CHANGING POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND CORRESPONDING CHANGES IN IDENTITY

Ferenc ERŐS, Budapest

The changes in political systems taking place in Central and Eastern Europe, i.e., the disintegration of totalitarian regimes, and the slow and painful development of post-communist society, have all raised psychological and, above all, socio-psychological questions to which there is not even a hint of the answers. It is no coincidence that we are groping in such darkness, for in Hungary, just as in the other socialist countries of the region, there is scarcely any scientific experience or knowledge about our system which can provide us with a starting point.

There have been other changes in political systems in the region during this century, of course, changes which prompted noteworthy hypotheses and studies in the field of social psychology. One such change in system was the rise of fascism in Germany. We have broad theories about the mass psychology of fascism, most notably the theory of the "authoritarian personality", elaborated by Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, and other representatives of the Frankfurt School. The theory achieved a particularly strong foothold in American social psychology following the Second World War. Fromm carried out his empirical investigations in the period directly preceding the rise of Nazism to power and stressed that the authoritarian personality or, to be more precise, the sado-masochistic personality type is not characteristic of just the German lower middle class, but of a wide circle of the working class as well.

Another change in system took place in Germany, this time after the Second World War. Numerous socio-psychological studies have also been done on this period. The German psychoanalytical couple, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, in their many books and studies sought the answer to the problem of German social apathy. They found their answer in the German "inability to mourn" *(Unfähigkeit zu trauern)*. Following the war, the German people threw themselves with frantic haste into the rebuilding of their society, into the construction of an industrial-welfare society, or what came to be referred to as the "economic miracle", all the while failing to face the past, to grieve for the victims of the war, the Holocaust victims as well as Germans themselves who had been victim-

ized at the hands of Hitler. The process of German re-unification taking place at present provides a concrete example of the hypothesis put forward by the Mitscherliches, as this process resurrects the problem of multiple traumas and collective amnesia.

The above two paradigms are both noteworthy: that the early Frankfurt School and that of the Mitscherliches. The former supports Freud's libido or, rather, character theory and uses it as the basis for constructing an analytical socio-psychological concept of social character, invoking by way of support Marxist social concepts. The second paradigm takes as its starting point Freud's theory of mourning and melancholy and uses it as a basis for developing a theory of collective repression and the consequences of such repression, which affect the whole of the nation. Both models, of course, can serve as useful frameworks for examining the present changes in systems, their background, and their consequences. At the same time, the two highly regarded models of analytical social psychology – the "authoritarian personality" and the "inability to mourn" – belong to a series of broad constructs which gloss over important elements. The theory of the authoritarian personality, for example, does not take into consideration leftist authoritarianism, while that built around the concept of the "inability to mourn" essentially takes as its reference point earlier West German society, which subsequently embarked on the road to the development of a civil democracy. Also, both paradigms are ideological, to the extent that they are built upon utopian ideals. In the first approach, all that is needed is for the masses to be able to live out their desires, whereupon all those personality distortions and false needs, upon which fascist dictators build, will disappear. As for the second model, one needs only to confront the past and to resolve it on the level of collective consciousness to immediately achieve a state of healthy democracy. Ultimately, neither of the two models take into account, or at least not sufficiently, the diversity of social reality. Their analyses of collective forms of behaviour and states of consciousness often gloss over the different needs, interests, socialization patterns, ideology, etc. of the various groups making up society.

These critical observations do not imply that I have a better model to offer in their place for the socio-psychological interpretation of the changes in systems taking place in Eastern and Central Europe at present. However, if we are even to begin thinking about the possibility of constructing alternate interpretations, we must first bear in mind a few basic factors. First of all, the current change in systems is better characterized as an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, course of events. Even though mass movements have played a certain role (primarily in Poland and in former East Germany), the new systems did not come into being during the course of a revolution, coup, or a lost war. (Rumania being a possible exception; and there is, of course, the threat of civil war in some areas, as in the case of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.) Secondly, in the majority of countries in the region, the change in system was not only preceded by half a century of

communist dictatorship, but also by centuries of various kinds of dictatorial or authoritarian and paternalistic systems.

The third important factor to bear in mind is that, although the systems presently taking shape guarantee basic civil liberties and human rights and have taken steps in the direction of parliamentary democracy and economic liberalization, basically they have not changed in terms of their power structure nor in their method of exercising power. A portion of the old élite has been stripped of their privileges, but the exercise of power at present is actually based on a compromise between more mobile layers of the old élite and the new upwardly mobile élite that has emerged in recent years. The upshot of all this is that centralization efforts, at least in Hungary, are stronger today than they were during the final years of the disintegrating communist system.

The fourth fundamental factor to be considered is the fact that these new systems are characterized by instability. The new institutions of democracy are developing slowly and by fits and starts, and are thus not fully functional. Also, many members of the new political guard are characterized either by dilettantism or gross incompetency. In addition, economic liberalization has heightened social tensions to a considerable degree, large numbers of people finding themselves in situations that they did not have to face before, namely, mass unemployment, growing impoverishment, uncertainty of existence, etc. Consequently, the change in system has been followed by disillusionment, political apathy, indifference, and increasing resentment, all of which play into the hands of various extremists, especially nationalists, anti-minority groups, chauvinists, and leftist demagogues.

From the socio-psychological perspective, the earlier mentioned constructs do not contribute greatly to understanding the present-day reality of Eastern and Central Europe, nor are they constructs that examine collective modes of behaviour and states of consciousness. It is much more interesting and productive to pose questions concerning what has and has not changed in terms of the everyday mechanisms employed in the exercise of power over the people, or, as Michel Foucault would put it, in the "microphysics of power"?

At this point I would like to focus on one basic component, in particular, involved in the daily exercise of power and control: namely, the representation and manipulation of identity. First of all, one of the major objectives of totalitarian systems is to strip people of the great diversity of personal and social identities and, in some instances, of their human identity as well. In such situations identity becomes no longer a mode of self-description or experiencing of the self but, rather, something that has been externally imposed on people. In Nazi Germany, for example, Jews were denied of the legitimacy of any kind of identity, with the exception of their Jewish identity, a single identity category which was established on the basis of race, one which was independent of any group affiliation and personally experienced self-identity. Yet another example can be seen in the Soviet Union of the Stalinist period, where the "Soviet man" prevailed as the ba-

sic identity category, with all other identity types being branded as illegitimate or, at the very least, as secondary and vestigal. Here, a specific example of the proto-type of the "Soviet man" comes to mind in the person of the pioneer Pavel Moro-zov who, having shaken off all "reactionary" obligations towards the family, de-nounced his own father and became celebrated as a hero all the way up to very recent times. Such elimination of differences within society and the subsequent homogenization of society principally means that even such basic categories as male and female come to lose their significance.

According to the renowned ethnopsychoanalyst George Devereux, overem-phasis or "hypercathexis" on a single identity pattern, to the exclusion of others, destroys the one basis on which individual identity is built, viz., differences. In such a situation, individual identity, based on true differences, becomes replaced by archaic pseudo-identities. And when a person is nothing more than a Spartan, capitalist, proletarian, Buddhist, or similar pigeon-holed designation, then he is close to being nothing at all and thus to being a non-person.

The abolition of differences and the psychological, even sometimes physical, stripping of identities inherited, adopted, or chosen by the individual (i.e., the elimination of the individual himself) is, for the most part, only a utopian objec-tive of totalitarian systems, e.g., as portrayed by writers like Huxley and Orwell. (Although, in some cases, reality is far worse than the most negative utopia, as seen in the Nazi example of the "final solution" to the Jewish question.) In daily life, however, totalitarian systems, especially established and stable dictatorships, are characterized by a duality and cleavage of identities, i.e., by a gap between private and public identities. Publicly, the person is a "Soviet man", a good party member, a worker, or loyal soldier, whereas in his private life, he is an Arme-nian, Hungarian, Jew, Catholic, man, woman, mother, Freudian, etc. Totalitarian systems try to do away with these more or less illegitimate categories of identity, primarily by exerting enormous pressure on private life, i.e., on the family itself, on spontaneous groups of citizens, political opposition groups, etc.

As a consequence of the above, extensive erosion of private identity takes place. This erosion can occur in several different ways, the first and most signifi-cant being through the repression of identity elements that have been deemed un-desirable or illegitimate. Such elements are expelled from the conscious mind and appear only in symbolic representations, dreams, fantasies, and in symptoms.

The second manner of coping with undesirable or illegitimate identity elements is through the transformation of such elements into negative identity fragments. This entails the destruction of some earlier existing identity pattern, with certain elements of it, however, being retained and classified as the "bad side of the per-sonality", i.e. that which is still necessary to overcome (e.g., "petit bourgeois vestiges"). The primary objective of constant self-criticism and of "brainwash-ing" is to transform earlier identity elements into negative fragments of identity and to compel the individual to grapple constantly with these fragments.

The third major means of weakening private identity is through marginalization. This involves the squeezing of certain identity elements to the margins of awareness, thereby rendering them seemingly insignificant. Such elements do not become repressed and are expressed by means of allusion, in the sense that Ferenc Mérei, the noted Hungarian social psychologist, employed the term. According to Mérei, allusion is a concrete detail of a vivid concrete experience, and represents the whole of the experience, evokes it, and communicates it to all those who have also experienced it. Allusion is thus a conscious process, driven not by the dynamics of repressed desire but by a still active and vivid experience situated on the margin of awareness. In other words, according to Mérei, allusion is the mother tongue of collective experience. Moreover, the stronger the external pressure, censorship, and the control of information, the more frequent and natural becomes the allusive mode of expression (knowing looks, innuendoes, and various forms of non-verbal communication), with which members of different groups achieve togetherness. It is no coincidence that Czech, Polish, Russian, and Hungarian literature and cinema which flourished in the shadow of the censor during the 1960s and 1970s frequently resorted to the use of allusion as a form of expression.

The marginalization of identity elements is not an all encompassing process, in that those people possessing marginal identities do not become marginalized in the social sense of the term. Quite the contrary, as frequently such a process involves people of high or central status who, with their marginal identities, comprise a unique community. This I would term "social Marranism", which derives its name from the Marranos, Spanish Jews who publicly converted to Christianity but clung to their Judaism for centuries afterwards. The intelligentsia of Central and East-European countries ended up in a similar type of marginal situation, or at least a good many intellectuals did so. György Konrád and Iván Szelényi deal with the paradoxical situation of such intellectuals in their 1974 book "The road of East European intellectuals to class power", in which they describe how marginalized intellectuals, those restricted in their most fundamental civil and human rights, became the ruling class under state socialism, but the consolidation of their class power was made possible only by abolishing the hegemony of the existing order.

The above paradox dealt with by Konrád and Szelényi raises the question of how this process of change in political system affects identity patterns characteristic of totalitarian systems. One of the most common signs of the disintegration of the communist system was the emergence of different groups, associations, organizations, movements, religious communities, etc. over the course of the past decade. These new entities and movements offered their members and followers new kinds of identity and made possible the open expression of identity elements that had been marginalized up to then. People began to take on identities that had been deemed illegitimate or undesirable and persecuted earlier. They "rediscov-

116

ered" and proclaimed their Hungarianness, Jewishness, etc., and their loyalty to particular forms of existence and experience, as well as to the past, tradition, region, and to earlier denounced customs or ideas. "Otherness" and "difference" became increasingly more important. What had once been marginalized and distilled through allusion regained its central position. This process has been further strengthened, of course, by the change in system that raised to legal status the deideologization of the state, officially removing still existing remnants of communist universalism from education, the media, etc.

The break with communism at times has assumed spectacular forms. There are, for example, those who cooperated with the party-state right on up to the last minute, but who, as it later turns out, had actually been opponents of the system all along and who, thus, became the current champions of anti-communism. Such people are generally referred to as "overnight converts", calling into doubt the sincerity of their "conversion". Disregarding the ever powerful mechanisms of conformity, what we are actually dealing with here is of obviously the reactivation of earlier prohibited marginal identity elements or the transformation of negative fragments of identity back into positive elements.

Despite the present political and social difficulties and crises, the change in political system has created the possibility for developing a civil society. Civil society is characterized by, among other things, a diversity of identity patterns, freedom of self-expression and to express ones identity, and individualism devoid of external control and paternalistic patronage; in short, by the coming of age of society. At the same time, this newly emerging civil society, as understood in the European sense of the term, is threatened by the free reign of identity formation, stemming from the fact that certain identity elements did not merely become marginalized but repressed. Communist systems swept centuries-old tensions and conflicts under the rug, thereby preserving age-old national, ethnic, and religious oppositions in dormant and encapsulated form. Today, the most alarming form of the "return of the repressed" is nationalism, which elevates to a moral level the mere fact of belonging to a given nation and by its own exclusiveness seeks enemies and scapegoats in other nations or in minority groups living in symbiosis with them. The nation, as an "archaic pseudo-identity" is the exact opposite of the homogenizing universalism of communism. However, both stand in opposition to civil society, just as they are the antithesis of modern frameworks and manifestations of identity patterns. The failure or success of the change in political systems in Central and Eastern Europe will ultimately be seen in whether "archaic pseudo-identities" will take hold or whether European-style patterns of identity based on diversity and heterogeneity will triumph.