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The Pitfalls of the Theory of Modernization

Professor Korbonski has written a thoughtful and thought-provoking essay with which I find myself largely in disagreement, in general and in detail. I hope that the following brief comments will indicate with what, and why, I disagree. But in spite of my disagreements I think that Professor Korbonski's effort was well worth making. Indeed, I share his view that the study of East European politics can well profit from the study of political development and comparative politics, and indeed already has, for example, from his and Professor Janos's work.¹

Let me first make a few general remarks of a theoretical nature. The study of politics is in my (neo-Kantian) view an art, not a science. Insofar as it tries to be a science, it usually falls flat on its face. It cannot repeat experiments, and it therefore cannot predict from them with any assurance of accuracy. This is so primarily for a reason best put, in my view, by Edward Gibbon: "History, Sir, is indeed the record of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." Predictions based on history can in my view be illuminating and suggestive, but they remain essentially subjective—best judged and therefore accepted or rejected, in whole or in part, according to the previous batting average of the predictor.

Yet economic and social forces certainly play a major role in history. They can be analyzed, and illuminating intuitions (a word Professor Korbonski commendably utilizes) can be drawn from them with respect to probability and possibility. But as Max Weber pointed out, these intuitions and the categories to which they give birth are at best "ideal types"—they resemble (to an indeterminable extent) but do not and cannot accurately reflect reality. Nevertheless, without such categories, analysis of reality may well be even more imperfect than with them. But they are to be used, I would argue, with great reserve.

These categories are, contrary to many in natural science, subjective constructs devised by the analyst. It is not surprising, therefore, as Samuel Huntington has refreshingly pointed out, that most of the early Western and particularly American literature on political development reflected a reaction

1. Andrew C. Janos, "Group Politics in Communist Society: A Second Look at the Pluralistic Model," in Samuel P. Huntington and Clement H. Moore, eds., *Authoritarian Politics in Modern Society* (New York, 1970), pp. 437–50, and Andrzej Korbonski, "Comparing Liberalization Processes in Eastern Europe: A Preliminary Analysis," *Comparative Politics*, 4, no. 2 (January 1972): 231–49.

against the Spenglerian-Lasswellian pessimism of the 1920s and 1930s, reinforced by the post-1945 American nationalistic optimism and anti-colonial and pro-“Third World” enthusiasm.² These theories were not surprisingly based on belief in progress, “social science,” and the benevolent virtues of modernization, rationalization, and bureaucracy—that is, the tradition of Comte, Mill, and Marx, of positivism, liberalism, and Marxism. (Ironically, one of their acknowledged inspirers, Weber, realized earlier and in my view more clearly than most of them that modernization, rationalization, and bureaucracy are indeed an “ice age,” whose denizens will not necessarily gratefully accept and adjust to them.) To counterbalance this optimism, Professor Huntington and others re-emphasized the possibility, indeed, often the likelihood, of political decay—only in turn, of course, to be attacked by the latest wave of optimists, the new radicals of the left.³

My first general disagreement with Professor Korbonski’s analysis, then, is that he seems to take over what in my view is an unduly optimistic general theory of political development. My second is that his listing of aspects of political development is more exhaustive than illuminating. Indeed, would he not have done better to emphasize one or more of them, and indeed to compare and contrast the factors (and countries) involved, rather than to attempt to stress similarities so much? My third general disagreement is in fact stated by Professor Korbonski, “It may be presumptuous even to consider the area as a single entity”—but then he goes on to do so. As he points out, to discuss together Albania, East Germany, and Yugoslavia is like discussing Austria, Sweden, and Spain. More so, I would add: Albania is at least as much Middle Eastern as European. What seems to me the very limited value of attempting to discuss together such sharply disparate states is twice compounded by two other factors: the revival, as he points out, of the traditional political cultures in Eastern Europe and, interrelated with this and in large part because of it, the sharply different degrees of Soviet influence within them.

This brings me to my fourth general disagreement with Professor Korbonski. At the end of his essay he approvingly quotes Triska and Johnson to the effect that Soviet policy is the most important single factor in East European politics. Yet he goes on to say that he has not considered this at any length for lack of space, even though it is a “serious omission which weakens the overall hypothesis.” I would go further: it so weakens it as to make it dangerously incomplete as a source of insights into East European developments.

2. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics,” *Comparative Politics*, 3, no. 3 (April 1971): 283–322.

3. Mark Kesselman, “Order or Movement? The Literature of Political Development as Ideology,” *World Politics*, 26, no. 1 (October 1973): 139–54.

The converse of Soviet influence is of course in most instances native nationalism. As I will attempt to demonstrate in detail below, it seems to me that in general Professor Korbonski tends to underrate its significance as compared with, for example, economic discontent, to which he devotes much attention.

These, then, are my general disagreements with the essay's theoretical approach. Let me now turn to some detailed comments on some of the theses set forth in it. I would stress that my comments are just as much "intuitions" as Professor Korbonski so generously (and honestly) calls his. The reader must decide which he prefers, the more so because whether or not empirical research is decisive in analysis of democratic countries, it is rarely possible to any significant degree in Communist ones, with the partial exception of Yugoslavia. I shall comment consecutively on various points raised in the essay.

Professor Korbonski's general prediction for the East European political future is of smooth, continued modernization. I would reply that this has hardly been the case up to now. Why, therefore, should one assume that it will be in the future? The years 1956, 1968, and 1970 are too close to allow one to assume that the course of East European contemporary history will change so rapidly and so decisively. Moreover, I would argue that the post-1945 crises in East European politics have largely resulted from what Huntington has termed political decay: the excess of mobilization over institutionalization. More specifically, it seems to me that in most instances, notably 1956 and 1968, political decay has resulted from the explosive mixture of socialization (that is, transition from a traditional to a modernized, mobilized status), revival of traditional political culture, economic deprivation, and anti-Soviet nationalism.

Nor am I so optimistic as Professor Korbonski with respect to the success of nation-building in Eastern Europe. He himself rightly excepts Yugoslavia, but he seems to feel that the process has been successful in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. As to the latter, he is probably right if he means state consciousness as opposed to national consciousness. But surely now more than ever most Czechs and Slovaks regard themselves as two nations in one state: the Masaryk-Beneš *československý narod* is presumably one of those multinational attempts which have failed. (Not surprisingly: so have similar attempts in Belgium, Canada, Malaysia, and various ephemeral "Arab unions.") As to East Germany, it seems to me most doubtful that the majority of its inhabitants regard it as a nation, but they increasingly do regard it, *faute de mieux*, as a state. (It may well be that Professor Korbonski uses "nation" to mean "state"; if he does, then I would agree that state-building is indeed far advanced.)

He then speculates that further riots like the Polish ones in 1970 are unlikely. Maybe, but de Tocqueville's law of revolution would indicate that improvement in the standard of living will arouse rising expectations. Moreover, the 1970 Polish riots were in my view an excellent example of Gibbon's "follies" of history. Gomułka disastrously miscalculated popular reaction to price rises just before Christmas. Gierek, presumably, has learned better; but why should one assume that his successor or other East European rulers will remember and act on the lesson? Historically, a fair number of them have not.

Professor Korbonski goes on to hypothesize that future change will come more from the pressure of elite experts than from the popular masses. Again, this is in my view contrary to past experience. Indeed, one can argue, conversely, that elite technocrats are likely to want the kind of stratified, bureaucratic society which, as Max Weber foresaw, will create more discontent. Moreover, I would suspect that the probable development, as Professors Bauman and Ludz have pointed out, will be more complex.⁴ The old Communist political elite will want technocratic rationalization insofar as it allays mass economic discontent but not insofar as it imperils its own privileges. Many workers, particularly unskilled ones, will be opposed to the technocratic elite (as some were in 1968 in Czechoslovakia) because they fear that rationalization will favor unemployment and material incentives rather than overemployment and wage egalitarianism. The humanistic intellectuals, as Professor Ludz has noted,⁵ will on balance be unenthusiastic about, if not opposed to, technocratic rationalization, because they tend to reject bureaucracy, mass culture, and consumerism from a romantic, utopian, communitarian viewpoint. Thus the Communist political elite will try to balance between the technocrats and the workers in order to maintain their hold on the commanding heights of power. The workers and the technocrats will therefore suffer from varying degrees of existential frustration, and the political elite will have ample opportunity for miscalculation and potential system crises. I thus doubt that one can assume that change will probably be smooth. Moreover, the essay does not mention what was an essential precondition of change and crisis in 1956: a succession crisis in the Soviet Union. It may well be that this will occur again, with destabilizing results in Eastern Europe.

Professor Korbonski cites Professor Brzezinski's prediction for the Soviet Union—oligarchic petrification plus technological adaptation—only to assert

4. Zygmunt Bauman, "Social Dissent in the East European Political System," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 12, no. 1 (1971): 25–51, and Peter Ludz, *The Changing Party Elite in East Germany* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972).

5. Peter Ludz, "Philosophy in Search of Reality," *Problems of Communism*, 18, nos. 4–5 (July–October 1969): 33–42.

that this is unlikely in Eastern Europe, which will “diverge sharply” from the Soviet Union. But cannot one best understand the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as a refusal to allow in Eastern Europe the kind of pluralism that Professor Korbonski foresees there? And why should this change in the future? On the contrary: it seems to me much more likely that the Soviet Union will continue to insist that any pluralism in Eastern Europe be severely limited so that it will not endanger Soviet power or Communist dictatorship.

Perhaps I should say something here about totalitarianism and authoritarianism. I agree entirely with Professor Korbonski that the totalitarian model no longer has, if it ever did, any particular relevance to East European politics. Professor Ludz’s concept of “consultative authoritarianism” seems to me far better.⁶ What Arendt and Friedrich termed “totalitarianism” could perhaps better be called “surplus authoritarianism.” As Professor Ulam has so well pointed out in his recent biography of Stalin,⁷ Stalin’s rule was irrationally dictatorial. Weber knew well that bureaucratic rationality did not mean democracy or necessarily political or cultural pluralism; quite the contrary. If one looks at contemporary Hungary, where economic reforms have been the most extensive (except for Yugoslavia), one is struck by the continuation, presumably as a result of Soviet insistence and the desire of Kádár and Company to maintain their personal power, of a monopoly of party control over political and cultural life and of Soviet control over foreign policy. The same is true *a fortiori* of Poland and East Germany, to say nothing of the desert that is today Czechoslovakia.

As to Professor Croan’s comparison with Mexico: except for Yugoslavia, Albania, and to some extent Rumania, it is like *Hamlet* with Hamlet (that is, Moscow) left out. A Mexican-type ruling elite would imply a nationalistic one, which the Soviets refuse to allow north of the Balkans. On the contrary, what Croan termed an “ideologically unencumbered, historically untainted ruling elite” could only exist in the Balkans, and I doubt that Hoxha or Ceaușescu or even Tito could be called ideologically unencumbered.

Of all the East European states of which Professor Korbonski writes, I think that I disagree with him the most about East Germany. I find it difficult to accept his view that the East German “synthesis of communism and nationalism” follows closely upon that of Rumania. By this I do not mean that I regard Ulbricht as having been, or Honecker as being, a Soviet Quisling. Not only was Ulbricht, within his lights, concerned with East German interests, but it was because of that, and specifically because of his opposition to Soviet concessions to Bonn, that Moscow removed him.⁸ Nor do I regard Honecker

6. Ludz, *Changing Party Elite in East Germany*.

7. Adam B. Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and His Era* (New York, 1973).

8. Dieter Mahncke, *Berlin im geteilten Deutschland* (Munich, 1973), p. 23.

as simply a Soviet agent, but his conduct indicates that he is (understandably!) more amenable to Moscow's wishes. The important point is that East Germany is not a nation, although it is an increasingly consolidated state. Thus German nationalism (for there is as yet no "East German nationalism") is contrary to the *raison d'état* and the *raison du parti* of the DDR. If Professor Korbonski would have put it as a "synthesis of communism and state interest," I would have agreed, within the limits of overriding Soviet power.

I entirely agree with Professor Korbonski's very important point on the revival of traditional political cultures, although I would emphasize more than he did their nationalist components (except in East Germany). As to elites, I think his discussion would have benefited from an excursus on the problem of the intelligentsia, and especially of the extent to which modernization differentiates it (for example, into technocratic and humanist) and nationalism keeps it intact.

His point on trade unions is well taken. I would add two points: first, as the opposition of the Hungarian trade unions to some of the economic reforms has shown, trade unions can become a pressure group against rationalization and increased power of the technocratic elite. Second, as to the "new working class," I understand that some of the leaders of the 1970 Polish seacoast riots were university-trained experts working in the plants and shipyards involved. Moreover, the new working class has developed, in Poland and elsewhere, a degree of class consciousness which is more disciplined but also more lasting. It may indeed become a pluralistic element which East European political elites will increasingly have to take into account.

Professor Korbonski's view that in the future the East European political elites will "in fact permit a somewhat higher level of criticism and dissent than in the past" is in my view contrary to present trends. One could perhaps make a case for this in Gierek's Poland (from which I think in general that Professor Korbonski tends to generalize too much). But consider what is going on elsewhere. In Yugoslavia the *Praxis* group has been under the strongest attack ever, and nationalist Croat intellectuals have been extensively purged. In Hungary the group of philosophers and sociologists including Hegedüs, Heller, and Markus, and more recently the (relatively) liberal party secretaries Nyers and Aczél, have been purged. In East Germany Honecker's initial indications of some slight degree of greater cultural liberalization have been reversed. Of Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Czechoslovakia we need not speak: there cultural repression continues to reign supreme. Finally, and perhaps most decisively, Brezhnev is engaged in breaking the back of the Soviet dissident movement and is therefore the more unlikely to allow anything similar within his area of control in Eastern Europe.

This is only one illustration of a general trend which, it seems to me,

Professor Korbonski underestimates. Certainly industrial societies tend, if left alone to their own economic and social forces, to move in the directions which the theories of political development set forth. But it is in the nature of Communist rule, and indeed of authoritarian rule in general, that they are *not* left to their own devices. In a perversion of Jefferson's famous dictum, the Communist rulers of Eastern Europe believe that government by themselves is better than good (that is, rational bureaucratic) government. For them, as for most rulers (including some nearer home!), maintenance of personal power is the *summum bonum*. The East European Communist elites and the Soviet elites behind them are not the servants but—if they have anything to say about it, and they do—the masters of the economic and social forces of which Professor Korbonski and the theorists of political development speak.⁹ It is in the successes and failures of these elites in this endeavor, more than in the results of economic and social forces, that in my view the future of East European politics will be determined.

9. See R. V. Burks, "The Political Implications of Economic Reform," in Morris Bornstein, ed., *Plan and Market: Economic Reform in Eastern Europe* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 373–402.