EUROPEAN POLITICS

EUROPEAN LEFT DILEMMAS

BY JOHN FEFFER

THE END of the Cold War in Europe and the still strong aftershocks of Anglo-American neo-conservoliberalism seem to have left Europe leftless. Though she is finally gone, Thatcher has pulled Labor away from the "loony" fringes and into the Tory center; Swedish socialists are being attacked by homegrown monetarists; socialists in Greece are awash in corruption and controversy; socialist leaders in France and Spain have quite liberally interpreted their putative ideology. And Germany? The world worries about *Deutschland* once again *uber alles* and the German peace movement sponsored no significant demonstration from the fall of the Wall to the recent October unification, no organized response to Kohl-inspired patriotism in the mainstream or the growth of neo-Nazism at the margins of the new Germany.

Well, at least the Eastern part of Europe proved in 1989 the potential of grassroots movements for democracy and justice. But have these been unmitigated victories? From Poland to Bulgaria, the region in 1990 is also characterized by an unabashed enthusiasm for capitalism, the production of new political elites, widespread citizen apathy, and new strains of nationalism.

Fortunately, this picture of Europe is incomplete. Though somewhat disorganized and a trifle stormtossed by current events, the Euroleft is still alive. One positive sign has been the appearance this year of a new transnational organization: the Helsinki Citizens Assembly (HCA). In October 1990, representatives of European grassroots movements East and West gathered in Prague to examine the implications of integration to the West, development of civil society to the East, and international trends in general. Over 800 representatives from the 34 countries of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) process discussed the three "baskets" of the Helsinki Accords-security, economy, and human rights—and sought to give the Helsinki framework more of a non-governmental, activist spin.

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The impetus behind the HCA came from the "detente from below" crowd: activists from Western European peace and human rights organizations (END, Campaign for Peace, and Democracy East and West) and Eastern European opposition movements (Charter 77, Solidarity). Charter 77 had laid the groundwork for cooperation with its "Prague Appeal" of 1985 which called for a linking of the peace and human rights issues, "unity through diversity," and a Europe without borders. In the spirit of the Prague Appeal, activists East and West maintained contacts during the 1980s, culminating in a 1988 meeting in Prague disrupted by the Czechoslovak police. Before the dissolution of the meeting, however, participants tentatively agreed to the HCA concept: a European Peace Parliament centered in Prague demanding an end to the Cold War and the democratization of Eastern Europe within the framework of the Helsinki process. History outstripped the organizers' expectations. By 1990, supported by two of the concept's original dissident enthusiasts (Czechoslovak President Havel and Foreign Minister Dienstbier) and guided by some of Europe's most talented activists, the HCA stood to benefit from both official encouragement and grassroots strength.

Despite this noble history and these diverse sponsors, October's inaugural HCA suffered from the usual conference illnesses: generally listless presentations and generally unfocussed debate. On the positive side, however, the HCA brought together an unprecedented geographic mix of participants, generated a good deal of energy and initiated an important discussion on whether the unity between Eastern and Western activists possible with the "Prague Appeal," could be duplicated in the post-Cold War era.

Such unity was not forthcoming. A major divide emerged at the conference, for instance, on the relationship between "official" political institutions and grassroots movements. Western activists are struggling with the new Euroinstitutions and what role the Left should play in shaping integration. Eastern activists meanwhile must choose between lending their considerable skills to new political parties or remaining outside government to build the watchdog elements of civil society. Side skirmishes raged around this central conflict: market modernizers confronted ecosocialists; movements of national identity squared off against internationalists; federalists swapped polemics with strict self-determinationists. The rights of women, gays and lesbians, migrant workers, and people of color, though passionately and eloquently defended by many participants and several speakers, were generally downplayed by conference organizers for fear of offending the more socially conservative representatives from the East.

Philosophically too, there was a divide. One cultural tradition developed by the various opposition intellectuals in Eastern Europe emphasized fundamental values, truth over falsehood, ideas over power. In part, this philosophy—enunciated by Havel in Czechoslovakia, Michnik in Poland, Konrad in Hungary—took on the relativism and perceived moral fuzziness of contemporary continental philosophy (Foucault, Derrida). There is clear good and evil, the East European philosophers maintained, in contrast to the slippery deconstructionists: the intellectual task is to speak the truth and live by it. A wholesome message and one well-tailored to the demands of life under communism. But "living in truth" has also encouraged a brand of intellectual elitism (the hegemony of the idea), an intoxication with Western civilization (read: white, male), and a lingering anti-politics (no compromises), all of which were excusable to a degree under communism but are indefensible in the new European context. Western activists at the HCA, by contrast, had a more nuanced view of the relationship between truth and power and treated with greater respect the discourses that have been pushed to the margins of European civilization. That left Eastern European and Western European activists talking from very different perspectives and HCA accomplished little—and realistically could accomplish little—in resolving the split.

The HCA brought together too politically diverse a group to achieve a concensus on practical alternatives, whether to capitalism, nationalism, or technocracy. It would be difficult to imagine any group comprising activists from both East and West that could agree on anything but the vaguest commitment to some form of ecological social democracy (a step forward for the U.S., but old news for Europe).

But even within the discrete realms of Eastern and Western Europe, radical alternatives have generally been muted by conciliatory attitudes toward the new institutions of integration in the West and parliamentary democracy in the East. Though several steps behind multinational corporations, the Left is presently developing strategies within the framework of European integration: pushing for stricter environmental protection, a stronger safety net, a larger institutional role for unions. Greater market pressures make these tasks more difficult, discouraging regional alternatives (the Mondragon cooperatives in the Basque region, for example) or local worker buyouts.

PROBLEMATIC AS the position of the Western European Left might be, the social democrats in Eastern Europe are in even worse shape. Without strong union or civic support, the Social Democratic parties by and large failed to win political representation in the region's national elections in 1990. Meanwhile, political instability is increasing as new governments lose popularity after implementing unpopular economic measures. (The first victims have been Mazowiecki in Poland and Lukanov in Bulgaria; Czechoslovakia's Civic Forum, Hungary's Democratic Forum, and Romania's National Salvation Front are next). What do the social democrats have to offer as an alternative for economic reform in Eastern Europe? Practically speaking, industrial policy: partnerships between government, labor, and business representatives at the federal, regional and local levels. Such a policy, in contrast to the neoliberal monetarist plans, would link investment and development to strong union presence and social provisions. True, this smacks of Dukakis liberalism. But for Eastern Europe at the moment, such an industrial policy is the most feasible radical alternative. Were more participatory and egalitarian alternatives developed and then implemented, they would inevitably fail because of international pressures (the lesson of Allende). Many Western participants at the HCA failed to recognize the practical limitations of reform in Eastern Europe and continued to press for more radical economic solutions for the region. They found few sympathetic ears from the East.

The debate over alternatives is not, of course, confined to marketizers versus social democrats. Right-wing nationalists are building their base with a well-crafted mix of political authoritarianism and appeals for order and even a modicum of social justice. Should the market reforms fail in Eastern Europe and the social democrats have no better option prepared, these nationalist groups have a Latin American model of authoritarian capitalism waiting in the wings.

Preparing for the rise of the Eastern right, the Anglo-American hardliners have begun their own brand of grassroots organizing. Innocuously entitled "The Peaceful Road to Democracy" and held in Prague this last June, the most recent neo-con fest in Eastern Europe was bursting with big names: Arnaud de Borchgrave, Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, Charles Lichenstein, Martin Colman, Alan Walters, Albert Wohlstetter, Vladimir Bukovsky. Presentations by Havel, Charter 77's Jaroslav Sabata, Soviet economist Vasily Selyunin, and representatives of various nationalist and right-oriented movements in the Soviet Union were almost incidental: the real work of networking took place in the corridors. "The idea was not to have a huge audience," Herman Pirchner of the co-sponsor American Foreign Policy Council told me. "It was open of course to everyone. But there were certain select people invited who we wanted to be here for definite reasons." One of those reasons was material aid. A "democracy kit" was given to each delegation from a Soviet republic: a computer, a fax machine and a copy of the U.S. constitution. Central European and Soviet participants in general responded favorably to this outpouring of aid and advice. "The right has and will serve as an important source of inspiration and support," said Alena Hromadkova, a Charter 77 activist who moderated one discussion.

As this tale of two conferences indicates, movements of the Left and Right are trying to shape the emerging European institutions of East and West. Though not as well-funded or ideologically unified as the European right-wing (or its American sugardaddies), the Helsinki Citizens Assembly represents one progressive option. It could serve as a necessary antidote to the anti-democratic modernizers in the East, the corporate Eurocrats to the West and the right-wing nationalists on both sides of a continent still very much up for grabs. Z

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