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## **Reformism and Conservatism**

Professor Cohen's stimulating essay can be read at several levels and from several vantage points. First, it offers a conceptual apparatus that attempts to encompass and characterize the main conflicting orientations in Soviet political and social life since Stalin. Second, it proposes a theory of historical development which casts Soviet history in a broader comparative framework. Finally, the essay presents a theory of recent Soviet historical development based upon assertions regarding the causes of changing orientations within the Soviet establishment and society-at-large.

Symposia are designed to generate controversy through criticism. It is important, however, to distinguish among types of criticism, in part to avoid the impression of rejection, and in part to illuminate the consensus within which the criticism is taking place. For these reasons, my critical remarks and suggestions will be prefaced by a catalog of the numerous points of agreement between Professor Cohen and myself.

At the conceptual level, I believe that Professor Cohen's insistence on the utility of "reformism" and "conservatism" as organizing concepts is well grounded. These terms avoid the ambiguities and more restrictive applicability of such terms as "liberal" and "neo-Stalinist." Moreover, I welcome his distinction between conservative reactions and conservative restorations; I wish I had thought of it when writing "Khrushchev Reconsidered." In addition, his notion of a dual (or dualistic) political culture has proven to be useful in my own research.

At the comparative historical level, Professor Cohen's essay strikes me as a valuable contribution to Soviet studies. This is not simply a matter of the focus on change which Cohen brings to his analysis. It is a matter, more importantly, of the need to incorporate into our epistemology a sensitivity to dialectical (rather than solely unilinear or cyclical) views of historical change. A dialectical view need not adopt the varied components or conclusions of the Marxian dialectic, but it should take as its unit of analysis ongoing political struggle, social conflicts, and the appearance of new syntheses which themselves are partial and transient. Such a view of change sensitizes Professor Cohen to the differences between Stalinism and Brezhnevism without forcing him to label Brezhnevism of the 1970s a reformist political persuasion. The dialectical view also makes Cohen responsive to the high probability of future reformism after a period (perhaps extended) of conservative backlash against reformist excesses. Finally, the dialectical perspective has directed Cohen to an examination of both the political and social bases of the regime and to an examination of the character of conflict within each.

At the lower level of analysis—Russian and Soviet history—I agree with Professor Cohen on many points. First, I agree with him that a broad-based conservative reaction eventually followed the removal of Khrushchev, primarily with respect to the character of social transformation, the terms of mass political

participation, and the level of generalization of political criticism. Second, I agree that Soviet history provides a variegated and ambiguous legacy on which representatives of different political currents can draw for justification of their demands. Third, I agree that conservatism *as defined today* probably has deeper roots in Soviet society and officialdom than does present-day reformism. Fourth, I also agree that the sources of the persistence of contemporary reformism are “systemic,” and not merely a product of memories of the 1950s and early 1960s.

Where, then, do I differ from Cohen’s analysis? Primarily on two counts: (1) the definitional shortcomings of the conceptual apparatus proposed; and (2) the lack of attention to institutional sources of reformism in the USSR.

His definition of reformism poses some difficulties. In good measure, the trouble derives from inconsistency in usage at various points in the essay. On the one hand, Professor Cohen uses reformism as a relative concept: what was reformist in the 1950s may be conservative in the 1970s. On the other hand, he sometimes alleges an enduring content for the term: “decentralization and the market [with] implications in political life as well”; “the great reforms of the Khrushchev years derived more from unusual historical circumstances than from the actual political and social strength of reformism in the Soviet Union.” (Reformism, *as defined in 1956*, had very broad support and deep roots, for it promised much of what Brezhnev was later to deliver!) Another inconsistency is Cohen’s assertion that reformism need not mean liberalization. Yet I find no indication in his essay of a reformist impulse that is not liberalizing. (Classical liberalism and liberal democracy, as absolute ideologies, are a different matter; Khrushchev was a liberalizer—relative to what came before him—but not a liberal.) Nor can greater attention to peasant welfare qualify as a nonliberalizing reformist impulse of the 1960s and 1970s, because, according to Cohen’s definition, this is part of the new conservatism.

The ambiguities are heightened by the formal definition of reformism Professor Cohen proposes: “Reformism is that outlook, and those policies, which seeks through measured change to improve the existing order without fundamentally transforming existing social, political, and economic foundations or going beyond prevailing ideological values. . . . This distinguishes it from radicalism. The essential reformist argument is that the potential of the existing system and the promise of the established ideology . . . have not been realized, and that they can and must be fulfilled.” It strikes me that radicals (as opposed to revolutionaries seeking violent destruction of the old order) often find ways of claiming that their programs are only fulfilling the “potential” of the system and the “promise” of the ideology. Moreover, given the dualistic Soviet heritage, this definition casts too wide a net and obscures the distinction between reformism and radicalism. Roy Medvedev’s *On Socialist Democracy*, for example, is not a prescription for multiparty liberal democracy, but, in my opinion, a prescription for radical change of the system, for Medvedev calls for the emergence of political and economic markets as primary mechanisms for the allocation of values in the system. (In contrast, Medvedev’s less hopeful position of 1975, geared toward a coalition of moderate reformists and moderate conservatives, strikes me as a case of his reversion to a reformist posture.)

According to Cohen’s definition of reformism, Martin Luther would have been a reformer, but not a radical. According to my definition, however, Martin

Luther was a radical precisely because he challenged the "leading role" of the church hierarchy and advocated a pluralism of "political elites" within Christianity. In other words, the distinction between reformists and radicals should hinge upon the definition of the "political order," rather than on the ability of radicals to point to ideological continuity and sanction. To me, the most enduring feature of the Soviet political order (and of Roman Catholicism) is its *official political culture* and the refusal of Soviet officialdom to countenance the dominance of political and economic markets. Those who advocate socialist democracy or market socialism may not be revolutionaries if they choose to work within the system for radical change, but they are radicals nonetheless.

I must also take issue with Professor Cohen on the matter of jargon. He denigrates such "contrivances" as "functional technocratic modernizer," and rightly so, for such a redundant convoluted phrase is better dispensed with. (Who uses it, anyway?) Yet Cohen will have to come to terms with some new labels as he goes further in his study of the complexities of Soviet reformism and conservatism. He notes that these are "complex amalgams of opinion and attitudes requiring further analysis." Hopefully, Professor Cohen will apply his immense ability and energy to such further analysis. As it now stands, his essay avoids detailed specification of various types within each camp. It disaggregates the components of conservatism and reformism today and in the 1950s, but necessarily avoids searching for the various ways in which these components are selectively recombined in given types of reformists or conservatives. Admittedly, this is a matter for future research; but if this is the case, the test of Cohen's ability to avoid unfamiliar terms or concepts will come when he tries to characterize these intermediate types. (Incidentally, Professor Cohen's characterization of Khrushchev as "quasi-populist" is perhaps the first indication of the future dilemmas of conceptual innovation. I do not disagree with the term, but neither am I sure what it means.)

So much for problems of definition. My final point is more an elaboration than a disagreement. In searching for enduring sources of reformism in Soviet politics, Cohen points to three factors, all of which are primarily ideational in origin: (1) an unserviceable past with which to justify the status quo; (2) the contrast between an ideological commitment to consumer-welfarism and "the inadequacies of the centralized economic system" (to which I would append "and present budgetary priorities," which are analytically distinct from over-centralization); and (3) the progressive character of Marxist-Leninist ideology. What is missing from this list, however, is an analysis of the potential institutional bases of reformism. Which institutional actors could develop a stake in reformism *out of institutional self-interest* (much as the middle class in Western Europe developed an "interest" in democratization, not for its own sake, but in order to secure their property rights)? My own research has led me to the conclusion that the General Secretary's role may well become one such source of future reformism (but not radicalism). To the extent that the party leader is expected to deliver dynamic new programs for progress in meeting consumer expectations or efficiency-oriented goals, he has an institutional interest in challenging authority relationships which impede the formulation and implementation of such programs. This pressure will also tempt him to expand the boundaries of political conflict (Perhaps in a "quasi-populist" manner?) in order to outflank

recalcitrant bureaucratic interests. From this standpoint, we may ultimately find that certain features of Khrushchev's populism were not as idiosyncratic as might be supposed.

Similarly, I am increasingly inclined toward the tentative conclusion that center-regional relations are becoming one of the more salient issues in Soviet politics. Many obkom first secretaries in certain types of oblasts perceive a conflict of interest between the balanced development of their regions and the current definition of center-local relations. This could lead to pressures from within the party apparatus for a future sovnarkhoz-like reform. How the issue will be dealt with cannot be predicted, but these (and other) *institutional* sources of possible reformism suggest that certain features of Khrushchevian reformism may not have been as much a product of unique historical circumstances as Professor Cohen suggests.