REVIEW ARTICLE

THE POLITICS OF RETREAT

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All the past history of the world testifies against the immortality of state power, and the earth is covered with the ruins of the fallen. (Johann K. Bluntschli, *Lehre vom modernen Staat* (1875)).

The Gorbachev Phenomenon

Some weeks ago, in the Ukrainian city of Chernigov, a most unusual 'revolution' was triggered by a car crush. Around midnight, near the city centre, two Communist Party officials, with alcohol on their breath, drove into each other. Neither had been injured seriously, but a crowd quickly gathered in sub-zero temperatures to express its concern, only to discover sausages, ham and other commodities long absent from Chernigov's shops trailing from the boot of one of the cars across the icy road. The crowd puffed with anger. It packed the street goods into the boot of the offending official's car, and towed it to Party headquarters, where a demonstration was held until two o'clock in the morning. Later that day, as the rest of Chernigov heard news of the sausages and ham produced by the accident, the building was besieged by a large crowd chanting patriotic slogans and demanding retribution. Police checked the demonstrators, who returned the following day. Shortly after, the offending official and Leonid Palazchenko, his boss, were sacked.

This episode in the era of perestroika conveys something of the kaleidoscopic drama and volatility of current events in the Soviet Union. Public bewilderment, frustration, rage and national resentment directed at the C.P.S.U. are spreading into the heartlands of the Soviet empire. Less obviously, the Chernigov episode suggests that buried within the drama and volatility of Soviet events is a deeper, less visible process of long-term structural convulsion and change—the breakup of an empire and the irreversible disintegration of its totalitarian regime, a process of deconstruction presided over so far by Gorbachev and his reform communist supporters. Much western opinion has difficulty comprehending this process of convulsion and decay because it has made the category mistake of fixing its eyes on Mikhail Gorbachev and pinning on him a variety of conventional western hopes. According to the French Sovietologist, Lilly Marchou: 'Gorbachev is the pioneer of a new order that will show the value of everything positive that socialism has accumulated over the last seventy years.' Others, including Margaret Thatcher, find him a good man with whom to do business, and hope that he proves to be a trustworthy market liberal and political democrat. Still others view him as either a Russian Kennedy (a view encountered frequently in America) or a protagonist of Scandinavian social democracy or (as Anthony Barnett supposed) as a democratic revolutionary—a leader of a democratic revolution which aims to modernize the Soviet economy by radically extending citizens' freedom.

There are three interrelated weaknesses of these western representations of Gorbachev. First, they fail to appreciate or to explain the widespread and deep wariness and frustration expressed by many Soviet citizens about their leader, the current reform process and the system itself. If, in the West, the cult of 'Gorby' has triumphed over scepticism and mistrust, in the East deep scepticism and mistrust have triumphed over faith in Gorbachev. Furthermore, the view of Gorbachev as *deus ex machina*—as an heroic, enlightened politician, a real leader (vysotnik), a secular political saint who has put his shoulder to the wheel of history for the cause of our hopes—overlooks the elementary point that the initiatives and manoeuvres of Gorbachev and his team are embedded in a wider and deeper process of crisis and transformation. As Richard Sakwa emphasizes, the reform process has not sprung from Gorbachev's mind like Minerva from the brow of Zeus. This process predates Gorbachev, he inherited it, adapted to it, worked with it and has imposed his credit—redirected its course in novel ways. Gorbachev and his team are making history in circumstances which they have not chosen and without a full understanding of the (unintended) consequences of their manoeuvres.

Finally, the cult of Gorbachev overlooks the more fundamental—and least obvious—point that he is not a leader in the mould of the most prominent political rulers of the twentieth century. We lack a language for interpreting Gorbachev because we continue to think of him as a strong-willed, charismatic and (potentially) iron-fisted figure who—like Woodrow Wilson, Mussolini, Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, Hitler, Brandt, de Gaulle, Thatcher and others before him—has devoted his life to preserving or expanding the state's integrity at home and abroad. Political analysis of this type converges with the dominant tendency in modern political philosophy, which has been fixated on the process of capturing

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and maintaining the key resources of state power (examples include Machiavelli’s *The Prince* or Carl Schmitt’s *Die Diktatur*) or which has concentrated (like Paine’s *Rights of Man* or *The Federalist Papers*) on the process of limiting, controlling, and apportioning state power. From either perspective, political leaders have been viewed as power hungry. Their lust for political power has been considered universal and polymorphous. Such thinking has become second nature in modern British political thought. Hobbes, for example, emphasized in *Leviathan* that ‘Kings, whose power is greatest, turn their endeavours to the assuring it at home by Laws, or abroad by Wars: and when that is done, there succeedeth a new desire; in some, of Fame from new Conquest; in others, of ease and sensual pleasure; in others, of admiration, or being flattered for excellence in some art, or other ability of the mind’. Those who have once intoxicated with power’, wrote Burke in *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, ‘and have derived any kind of emolument from it, even though but for one year, can never willingly abandon it’. And in *Queen Mab* Shelley writes that ‘Power, like a desolating pestilence, Pollutes whate’er it touches’.

This mode of political thinking is unhelpful in analysing the Gorbachev phenomenon. So long as we remain under the spell of traditional ideas about charismatic leaders who love state power and do not like to share it we will fail to see that Gorbachev is one of a recent crop of political leaders whose chief function is to contribute to the *dismantling* of a despotic political system. Latin American analysts long ago recognized the importance of ‘state-led’ liberalization from above, but in Europe this process has rarely been discussed, despite a succession of political figures skilled in the tasks of dismantling: Adolfo Suárez, who forced through a democratic constitution upon becoming Spanish prime minister after Franco’s death; János Kádár, who survived the fall of Kruschev and prepared the way for a multi-party system in Hungary; Alexander Dubček, the symbol of reform communism during the 1960s; Constantine Karamanlis, who with high-ranking military support facilitated the dismantling of the ‘regime of the colonels’ in Greece; Wojciech Jaruzelski, who eventually collided with the formation of a Solidarity-led government in Poland; Milan Kučan, the protagonist of constitutional reform in Slovenia; and Mikhail Gorbachev, who walks in the footsteps of Nikita Kruschev, the first leader to attempt to dismantle the Soviet system from above. These politicians of retreat are a new species of political animal. Although schooled in the arts of conventional politics—politicians of retreat always begin their careers in the corridors and committee rooms of state power—they are not driven by lust for power or visions of grand victories through conquest. They are instead skilled at the difficult art of unscrewing the lids of despotism by forging new compromises and withdrawing and retreated from unworkable positions.

Some politicians of retreat learn this art retrospectively, when the process of dismantling in which they are embroiled has already begun. This is unsurprising, since the art of retreat, as von Clausewitz explained in *Vom Kriege*, is the most difficult of all skills to learn. It requires an ability to know the difference between foolishness and magnanimity. It entails knowing when and how to blow the whistle on (potential) opponents, to abandon untenable positions, and to slip through the loopholes of retreat. It sometimes necessitates surrendering the middle ground and it always requires mettle, acumen, nerve, toughness and patience. The politics of retreat is naturally a delicate and dangerous process. Its protagonists are trapped constantly within the quicksands of politics. They risk their careers and lives at every step, and they are always surrounded by enemies operating in the shadowy corners of state power. Ingratitude of many of their rivals and subjects is their ultimate fate. The wisest politicians of retreat know from the outset that they must be ruined for the good of others.

The legitimacy problem confronting politicians of retreat is partly due to the fact that they hasten the disintegration of the existing despotic regime, thereby threatening certain individuals and groups whose power base lies within this system. The politicians of retreat also suffer unpopularity because they normally insist on doing without certain privileges or old routines. They help dramatically to widen the political spectrum. Their actions breed the uncertainty and confusion typical of a ‘post-prison psychosis’ (Havel). They rarely offer immediate positive benefits to the supporters. They tend to speak the language of future gains, and they know one thing best: that despotic regimes can die of swallowing their own lies and arrogance, and that fear and demoralization cannot govern forever. The politicians of retreat also lead a tempestuous and unpopular (and usually short) existence because their actions often have the unintended consequence of fostering the growth of social power groups acting at a distance from the state which they help to dismantle. In dismantling the Leviathan, the politicians of retreat encourage the growth of a self-organizing civil society, whose chattering, conflicts and rebellions undermine them. They learn to ask so slowly that effective government requires winning the trust of citizens, and that this involves more than dismantling or scheming, capacity, peacekeeping, and shouting orders. For all these reasons, the politicians of retreat typically sow the seeds of their own downfall. In the end they usually prove no match for the political and social forces which they help to unleash. They become victims of their own success. Sometimes their experiments in reform breed revolutions.

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Totalitarianism in retreat

This political process of dismantling, in which the politicians of retreat inch their way across a long and slippery tightrope, has been evident in the Soviet Union since the accession to power of Gorbachev in March 1985. Since that time, Gorbachev and his supporters have battled with the defenders of a totalitarian state, which strives to control an empire in which virtually every structure of institutional power, from factories and hospitals to youth clubs, newspapers, apartment blocks and graveyards, is supposed to be organized by the Communist Party. Four overlapping phases of this politics of retreat are discernible.

The phase of preparation stretched from March 1985 until the summer months of 1986. Within weeks of his election as General Secretary of the C.P.S.U. (11 March 1985), Gorbachev launched the key policy themes of his political strategy: *perestroika*, *glasnost*, acceleration (*uskorenie*) of the economy and the declaration of war against the later Brezhnev years—the ‘era of stagnation’ (*period zastoy*). Such reforms were designed to make the existing system work better by tapping its potential. *Perestroika* was envisaged as a long-term programme which by the year 2000 would result in a democratic society underpinned by a fully modernized socialist economy. Production was to be intensified, scientific and technological innovation would quicken, management methods would be improved, labour would be encouraged to work harder. The intensification of economic growth was understood by the Gorbachev group in surprisingly conventional ways. Huge investments in heavy industry were envisaged, labour productivity was to be enhanced through moral rather than material incentives, alcohol consumption was restricted, and there was even praise for socialist emulation and Stakhchovite ‘shockwork’. The Law on Unearned Income of July 1986 aimed to restrict unofficial economic activity. And the reformers continued to pepper their language with ‘perfecting socialist construction’, ‘improving the economic mechanism’ and other stock phrases.

The precise methods of achieving these aims remained unclear during this first phase. Gorbachev and his supporters buried themselves in the Byzantine intricacies of bureaucratic politics, building up alliances and prestige within the Party and *nomenklatura* through changes of personnel, anti-corruption drives and other methods of undoing Brezhnev’s policy of ‘stable cadres’. The most dramatic changes occurred in the foreign policy arena, where the politics of retreat developed most rapidly. Gorbachev came to office with the Soviet system displaying all the signs of ‘imperial overstretch’. Unable to sustain its global role without incurring huge debts caused by escalating military expenditure and a self-paralyzing economy, the system bequeathed Gorbachev a colony of albatrosses: the unwinnable Afghan war, fears that the ‘Polish disease’ of economic stagnation and organized social resistance would spread throughout the empire; great tension in western Europe generated by the development of Soviet SS-20 missiles and American Cruise and Pershing missiles; and the acknowledgement within some quarters of the Party that the rearmament programme of the Reagan administration could spell disaster for the Soviet Union if it attempted to reciprocate. Gorbachev reacted swiftly, taking a strong personal interest in foreign policy. The demotion in July 1985 of foreign minister ‘Grim Grom’ Gromyko and his replacement by the relatively inexperienced Eduard Shevardnadze signalled the beginning of an extended demolition process which—in the name of ‘necessary military sufficiency’—would repeal the Brezhnev doctrine, loosen the bipolar structure of superpower politics and ‘modernize’ Soviet weapons systems by introducing T-80 and T-72 tanks, MIG 23s and S-17s, and the Blackjack supersonic bomber.

During the second phase, the struggle for political ascendancy lasting from mid-1986 until July 1987, the Gorbachev group continued to undo the foreign policies of the Brezhnev era. At the Reykjavik summit, and during his Prague visit in April 1987, Gorbachev called for complete nuclear disarmament. But at home Gorbachev began to recognize the dangers of a contradictory, faltering, ‘cut-down’ reform that encounters deliberate and constant opposition from the all-powerful state monoplies of ministries and government departments. He began to give special emphasis to the slogan ‘We need democracy as we need air’. Changes of personnel and anti-corruption drives were seen to be insufficient means of defeating the Brezhnevite *nomenklatura* and accelerating economic growth. New strategies—multi-candidate secret elections for state and party posts, for example—were used to dislodge conservatives. Individual initiative and self-reliance were praised publicly. Sakharov was released from internal exile in Gorky. And in the widely reported Krasnodar speech of mid-September 1986, Gorbachev broadened the attack on *nomenklatura* resistance by calling for a profound ‘psychological restructuring’ of *Homo sovieticus*. The deference, apathy and laziness of the years of stagnation were to be undone through a ‘radical democratization’ of Soviet society. Political democracy—a synonym for the methods and policies of the Gorbachev group—was now understood as the key to economic growth.

The struggle of the Gorbachev line for political ascendancy produced a new emphasis on *glasnost*. It was seen as a vital means of exposing the secrecy, disinformation and lies of the Brezhнев state and of increasing

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public participation in the affairs of state—of advancing from obloquism to 'socialist self-management'. Especially in the wake of the Chernobyl accident of 26 April 1986—whose mis-reporting and delayed reporting proved embarrassing for the Party—the seamier side of Soviet life began to be reported, discussed and reported again. Formerly tabooed stories about organized crime (bandokratia), drug addiction, prostitution and human and natural disasters surfaced. Journalists were encouraged to investigate, to criticize openly, and to compete for audiences. Novels by long-dead authors—Rybakov's Children of the Arbat, Grossman's Life and Fate and Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita were resurrected. The Brezhnev method of attacking unofficial art exhibitions by means of bulldozers and fire hoses ceased. Schnittke, Denisov and other new wave symphonists became respectable. Yet glasmest' contained definite limits. It did not mean the unrestricted flow of information—market- and public-service-based press and broadcasting freedom in the western sense—but, rather, whatever information flows were sanctioned by the Gorbachev group. Criticism of the Party and political satire remained taboo. Real life in the armed forces continued to be an untouchable theme. Theatre directors were 'persuaded' not to stage controversial plays and cinema directors were 'advised' to shelf 'blackening' documentaries. During this period, glasmest' not only brought more information, but new forms of disinformation as well. A case in point was the grossly misleading media representation of the character, scale and motives of the Alma-Ata demonstration on 17 December 1986 against the appointment of the Russian Genai Kolbin to head the party leadership in Kazakhstan.

The brief period between August 1987 and June 1988 may be described as a phase of consolidation and desubordination. During this period the process of retreat Gorbachev and his supporters strengthened their grip on state institutions. Further parts of the nomenklatura system were dismantled. The Politburo ordered the closure of Beriozka shops stocking foreign goods for privileged Soviet citizens holding special coupons. The system of state honours and medals was criticized officially, and the number of official cars—estimated by Argumenty i facty to be greater than in average small provincial Soviet town than in the entire United Kingdom—was cut drastically. The reconsideration of j Soviet history—the ability of citizens openly to mourn their murdered and tormented friends and relatives—and the rehabilitation of Bukharin were encouraged officially. The phased withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Afghan war was agreed at the United Nations. And at the 19th Party Conference priority was given to the programme of institutionalizing a 'state governed by law'.

Such dismantling coincided with a marked increase of social resistance to the Party-dominated state. The Gorbachev reforms from above were met increasingly with radical demands from below. Public rallies in the Baltic republics protested against the Molotov-Ribentrop pact. Crimean Tartars demonstrated in Red Square. The independent Federation of Socialist Clubs held its first conference in Moscow. The Democratic Union, the first independent party since the 1920s, was founded. Huge demonstrations in the Armenian republic supported Nagorno-Karabakh and denounced the degrading ecological and social effects of industrialization. New social movements appeared, plans for the establishment of Popular Fronts were announced, and in May 1988 an important appeal, drafted by Andrei Sakharov and others, called for the exposure of the Party directly to the public opinions of non-Party citizens. The Gorbachev group showed no clear signs of accepting this demand. Gorbachev's speech in Prague tacitly acknowledged the point: 'No party retains the monopoly of truth.' But there were few signs that the Party was willing to saw off the very limb upon which it was sitting, to reform itself voluntarily and to relinquish its totalitarian grip in favour of a democratic civil society. The Party was to lose its monopoly on truth and retain its monopoly of power.

The disintegration of the Party

The politics of retreat is a dangerous business. There comes a point when it intensifies the crisis it is supposed to resolve. Events become pregnant with unforeseen consequences. Many subjects become active citizens who are no longer prepared to suffer patiently the burdens which formerly seemed inevitable. And (as the events in Chernigov show) the politicians of retreat are themselves accused of being part of the problem. Controlled retreat begins to turn into utter rout.

Since July 1988, the month of profound constitutional crisis precipitated by Armenian claims upon Nagorno-Karabakh, the politics of retreat in the Soviet Union has entered a fourth and most dangerous phase. The Gorbachev group has begun to treat on clouds. Like the liberal bourgeoisie under the Czar, it has begun to appreciate that dismantling a despotism can bring misfortune and ruin. But matters are worse for the Gorbachev group because it is caught in the arms of an additional contradiction which dominates social and political life and forces insomnia and sweaty nightmares on all communists, reformers and conservatives alike. The contradiction faced by the Gorbachev group during this phase of the politics of retreat is well summarized by Richard Sakwa, Geoffrey Hosking and others: How can the Party which it controls and uses as its key power base be absolved of responsibility for the policy problems it produces and/or evidently failed to solve? Since the Party claims a monopoly of power, how can it explain and justify the catastrophes and setbacks brought about by the system of socialism?
which it leads? The governors of retreat become potential victims of a boomerang effect: since it enjoys total power, the Party becomes accountable and responsible for every setback and disappointment.

This contradictory dynamic—described by de Tocqueville as the ‘common and incurable malady of every power which has undertaken all, predict all, and achieve all’—is currently tearing the Party to shreds. It convinces many to resign from the Party; it forces others to work for the transformation of the Party into a campaigning social democratic party or to denounce those ‘anti-socialist elements who are carrying on a factional oppositional struggle’ (Ligachev). The contradictory dynamic which paralyses the Party also underpins the decision of Gorbachev to jump ship by rescinding Article 6 of the Constitution, and creating new institutions—a Congress of People’s Deputies and a trimmed-down, semi-permanent Supreme Soviet—designed to underpin a strong state presidency ‘with all necessary powers to implement perestroika’. This initiative, delayed to the last moment in order to maximize the chances of pro-Gorbachev candidates in the republican assembly and city council elections, is exceedingly dangerous from the standpoint of the Party. Without the leading role of the Party, the process of dismantling the totalitarian state could take an unexpected and (to Gorbachev’s mind) unacceptable turn. And yet precisely this risk must be taken in order to outflank Brezhnevism, to avoid further social upheavals and to slow down the rate of secessionism, and to realize certain promises of perestroika: economic renewal, civil rights and democratic co-operation. The Gorbachev group has been forced to abandon its original dream of a revitalized and dynamic socialism based on the unity of the Party, state and society. It is learning a lesson of the final stages in the politics of retreat: no legally guaranteed civil society, no democracy; no democracy, no freedom in the factories, no independence for nations, no freedom for Soviet citizens to travel to the western half of Europe.

It may be, of course, that this basic fact will go unheeded, that a civil society will not be institutionalized, and that the politics of retreat will result in the restoration of neo-Stalinism or, as the Russian pun has it, in the gun-play (perestroika) of direct military rule. The rising tide of Russian nationalism makes this scenario possible. Literaturnaya Rossiya, a mouthpiece of this nationalism, declared in its last issue of 1989 that ‘the Motherland is in danger’, castigated the ‘thoughtless destruction of the established economic structures’ and accused the Gorbachev group of appeasing ‘separatists and left radicals’. The pain of the nationalists, their profound despair at the state of the country, has been transformed into hatred—of democrats, liberals, cosmopolitans, secessionists, Jews and zapadniki (the uncritical acceptance of Western fashions). Many nationalists (such as Solzhenitsyn) are isolationist neo-Slavophiles who like to display the double-headed eagle of the Czar in public. They quote Pushkin—‘What a sad country, our Russia’ he said upon reading Gogol’s...
nomenklatura system, developing democratically accountable state institutions, improving the quality of the everyday lives of millions of Soviet citizens and effecting a transformation of the Empire into a stable commonwealth of nations.

Numerous obstacles remain in the way of this outcome. It is no more than a possibility, and since the politics of retreat has done work the barriers to democracy must now be carefully analysed—and overcome in practice. Three obstacles are especially worrying: the weakness of civic traditions, nationalism and economic stagnation.

Most observers in the Soviet Union who ponder the democratic alternative lament the uneven distribution and relative weakness of traditions of active citizenship in the region. Early commentaries such as Iuri Krizhanich's Politika (1963) reveal that since the bloody revolution from above and the subsequent reign of terror of Tsar Ivan IV in the mid-sixteenth century, everyday life in the Russian lands has been branded with despotic state power and periodic attempts to break out of the autocratic mould, followed by violent restorations of the ancien régime (Yanov). Other observers emphasize how the experience of being at the centre and on top of a vast empire has induced guilt-ridden feelings of 'collective suicide' among many Russians (Kagarlitskii). Others have suggested that the laboratories of total power erected by Lenin and Stalin cultivated new anti-democratic baselines—hard-heartedness, mendacity, cruelty and the hatred of good work—which escaped their masters and infected the whole socialist body politic (Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn). For these various reasons, Homo sovieticus is not yet dead, nor even within the ranks of the democratic opposition itself. Until he is laid peacefully to rest the prospects for a democratic civil society and state remain shaky. Soviet public life will continue to be threatened by 'zombie leaders and millions of little Stalins' (Ariemy Troitskii).

The stench of nationalism also threatens to suffocate the present democratic trends. The Soviet Union is the last remaining great European empire. It comprises a patchwork quilt of territories, tongues and nations integrated and dominated—here it differs from its Ottoman and Habsburg predecessors—by a political party whose leading cadres are predominantly Russian. This empire contains many countries and national minorities who are the natural foes of totalitarianism. Their growing restiveness confronts both the politicians of retreat and the protagonists of democracy with an anguishing dilemma. The striving for democracy demands recognition of at least some rights of self-determination of a nation. And a shared sense of nationhood—in Georgia and Hungary no less than in Russia and Kazakhstan—boosts the potential for democracy by infusing citizens with a sense of confidence, dignity and purpose. But the crucial trait of a nation—a large body of people who identify primarily with the amorphous collectivity and not with its sub-groups—can be a grave menace to democracy. The striving for nationhood can turn into nationalism and, hence, insularity, xenophobia and the love of guns and knives and despotic power. This metamorphosis has been facilitated by the spiritual vacuum left by the communist attempt to root out other cultural traditions. Nationalism thrives within humiliated nations, and as the case of Pamyat' in Russia illustrates—that is why the friends of democracy within the Soviet Union recognize the need both to oppose the present imperial framework and to abandon the nineteenth century belief that national interests are essentially incompatible. Guided by Sakharov's vision of a federal system that would provide 'all existing political structures for different Soviet nations, irrespective of their size and present status, with equal rights (while preserving present borders), they work for a new compromise among the Belorussians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Russians and other nations. They envisage a federated commonwealth of democratic nations. They know that the iron claws of Russian chauvinism are the remaining alternatives.

Finally, democracy in the Soviet Union is threatened by the frightening failure of the Soviet economy to provide for the material needs of its population. The peoples of the empire have suffered hard in the twentieth century. In Stalin's time, they were forced to make soup out of their own leather shoes. Paper was transformed into bread and many people, nearing starvation, went for weeks without rations. Although conditions have improved, taxes are again hard, and worsening daily. Inflationary pressures are combined with huge budget deficits, delays in capital construction, the survival of imposed gross-output targets, persistent heavy losses, large-scale waste and ecological destruction. Co-operative enterprise and family farming remain a dead letter. Production of the means of survival is faltering. The rouble (according to a Moscow saying) is ever less a meaningful currency and ever more a lottery ticket. Shortages of buttons, clothes pegs, toilet paper, maps and other household items are rife. Hoarding by managers and consumers is chronic, and in the distribution system edges towards collapse: syringes, thermometers and dressings are unavailable in hospitals, wagon loads of meat, fruit and vegetables rot, undelivered, and the non-delivery of spare parts brings production to halt.

Such trends work against the formation of a democratic civil society. Democracy thrives on a public capacity for tolerating ambiguity and patiently defining and solving problems. Economic collapse generates rootlessness, panic and the craving for certainty. It spawns meanness. It breeds the belligerent convulsion of the queues, street demonstrations and strike committees that fine-words butter no parsnips. Radical economic reforms leading to more decentralized, flexible and ecologically sustainable systems of production and exchange could block this anti-democratic reaction. Yet the precise form and timing of such reforms continues to be

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12 Alec Nove, op. cit., chapter 8.
debated in the Soviet Union. Some praise market competition as a great unifier of the peoples (V. Selyunin) and plump for the Polish strategy of leaping quickly into a free market with free prices. Others warn of the dangers of 'market Stalinism' and call for a system of 'socialist planning' and workers' self-management' (Kagarlitski). The more technocratically inclined propose emergency rationing schemes (Popov). And others have no economic programme. They prefer to muddle through along the old Brezhnevite lines. They simply loathe the prospect of harder work, job insecurity, higher prices and greater social inequality.

It remains unclear whether Gorbachev and his supporters are capable of recognizing and addressing these problems in time. They seem to have difficulty acknowledging that they are caught up in a stage-like process of reform—do not make a major commitment to political and economic reform. And so the Gorbachev group continues to act nervously and energetically, sometimes toughening its resolve to save what is left of the totalitarian system. It allows the stranglehold of co-operatives on the grounds of their alleged 'profligacy'. It has granted more decision-making power to Gorbachev than to any other leader since Stalin. It sanctions hostile press and broadcasting campaigns against its democratic opponents. It threatens Baltic independence with talk of 'illegality' and 'anti-socialist extremism', tough economic sanctions and displays of armed force. And it has deeply alienated the supporters of Armenian and Azerbaijani independence by sending in units of the army, navy and the KGB to Transcaucasia.

For democrats within the Soviet Union—those citizens who nurture the old European project of taming the arrogance of the powerful and embracing the powerless openly and non-violently—the life and death questions of how to secure a culture of dignity without fear, to effect a new compromise among the nations of the Empire, and to create an equitable and ecologically sustainable system of production and exchange remain. In facilitating the birth and public circulation of these questions the politicians of retreat have done their job. They are now in deep trouble, and for all of us the outcomes of the present events are utterly uncertain. The unpredictability of real politics is at least, making its mark on public life. Perhaps we can be sure of only one thing: the Soviet Union has hopefully seen the back of those times when executions and prison sentences rolled like berries on the tongue of the Party. But the Soviet Union has not yet escaped the clutches of totalitarianism. It does not yet enjoy democratic freedom. For freedom, as Joseph Brodsky has remarked, is when you forget the spelling of the tyrant's name.

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