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EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE, A PERIPHERY
OF "GENUINE EUROPE"?

(in connection with the book: Ivan T. Berend,
*Central and Eastern Europe, 1944–1993. Detour from
the periphery to the periphery*, Cambridge University
Press, Cambridge 1996, XVIII + 414 pp.)

From among the books discussing East-Central Europe's recent history I have singled out this one because of the author's approach to the task he set himself. Many, if not the majority, of the recent studies on this subject are based on ideological considerations and in practice are political propaganda publications, usually of a denunciatory character. Berend, a well known Hungarian economist and historian, pledges himself to stay clear of preconceived ideological assumptions. Being an inhabitant of this region of Europe, he has a deep knowledge of the subject, which is often inaccessible to Western authors. This is why I have decided to discuss his book, which does not, of course, mean that I have no reservations about the author's general theory and some of his assertions.

The motto of Berend's book consists of five statements on communism, socialism and modernization by Zbigniew Brzezinski, John Paul II, Richard Pipes, Eric Hobsbawm and Niels Bohr. The choice of these statements, which are frequently contradictory, reaffirms the author's guiding rule: *sine studio partum*. Bohr's conclusion is: "Only by entertaining multiple and mutually limiting points of view, building up a composite picture, can we approach the real richness of the world". This is a most opportune motto for our subject.

The latest book by Berend, an economic historian known for his studies on East–Central Europe¹, now a professor at the Los Angeles University in California, also covers the period after the 1989–1991 political change, up to about 1995, and this enhances its value. The book inaugurated the Cambridge Studies in Modern Economic History series. The aim of the series is first and foremost to present the history of the economic achievements of the Western World, their base and consequences. But Berend's book is not confined to economy; it also deals at length with other fields of social life. This is why it has aroused our interest. In view of the present trend to turn political history into an absolute, it is to the author's credit that he pays great attention to socio–economic transformations.

The region the author deals with in his latest book is Central and Eastern Europe. He does not investigate the question of the region's past and present boundaries, even though they varied in the epochs he refers to. The region discussed by Berend is often called East–Central Europe in our literature; it corresponds to the territory of the countries which were under communist rule in 1945–1989/1990 (but not necessarily within the orbit of Soviet influence), that is: Poland, Czechoslovakia (the Czech Republic and Slovakia from January 1, 1993), Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania. In the past this was an area which (structurally and functionally) was a periphery of the "hard centre" of developed capitalism and, according to Berend, everything seems to indicate that its position will not change. In the 19th century, the area developed later and more slowly than the Western countries. In the 20th century attempts were made first by the pre-war authoritarian right-wing regimes and after World War II by left-wing regimes to reduce the distance, but they failed and the distance, far from being reduced, increased. This is the main thesis of Berend's book; as its subtitle explains, the history

¹ T. Berend has published a number of studies on the socio–economic history of our region together with the late G. Ránki, some of them in *Handbuch der Europäischen Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte*, ed. by Wolfram Fischer (Stuttgart 1985) as well as a book entitled *The European Periphery and Industrialization 1780–1914*, Cambridge 1982. As the title of this book shows, the question of peripheral area and peripheral capitalism has interested Berend for a long time and history has given him an occasion to examine the post-war evolution of the East–Central European region from this point of view.

of the region has come full circle from the peripheral position in one system (before World War I) to a similar position at present.

It is stressed in the publishers' brief preface that the author has adopted a thematic structure. Indeed, he strictly adheres to it and refers to the seven countries (there are now 12 in this territory) whatever the question he discusses. He has succeeded in keeping up this convention, which was not always simple, for he had to gain detailed information according to a single pattern on countries whose authorities did their best to conceal inconvenient information and sometime even all facts and data. Berend combines this principle with chronology, dividing his study into three chapters (to the turn of the fifties, to the end of 1989, and the years after 1989) which in turn are subdivided into the following sections: up to 1948, the years of Stalinism, the crisis of 1956 and its consequences, the post-Stalinist socialist state, economy, the crisis of post-Stalinism 1973–1988, the fall of the regimes, construction of a parliamentary market system, economic crisis and the growth of nationalism.

I will speak only of those of the author's descriptions and statements which, in my opinion, deserve attention because of their unconventional character or interesting presentation, and will pass over in silence ordinary descriptions of events if they do not give rise to serious reservations.

In discussing the seizure of power by the communists in East-Central Europe the author emphasizes that Europe was divided into spheres of influence a long time before the Yalta conference. Military intervention by one of the Allies in his own sphere was regarded as something absolutely normal by the leaders of the Great Powers; e.g. while intervening in Romania Stalin was strictly neutral during the British intervention in Greece, to say nothing of the United States' interventions in Latin America and other places outside Europe². The demonstration of the American atom bomb in Hiroshima and the consequent change in the balance of power broke the World War II co-operation of the Allies. Berend quotes the opinion of some authors who maintain that accelerated Sovietization was both a result of the break in the Allies' unity and the beginning of this break; it

² "Having paid the price we have to Russia for freedom of action in Greece, we should not hesitate to use British troops", wrote Churchill to Gen. Scobie in October 1944.

was a result, for at first Stalin intended to co-operate with the West for a longer time and consequently, to keep up appearances in his sphere of influence in Central Europe; it also marked the beginning of the break, for the subordination of this zone of Europe to the USSR induced the Western allies to apply counter-measures (p. 36). Stalin's initial policy foresaw three forms of government, three stages of vassalization: genuine coalition governments, like those existing at first in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and, for a short time, in Romania and Bulgaria; a stage defined as "people's democracy", that is, fictitious coalitions of communists with puppet politicians allegedly representing other parties; and finally the era of a monolithic government by the communist party.

What attracts attention in Berend's description of the next stage, generally known as the era of Stalinism, is his polemics with the generalization of the concept of totalitarianism, which Berend restricts to fascism (p. 53). He extensively describes mass repression, show trials, the crimes and mechanisms of power. In his view, all this was accompanied by endeavours to modernize economic structure and social relations. But paradoxically, this was an obsolete modernization compared with the modernization carried out in the Western countries at that time³. The author points out the material, social and cultural advancement of the plebeian strata and circles which stood no chance at all in the previous system⁴. It can be assumed that without transformations of this kind it would have been impossible to modernize and democratize the societies which until that time were in the pre-capitalist post-feudal phase of development. Representatives of these socially underprivileged milieux frequently moved up the social scale by working in the party or state apparatus. The author analyzes the role of various party cells in the Stalinist system. Local cells and lower echelons of the party hierarchy frequently represented local and group interests (e.g. of various

³ "What actually happened in the region between the 1950s and 1970s (in some cases until the 1980s) was nothing other than a belated duplication of nineteenth-century Western social restructuring: besides «melting» the peasantry, a huge industrial and blue-collar worker society developed and began to predominate, comprising from 50 percent to 60 percent of the populace and concentrated in urban settlements" (p. 211).

⁴ "It was a great wave of emancipation of the masses, formerly excluded from politics. For the first time in the region, mass peasant and worker parties became part of the power structure and of government" (p. 25).

industrial branches); they offered the possibility of advancement to less able persons with lower qualifications. Such selection was evident in scientific institutions (p. 55).

In a separate chapter Berend discusses the economic mechanism of the system, a subject which he is most competent to discuss as an economist. He lays stress on obsolete industrialism based on out-of-date technologies and on the "coal and steel" model created at the turn of the century. All this could function only in a closed economy, in a society shut in its borders and in an appropriately adapted closed culture symbolised by "soc-realism" (socialist realism) which was sometimes allied with conservative academism (pp. 88–89).

Berend consistently upholds the theory that the evolution of Eastern–Central Europe was a search for a way of closing the gap separating it from the West, a search for accelerated modernization. Let us add that this way has not yet been found, as is confirmed by the fact that compared with the West, East–Central Europe ranks lower than it did at the beginning of the 19th century (p. 361, after Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy 1820–1992*). According to Berend, both the pre-war dictatorships and the "communist experiment" were attempts to speed up modernization⁵. The weak point of this argumentation is that it ignores the fact that the regimes in the satellite countries were not independent but, in one way or another, were imposed on the nations by force. Even the pre-war dictatorships, which were by no means supported by society, relied on some local social forces which helped them to seize power. To this one could reply that irrespective of the way in which the satellite regimes were founded (besides not all socialist countries were satellite countries in 1944–1989: Yugoslavia, Albania and partly also Romania were in opposition to the USSR) and irrespective of the degree of these regimes' legitimization, they were able to play a modernizing role. At a certain moment they even gained legitimization, a subject which Berend discusses in detail; moreover, they always had a nationalist component which later became the dominant part and the axis of the whole policy for the anti-Moscow regimes (Yugoslavia, Albania and to some extent also Romania). Thus, whereas during the Stalinist years the satellite regimes

⁵ "The communist experiment was part of a twentieth-century rebellion of the unsuccessful peripheries" (p. X).

were mainly, though not exclusively, satrapies of the Soviet empire, the situation changed radically in the post-Stalinist years. This is how the author presents the situation.

When assessing the role of the East European regimes, the author says: "The effort to escape from the traditional peripheral position via central planning and forced industrialization, though not unsuccessful until the mid-1970s, did ultimately fail (p. XVI, emphasis mine — J.Ż.). Berend is thus inclined to admit that in the initial period of their existence the communist regimes helped to reduce the development gap between Western and Eastern Europe (he deals exclusively with the countries of East-Central Europe) and that it was only in the mid-1970s that the process was halted and later even reversed, so that in effect the distance increased and the East European countries still lag behind the West.

The author emphasises, as has already been mentioned, that the modernization carried out in East European countries after World War II, like the earlier industrialization in the USSR, was carried out on the basis of technologies from the 1920s and 1930s and even from the turn of the 19th century (p. 79). Let us add that at first the technological differences were not very conspicuous, even though new technologies began to appear in the West in the first post-war years (after World War II). But according to the author, from the beginning of the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s, the technological revolution inflicted a heavy blow on the communist countries. This was the result of the immanent inability of the communist model to develop new technologies and even to adept them to their needs; this was a consequence of isolation from the world market (pp. 184-200).

The author tries to present an accurate inventory of the social, economic, political and cultural changes which took place in the area in question in the course of modernization, that is, in the fifties, sixties and the beginning of the seventies, for later a period of degradation and collapse set in. He examines the question of social achievements together with the legitimization of the communist system. He also reflects on the character of the regimes in the post-Stalinist period. He emphasizes the concessions to the population (they were not made in all countries) but also the fact that the essence of the system, the supremacy of the party, was preserved and the party retained all the instruments

of power it had during Stalin's days. In addition to the mass social advancement and the opening of prospects to the underprivileged classes, that is, tasks which should have been fulfilled earlier by the development of a democratic society, the author also speaks of other achievements: urbanization, positive demographic changes, such as prolongation of life expectation, decrease in the death rate of infants, which brought these societies nearer to the Western model. All this took place before the middle of the sixties; then the situation deteriorated. Another phenomenon or rather institution, was the social care system which Berend defines as a "premature welfare system" (p. 169). He then speaks of the development of education; the authorities threw education (especially on the primary level) open to the broad masses and gave them access to popular and even higher forms of intellectual culture. But these favourable changes came to an end in the sixties; what followed was an ossification of structures and bureaucratization; the new élites separated themselves from the rest of society. Berend regards this as the formation of the middle class, while the fifties and sixties were, in his view, marked by the proletarianization of society.

A socialist consumer society, defined by others as "goulash socialism", emerged in the sixties and seventies, in particular in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The level of consumption was high compared with the pre-war years and also with many regions of the world. Compared with the West, the level was low in most families; the socialist welfare society was, in a way, a parody of what existed in the West. The relatively high level of food consumption in some countries was secured by a substantial growth of agriculture, especially in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Poland differed in this respect, for her fragmented, backward and neglected agriculture did not produce a sufficient amount of agricultural products. Berend cites the opinions of Western economists who as late as the seventies deplored the fact that agriculture had not been collectivized in Poland. Polish sociologists and economists have also expressed the view that communist collectivization would have facilitated the transformation of agriculture. But in my opinion such views ignore the social and cultural aspects of this problem.

The question of living standards is connected with the legitimization of communist régimes. In Berend's opinion legitimiza-

tion was easier in prosperous countries; the authorities reckoned that the lack of an alternative, tolerable living standards and social security would give them some legitimization, and in the sixties and seventies they could count on this, all the more so as democracy (together with the respective forms of legitimization) had lost face in East-Central Europe during the inter-war years and functioned only in about a dozen rich countries in the West.

In poorer countries, weaker economically, the regimes appealed to nationalism, which gradually became the dominant ideology openly proclaimed by the authorities; but the authorities' original sin was that they had been invested with power by a foreign country.

In the author's view, the situation was different in Poland, where economic crisis was permanent and where the Church functioned independently of the authorities, and in Czechoslovakia, a developed country which found communist standards, addressed to backward countries, unattractive. This is why the communist regime did not gain even a short-lived legitimization in these countries. However, I doubt whether Berend's statement is correct. In Poland broad circles of society acquiesced in the system for some time. This was motivated in many cases by the lack of a clear alternative, and if this can be regarded as legitimization, as the author seems to think, the authorities had legitimization in Poland. Acquiescence was much wider in Czechoslovakia, and in this sense Poland was indeed different from the other countries of East-Central Europe. The author cites examples from the countries he discusses, including Poland, to substantiate his theories. They are mostly correct but misunderstandings also occur. This shows how difficult it is to formulate general statements about several countries of a region, even when one comes from this region. Modernization was continued in the East European countries but it was carried out on the basis of a technology which was obsolete, compared with the technology of the developed countries; the author believes that this was a result not only of the regimes' specific isolation but also of the specific features of this underdeveloped region. Incidentally, this brings to mind the words used by Witold Kula with regard to the 19th century: "economic development in conditions of growing back-

wardness"⁶. Berend writes about the cyclic development of the communist countries, their obsessive periodic intensifications of investments, followed by successive economic, social and political breakdowns (p. 183).

The author's description of the decline and fall of the communist regimes in East-Central Europe and of the mechanisms which brought this about does not require detailed comments for it is truthful on the whole. What is surprising is the author's remark that the rulers did not understand the necessity of economic reforms. The reforms which could be carried out in countries dependent on mono-parties would not have saved the situation in the long run, as was shown by Hungary and especially Yugoslavia. The author speaks highly of the Yugoslav reforms but it cannot be said that they solved the problems of that country. Substantive reforms would have burst the regime. In my view, the author overestimates the possibilities and significance of reforms in the socialist system⁷. He frequently emphasises that the situation in Poland was exceptional (the role of the Church, the existence of opposition in the Sejm in the form of the *Znak* faction, mass character of opposition movements which in other socialist countries comprised a few to several hundred persons). It is worth stressing the author's view that the communist party lost influence on the younger generation, a fact which was evident not only in Poland (p. 251).

Berend paints the fate of the region after the fall of communism in dark colours. He lays stress on the deep recession and the destruction of many fields of economy, including agriculture (Hungary) in which the damage caused by transformations was greater than that brought about by collectivization during the Stalinist days (p. 343). An ideological approach to economy (*laissez faire* irrespective of circumstances and the social environment), attempts to transplant Reaganomics and Thatcherism, the dictatorship of international financial organizations deepened the crisis. The new élite introduced a specific dictatorship of libera-

⁶ W. Kula, *Wprowadzenie (Introduction)* in: *Przemiany społeczne w Królestwie Polskim, 1815-1864*, Wrocław 1979, p. 23.

⁷ "The unbroken chain of (different types of) revolts and reforms thus characterized the history of Central and Eastern European socialism during this period" (p. 95).

lism with neophyte zeal⁸. "The application of the self-regulating free market model in the transforming Central and Eastern Europe was certainly a historical mistake", concludes the author. In his opinion, the structure of production has deteriorated as a result of this policy and only primitive branches, such as textiles, stand a chance of development. What is important in his view is not to carry out reconstruction on a primitive basis, as was done after World War I, not to recreate the situation of a periphery, which East-Central Europe has been for a long time. Some of the author's remarks seem to be justified, but the general picture seems to be too pessimistic now (in 2000).

Another problem which has drawn the author's attention is the growth of nationalism. According to Brzeziński, nationalism was "the highest stage of communism" and coexisted with it for a long time. Its present development is therefore no surprise.

In conclusion Berend recommends the model of mixed economy applied by Austria, Italy and France in the first post-war years. The crisis will be followed by periods of prosperity but Berend warns: "The main question is, however, what type of prosperity will emerge: a prosperity based on adequate technological-structural changes, and new, competitive export sectors, resulting in a catching up process gradually leading toward Europe; or prosperity and growth in the region, but only as a backyard of the European Community or Germany, without proper restructuring, and with a continuously increasing gap between the Western and Eastern halves of the continent" (p. 380). In Berend's view the western part of the region, with Hungary and Poland, stands the chance of becoming part of the European Union in favourable circumstances, and if it is restructured, it can play the role of a *cordon sanitaire* separating the Union from the chaos in the East and South. As regards the other countries, no definite prognoses can be made. There is a danger of unexpected happenings caused by the growing nationalism, the only antidote being economic development resulting in an even relative prosperity. Berend could take into account only

⁸ "The new élite thus became the world's most ardent advocates of free trade ideology, and they followed it with neophyte bigotry. Anyone who questioned this policy fell under suspicion and was arbitrarily accused of harboring nostalgies for the collapsed régime or of attempting to preserve certain elements of it" (p. 356).

those events which happened before 1995; what has followed is part of the present day.

The strong point of Berend's book is his attempt to depict the history of the long post-Stalinist period in the communist countries, a period which many authors put off with generalities, identifying the nearly fifty years of communist rule with a few years of Stalinism. But the present generations, with the exception of the youngest one, were brought up in the thirty-five post-Stalinist years and drew their opinions and experiences from that period.

What is striking is the author's determination to uphold the theory of modernization as the source of transformations in East-Central Europe, a theory which although it explains many questions, leaves others in the shade. One could ask whether the author has really made use of the device of Niels Bohr to whom he refers at the outset, that is, whether he really presents different points of view which, considered together, show a true picture of reality. The opinion that authoritarian dictatorships and communism were swings of the pendulum in opposite directions in a region which was unstable because of its economic, social and nationality structure does offer a tempting and credible explanation of political events in structural categories. But fascist ideology as well as the model of fascism and inter-war authoritarianism were brought into these countries from the outside, from the West of Europe, and communism was directly imposed on them from outside the region, from the East. This means that the transformations in the countries of East-Central Europe cannot be ascribed to an autonomous internal evolution. Even the purely economic questions cannot be explained more by internal factors because political and international factors, wars, conquests, border changes and finally mass population transfers frequently exerted a decisive influence on them. What is most difficult for an author of historical syntheses — especially those covering entire regions and continents — is that events and their causes cannot be reduced to a single theme; they have many causes and influence one another, but this influence is not liable to a systematic explanation and seems to be fortuitous. To return to Berend's book let us recall that it covers only the half century after World War II and the author's conclusions should therefore concern mainly that period. If they are to apply also to the

inter-war period, the author should have examined the pre-war years as scrupulously as the post-war ones.

The modernization model concerns mainly socio-economic transformations. But since the author writes about the history of our region in general, he should have also taken into account models which refer to other sectors of social life. I have in mind first and foremost political sociology, including the role of the masses and the question of national communities in East-Central Europe as well as the historical factor, namely, the pre-war disappointment in democracy and liberalism and, in general, in capitalism as an efficient economic system. The paralyzing impact of the economic depression remained for a long time in people's memory and so did dislike of the authoritarian system with the indivisible power of a self-styled bureaucratic élite, though this dislike was weakened by the war-time experiences of nazism and fascism. As to the role of the masses, in particular the lower strata of society, and their gradually achieved ability to take an active part in political life as well as their activity as clients of populist movements, the author should have taken into account the achievements of the theory of mass societies and mass culture and the resulting attempts to explain contemporary history. Irrespective of what one thinks of these theories, which are rightly being submitted to criticism, one cannot ignore the social and political potential represented during the pre-war period by broad rural and urban social strata (the process began already in the 19th century) which under the influence of civilizational development, which was slow but evident in some fields, especially in education, felt they were treated unjustly and demanded a share in power. The events of the Second World War intensified these feelings. The new communist regimes could for a time make use of at least a part of this political potential and gain support from the activists who owed their advancement to the new authorities. The Stalinist period probably dispersed this spontaneously created potential, but then a new generation of activists entered the scene; selected and trained in a planned way, they assured the authorities of support in the provinces.

This question is closely connected with the formation of nations and national communities. Started a century ago, or even earlier, this process went on in practically the whole region under discussion. This was one of the forms of the previously mentioned

emancipation of the masses and lower social strata, including the peasantry. The strengthening of national ties and their extension to the previously excluded milieux took place during the war and the post-war years when the communist regimes were established and grew in strength. However, the process cut out both ways: on the one hand it favoured anti-communist forces which blamed the regimes for their dependence on Moscow, but on the other hand nationalism was used by the communists, who proclaimed they were expressing national and people's interests in defiance of what they called anti-national reactionary forces which had shown their impotence at the end of the inter-war period and failed to save their countries from the German invasion (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia) or had led them to defeat at the side of the Nazis (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria). A rapid joining of a national community usually opens the door to nationalism with which communism tried to flirt already in the thirties and, on a wider scale, after World War II. The development of communist nationalism took place in the socialist countries opposed to Moscow, but nationalist ideology began to replace the platitudinized Marxism-Leninism also in other socialist countries. This factor should not be underestimated when one evaluates the attitudes of various social groups during the communist period. The phenomenon of nationalism in the communist system is not at variance with modernization but complements it in a way.

Supplementation of Berend's concept by the above-mentioned factors would add credibility to the book.

(Translated by Janina Dorosz)