

This preface was specially written for Professor Janine R. Wedel's book *The Unplanned Society: Poland during and after Communism*, New York: Columbia University Press 1992. Professor Wedel reports that the publisher first accepted and then rejected it as not to the point. This displeased Professor Wedel. Gellner's reaction is not known. Some obvious misprints have been corrected, mostly silently.

Preface

Men work, fight, and pray. Producing the werewithal required for survival, maintaining social order by coercion or the threat thereof, and servicing the normative, ritual, conceptual, communicative equipment of society - these are the three principal activities of mankind. Societies can usefully be classified in terms of the way in which these three activities are ranked and related to each other.

By and large, agrarian society did not rank work highly. Agrarian society can be defined roughly as one endowed with the capacity to produce and store goods, but only on the basis of a fairly stable technology. By definition, agrarian society is not possessed of the secret of sustained cognitive and technological innovation, which leads its successor, industrial/scientific society, to attain levels of production which then relegate agriculture to a minority employment. On the contrary, agrarian society is characterised by the fact that food producers, normally designated as peasants, form the majority of the population. Agrarian society normally disposes of only a small surplus and so cannot sustain a large non-peasant population. For all these reasons, it tends not to value work highly. Work is associated with the oppressed majority, not with the privileged minority. Indulging in it is a sign of subjugation, partial or total.

The emergence, first of commercial and then industrial society, profoundly modified this situation. The high valuation of martial and hieratic skills had been linked to the perception of production as a more or less zero sum game, where total output was bounded. The recognition of the possibility of sustained growth, and of the superiority of production over predation as a means of the acquisition of wealth, shifted both prestige and power in the direction of producers, or at any rate, some of them. Some thinkers of the Enlightenment dreamt of strangling the last king with the entrails of the last priest. This rather bloodthirsty and vindictive measure was not generally implemented, but unquestionably, the standing and authority of monarchs and clerics was markedly diminished. Strangled or not, their relative prestige declined. They came to defer to those who were, if not in work, at any rate in trade. Acquired wealth led to status, rather than the other way round.

The new prestige and authority of work or at any rate wealth-acquisition, and of those who performed and organised it, called for some kind of ideological accompaniment and ratification. Two theories above all proposed models which outlined the place of work and its reward in the overall Scheme of Things. The liberal or laissez faire theory ran roughly as follows: each man should

produce what he feels himself to be best equipped or most inclined to do, and exchange the fruits of his labours with his fellows on the free and open market. The regulation of that market by political authority should be limited to the prevention of coercion and cheating, and perhaps the satisfaction of a few other collective requirements, but it should be limited to as small a zone as possible. The resulting interaction of supply and demand would ensure both the optimal use of resources and a reasonably fair reward to all the participants.

The actual social implementation of this theory provoked a whole series of powerful criticisms. The game was not fair: those who entered it well equipped with resources were in an incomparably stronger position than those who entered it as it were naked, and could force the latter to remain in a weak and helpless condition. The free pursuit of gain was disastrous ecologically, and it also had exceedingly deleterious effects on the internal culture of the society, causing it to be pervaded by greed and pursuit of inherently worthless material symbols of wealth, in a world which no longer recognised any foundations of respect other than wealth.

Criticisms of this kind led to the formulation and to the wide appeal of the rival theory of the role of work and property in society: socialism. This theory maintained that the tools of production should be owned and controlled communally and in the interests of society as a whole. According to the most influential version of this theory, Marxism, such an arrangement would lead not only to greater economic effectiveness and productivity, but also to an improved quality of life and of human relations, and above all, to the diminution and even the eventual disappearance of the need for coercion. Oppression had only been called into being by the need to sustain and protect inequitable differential access to resources and means of prohibition [production?]. Once this iniquity had been effectively abolished, human relations would spontaneously become harmonious. If liberalism had been optimistic in promising the harmony of interests in the open and free market, under the benign and neutral supervision of a minimal polity, then Marxism was incomparably more optimistic in promising the harmony of men peacefully administering their shared communal patrimony, unsupervised by anything whatever.

The Marxist theory was widely tried throughout Eastern Europe (and also in other parts of the world), and after an experiment lasting seventy or forty years, according to region, has been widely and almost unanimously acclaimed to be a failure. The code word for that recognition, openly avowed in some places or veiled in a measure of partial obscurity, in the interests of political continuity, and the avoidance of anarchy, is known as Perestroika.

The failure of the socialist ideal has a number of aspects, which need to be listed. It led, not to harmonious human relations, but to the very extremes of oppression. Ecologically, the rule of bureaucratic convenience and secrecy appears to be even more disastrous than the pursuit of private gain. Culturally, it led

to a profound bifurcation between inner feeling and permitted public expression, culminating in an almost total contempt for the latter. Economically, and it is this which eventually turned out to be decisive, it was far, far less effective than its liberal rival. The system deserved to perish for the massive and arbitrary murderousness of its earlier period; in fact, it survived that period with its convictions intact, and only admitted its defeat in response to the sleazy ineffectiveness which accompanied its later and, from the viewpoint of political tyranny, much milder expression. This may be regrettable, but it is a fact. It would appear that advanced industrial societies can murder their citizens with impunity, but that they cannot live with inadequate rates of economic growth.

So, *What's to be done?* The most frequently heard, and officially endorsed, slogan is that of return to the 'market', the faith in the effectiveness of market levers. It has been said of the successful revolutionaries of 1917 that they acceded to power without any clear idea concerning how to set up and run a socialist society. It can be said with as much justification of the leaders of Perestroika, that they have just as little of an idea concerning how to set about dismantling socialism and replacing it by the market. The first time round, they had to fall back on the 'New Economic Policy': in effect, a temporary and transitional return to capitalism, for lack of any immediately available alternative. This period and experiment is now much invoked and remembered, as a kind of alleged precedent for current policies. In fact, the absence of concrete and effective ideas for bring about a new order may lead to the opposite, to a New Socialist Policy, which would really be analogous to the N.E.P.: a temporary continuation of the use of old methods, not out of conviction, but simply because, whatever their defects, at least there are people about who know how to work them...

The transition to a market and work-ethic dominated society, from the feudal version of a command administrative system, was a long-drawn-out and complicated process. Its repeat performance, starting from the wholly different baseline of a wholly centralised and fairly advanced industrial society, is fundamentally different, and totally unprecedented. No one can claim with confidence that he knows how it will proceed.

One particular problem which this transition has to face is connected with the manner in which work and its reward and organisation are to be seen, the normative principles which are to be encouraged, internalised, and perhaps in part legally enforced, or at any rate institutionally underpinned. When facing this problem, one has to consider the possibility that not merely the naive image of a benign communal command/consensual system, which had inspired the early Marxists, but equally that any simple invocation of the market model, may be grossly inadequate. One finds very sophisticated people in Eastern Europe who simply equate democracy with political pluralism plus a free market. The two are

held to complement and complete each other. The 19th century idea that the market leads to inequalities of power which undermine the genuineness of political democracy, seems to have been forgotten. Marxism is indeed false: but this does not automatically validate an extreme *laissez faire* liberalism! The world is not that simple.

It is also becoming obvious that one cannot ignore the cultural and institutional inheritance of the period which had led up to the present Reconstruction. It is not operating in a vacuum. It is operating on and with people who have behind them, as a pervasive background if not always as a personal experience, the Hitlerite, Brezhnevian, Stalinist periods, and behind it all, semi-modern societies with their own distinctive traditions of handling the place of work in life.

The attempt to implement Marxist ideas had led to an astonishing and extreme new form of the disparity between *pays legal and pays reel*. We are all familiar with entertaining horror stories concerning what happens when unrealistic plans need to be implemented, or rather, when administrators and managers are obliged to go through the motions of implementing plans, which they know to be unrealistic and absurd. So, layers and layers of Illusion and Reality emerge. The official ideology of the society postulates a voluntary, not to say enthusiastic fulfilment of a Plan, which had been freely agreed. Banners proclaim the determination to fulfil the targets set by the Party Congress; even during the early period of Perestroika, it was possible to see the new aims endorsed with the old rhetoric and in the old visual style.

But this rhetoric was for holiday and demonstration use only. Everyone knew that the reality was different, and what it was. But even this reality, one circle lower in this inferno of mystification, was not the true reality, as you might say. The system of commands and obedience was there, but what really happened was to be found at another ontological level again, one circle lower.

This is the sphere which is investigated by some of the important contributions to this volume. And what was there to be found at this further level? Under the command/admin (relatively) legal level, was there an informal market, or a different *kind* of command/admin system? Whatever it was, it was unlikely to be a very *pure* example of anything. No doubt there were trade-offs, and to this extent, it was a market, of a kind. Ideally, there was a Plan which was both wise, inspired by the Revealed Social Theory and worked out by its illuminati, and implemented by a virtuous Apparat, standing in a non-antagonistic relation to the rest of society. In practice, as everyone knew, the plan was fantasy, the Apparat amassed privileges for itself, and its members were engaged in struggling with each other for control of the machine as a whole. Their attention was inevitably focussed on their own survival and

advancement in a ruthless struggle, and not on technical efficiency. They could not afford to be efficient and honest, if they were to survive. The fact that the idiom of the society as a whole was that of a Messianic, total social salvation, conferred a particularly nasty viciousness on the inner struggle, in as far as those who were defeated were not merely branded as unlucky, mistaken or ineffectual, but as sinners, as Enemies of the People. Vicious bureaucratic in-fighting had to express itself, bizarrely, in absolutist moral language.

If the formal self-image of the society was a tissue of absurdities, we need to understand the real principles which governed the underlying human conduct and relations. It was clearly not simply a Hidden Market - it was far too dependent on personal associations and positions for that. It did not allow a Fetishisation of Commodities, in as far as commodities were not free to move untrammelled by their Possessors and Movers. Nor, on the other hand, was it an intricate network of personal statutes, recognised and ritually confirmed, such as we might expect to find in some 'primitive', pre-industrial society: it was linked to a specialised, industrial society (even if an inefficient one), and moreover, the political and ideological monopoly of a Single Centre prevented the networks from externalising and legitimising themselves. It constituted *neither* a market *nor* a social order, but a murky legally dubious blend of each, and was deprived of the opportunity of open expression and recognition.

The nature of this world is not merely of academic interest. It is this which is the baseline from which a new social order is emerging, and which provides the only available nucleus of that Civil Society which is so ardently desired. The first European civil society had emerged from the intrinstices of the feudal command/admin system by a long, slow, complex process. It had its traditions and its ethic. The precise nature of that process has been much investigated by historians and sociologists, but remains contentious. Its contemporary version starts from a totally different and perhaps much less favourable starting point, and against a wholly different technological background. The second Civil Society is required to emerge very quickly, in response to a strong and overt desire and need, rather than as the result of a prolonged unconscious maturation. Can it be done?

It is all happening at a time when the relationship of state, economy and civil society is far from clear in the other, more fortunate parts of the industrial world. The simple *laissez faire* model is not applicable there either. The original liberal model had been elaborated in rather special circumstances, prevalent in parts of 18th century Europe: a technology powerful enough to lead to the creation of wealth, but not powerful enough really to disrupt the surrounding natural and social environment - and all this is no longer the case. It had arisen in circumstances in which the required infra-structure was providentially available, and did not require to be created by the state.

In developed liberal societies, the political and the economic are now deeply intertwined, but not usually formalised. Liberal pieties cause some Western societies to legislate against 'insider trading', and attempt to create an artificial 'Veil of Ignorance' which would restore a pristine innocence to the Market: but all this is probably just so much mystification, and constitutes the liberal equivalent of the disjunction between *pays reel* and *pays legal*. Advanced liberal industrialism is perhaps essentially a society of Insider Trading. That too is *Handel*, in the pejorative term [sense] which Poles inject into the word, but it is on a larger scale, more efficient, and accompanied by affluence.

The successive hardships of first Hitlerite occupation and then Communist dictatorship have forced a society into *Handel*, but have hardly purified its image. A society which may always have spurned *Handel* in some measure because it was the speciality of a despised ethnic/religious minority, is liable then to have its attitude complicated further, by the fact that it has become a sordid but inescapable necessity under conditions of both acute scarcity and oppression, and in circumstances which obliged its practitioners to combine it with illegality or semi-legality, and to fuse economic haggling with political brokerage. A political and an economic demi-monde were fused with each other.

We are less than clear about either the ideal, or the feasible forms of that civil society which is struggling to emerge from the ruins of the ideocratic command/admin system. Those eager to advance their understanding of this problem will find this volume invaluable. It addresses itself to the problem of the comprehension of the reality of the world which is the baseline of the current reconstruction. The transition in question is one of the crucial issues of our time, and the volume makes a significant contribution to it.