

Prospects for democracy and socialism in eastern Europe [1985]¹

Since the end of the Second World War, democratic strivings have surfaced again and again in the socialist bloc countries of eastern Europe within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. These efforts have always been blocked or suppressed, only to reappear somewhere else at a later moment. Such attempts to win greater democracy have varied in their character and form according to the social structures and political traditions of the country concerned. However, in the course of time, the differences have become less marked and specific factors have ceased to play such an important role, with the result that we are now seeing a convergence of emphasis on political democratization, which is viewed increasingly as a sine qua non of a developed socialist society. The latest development to confirm this by now undeniable trend is the establishment of distinctly analogous groups and even movements in a number of socialist countries. All of these groups and movements call for the restoration of democratic practices or, where applicable, their institution and gradual assertion within the framework of the given social order, and emphasize the need to implement and respect inalienable human and civil rights. These groups and movements have already been successful in establishing a degree of continuity which shows hopeful signs of being able to survive periods of increased political rigidity in individual countries or even on a bloc-wide scale. Although it is far too early to speak of this trend assuming really international proportions, there is, none the less, a widening acceptance of the vital need for co-operation and a common platform, at least within the bloc.

The intervention of a victorious Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War, during which it had been transformed into a world power, effectively checked and halted the evolution of democracy in central and eastern Europe; this region now found itself part of a widened Soviet sphere of influence as a result of the new political settlement in Europe. Czechoslovakia was arguably the worst hit, after having remained a firm bastion of democracy in central Europe throughout both the inter-war decades. During the last quarter of a century, however, the political, cultural, social and even economic situations in the European countries of the Soviet bloc have grown to resemble each other to such a degree that, for the foreseeable future, the trend towards convergence seems likely to prevail over tendencies to assert national peculiarities. This represents a significant change. Until now, all attempts to counteract the compulsory Soviet archetype and assert a degree of autonomy have based themselves on the specific conditions of the individual national societies. Henceforth, they will be in a position to refer to generalized conditions when confronting directives rooted in the remnants of the political and social anomaly of Russian autocracy. It is high time to jettison, once and for all, the idea that the democratic forces in the individual Soviet bloc countries should concentrate on asserting some sort of independent path, some kind of 'private' emancipation from the Kremlin's economic and political control and governance. It is necessary to examine the issue in terms of political power, and to concentrate on co-operation between the democratic forces of all the countries concerned. It must be absolutely plain that it is not the goal of the democratic forces to destroy the bloc (or socialism, for that matter) but, rather, to achieve democratic transformations in the social, economic and political life of all countries of so-called 'existing socialism'. And in support of this goal, it is essential to unite the democratic forces in the individual countries on a genuinely democratic footing and, if possible, by democratic means. These days, this means establishing and maintaining direct personal and working contacts between them, quite separate from official contacts and irrespective of them. In

¹ Translated by A.G. Brain.

recent years, this has actually started to happen, as I indicated at the beginning of this chapter.

Meanwhile, it is vital to maintain contacts and engage in talks with the western European democratic forces, even though one has the impression that in western Europe they have no clear notion of what the coming, i.e., post-capitalist society will look like. However, these days there are substantially fewer people, among the socialist-minded inhabitants of western Europe, who regard the states of so-called 'existing socialism' as examples worth emulating. The difficulties which their own political efforts encounter in those countries are quite different from those encountered in eastern Europe by the democratic supporters of human rights and freedom. It is therefore all the more important that we should achieve the maximum possible degree of mutual understanding and knowledge of each other's problems. There can be no doubt that, in the long term, the future of Europe in the broadest sense depends on the preparedness of the democratic movements in both currently separate parts to lay the foundations of a new, more open, just and humane society. Only then will Europe be able to share effectively in building a new world and assist substantially in finding solutions to global problems, instead of constituting an obstacle as it does at present.

There are many reasons for the partisans of democracy (and socialism) to concentrate on long-term tasks and the broadest of objectives. Attempts to form a political opposition in the countries of central and eastern Europe which fall within the Soviet sphere of military, political and economic control are, at this particular moment, not only premature and ill-prepared, but actually misguided, and they are proving an obstacle by delaying the settlement of the really burning problems confronting us. Besides, the whole issue of opposition is far from clear. By its very nature, political opposition implies having something in common with the regime it opposes. And this is more than just the common framework of the same social structure. It also requires a space, a common level at which differences can be thrashed out, not to mention a whole set of basic principles which the opposition shares with the regime. Furthermore, any opposition is deeply influenced by the form and quality of the political 'position' which it rejects and confronts. On the other hand, an opposition can only play its role if the regime 'recognizes' it in some way, i.e., takes it into account and acknowledges it. All this clearly demonstrates that the establishment of opposition political groups would do nothing to solve the most important and crucial problems facing the societies of so-called 'existing socialism', particularly in central and eastern Europe. Besides, not only are the structures and machinery of the regime not ready for the integration of an opposition into the life of the country; they are also unsuited for the task. Unhappily, the only prospect for reforming the regime is a gradual change of personnel involving an increasing liberalization, or, rather, a softening of the repressive methods, so as to permit a certain limited influx of 'rational' measures in a technocratic sense. The only possible alternative is an upheaval which is inconceivable in a single country in view of the above-mentioned framework of bloc-wide control, while a shake-up of the entire bloc is unthinkable without catastrophic consequences, both immediate and long term; and only the blind can harbour any illusions on that score. If our countries are to count on a future better than their past and their present, thought must be given to more than mere methods of political conflict. The greatest failure of socialist programmes to date, and particularly of the Bolshevik revolution, was that they did not tackle the question of what the new society was to look like and, above all, what sort of person was going to feel at home in it (nor, for that matter, did they do anything to ensure that anyone could feel at home in it).

This is all linked to the need to re-evaluate the roots of the socialist movement and to seek the reasons for its numerous failures and cases of outright deviation. By now, it must be obvious to all thinking people that socialism is the offspring of liberal-democratic traditions and is far from capable of prefiguring, or of even presenting itself as, a new historical epoch or, as Marx and his supporters thought, a new socio-economic system. Socialism's historical justification is its extrapolation of democratic principles into social and economic realms and its practical implementation of them. Socialism is democracy taken to all its conclusions in every field. Whenever the settlement of social demands has been violently divorced from its democratic roots, and whenever democratic structures have been abolished in the name of social progress, or deprived of any real meaning, socialism has entered a historical blind alley and become a negative example to all who might seek to follow in its footsteps. In order to conceal the true facts about such deviant socialism, the socialist programme was transformed into an ideology capable of acting as a cover even for expansionism, using socialism and socialist feelings as a strategic weapon, i.e., as an instrument. At the same time, the social realities of so-called 'existing socialism' had to be hidden as far as possible from view, so as to minimize control and inspection. This was the principal motivation behind drawing the so-called iron curtain (which was not at all a defence against subversion or espionage). And even after so many appalling revelations, the fear that the veil might be lifted on the internal social and political situation in extensive areas of the Soviet Union constitutes the chief obstacle to extending economic and cultural ties beyond a strictly official and narrowly selective minimum.

It will therefore be necessary to subject socialist ideology to the severest and most open criticism from within in order to expose its fraudulent and mendacious pretensions and, instead, rehabilitate its genuine roots and the true core of socialism as the social implementation of democracy's political principles. There must be a radical effort to take the ideology out of socialism. And, of course, this must not fail to tackle the democratic programme and its fundamental principles, for democracy as well as socialism has failed on many occasions.

In today's Europe (and today's world in general) Christianity is the only current or movement capable of ensuring that democratic programmes are re-instituted on a firm moral and spiritual footing. But, at the same time, one must acknowledge how many times in the past Christians and the Christian church failed disastrously to live up to expectations in the political sphere. Hence, it is far from easy to predict whether they will rise to this task or whether they will even be capable of undertaking it properly. For this reason, we should especially welcome the course chosen by groups and movements calling for the recognition, and implementation of human rights. They do not consider themselves a political opposition, nor have they any intention of constituting the first rung on the ladder for some alternative power bloc. The political role of such groups and movements is obvious: they hold a mirror up to the face of the regime which claims to be democratic and humane, but rejects any criticism of its undemocratic and inhumane nature as a slander (when voiced from within the society) or as inadmissible interference (when it comes from outside). By playing this role, they might indeed begin to represent an opposition-in-formation in a situation where the regime would refuse to broach any opposition at all. In the long term, however, the principle of keeping at arm's length any pretensions to power and, likewise, any political power conflict, opens up a new dimension of political, or should we say 'apolitical', public activity. The goal of an opposition political movement is to expose the regime, in which the act of drawing attention to individual acts of injustice, illegality or cruelty becomes an instrument of political

struggle. As soon as the opposition wins power, its criticism of injustice, illegality, etc., ceases to be functional since, no longer an instrument of opposition, it is instead influenced by whether, after its victory, this former opposition has put matters right, or is in fact committing the same excesses. On the other hand, a human rights movement maintaining its detachment from all political power conflicts and not striving to share power, will continue to pursue its vital work whatever the regime or social system, and in every political situation. It can afford to support minorities even when this does not generate any political (i.e. powerpolitical) capital. The sole reason for its activity is to ensure that there should be no flouting of basic human rights and freedoms. It is then immaterial who is responsible for violation or from whence come threats to them.

The creation of a living organism of 'alternative culture' is of fundamental importance in overcoming the decline of social life and reviving it at every level. Of special importance for the future will be educational and discussion circles and even workshops where gifted young people will be able to receive instruction in subjects that today's universities are unable or forbidden to teach from older specialists who have been deprived of their jobs. The political significance of these 'non-political' activities is extensive, not only within the individual national societies, but also in so far as it holds out a prospect of achieving broader international understanding, above all within the bloc. Without the background of a vigorous and lively 'alternative' cultural front independent of official structures, the activity of the defenders of human rights and freedoms would inevitably atrophy and decline. Human rights and freedoms are particularly important for those citizens who have committed themselves most deeply and accepted greater responsibility than others; and that applies chiefly to genuinely creative people. Freedom does not consist in alleviating people's lives, but rather in giving them the opportunity to accept the most difficult and important tasks which, for that reason, are the most pressing. Only then do the principles of democratic respect for the basic freedoms and inalienable rights of every human being become bulwarks against the victimization and exploitation of the weak, and this only as a result of the vigorous efforts of those who assume the major tasks.

This 'alternative culture' is already a fact of life in the countries of the Soviet bloc. Whole samizdat editions of banned and suppressed authors, as well as translations and minor literary productions, newsletters, popular studies and essays, not to mention highly specialised learned commentaries and literary and specialist reviews, are all published in typewritten form. Then there are musical groups, private theatrical publications, study circles and seminars, and so on. In many cases, these are of a much higher standard than the official culture. In fact, it is fair to say that it constitutes a 'position' in relation to which the officially sanctioned productions of state publishing houses are no more than an opposition, and frequently a feeble one at that. Despite all this, one hears complaints from time to time that the human rights groups are linked too closely with the life of the unofficial culture, and that they do too little to publicize their own specific positions among the population at large. I fear, though, that despite the slight element of truth in these complaints, their weakness lies in their failure to free themselves from power-political evaluations, such that they regard 'the masses' in the first analysis as their allies and the basis of their political (or at least social) support. None the less, we should be clear in our minds that not even a cultural front dissociated from the regime and official policies is capable of keeping up its essential independent stance without a wider social back-up. This is not a question of having a large number of sympathizers but, rather, of the nature and quality of that sympathy, and the degree to which social support is

firmly anchored. In brief, what is chiefly required is 'moral' support rather than political support, however numerically strong it might be.

Human rights defenders will always have difficulty in finding the terms in which to address the majority of the population who have adapted themselves and discovered a *modus vivendi* in a situation of pressure from all sides. And it is in this task that the former need the extensive and long-term (or, rather, permanent) support of those working in the field of culture who will find the words to explain the situation to the public at large, kindle people's awareness and help promote the establishment in ordinary people of a moral sense and strength of character. Without such eminently important mediation, human rights groups will remain relatively isolated and on the fringe of events most of the time. Furthermore, at moments of tension and conflict, they will be powerless in the face of pragmatic and utilitarian misuses of the principles they espouse. Such mediation makes sense, however, only on two conditions. One is that the creative people involved should display moral integrity in their own lives and work - something which cannot be taken for granted in today's conditions of generalized moral decay. The second condition, which clearly relates to the first, is that the cultural front should speak to the public at large in a non-ideological fashion. The main tasks facing us now are long term: raising the people's political understanding to a much higher level, kindling and encouraging the moral integrity and independence of mind of ordinary citizens, and promoting a profound spiritual renewal grounded firmly in the lives of the widest sections of society. Without this, our efforts to achieve respect for inalienable human rights and the extension of human and civil liberties will soon founder.

The countries of the Soviet bloc are entering what might be described as a latter-day national renaissance, in which the intelligentsia could play a decisive role, so long as it does not renege on its essential mission and, instead, contents itself with acting as mere technical specialists. The way forward must consist chiefly in providing practical and tangible proof that the state and political power are not the supreme expression of the life of societies, but are merely one function a function that is by no means the most essential and, indeed, that will have to play an increasingly minor role. Society must gradually overcome its enthrallment by a state which seeks, with the help of its bureaucratic machinery and powers of coercion, to achieve total domination of the life of society as a whole and of every individual down to the last detail. This tendency is worldwide, which is why it will take a worldwide programme to halt and suppress it. It is obvious that such a grandiose project can be sure of success only if it will be undertaken in all countries and not just in one part of the world. International understanding of a non-governmental and extra-governmental character is becoming absolutely vital in this connection. What is more, we are talking about a considerably long-term operation. None the less, the first steps allow no delay. We can never be sure when, as a result of all sorts of disorder, breakdown or catastrophe on the existing international scene, these systems will become less rigid and tense, and susceptible to the introduction of new elements and principles. We must certainly count on such an eventuality by the end of the century at least. It would be unforgivable if we were caught unawares, inadequately prepared for a new situation.

In the countries of so-called 'existing socialism' (and not only there), the state has taken over the entire economic life of the nation and, in so doing, has forced every individual and the whole of society into a state of dependence and subjection. The purpose of human rights campaigns was, at the outset, to establish the bounds beyond which all state and government intervention ceases to be legitimate and legal: in short, to prevent the political enslavement of the

citizen. It has turned out that the defence of civil and human rights must be looked at in a much wider sense: the citizen is also in need of economic liberation. So-called 'existing socialism' may well have freed citizens from want, but it did so by increasing their economic and, therefore, their general social dependence. The root cause of this failure and deviation of socialism was the linking of the machinery of state and its political structures with a country's economic structures. In accordance with the trend towards total control over society at every level, the state also gained ascendancy in other major fields, such as culture, scientific and technical research, the media, education, such that it now increasingly penetrates the private lives of citizens through every channel. There is only one way to right this: by emancipating civil society from domination by the state and its machinery. And this can only be achieved by completely emancipating every main area of civil society, starting with the workplace. As a complement to the old and, in general, well-tested separation of powers and the decentralization of the state machine, it is necessary to separate culture, information and communication media, education, etc., from the state, on the same lines as the church/state separation. A consequence of this will be that the economic organization of a country will assume greater importance, since it is a task which is impossible without a certain degree of central control; the dangers inherent in this can only be avoided by means of thorough-going democratization, i.e., the establishment of self-managing bodies at every level, and the systematic separation of all economic structures from the field of government control.

There can be no doubt that these aims cannot be attained by piecemeal or marginal reforms of the existing societies. It is also clear that a similar solution is called for in other parts of the world. The route described is, as far as we can see, the only one which would assist, instead of impede, the reconciliation of different countries and societies, and one which, with the inevitable unification of the continents and, eventually, the entire world, will contain defence mechanisms against the hegemony of the powerful and the monopoly of the entrenched. One thing is, nevertheless, indisputable: the establishment of a political opposition does not accord with the course I have indicated, and nor does it answer its needs. Power struggles inevitably enhance the importance of political power, whether they occur within states or between them. The evolution we seek can be brought closer and assisted only if there is a winding down of tension both internationally and between the blocs, as well as within the blocs and in individual countries. The right way to tackle this will be by slow but steady pressure, avoiding confrontation and wide-scale conflict. Social upheavals and catastrophes cannot be ruled out, of course, but in no event can they be regarded as a solution or even as a means of accelerating developments. Concentrated, and at the same time widely exerted pressure, avoiding all excesses, may (and should) achieve concessions on the part of those in power, and also constitute important experience for human rights activists. The goal must not be to share power, however, but to force the powers-that-be into legal and legitimate paths.

Democracy and socialism both have their roots in Europe, and not only in its political, but above all in its spiritual and moral traditions. There are hopeful signs that as a result of the progressive decline of these traditions (a phenomenon which can be explained partly as a temporary outcome of social and historical upheavals and shifts), Europe will be the first to realize the need to move into a new phase of the centuries-old struggle for basic human freedom and inalienable human rights. And since it is immediately obvious that in the course of this continuing fight the existing states will look on the defenders of these rights and

freedoms as a threat to their power, there will be a vital need to make every effort to achieve understanding between groups and movements of this type across state frontiers and, above all, beyond the blocs. If the trend towards international détente can be maintained, and progress can be made in talks about European security and co-operation, and if, in other parts of the world, the forces of peace succeed in isolating and extinguishing the hot-beds of tension and conflict, perhaps we can look forward with hope to the day when, in Europe itself, we witness the liberation of society from total state domination and the emergence of a situation precluding the centralization of the means of production, which have for so long been kept out of people's hands and removed from human ends by governments. Perhaps then we would see the end of the division of Europe. This could in turn set an example to other parts of the world of how to construct a society in which peace will not only be preserved superficially but also inwardly, on the basis of the thorough-going democratization of all aspects of life, not only in political terms, but also in the broadest economic and social sense. This will be inconceivable without the emancipation of the overwhelming majority of the lives of societies and individuals from the clutches of dirigisme and control by the machinery of state. Furthermore, this will not be achieved without the patient struggle of creative people and defenders of fundamental human values, a process that can only be jeopardized by political agitation, organization, coercion and violence. These human values, and these values alone, justify the battle for human freedoms and rights. Democratic political, social and economic structures have as their highest purpose the creation of a space in which to bring these values to life and introduce and assert them in the lives of individuals and societies alike: in the lives of free individuals and free societies.