Socialist Societies, Anthropology of
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171 Socialist Societies

Socialist (also known as communist) societies constitute a class of twentieth-century societies sharing two distinctive features: the political dominance of a revolutionary -- usually a Communist -- Party, and widespread nationalization of means of production, with consequent preponderance of state and collective property. This definition excludes societies governed by socialist or social-democratic parties in multi-party systems, such as the Scandinavian welfare states. It includes, among others, the Soviet Union, the East European countries, the People's Republic of China, Mongolia, North Korea, Vietnam, South Yemen, Cuba, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, and Mozambique.

Socialist societies came into being with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union. Others founded later by various means (revolution, conquest, or annexation) all reflected the influence -- both negative and positive -- of the Soviet model created under Lenin and Stalin. All employed extensive coercion and central control, yet they increased living standards, access to housing, employment, education, and medical care. Although they instituted new hierarchies, they also promoted gender equality and improved life-chances for many disadvantaged people.

1. Research on Socialist Societies

For much of the twentieth century, social-science understanding of these societies was politically circumscribed. Their own scholars were under strict Party control;
nonetheless, invaluable knowledge came from dissidents (e.g., Bahro 1978, Casals 1980) and from scholars in countries with strong reform movements (e.g., Kornai 1980, Wesolowski 1966). In Western Europe and the U. S., political and economic hostility to communist principles distorted thinking about socialist societies as epitomized in the concept of totalitarianism, which overstressed the importance of terror and top-down control. In all western social-science disciplines, impediments to on-site fieldwork hindered understanding. This situation improved in the late 1960s, for Eastern Europe, and the 1980s, for the Soviet Union and China, as détente and the impetus for technology transfer produced an infrastructure for intellectual exchange. The result was analyses that displaced totalitarian models to explore the societies' inner workings, with greater attention to phenomena such as kinship, ritual, the mobilization of labor, and the exchange of gifts and favors, as well as more subtle treatments of political economy (e.g., Humphrey 1983).

2. Political Economy and Social Organization

Although they varied widely in economic development (from industrialized Czechoslovakia to agricultural China and Cuba to pastoral Mongolia), most societies that became socialist lagged behind the advanced industrial countries economically; all embarked on programs of state-led development through central planning. The following description of their political economies emphasizes "classic" socialism prior to the reforms introduced at various times, and draws on research in both agricultural and industrial settings in China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe.

3.1 Redistribution Bureaucracies and Reciprocal Exchanges
Owing to the role of exchange in legitimizing socialism, it is appropriate to begin with Karl Polanyi's three basic modes of exchange: reciprocity, redistribution, and markets. Socialist systems suppressed the market principle, instituting redistribution as the chief exchange modality and the system's *raison d'être*: everyone would have the right to work, and the wealth they produced would be redistributed as welfare for all. Centralized redistribution required social ownership and control of productive resources, together with centralized appropriation of the product for reallocation along lines set by the Party. The instrument Party leaders developed to orchestrate production and distribution was the plan. Fulfilling it, however, depended on relations of reciprocity, both clientelistic and egalitarian.

Although these were highly bureaucratized societies, they were not Max Weber's impersonal modern bureaucracies dedicated to procedural rationality. Dense social networks sustained reciprocal exchanges that, far from constituting resistance to bureaucratic control, were intrinsic to its functioning: horizontal exchanges enabled socialist managers to do their jobs, and clientelism facilitated controlling both labor and Party cadres in seemingly noncoercive ways. Personalistic ties extended far beyond the bureaucracy as well, linking ordinary citizens with one another and with bureaucrats. The warp and woof of socialist societies, then, consisted of vertical and horizontal relations of patronage, loyalty, and exchanges of goods, favors, and gifts. Although the forms of these relations differed according to the various societies' pre-revolutionary histories and cultures, (e.g. gift relations in China, *compadrazgo* in Cuba or Nicaragua, or specific kinship structures of Soviet minorities), they were widely prevalent in all. In each socialist society words indicating "connections" (Russian *blat*, Chinese *guanxi*, Romanian *pile*, Hungarian *protekció*, Cuban *compañerismo*, Polish *dojście*) appeared often
in daily speech.

3.2 Organized Shortage

Personal relations were integral to socialism in part because of certain pervasive features of planned economies: tension between Party planners and firm managers, bargaining and soft budget constraints, and barter amid shortage. Socialist property could be productive only if the center's ownership/control rights were disaggregated and devolved onto lower-level managers charged with realizing production. Because planning could never foresee all contingencies, these managers had considerable discretionary power. Expected to achieve Party directives with inadequate wage funds and to exceed their plan targets with inadequate raw materials, they bore responsibility far greater than the means allotted them for fulfilling it. Therefore, they strove constantly to expand their local power base and their effective capacities. In so doing, they posed a threat to their superiors, who thus were motivated to encourage subordinates' loyalty with favors and patronage.

In redistributive systems governed not by demand for products but by the Party's planned allocation, materials for production could not simply be bought on a market; their availability depended on the supplies budgeted in plans and on often-inefficient central distribution. Managers therefore requested more supplies than they needed, hoping to obtain enough materials to fulfill and exceed their targets. Because the planning mechanism required firms to produce regardless of profitability -- they operated under soft budget constraints and were rescued rather than bankrupted if they lost money -- local managers could with impunity overstate their needs for materials and investments and then hoard any excess. They also strove to bargain their plan targets downward,
making it easier to fill these and have goods left over. Comparable processes occurred in both industry and agriculture, as cadres everywhere manipulated information, underreported production, and engaged in illicit trade to benefit their firm or locale.

The result of bargaining and hoarding was endemic scarcity of the materials necessary for production; thus, classic socialist societies were *economies of shortage* (Kornai 1980). Shortage caused competition among firms but also widespread exchanges, each manager supplying from his hoard today the materials needed by another who would return the favor tomorrow. Thus, firms hoarded materials not only to cover emergencies in their own production but to backstop the supplies needed by others in their network. Shortage affected materials for production and also consumption goods, generating the queues characteristic of many socialist societies. It also affected two other crucial resources: information and labor.

Party planners could implement top-down planning only if they had detailed and accurate information. This happened rarely, for lower-level cadres had many incentives to falsify information so as to build careers by appearing successful, evade responsibility for disasters, inflate their materials requests, provide cushions against production shortfalls, overfulfill their targets to receive bonuses, etc. From these discrepant needs came a perpetual struggle over information. Higher authorities hoarded information as a source of power and engaged in continual information-gathering at all levels of society (Horváth and Szakolczai 1992). Censorship and careful management of information at the top provoked information hunger below, generating a culture of rumor, gossip, selective secrecy, and conspiratorial explanations of events, as well as producing a citizenry skilled at reading between the lines. Classic socialist societies were thus a special kind of information society.
3.3 Labor Shortage and Rights in People

An additional resource subject to shortage was labor. Relatively underdeveloped socialist economies had initial problems mobilizing skilled workers where there was effectively no "working class," and they lacked the resources for either paying labor well or substituting capital-intensive methods. Moreover, the shortage economy encouraged firms to employ excess workers so they could complete monthly plans once sufficient materials were on hand (in a frenzied effort known as "storming"); managers therefore padded their workforce, exacerbating shortage. Labor shortage thus had both macro and micro dimensions. Means for stabilizing the labor supply included making workplaces the locus of benefits such as daycare, housing, vacation permits, pensions, medical care, etc. Certain cities were closed to immigration and construction of urban infrastructures was limited (Szelenyi 1983), thus compelling millions to become village-based "peasant-workers."

Within each industrial and agricultural workplace managers had to ensure a labor supply adequate to both normal production and periods of "storming." Workers, for their part, might bargain for better conditions by withholding labor, through intentional slowdowns or time off for household tasks and moonlighting -- that is, labor shortage gave workers structural leverage. Conflicting demands for labor put a premium on ways of accumulating rights in people. For managers, these included extending patronage and favors (access to schooling, houses, or building sites, e.g.), overlooking petty illegalities, and securing loose plans that enabled them to produce a surplus they might use to create labor-securing debt and exchange relations (cf. Humphrey 1983). Both managers and others needing labor might appeal to kinship idioms, emphasize ethnic identities,
participate in special rituals, and expand networks of reciprocity through gift-giving. Thus, the quest for labor further encouraged personal ties and reinforced particularistic identities.

3.4 Second Economies and Socialist Reform

Believing they alone could best determine how social wealth should be redistributed, Party leaders initially opposed economic activity not encompassed within plans. The inability of planning to cover social needs at the given level of technological endowment, however, compelled officials to permit and even legalize some small-scale private effort, known as the "second" (or informal, unofficial, or shadow) economy. Among its forms were food production on small plots, after-hours repair work or construction, typing, tutoring, unofficial taxi services, etc. Because these activities overlapped with semi-legal and illegal ones, their situation was everywhere precarious, with authorities persecuting them more in some times and places than in others. The second economy was largest in Hungary after 1968, for example, small in Cuba until Castro's "Rectification" of 1986, harassed in Romania throughout the 1980s; it burgeoned in post-1978 China; extreme forms are reported for the Soviet Union, where entire factories ran illegal production after hours. Crucial to understanding the second economy is that it nearly always utilized materials from the first (or formal, official) economy; its much-noted high rates of productivity were subsidized, then, by state firms. The prevalence of second-economic activity both indicated popular resistance to the Party's definition of needs and helped to fill those needs by voluntarily lengthening the working day.

Pressure from the second economy was but one of many signs of difficulty in
socialist planning that led to repeated efforts at reform, initiated from both within and outside the Party. Beginning with Lenin's New Economic Policy, every socialist society experienced cycles of reform and retrenchment, devolution and recentralization (cf. Skinner and Winckler 1969, Nee and Stark 1989). Most exhibited a trend toward less stringent planning and the introduction of market mechanisms, heightened material incentives, and mixed property forms. System-wide experimentation began with Khrushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech" criticizing Stalin and increased as each society moved from "extensive" development (mobilizing resources) to the "intensive" phase (attention to productivity). Hungary and Yugoslavia introduced the most durable early reforms; those in the Soviet Union ended in the collapse of the Soviet bloc, while comparable reforms continued in China, North Vietnam, and Cuba. As they reformed, socialist societies increasingly diverged not only from the Stalinist model but from one another, introducing path-dependent differences that became ever more marked.

Despite these differences, the reforms everywhere redefined basic units of activity (revitalizing villages or households at the expense of collective farms, teams, or brigades, for example); altered gender relations (usually in favor of men and patriarchal authority) and increased other inequalities; affected networks of reciprocity (expanding horizontal over vertical connections); dismantled at least some socialist property (as with China's decollectivization, begun in 1978); shifted the locus of authority (usually downward, provoking reactions from higher-level bureaucrats); and entailed new, more intimate forms of state penetration (implied, for example, in Chinese rituals that no longer imagined gods or ancestors as inhabiting a nether world but found them immediately present).
3. Social Engineering and Resistant Personhood

All Communist parties promoted massive projects of social engineering. They accorded knowledge and expertise a privileged place, under Party monopoly. Convinced of the creative power of language, Party leaders both used and modified language in commanding ways. They spoke of things that had yet to be created -- the working class, the proletarian dictatorship, the new socialist man -- as if those things already existed, and they developed hieratic speech with reduced vocabularies, clusters of noun phrases, and few (often passive) verbs, creating a limited, static verbal world. Party cadres intervened exhaustively in all facets of life, aspiring to create new moralities and to control populations in myriad ways. They attacked religion as superstition, instituted new socialist rituals, and expanded educational access to create enlightened citizens indifferent to religious belief. They filled the air with moral exhortations aimed at instilling a new, puritan, socialist ethic. Toward better management of resources, they introduced massive population programs, from Romania's enforced pro-natalism to China's stringent birth control, insinuating themselves into people's most intimate lives to often-devastating effect (e.g., Kligman 1998).

Dedicated to building an alternative to the world of bourgeois capitalism, communist leaders announced an assault on all forms of inequality, including those based in kinship status, gender, class, and ethno-national difference. Society would be homogenized, lineage-based kinship structures broken up, gender differences minimized and authority relations in families altered, classes and private property abolished, national minorities given equal chances. New social entities emerged -- state and collective farms, teams, and brigades, for instance, to take the place of kin-groups and village structures. When pre-existing social relations proved difficult to abolish, they would be coopted and
turned to the Party's purposes. From all these efforts would result the "new socialist man," a new kind of person, and the "people-as-One," a new kind of human community, bearing an exalted socialist consciousness.

The results of these interventions were decidedly mixed. To begin with, the Party failed to speak with one voice, as ministries vied for resources rather than cooperating to remold society, and as cadres built their careers by under- or over-executing central directives and engaging in rampant corruption. In addition, the annexation of pre-existing forms inevitably modified the purposes they were intended to serve. Exhibiting greater capacity to formulate goals than to implement them, socialist governments were continually plagued by the unforeseen consequences of their policies. To solve conflicts among nationalities they institutionalized ethno-national difference in ways that strengthened it; they embraced nationalist idioms that then overtook socialist ones (Verdery 1991, 1996). Parties created working classes only to find themselves opposed by their creation, as with the Polish authorities and Solidarity.

Beyond this, resistance to social engineering proliferated even as people adopted the new forms. Constant surveillance politicized behavior: small acts of joke-telling became willful anarchy in the eyes of both authorities and joke-tellers. Dissidents sought support internally and abroad for their critiques of the system, launching projects to build "civil society" against the state. Less visibly, peasant refusal to accept starvation from China's Great Leap Forward or Eastern Europe's delivery quotas ultimately forced authorities to renounce these policies (Yang 1996, Rév 1987), while popular insistence on living standards pressed the parties toward reform.

Highly complex political effects centered on the making of persons and political subjects. Redistribution and socialist paternalism tended to create subjects disposed to
dependency and passive expectation; early campaigns taught the poor to see themselves as victims of oppression (rather than simply of fate) and offered them the Party's instrument of vengeance, in the form of denunciations. Thus arousing people's complicity, the Party also instilled self-denigration. At the same time, however, many adopted dissimulation as a mode of being: apparent compliance covered inner resistance. The resultant "social schizophrenia," "doubling," duplicity, or split self is described for every socialist society. It accompanied a pervasive dichotomization of the world into "Us" (the people) and "Them" (the authorities). More significantly, it encouraged subtle forms of self-making in people's own terms: they defiantly consumed forbidden western goods, created self-respect through diligent second-economy work while loafing on their formal jobs, participated in ethnic- or kin-based identities and rituals constitutive of self, and gave gifts not just to secure advantage but to confirm their sociality as persons and human beings.

The collapse of the Soviet bloc hinders a balanced assessment of socialism, which once represented great hope for countless people. Undeniably, socialist societies diminished certain forms of oppression, yet they created others. In many of these societies, an early élan for the expressed goals gave way to cynicism and a feeling of betrayal, as the means used to achieve them sabotaged their fulfillment. Admirable gains in education, medical care, and social well-being counted for less against the devastating purges, labor camps, Party-induced famines, environmental degradation, and abuses of human rights. Top-down engineering foundered as socialism's leaders resisted their citizens' efforts to educate them about social relationships, self and human feeling, the value of ritual practices, and the limits to imposed change. The lessons of these citizens'
refusals, their silent revolutions from below, should guide future attempts to create
alternatives to the world of global capitalism.

For further reading, see Centrally Planned Economies, Cold War, Communism,
Lenin, Mao Zedong, People's Republic of China, Socialism, Soviet Union, Stalin

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