion would not have been taken. However, without in any way considering future roads closed, we must appreciate the weight of past experience upon people's social and psychological attitudes; and we must relate these to the future possibilities of change in Eastern Europe as well as assessing their relevance to the achievement of socialism in the West.

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The main question I wish to discuss is the relevance of the **1956** demands to the current situation in Poland and Eastern Europe in general. To do this in depth would, of course, first require an analysis of the economic and social history of the past twenty years; and for reasons of time this is not practicable. I have to assume familiarity with the general facts of economic growth and its consequences in urbanisation, the relative decline in the share of the agriculture population, extended educational facilities, and so on. Today Poland, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, is quite different from the country which emerged in **1956** from the brief but historically eventful Stalinist period. What needs perhaps emphasising, in the light of certain propositions put forward by Deutscher in his *Unfinished Revolution,* is that the Polish working class has for the most part already gone through the stage of first-generation peasants, and that the increase in the urban population is now to a smaller degree than before the result of rural migration. Nevertheless the expectations of a straightforward, almost automatic, correlation between social changes and democratisation has by no means been realised; although this does not disprove an indirect and long-run interaction.

Despite the failure of democratisation in any significant sense, it is important not to overlook the changes which have taken place since **1956,** some at least in response to the events of that year. One can hardly underestimate, for example, the replacement of mass preventive terror by what may be called selective terror, or the application of the due process of law in cases which are not regarded as involving a political challenge to the existing order. In the area of external affairs there is today a greater openness with the outside world, and there is also the institutionalisation of relations with the Soviet Union which has now to accept certain basic rules and regulations in their dealings with Poland, as with other countries of the Eastern bloc; and this despite the USSR's overall commanding position. We must note also the improvement in consumption levels and the higher priority now given to it in the Plans. What economists describe as the consumption-effect cannot be disregarded by political leaders in Poland as various manifestations of popular discontent in recent years have made abundantly clear.

The list of changes on the positive side could certainly be extended but it would not affect the conclusion that political power remains the preserve of a ruling oligarchy. My own description of the political system of the East European socialist countries is that they are totalitarian, although this term is considered inadequate by some commentators. There are those, for instance, who use the term to describe a 'pure model structure', in which literally everything is controlled and commanded from above through a hierarchy free from any internal conflicts and completely insensitive to grass-roots reactions. My usage may lack precision, but it seems to me to be fully appropriate for the real world situation and it is discussed in detail

in my *Socialist Ownership and Political Systems*. The social characteristics that are central to a totalitarian regime may be summarised as follows:

1. the domination of the apparatus and the executive organs over formally elected bodies in the state administration, trade unions, and in the Party;
2. the appointment to Party, state, trade union and all other organisational bodies by the higher levels of the apparatus. This is achieved by the imposition of candidates and the reduction of electoral procedures to a formality;
3. the application of the concept of 'the leading role of the Party' in a form of complete subordination of all other institutions to the Party apparatus by means of full control of personnel policy and total prohibition of all independent political initiatives or associations;
4. monopoly control of the mass media, both by the control of the personnel involved and by universal preventive censorship.

Thus in all areas of social life, members of society are confronted by an all-powerful state apparatus and are reduced to atomised individuals deprived of political and legal means of expression or control. This I describe as totalitarianism, and it seems to me that what has changed in Eastern Europe in the past two decades is the extension of what may be called the 'political indifference area', but certainly not the basic principles themselves. In addition it is worth noting that the retreat from the positions reached in **1956** has gone on not so much by abolishing institutions which were created at that time, but by emptying them of any real content. Thus, there is still the legal obligation in Poland to have more candidates than seats on ballot-papers, but there is not, in fact, a genuine choice; Workers' councils still exist but they are not considered by anyone as co-management organs, let alone as representatives of workers' interests; and the same is true of the relationships between the Communist Party and other parties, or the status of trade unions. The single exception, and it is one of a very peculiar nature and of an extraordinary political importance, is, of course, the Catholic Church. The use (or preservation) of facades is ubiquitous; this applies also to the sphere of management of the economy where the discrepancy between proclaimed and real reforms remains very great.

The system, then, has not changed in any fundamental way and the demands and hopes of October **1956** remain unfulfilled. But does it really matter? Does the situation cause conflict and encourage sources of instability, as it should if the Marxist category of the maladjustment of production-relations and productive forces were applicable? I have tried to analyse the East European scene in these terms, first by arguing that because the state is obviously not representative of society *public* ownership has not become *social* ownership; and second, that this fact is increasingly the main obstacle to the proper utilisation of the potential of

a centrally planned socialist economy. I cannot develop the theoretical arguments here, but let me underline some implications which look plausible, especially in the context of recent events in Poland.

Deprivation of freedom, even in its present day forms which are 'soft' compared with the Stalinist period, destroys the roots of human creativity and initiative, and stifles the ability to make intelligent choices. In consequence a deep contradiction persists between 'mine' and 'theirs', the latter meaning what is supposed to be common ownership. The official ideology, by contrast, incessantly preaches the theme of social integration, based upon what is allegedly 'all power to the people' and on mass participation in economic decision-making. This ideology cannot, of course, be abandoned—it is, after all, the regime's source of legitimation—but since it is in striking contrast with observable reality it naturally contributes to a breakdown in social morality and it leads to cynicism and frustration. Too often the natural outlet for these deep social contradictions finds its expression in pursuing strictly egoistic interests, in developing an admiration for bourgeois patterns of success in general and of consumerism in particular; and these are met, in practice but obviously not in words, with far greater approval by the Party leadership than activities which are closer to the socialist ideal but carry a threat to the regime. From the side of the political Clite there is undoubtedly an element of rationality in this encouragement of bourgeois individualism in its several manifestations. People have more to lose than their chains, especially after the repeated failures of attempts at fundamental political change.

This policy may be partly and temporarily successful, as in the GDR or Kadar's Hungary—the latter perhaps the best example of 'enlightened socialist absolutism'. It was true, too, of Poland for a couple of years after 1970. However, it is a policy which must run into serious problems, apart from the central fact that for many, liberty and freedom remain good in themselves. In East European countries, unlike the Soviet Union, there is no compensation in the status of a great power and in many countries a deep feeling of national subjugation persists. Inside each nation state, the crude reliance upon material well-being in the political and social conditions briefly described above produces socially disintegrating effects; it exacerbates conflicts between the individuals and the society as a whole, between different social groupings and between individuals in a struggle for the few prizes within the context of the limited possibilities of private material improvement. The most important problem, however, is that the pursuit of this policy in the long term requires a continuous increase in economic efficiency which clashes with the existing political system, if my analysis of the interrelationship between the economics and politics of socialism is correct. The 1970-71 storm in Poland which swept Gomulka out of the leadership pushed Gierek to attempt a policy of increased consumption together with a high investment boom; a combination only

made possible by means of massive injections of Western credits. As a temporary measure this might have justified itself; but now, after three to four years, the ability of the economy to generate a momentum of its own is hardly visible. The result has been a most painful aggravation of imbalances within the economy and the introduction of panic measures which exhibit the breakdown of meaningful communication between the rulers and the ruled; even the timid steps towards an economic reform have been reversed. Recent Polish history suggests that at some stage a totalitarian regime may start to lose what is supposed to be its greatest advantage, namely, the ability to pursue consistent policies.

I do not want to leave you with the impression that all ways out of the present crisis (and similar crises in the future or in some other countries) are blocked. That would be a mistake. Matters can be patched-up; some parts of the system can be mended for instance in the economic mechanism; socio-political tensions can be eased at this or that point and for shorter or longer periods. It is therefore wrong to assume any inevitability of collapse, or of complete stagnation in living standards, or of the impossibility of some social or cultural advance. What I do maintain, however, is that only by a fundamental change in the political system will conditions be created for the economic and social progress capable of meeting the rising aspirations of the people. In the absence of such a fundamental change, which will lead to a transformation of public ownership of the means of production into social ownership, the present contradictions can only grow and exert an increasingly negative influence on all aspects of life. In this crucial sense the issues raised twenty years ago are still very much alive, and the solutions offered by the October movement remain highly relevant to the conditions of today.

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If we assume that the need for change is proved, the question that remains is what the prospects are for change of a fundamental kind? It is not a question, it must be said, that can be answered even in a tentative way in terms of a straightforward economic, sociological or political analysis. The problem involves a knowledge of many intangibles that can be acquired not by theoretical deliberations alone but by practical activity. I cannot myself pretend to such knowledge, and the few points I commit myself to are in part based upon the views presented at a colloquium held in Paris in September 1976 on the 1956 events.

More or less abrupt change in the political system, even of the kind attempted in Poland in 1956 or in Czechoslovakia in 1968, is considered out of the question in the foreseeable future. And this for both internal and external reasons, meaning by the latter the threat of Soviet intervention. The only practical way forward for countries like Poland is

thought to be a continuous struggle for reform and for evolutionary extension of civil liberties and guarantees of human rights. In contrast with what is now regarded as the revisionist approach of 1956, it is argued that new policies can only be achieved as a result of appeals to public opinion and the encouragement of pressures upon the Party leadership from the outside. This does not mean a rejection of the possibility of the emergence of reforming groups within the Party leadership, but it is much more critical of such support than was the case in 1956 and it recognises that only the strength and effectiveness of pressure from below will translate verbal support into practical results. Obviously the central element in this new 'evolutionism' must be a reliance upon the working class which has already shown its capabilities in extracting important concessions from the authorities. What is needed is an alliance with the intelligentsia and the students in order to articulate the reforming process and to maintain its momentum. It must be further noted at this point that all the different currents of opposition in Poland emphasise the significance of the Catholic Church which has been changing its attitude from one of anti-socialism to anti-totalitarian. The Church today plays a major role in highlighting the struggle for freedom of conscience, and, it is important to note, it is now joining forces with opposition socialist movements in defence of basic principles such as the right to strike and on genuine representation at the institutional level.

I am only too aware that this brief summary has raised more questions than it answers. Among many other considerations there is the traditional problem of preserving the identity of the socialist current in what is obviously a very heterogeneous movement of opposition. But those involved in the new policies emphasise that every step which weakens the totalitarian structure, which encourages people to think and behave more freely is a move towards the creation of those necessary conditions for the emergence of a democratic socialist society. Whether these conditions are sufficient unto themselves is, of course, another question.

There is nothing in this lecture which can offer any sense of easy optimism. On the contrary, the contrast between the hopes of twenty years ago and present-day reality is rather depressing. But there is one crucial reason why we should not, and must not, succumb to pessimism. Nowhere in Eastern Europe, and certainly not in Poland, have people stopped thinking and acting in terms of change. To be aware of this fact, and to draw the necessary conclusions from it is as important for the Left in Western Europe as it is for them to be aware of the politics of Chile or South Africa. Socialism in Western Europe and other developed nations has paid, and will continue to pay, a heavy political tax for the Soviet-type degeneration which infects Eastern Europe. Western Socialism—including Euro-communism—endeavours to remedy the situation by overt and specific dissociation; in my view—and I believe this emphatically—this

is not enough. What is needed is active, continuous support which in time could become a powerful engine of effective pressure for change.