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## Unity, Duality, or Fragmentation?

*The inference to which we are brought is that the "causes" of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its "effects."*

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No more pressing task faces students of Soviet affairs than the development of a rigorous taxonomy for the forces of continuity and change that arise and interact with one another in the USSR. Stephen F. Cohen's essay is an ambitious, provocative, and sorely needed attempt to address this issue. By reviving the traditional but serviceable notions of "reform" and "conservatism," he provides axes along which numerous important phenomena can be plotted without distortion. And by seeking the historical roots of this polarity, Cohen gives his analysis a depth that is frequently lacking in the present-oriented behavioral fields. Finally, by cautioning that his categories refer only to inchoate tendencies rather than to self-conscious groupings, Cohen stops short of erecting yet another of the simplistic and Manichean dualities that have long confused the analysis of the Russian and Soviet systems.

Assuming that the categories of reform and conservatism are somehow pertinent to public life in the USSR, how precisely should the terms be applied? The fact that many Soviets themselves employ them, or terms like them, in public discourse indicates that they have validity as descriptive tools. Yet, in using them, one must not ascribe to reformism or conservatism any meanings they do not actually bear. A Soviet reformer would, of course, deny that the logical, if extreme, terminal point of his program would be revolution, just as a Soviet conservative would sharply reject the claim that he seeks merely to preserve the established order of things. Nor would this be mere rhetoric. Reform, after all, can be a strategy for the prevention of systemic change, just as conservatism can directly challenge the status quo. Lest the terms reform and conservatism be applied carelessly, then, Cohen's formulation carries with it the need to distinguish between their use for descriptive and analytic purposes.

With this caveat in mind, let us ask how broadly the terms "reform" and "conservatism" can be applied to the analysis of current Soviet affairs. At the outset, one cannot help being struck by how many sources of cleavage in Soviet life do not readily correspond to this dichotomy. The tension between center and periphery, between nationalism and internationalism, and between mass society and a class society based on the intelligentsia all elude the proposed taxonomy. A second category of cleavage in Soviet life runs through the center of the nominally reformist camp and also through the ranks of those generally classified as conservatives. Thus, among nominal reformers, one finds proponents both of consumerism and of further capital investment, just as putative conservatives are divided among those who stress Great Russian aspirations and those whose orientation is primarily toward the Soviet Union or the world Communist movement.

In fairness, it should be acknowledged that Cohen's categories do not exclude the existence of such anomalies. But if they are applied too broadly or are used to give the false image of unity among those whose outlooks and positions are in fact diverse, Cohen's terminology will confuse more than it clarifies.

A notable aspect of Cohen's analysis is that it takes into account the changing content over time of the reformist-conservative spectrum. Yesterday's reformism is the conservatism of today. But although Cohen acknowledges the changing content of the Soviet debate, he stresses that the line-up of forces on either side was fixed during the Stalin era and has remained relatively intact. This accords well with the history of parties and factions in Western parliamentary systems, where, in nearly every case, the emergence of distinct and enduring lines of division can be traced to some particular point of crisis. By implication, one should expect that new issues in Soviet political life will continue to array themselves along the reformist-conservative spectrum, and that this spectrum will, for the foreseeable future, provide the main axes of public controversy in the USSR. Common sense would seem to support such a hypothesis, but it cannot be accepted without certain important reservations.

First, it may be argued that the spectrum of Soviet opinion today is less wide and hence less polarized than was the case twenty years ago. Without minimizing the profundity of the many cleavages in Soviet life, it should be pointed out that a number of extreme options on both the conservative and reformist flanks have been denied respectability, in part by censorship and the application of the party's antifaction rule, but also by a genuine strengthening of the political center during the Brezhnev years. The continuation of this tendency cannot be taken for granted, of course. Nonetheless, one might suggest that Cohen's formulation would have been more appropriate for Soviet political life twenty or even ten years ago than it is today.

Second, the future usefulness of Cohen's bipolar analysis will depend on the extent to which more complex and fluid groupings of opinion will continue to emerge. Before accepting the bipolar image, with its implied parallel to West European history, one has to consider the possibility that, in the years ahead, the essential characteristic of Soviet political life will be, as some have claimed to be the case already, its tendency to group and regroup actors along institutional lines ("interest groups"), along lines of individual leaders and their followers ("factions"), or in shifting "complexes" or "whirlpools."<sup>1</sup> The existence of these lines of cleavage does not in itself discredit Cohen's hypothesis. Their continued and expanding importance would, however, reduce its usefulness.

Cohen's argument correctly assumes that groups and factions in the USSR enjoy greater possibilities for airing their positions than in the past, and that these possibilities will in all likelihood continue to exist in the future. While this development is significant, one should not lose sight of the manner in which the Soviet system continues to maintain cohesion amidst a welter of divergent views. No political organization on earth has a more subtle appreciation of the dangers of centrifugal tendencies than the Communist Party of the USSR. That it permits agencies to advocate their own needs does not alter this fact, nor does its

1. See Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge and London, 1979 [rev. and enl. ed. of Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953)]), pp. 524 ff.

acceptance of the need for "feedback" and hence for criticism that is offered *after* decisions are taken, however much that may conflict with traditional practices of democratic centralism.<sup>2</sup> Such tolerance may be a necessary precondition for the kind of polarization with which we are concerned here. But the relative permissiveness is the result not of a new zeal for pluralism, but of the Soviet leaders' acknowledgment of the continuing multiplicity of goals even in an advanced socialist society. This being the case, there is no *prima facie* reason to think that the main divisions in Soviet public life will become broader or more pronounced in the future than they are now.

Granting for the moment that unitarian tendencies in the USSR still outweigh the forces of ideological and programmatic diversity, what might cause such currents as reformism and conservatism to develop into conscious programs? The fact that the crisis at the time of Stalin's death contributed to the polarization of Soviet ideology in the 1950s has already been noted. Although the debate over the legacy of Stalinism has by no means run its course, and, in certain quarters, has yet even to be engaged in, it is difficult to imagine that this issue still possesses sufficient urgency and vitality to split Soviet discourse more completely than it already has. Hence, some fresh crisis would have to occur, one that would cause Soviet leaders to place their particular ideological and programmatic commitments above, or at least on a par with, their dedication to the maintenance of intraparty unity. Though unlikely, such a crisis is by no means out of the question, since the current balance of forces around a common center is so highly dependent upon the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev.<sup>3</sup> As James Madison observed two centuries ago,

It is vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.<sup>4</sup>

Supposing that the weight of unresolved issues turns the succession into a genuine crisis, would this cause Cohen's two tendencies to coalesce into more all-embracing programs, or, instead, cause both tendencies to split into their constituent parts, amidst a general fractionization of Soviet ideology and politics? On this point the historical precedents are unambiguous. Throughout Russia's entire history the main lines of contention have only rarely numbered as few as two main tendencies. Indeed, observers from countries with parliamentary systems frequently cited the extreme division of interests in tsarist Russia as an impediment to their aggregation into a small number of parties. Much the same can and has been said of many countries today, including France and Italy. Cohen would be the first to admit that bipolar political and ideological systems are rare exceptions, and that, even where they exist, the two poles rarely describe the true configuration of forces. If this is so elsewhere, one should be the more cautious about the possibility of fitting Soviet political life into such a mold.

2. On "feedback" and democratic centralism, see Erik P. Hoffmann, "Information Processing in the Party: Recent Theory and Experience," in Karl W. Ryavec, ed., *Soviet Society and the Communist Party* (Amherst, Mass., 1978), pp. 68 ff.

3. Hough and Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed*, p. 559.

4. Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist* (Washington, D.C., 1937), p. 57.