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Perestroïka, Social Justice and Public Opinion

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Perestroika, Social Justice and Public Opinion

In its struggle to reform, the Soviet leadership faces a major dilemma in attempting to reconcile economic efficiency with a commitment to social justice. The economic reforms of perestroika call for a greater role for market mechanisms and even private enterprise. However, these policies often run up against a public opinion that is staunchly egalitarian. Public attitudes that are, on the one hand, critical of elite privileges and distrustful of the state distributive apparatus are also, on the other hand, supportive of centralized distribution of resources, limitations on high incomes, and restrictions on private property.

The issue of social justice has been revived in the last few years in the Soviet Union, with the encouragement of Gorbachev himself. This has stimulated a lively debate among intellectuals, and also touches some sensitive nerves in public opinion, which is becoming increasingly visible with the growth of survey research and the more widespread publication of its results. This creates a kind of spiral of discontent: the economy deteriorates and inequities increase; journalists and academics openly discuss these problems; because of this publicity ("glasnost"), the sense of injustice is heightened; and the regime's legitimacy is further reduced, not only from the declining standard of living, but from the increased popular consciousness of injustice. The whole phenomenon resembles the sense of relative deprivation and frustrated expectations which is characteristic of revolutionary situations. The way in which this issue is resolved, or not resolved, will determine the future shape of the Soviet Union.

Justice in Communist Ideology

The concept of justice is a tricky and slippery one in Marxist-Leninist theory, and in

Soviet interpretations of that theory. Marx's prolific writings are surprisingly devoid of references to justice, and Marxists ever since have been reluctant to employ the concept. For Marxists writing about capitalism, justice is an illusion, for without structural changes that would sweep away the system altogether, justice is unattainable in such a society. In a communist society, on the other hand, justice has no meaning, for the capitalist sources of injustice have disappeared. Robert Tucker has perhaps overstated the case in writing that "the ideal of distributive justice is a complete stranger in the moral universe of Marxism."¹ Others have argued that despite the explicit references to justice, Marx and Marxists "do have strong beliefs about justice."² Roy Medvedev, the formerly dissident Soviet historian (now a member of the Supreme Soviet) who considers himself a Marxist, has said that "the idea of justice and a just society was the basic stimulus for the founders of Marxism and their first followers."³

With the 1917 seizure of power in Russia by the Bolsheviks, there were a few years of radical egalitarianism in both policy and rhetoric. In 1918 Lenin stressed that "the foundations of socialism lay in the ability to distribute evenly."⁴ In the early years of the Soviet regime, there was much emphasis on social equality and egalitarianism, and a substantial reduction of income differentials from the tsarist period. Lenin was opposed to excessively high wages for anyone and favored limits on income to prohibit unlimited advantages in consumption or accumulation.⁵

By 1921, with the retreat from "war communism" and the beginning of the "New Economic Policy," Lenin enunciated a more pragmatic view of justice: "when we deal with distribution, to think that we must distribute only fairly is wrong; we must think that

distribution is only the method, the means to raise productivity."⁶ Marx had written that the formula for the constitution of a communist society was "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." But he also wrote in the Critique of the Gotha Program that in the first stage of communism, people would be rewarded according to their labor rather than needs. Lenin emphasized this latter formula. This utilitarian approach marked a rejection of the utopian notions of justice, and has dominated official Soviet thinking ever since.

Through the Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev years the concept of justice was rarely discussed. Particularly in the later years, justice seems to have been treated as something of a fait accompli. A 1987 booklet on Socialist Society: Its Social Justice, for example, argued that the "key factor in understanding the social justice of socialist society" was the transfer of the ownership of the means of production to the working people.⁷ To the extent that the achievements of justice were debated, it was hidden behind the issue of wages and wage distribution. Even the seemingly central communist concept of social equality was rarely mentioned during this period. Ideological reference works such as The Fundamentals of Communist Morality (1984) did not even mention "social equality."⁸ When the broader issue of equality was addressed, the focus was on equality of opportunity rather than the equality of result. The explanation for continued social and economic inequalities was still based on the Leninist formula that differentiation was based on the quantity and quality of labor. The effects of such differences, however, were to be mitigated by "social consumption funds" in the form of free education and medical care, student stipends, pensions, subsidized holidays, and other allowances.⁹

The Reconsideration of Social Justice

The concept of social justice was reintroduced by two reformers, Andropov and Gorbachev. Andropov first used the term "social justice" in 1983, and it was frequently employed by both him and, after 1985, by Gorbachev. Under Andropov, and in Gorbachev's first years as Party leader, the concept was used as an instrument against official corruption and privileges. It came to have broader applications, though, in connection with the second half of the socialist formula "to each according to his labor:" against lazy and inefficient workers who received an average income; and against recipients of "nonlabor income." In all three of these cases—corruption and privileges, lazy workers, and nonlabor income—people were being rewarded by criteria that were based neither on need (the communist formula) or on work (the socialist one). To the extent, then, that justice was based on the socialist formula of distribution, people that benefitted from society in this way were perpetrators of injustice.

The term "social justice" was a central concept in Gorbachev's report to the 27th Party Congress (in 1986), and even made a title for one of the sections of his report. Both at the Congress and since then, Gorbachev has frequently used the concept, though usually as a tool against egalitarianism and "leveling." In his speech to the Congress, he illustrated the concept in the following way:

when equal payments are fixed for the work of a good employee and that of a negligent one this is a gross violation of our principles. And first of all it is an intolerable distortion of socialism's basic principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work," which expresses the substance of

social justice under the new social system.¹⁰

The Central Committee's report to the Congress asserted that "the unity of socialist society is by no means a leveling of social life," and stressed the necessity of "overcoming egalitarianism in pay, etc." But the Party was also committed to overcoming unjustifiable differences by expanding public consumption funds, curtailing unearned incomes "and attempts to use public property for selfish ends," and eliminating "unjustified differences" in pay.¹¹

The concept of social justice is two-edged; it is seen on the one hand as a key component of socialism, which is essentially egalitarian; but it is also directed against "leveling" and "egalitarianism in pay, etc." The tension within this concept reflects a broader tension within the whole structure of reforms in the Soviet Union: Gorbachev wants to achieve a more efficient, market-based economy; but this will lead to inequities, in terms of wider income differentials and unemployment, for example, that undermine the social support system that has been such an important element of the fragile legitimacy of the communist regime. This dilemma has stimulated a debate within the Soviet Union, and has led some people to challenge the reforms because of their apparent retreat from the egalitarian principles of socialism. With the airing of the issue of social justice by political leaders, academics began to develop the concept more fully, often in important philosophical and party journals, including Voprosy Filosofii and Kommunist, the party's monthly theoretical journal. There has been no consensus among academics, however, either in defining social justice or in deciding how to achieve it. Some prominent theoreticians have even argued that short-term inequality will lead to greater equality in the long term.¹²

Despite the differences, there are three main elements that they seem to have in common. First, all writers stress that the present stage of socialism is not able to deliver full social and economic equality. Second, there is an effort to put distance between the concepts of social justice and social equality. And third, though socialist societies will have to put up with inequality in the short run, these inequalities can be mitigated by "social consumption funds."

Efficiency over Equality

The cause of this reassessment of ideals and ideology, as for all of the changes associated with perestroika, is economic. Gorbachev's economic reforms are meant to revitalize a stagnant Soviet economy that has been growing at only about 2% annually for a decade. The economic slowdown had a deleterious effect on living standards in the country, which increasingly became a topic of discussion in the Soviet press. A 1988 article in Moskovskie Novosti (Moscow News), for example, asserted that the Soviet Union now ranks between 50th and 60th of the world's countries in per capita consumption of goods and services, and that the share of government expenditures going to human needs is higher in the United States than in the Soviet Union!¹³ American estimates show annual average growth in consumption declining from 5% in the late 1960s to just 0.8% in the early 1980s.¹⁴

This economic deterioration led party reformers to focus on creating an economy that is more efficient, and they see the means to this goal in creating more financial and material incentives for efficient and productive labor and, in the words of one sociologist, to simulate "the development of talents."¹⁵ The inevitable consequence of this is the necessity to

social justice under the new social system.¹⁰

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reconsider the principles of social justice, emphasize equity over equality, and introduce justice of desert as the main form of justice. Such changes will also result in greater differentiation in wages and growing inequality.

Gorbachev and his advisors have increasingly recognized, and sanctioned, the fact that his reforms will lead to greater inequality, wealth, and materialism. In some of his earlier speeches on the necessity of change, the party leader addressed primarily the "macro" issues of efficiency and quality of production, but later began to recognize the "micro" issues of personal incentives and the accumulation of wealth. At the 27th Party Congress, for example, he stressed that "the size of the wages fund of enterprises must be directly linked to incomes from the sale of their output" and criticized workers who produce "unsuitable output" but still receive full wages, bonuses and other goods."¹⁶ By 1988, however, he was emphasizing the micro factors of incentives at the individual level:

We also must think about why a person in our country who has earned money honestly is sometimes unable to build the kind of house he wants, to buy a cooperative apartment or to spend his wages in some other way. The principle of socialism is violated in this instance, too. A good toiler and his family should feel that honestly earned money enables them to live better.¹⁷

Allowing people to earn more, of course, raises the issue of individual wealth, and how this accords with socialist principles. This has occasioned a lively debate in the Soviet press, but the dominant position seems to be a justification of wealth, as long as it is earned "honestly" and by hard work. The magazine Literaturnaia Gazeta ran a series of articles which posed the question "Is it shameful to earn a lot?" One point in the debate revolved around a study from Latvia showing that more than half of the total bank deposits were concentrated in just 3% of the accounts. A sociologist, V.G. Rogovin, argued that such a

disparity, "should not exist in a socialist society." An economist, Gennadii Lisichkin, responded that such a disparity was all right, and suggested that it might well be due to honesty, hard work, and thrift, all values that should be encouraged. He went on to speak of the need to "teach [people] how to make money" and praised "those healthy people who want not merely to receive more but to earn more."¹⁸ Another sociologist has put the issue in language reminiscent of Adam Smith: "might we not hypothesize that rational calculation, material interests, and the striving for well-being are by no means alternatives to virtue."¹⁹

Soviet sociologists have pointed out that income differentiation in the Soviet Union is not large, citing data that shows the ratio between the 10% most highly paid to the 10% most poorly paid to be about 3:1; and between the minimum and maximum wages to be about 10 to 1.²⁰ According to one, increased differentiation is inevitable when profit and cost accounting is introduced, "but it does not contradict the principle of socialist justice despite the opinion of some of our philosophers and sociologists."²¹ As political scientist Fyodor Burlatsky has put it: "you have to choose: either an active society with some kinds of differentiation, or a stagnant society with equality."²²

The advocates of reform favor greater differentiation and oppose egalitarianism, but most also argue for restrictions at the "top," through reductions in privileges and restrictions on non-labor incomes, and for cushioning the impact on the "bottom" with increased social benefits and increases in the minimum wages. Both of these solutions, however, are difficult and complex ones, and often run up against the dynamics and imperatives of the market mechanisms which are central to the economic reforms. The issue of privileges is politically sensitive, in that it threatens the perquisites of the political and economic elite at all levels.

Gorbachev and his advisors have addressed the issue, but not often forcefully. In fact, this may have been one of the factors involved in the 1987 dismissal from the Politburo of Boris Yeltsin, who at party meetings had railed against the "special goods" available to the elite.²³ Yeltsin's populism later contributed to his election as President of the Russian Republic.

The concern over "non-labor incomes" runs into a sticky wicket of economic issues. The struggle against such incomes, those earned outside the official economy, has been a prominent aspect of the campaign for social justice. Restricting these incomes is seen as a way to temper the accumulation of wealth that could occur with the greater differentiation allowed in official incomes. A prominent voice in this debate has been that of Tatiana Zaslavskaja, a reform minded sociologist who moved from Novosibirsk to Moscow after Gorbachev assumed the party leadership. Initially, Zaslavskaja and others identified non-labor income with illegal income, but even before many of the reforms were implemented, it was evident that the distinction between legal and illegal incomes, or labor and non-labor incomes, was not always clear. The press raised questions, for example, regarding sales of goods in the farmers' markets, or of handiworks.²⁴ Gorbachev raised the issue at the 27th Party Congress, when he warned that "while combatting unearned incomes, we must not permit any shadow to fall on those who do honest work to earn a supplementary income."²⁵ The line between labor and non-labor incomes faded even further with new laws that allow cooperatives and "individual labor activity."

The issue of non-labor incomes becomes even more complicated when social scientists equate subsidized prices with such incomes. Tatiana Zaslavskaja, for example, has argued that anyone who benefits from subsidized prices is, in effect, receiving unearned income

which, as we have seen above, she believes should be eliminated. This leads Zaslavskaja and others to propose raising rents for state-owned housing and reducing subsidies, and thus raising prices, on meat, dairy products, and other deficit items.²⁶ This fits in with another central element of the economic reform (price rationalization), but it does muddy the issue of non-labor incomes which, as we have seen, in other contexts are described as illegal. Benefitting from subsidized prices hardly seems to be an infraction as serious as black market economic activities.

The concern over excessive privileges and wealth is matched by concern with those who are likely to be affected negatively by the reforms. The popular and academic literature has addressed the issues of unemployment, of poverty, and of those living on fixed incomes. Fyodor Burlatsky, for example, has expressed concern over managers who talk of reducing their workforces by a quarter or more, when "guaranteed labor and social security constitute the chief gains of the socialist system."²⁷ The Soviet press has addressed the dire lot of the country's 58 million older citizens, more than a third of whom live on pensions of less than 58 rubles a month. The official poverty level is 75 rubles a month; some 40 million people earn less than this.²⁸ The issue of poverty came out in the miners' strikes in Siberia and the Ukraine in the summer of 1989, and was one of the factors that led the government to increase pensions in 1990. These are difficult and expensive tasks for a government that is already facing a huge budget deficit.

Such issues will become increasingly visible and acrimonious as the economic reforms lead to price increases, a reduction in state subsidies, and layoffs of workers. Already Soviet citizens are feeling the bite of such changes. Unemployment is now estimated at 6% of the

able-bodied population--some eight million people, and expected to double within the next five years.²⁹ The government got a preview of potential problems this past summer (1990) after Prime Minister Ryzhkov outlined the government's program for transition to a "regulated market economy." His forecast of a doubling in retail food prices led to panic buying, the emptying of many Moscow grocery stores, and consequently the implementation of modified rationing in the capital.

The new recognition of poverty in the country has raised another set of concerns, over the system of social consumption funds. The proclaimed purpose of these funds was to satisfy basic needs and equalize living standards through free education, medical care, student stipends, pensions, subsidized holidays and other allowances. Increasingly, however, there are criticisms of both the effectiveness and fairness of distribution of these resources. Some argue that they heavily favor the elite, and in fact do not guarantee much to the ordinary citizen. Sociologist Yuri Levada, for example, states that:

in comparison with other developed countries and, more importantly, as a measure of the growth of our own social needs, we don't have too much, but rather too little real social and economic guarantees. There are no guarantees of a minimum hourly wage, a minimum standard of living, necessary medical services, kindergarten facilities, and so on.³⁰

Levada also questions the constitutional guarantee of employment, pointing out the lack of a system of institutional guarantees through job retraining programs, information about job vacancies, and credits or subsidies for the unemployed.

Others argue that the public pays a high price for the few guarantees that remain. Ludmila Piiasheva, an economist who openly calls for movement toward capitalism, has written that the present system "makes everyone always needy and always dependent on the

state." This, she contends, "makes every citizen a petitioner for his share of social benefits that are not given automatically" and forces them to depend, therefore, on the benevolence of officials.³¹ Furthermore, she argues, the social consumption fund leads to an excessive concentration and centralization of power, demands enormous expenditures by the state, and gives to the state functions "which can and should be accomplished by the citizens themselves." In this sphere, she continues, "the state must radically limit its power and participation, for its services are too expensive, of low quality and, as long experience has shown, contradict the principles of social justice."³² Piiasheva believes that welfare payments should be allocated only for the needy: the disabled, elderly, and those who suffer from the modernization of the economy.

The arguments for reduced social welfare, greater differentiation and increased inequality have also led to a reconsideration of the concept of social classes. Already in the late 1960s and early 1970s writers were modifying their treatment of classes and social stratification. The traditional tripartite division of Soviet society into "two basic classes plus one stratum" was challenged by the identification of numerous additional socio-occupational groups or social strata. And some sociologists contend that inequality of social groups was characteristic of both capitalism and socialism.³³

A much more radical revision of these concepts, however, was mounted in the 1980s, led by the sociologist Tatiana Zaslavskaja. Zaslavskaja has bluntly challenged the Marxist-Leninist criterion for identifying classes on the basis of their relationship to the means of production. She contends that other factors have to be taken into account, including "the extent of their executive authority and prerogatives, the economic sector in which a group

operates, the volume and structure of the means of production that a group puts into circulation, and the opportunity to use them for personal ends or to own them."³⁴ She has also called attention to the existence of group conflicts within Soviet society, though she has not gone so far as to refer to this as class conflict. "The driving force of behavior is personal and group interest," she has written. And while Soviet society may be one of "moral and political unity. . .however, every social group has its own special interests, which may come into contradiction with the interests of other groups."³⁵ Her colleague V.G. Rogovin has even said that these "contradictions" may in some cases become a "conflict between social interests."³⁶ In combination with Zaslavskaia's broadened definition of social classes, this comes very close indeed to stating that there are class conflicts in Soviet society.

Zaslavskaia and others recognize that these conflicts will be intensified in the process of reform. In a 1987 interview, she said that "if we want. . .radical changes. . .there will be a relative change in the situation of classes, groups and strata of society, " with "advantage for some, . . .disadvantage for others."³⁷ A 1988 Novosibirsk seminar on restructuring, in which Zaslavskaia participated, pointed out that the reform was bound to cause dislocations: "the practice of carrying out transformations here in our country and in other socialist countries has shown that reform cannot be both deep and 'gentle' at the same time." Among other things, the report recommended "an entire system of socioeconomic compensations, equalizers and shock absorbers" to cope with such problems.³⁸ The government has recognized this need; Ryzhkov's program for a market economy promised "a system of comprehensive social protection for the population."³⁹ Such concerns led Gorbachev and the

Supreme Soviet to opt for a modification of this plan in October 1990, rather than the more radical reform proposal favored by Boris Yeltsin.

If Soviet society is to become more stratified and less gentle, the issue of justice will become even more acute. As the philosopher Brian Barry has written, "the problem of distributive justice arises only when there is a conflict of interest; it is moot when there is a harmony of interest."⁴⁰ Until recently, the Soviets have claimed that theirs was a harmonious society. With the economic reforms, however, we are likely to see increasing tension and conflict as some become wealthy under the new system, and others remain poor. The reforms are basically sacrificing harmony for efficiency. In those republics where ethnic issues predominate, class divisions may actually reinforce the ethnic ones.

Soviet Public Opinion and Social Justice

So far we have discussed only the views and positions of official Soviets and scholars, those in positions of authority. But the issue of social justice is closely connected and dependent on the Soviet public, which has become increasingly vocal and feisty. The Gorbachev leadership has increasingly encouraged the public to speak out, and has stimulated new public opinion research to allow the regime to gauge popular attitudes. In some cases, however, especially on justice issues, the public mood runs counter to the interests of the reformers.

The role of public opinion, like so much else in the Soviet Union, is undergoing dramatic change. During most of the years of the Soviet era, public opinion has been seen as "a useful and auxiliary instrument of social management"⁴¹, but the Soviet leadership always resisted research that might reveal hostility to the system. During the "thaw" of the

Khrushchev era, more liberal public opinion studies were allowed. But even then, according to Boris Grushin, a prominent public opinion researcher, social scientists were like "a scientific council for Ghengis Khan;"⁴² public opinion research did not much influence the authorities, and substantial, revealing research was a dangerous enterprise. Gradually, most scientific public opinion research withered away.

With the advent of the Gorbachev leadership, the situation changed in a radical way. As emigre Soviet sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh has noted, "popular attitudes in the USSR can have an important impact in a period of crisis, when there is no unity at the apex of power, or when the leadership desperately needs the cooperation of the population."⁴³ The current period seems to be one which fits all three of Shlapentokh's criteria for an enhanced role for public opinion: it is a period of crisis, there are divisions within the leadership, and the Gorbachev leadership is seeking popular support for its reform program. Consequently, public opinion research has been given a stronger role than ever before in Soviet history. The liberal and iconoclast sociologist from Novosibirsk, Tatiana Zaslavskaia has been appointed director of the All Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion, established in 1988. Other public opinion research centers have appeared as well.⁴⁴

Zaslavskaia has argued both for more honest and sophisticated sociological research, and for more attention from the authorities to the needs and voices of the public. She sees public opinion research as a tool that is both informational and political: one that is necessary for the development and implementation of new policies. Management organs, she wrote in Pravda, "greatly need full, accurate, and truthful information about the real state of affairs in any sphere of social life and the requirements, interests, values and behavior of

social groups. . . .the light of sociological research must penetrate the remotest corners of public life, expose the accumulated dust, and stimulate the speediest possible cleaning up of our common house."⁴⁵ Among the kinds of questions for sociological research, she wrote, are "what differentiation in remuneration for work of different kinds is considered just and what is excessive."⁴⁶

The public opinion surveys often reveal things that the reformers are not very happy about. The most problematic issues revolve around social justice. As we have seen above, there has been a long debate on the meaning of social justice and equality among policy-makers and academics, and the reformers seem to have won the day with the arguments that egalitarianism must be tempered in the interests of economic reform and efficiency. While Gorbachev and his advisors may have expected resistance to these changes from "conservatives," they probably did not expect opposition along these lines from the public.

Western students of the Soviet Union have recognized "the strong strand of economic egalitarianism" in the Soviet political culture.⁴⁷ The Gorbachev leadership may have figured that such egalitarianism was part of the old system of inculcated values that would easily wash away in the new atmosphere of openness and democratization. Public opinion surveys reveal that this has not happened, and that there is still strong support for egalitarianism. A 1988 survey of Moscow residents, in asking how incomes should be distributed, found fully 38% agreeing with the proposition that "society should strictly control incomes so that all its members live in approximately equal material conditions"--a quite radical egalitarian point of view. A larger group (48%), felt that incomes should be distributed based on the quantity and quality of labor, but they should not be "excessive."⁴⁸ In identifying various "types of

political consciousness", the same survey found a much higher proportion (41%) favoring a system that promoted social justice than those (14%) who favored a more pragmatic, Western orientation.⁴⁹ The reformers could find little comfort from these results in their efforts to Westernize the Soviet economy.

What is even more surprising is how many Soviet citizens believe that even the existing system of distribution is unjust. In a fall 1989 urban survey on economic reform, only 2.5% of the respondents agreed that the current distribution of incomes in society was "just" and almost two-thirds believed that the last 2-3 years had led to an increase in the differences between families with high incomes and those with low ones.⁵⁰ Furthermore, people seem to recognize that perestroika will not improve this situation. When asked "do you expect that perestroika will make the distribution of incomes in society more just?", 31% answered "yes", 25% thought no, and 44% were not sure.

The public also has reservations about new forms of property relationships. A national survey on enterprise ownership found high degrees of support for various forms of collective ownership and joint ventures (71-72%), but only a minority (31%) favoring privately owned enterprises (though this antipathy was primarily toward private ownership of heavy industry).⁵¹ Even the new cooperatives (which are not based on private property) are widely distrusted, because of the high prices they charge and the high incomes enjoyed by their proprietors.⁵² The 1989 urban sample mentioned above found only 25% approving of cooperatives, and 50% disapproving.⁵³

Gorbachev and other leaders are fully aware of these popular perceptions, and frequently voice frustrations at "leveling" attitudes and the persistence of a "nonmarket psychology" in

the population. Speaking to the Central Committee in early 1988, Gorbachev complained that "our understanding of social justice has been deformed." If we were to implement certain notions in the press, he said, "we would have to take up a big iron and iron out all of our society. Everyone would have to fit the same pattern: the gifted person and the untalented, the conscientious worker and the loafer, the honest man and the thief." He mentioned cases of productive workers who increased output manyfold, but whose wages had grown by "only 50-100%" But even with those increases, too small from his point of view, people complain, and worry that this will lead to "private-ownership mentality."⁵⁴

While Gorbachev may complain about these popular attitudes, he also recognizes their power. A striking example of this was provided in a meeting of the Central Committee in late 1989, when there was much discussion of the market and economic decentralization. During the discussion, one participant invoked the argument of the pro-market economist Vasilii Selyunin, saying "Selyunin argues that in a month the market would put everything in order." At this point, Gorbachev suddenly interrupted, saying: "I know but one thing. In two weeks this 'market' would draw all the people into the streets and sweep away any government, however much it might vow fidelity to its people."⁵⁵

There is a certain split consciousness on the issues of egalitarianism and efficiency, however. To some extent, the support for egalitarianism is related to popular concerns about the basic standard of living, and about one's own material position in society. Numerous public opinion polls have shown the overwhelming concern among Soviets for material factors: wages, housing, consumer goods, and the standard of living. This is reflected even in the popular perceptions of the various periods of Soviet history. In a 1989 poll of

Leningrad residents, respondents were asked to give positive or negative evaluations of various periods in Soviet history (see Table 1) and then asked what criteria they used in evaluating those periods (see Table 2).

Table 1
Popular Assessments of Periods of Soviet History

Period	Percentage of positive assessments minus Percentage of negative
NEP	+21
Industrialization	+11
Perestroika	+ 6
Late 1950s and early 1960s [Khrushchev era]	+ 2
1964-1975 [early Brezhnev era]	-36
Collectivization	-58
Late 1970s and early 1980s	-62

Source: March-June 1989 survey of Leningrad citizens by the Institute of Sociology. B.Z. Doktorov, "Materialy k svodnomy otchetu po teme: Sotsal'nye i ekonomicheskie problemy razvitiia krupnykh gorodov," [Socialism and economic problems of development of large cities], Presented at a Soviet-American Colloquium on Public Opinion, Moscow, December 1989.

Table 2
Criteria Used in Evaluating Historical Periods

Criterion	Percentage of respondents citing criterion in evaluation of a period, among those with:		
	Higher Education	Secondary Education	Less than Secondary
The degree of improvement of the material situation	73	56	38
The development of the economy of the country	60	36	23
Degree of support for the personal incentive of the worker	52	38	31
Degree of justice in the differences in the material well-being of various strata	27	28	23
The character of sacrifices required for development	26	20	21
Rate of economic growth	25	25	21
Degree of order, labor discipline in the country	16	19	33
Hard to say	5	25	32

Source: Same as Table 1.

First of all, it is interesting to note the relatively high assessments for the earlier periods of Soviet history, including the NEP period under Lenin and the period of "industrialization" under Stalin. The period of the 1960s and 1970s receives much lower evaluations, despite the presumably more relaxed political atmosphere (compared to the Stalin era) and the higher standard of living. It is clear, though, that economic factors were high in the criteria for evaluation, and that justice per se was not one of the most important factors. This suggests that there is a basically instrumental view of justice, as a means to achieve a higher standard of living for all.

The public is also ambivalent, even schizophrenic, about the role of the state in insuring social justice. In the fall 1989 urban survey mentioned above, 63% agreed that the state should interfere "as little as possible" in the distribution of incomes. At the same time, 85% thought that the state should "give more privileges to people with low incomes," and 84% agreed that the state should guarantee to each person a minimal living income. Almost half (48.9%) also felt that the state "should not allow excessive differences between low and high incomes."⁵⁶ This accords with strong lingering strain of support for firm rule in the country. In the same survey, about what was necessary for decisive changes in the economy, 54% answered, "to establish firm order in the country," and 40% favored reinforcing state control over prices. While the market oriented reforms called for a relaxation of state price controls, only 5% of this urban sample favored flexible prices, and fully 60% supported the rationing of scarce commodities.⁵⁷

If Soviet citizens feel some ambivalence about the economic reforms and the tension

between egalitarianism and efficiency, they are categorically opposed to another element of inequality: elite privileges. This may account in part for the popularity of Boris Yeltsin, recently elected President of the Russian Republic. Yeltsin's populism plays on the popular sense of egalitarianism, which is manifested both in concern for the poor and resentment against the rich. At the 27th Party Congress in 1986, Yeltsin voiced complaints about the privileges and "special goods for leaders" and asserted that "for us, the criterion of social justice must always be the interests of the working class above all."⁵⁸ He revived these themes at the Congress of People's Deputies in May 1989, wondering aloud "why are tens of millions living below the poverty line while others are wallowing in luxury?"⁵⁹ These are powerful themes in the Soviet political culture, and they find a sympathetic hearing among many citizens. After the Congress, the All Union Center for Public Opinion Research conducted a poll in which they asked about Yeltsin's proposal to transform the fourth division of the Ministry of Health (a special division for high party and state officials) into medical facilities for maternal and child care. Almost everyone agreed with this; 75% fully, and 16% mainly; only 2% disagreed.⁶⁰

The popular sense of egalitarianism is linked to an underlying support for socialism, and considerable distrust of both capitalism and the entrepreneurial spirit. This basic support for socialism has been noted by sociologists and other observers both in the Soviet Union and in the West.⁶¹ It is due in part to the semi-successful propaganda that has led many Soviet citizens to support "the key official values and beliefs."⁶² But it is also a result of the real success of the Soviet state in raising the standard of living and assuring most citizens of a basic level of security, at least up to the 1970s. As Roy Medvedev has put it, "our country

has achieved no mean progress in the area of individual economic, cultural and social rights which to all intents and purposes did not exist in tsarist Russia."⁶³ Despite popular fatigue and political apathy, there is still some degree of trust in the Soviet Communist Party. Polls over the last two years show a steady decline in popular trust in the Party, but in August 1990, some 38% still expressed full or partial confidence in the organization (compared to 42% who did not). Given the events of 1989-90, it is difficult to know whether to be more surprised by the decline or by the persistence of support.⁶⁴

Most Soviet citizens had achieved, in the 1970s, a relatively comfortable existence not, perhaps, in comparison with the West, which most had never seen, but in comparison with that of their parents or grandparents. The Soviet welfare state had provided jobs, housing, education, and medical care. In earlier years, Soviet sociologists had found that the great majority of Soviet people are satisfied with their jobs--the figures were similar to those in the United States.⁶⁵ Even among Soviet citizens who emigrated in the 1970s, over two-third reported being satisfied with their standard of living, housing, job, and medical care in their last years in the Soviet Union.⁶⁶ If there were shortages of consumer goods and certain foods, this was largely a given, something that Russians had lived with for generations. From the point of view of many Soviet citizens, capitalism produced wealth, but it also required hard work, generated uncertainty and insecurity, and fostered inequality. Such perceptions pose a real obstacle to the efforts of the reformers to move the economy toward competition, market pricing, and greater economic and societal differentiation.

There is, paradoxically, a possible resolution to this problem in the continued prevalence of authoritarianism in the Soviet political culture. Both Western and Soviet

political scientists⁶⁷ have called attention to the political tradition of authoritarianism in the Soviet Union. Sociologist G.S. Batygin noticed this in his reading of letters addressed to Literaturnaya Gazeta on the issue of incomes and inequality. He noted that most authors "regarded unearned income as illegal income not sanctioned officially, not provided for in some document." Soviet citizens, then, expect the authorities to solve the problem: "mass consciousness puts its trust in the authorities for everything. . .and it firmly believes that negative phenomena come from the fact that the system of administrative control has not yet been extended to some insignificant segment of life."⁶⁸

Batygin deplores this situation, and sees it as an obstacle to the reforms. But the long-standing authoritarianism of the Soviet citizen, the tendency to look to the center for solutions, may well work in favor of the reforms. Before, the Soviet citizen largely accepted the centralized role of the state, and conceded politics to the authorities. So when the official ideology postulated equality and social welfare, the citizen accepted and supported that. Now, however, Gorbachev is reshaping the ideology, demanding hard work, legitimizing competition and differentiation, and giving credence to the market. If Soviet citizens continue past patterns of accepting from their leaders the accepted vision of the world, then eventually they should come around to the reformers' point of view, and be more accepting of these new concepts and ways of life. If they do not, the reforms will fail.

These social and political obstacles to reform are, of course, increasingly compounded and complicated by the growing nationalities disputes and the step-by-step fragmentation of the Union. The task of bringing the population over to the market will be no less difficult in an environment of national conflict, political instability, and the decay of central authority.

Gorbachev's task is a big one. He must, essentially, reshape the political culture of the Soviet Union. Samuel Barnes, in a comparative study of politics and culture, points out that "culture suggests the 'easy' behavior. . . .cultural patterns provide the routine, largely unexamined options followed by most people most of the time."⁶⁹ Thus, for most Soviet citizens, it was "easy" to accept the Soviet welfare state, its centralized political structure, and the system's undemanding work ethic. In trying to alter these patterns the Gorbachev leadership will have to disrupt the easy behavior of citizen compliance with them. The end result may be attractive, with more citizen participation and a higher standard of living, but the transition period will be a difficult and wrenching one for both the society and the leadership.

The reforms of Gorbachev will also change the rules of the game, and, as Peter Hauslohner puts it, lead to "a markedly different set of prospective winners and losers than obtain under the rule of his predecessors."⁷⁰ The old system favored the working class, in terms of the material and economic benefits, at the expense of professionals and intellectuals, who suffered most from the restrictions on politics and information. Now the balance is being shifted. Gorbachev has promised greater wage differentiation, especially between workers and professionals, and has, in addition, satisfied the demands of many professionals with his policies of glasnost and democratization. Professionals are the "winners" in this arrangement. In the working class, there may also be a new stratum of winners in those who capitalize on the new economic incentives and entrepreneurial possibilities. But probably not many workers fit into that category, at least not at the moment.

The more nuanced political and sociological analyses now being conducted in the

Soviet Union have recognized these differentiated responses to the reforms. The 1988 Novosibirsk seminar on restructuring categorized social groups by their attitudes to the reforms. Unskilled manual workers, the report noted, are skeptical about both economic and political reforms. Skilled workers support democratization but have a "guarded attitude" toward economic change. The state and economic bureaucracy are opposed to radical reform in both areas. Only those engaged in creative work, highly skilled specialists and high-level managers favor both kinds of reform.⁷¹ This constituency is much too small to sustain the reforms over a long period, especially given the regime's encouragement of democratization and grass-roots political activity. Unless the state or the economy can generate some positive material benefits for the workers, the Kremlin is likely to confront many more of the kinds of strikes that seized Siberia and the Ukraine. Gorbachev has recognized this problem, telling the Central Committee in January 1988 that "just two or three years will decide where restructuring is going."⁷²

Conclusions: Market Justice, Political Justice and Expectations

Gorbachev and the Soviet leadership face multiple dilemmas in the next two or three years. With democratization, perestroika and glasnost, they have unleashed social forces that will not be easy to control. Perhaps the most important problem is in managing, or satisfying, popular expectations. Since 1985, Gorbachev has been pledging "radical reform" and even "revolutionary" changes in the Soviet Union. The reforms he promotes are meant to move the Soviet Union to a higher plain of development. For most Soviets, however, little has changed; indeed in many cases the marketplace has become even worse. In past

years, the management of expectations was not a particular problem for the Kremlin. As Walter Connor observed over ten years ago, "what is most remarkable about Soviet mass expectations is their apparent continuing modesty." He quotes Paul Hollander to the effect that the "key to the stability of the Soviet system lies in its management of expectations."⁷³ Gorbachev has stirred the hornet's nest by stimulating expectations without yet delivering the goods to satisfy them. This puts the Soviet Union in a dangerous situation.

The basic problem for the Gorbachev leadership, then, becomes one of shifting popular expectations of justice from the political system to the marketplace, and then in getting the market to work. In a discussion of perceptions of justice in the United States, Robert Lane has argued that Americans prefer "market justice" to "political justice": "they prefer the market's criteria of earned deserts to the polity's criteria of equality and need, and believe that market procedures are more fair than political procedures."⁷⁴ If Gorbachev is going to succeed in the Soviet Union, it would seem that he would need to nudge the Soviet population, or a good part of it, toward this preference for market justice. As the new Soviet notion of "social justice" makes clear, the state will reduce its commitment to satisfying the norms of justice, by cutting back on its distributive role.

This will put the regime in a dangerous position. The population as a whole has become increasingly dissatisfied with the political system, and with the heretofore meager results of economic perestroika. Groups that profited from the old arrangements, such as unskilled workers, bureaucrats, and collective farm workers, are especially unhappy with the government. Meanwhile the regime is also under fire from groups that want more radical reforms in respect to property and politics: skilled workers, the creative intelligentsia, some

high-level managers, and industrious farmers. The regime is in danger of losing all of its constituencies, and therefore its legitimacy.

Under Gorbachev's reforms justice will increasingly be found through hard work and commitment to quality. The burden will be more on the individual. This, of course, begins to sound like the free enterprise system which, however, both Gorbachev and most Soviet citizens profess not to want. The Gorbachev leadership remains committed to socialism, and the population remains somewhat egalitarian and supportive of the welfare state. This constitutes, then, the central dilemma facing the Soviet Union: how to create a more efficient society without sacrificing too much of the commitment to social justice. The ideology of communism, the achievements of the Soviet state, and the legitimacy of the regime have been based in large measure on the commitment to justice. The future of the regime, however, depends on making the country more efficient, in terms of satisfying the material needs of its population and being competitive in the world market. In the tension between these two demands, for efficiency and justice, we see the link between the past and the future of the Soviet Union.

Endnotes

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44. Up to now, the All Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion has been the only survey research organization conducting nationwide surveys in the USSR. The Center has conducted about two surveys per month, through some 23 regional centers in all of the 15 republics. With the nationalities problems of the last year, however, some of these regional centers are no longer operating, and the scope of the "national" surveys has been reduced, and no longer include all of the republics.

This raises the question of whether the Center's surveys genuinely represent the whole country, and in particular whether they obscure important differences among republics and nationalities. Researchers at the Center have responded that on most of the Center's survey questions discussed in this paper, there were not significant differences among republics. Nevertheless, these issues have not yet been systematically explored.
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47. Archie Brown, "Ideology and Political Culture," in S. Bialer, ed., Politics, Society and Nationality Inside Gorbachev's Russia (Boulder: Westview, 1989), 31-32. As the USSR divides and disintegrates, a "Soviet political culture" no longer exists. But elements of that culture, especially economic egalitarianism, remain in much of the country, and especially among Russians. See, for example, Hedrick Smith's discussion of "The Russian Character" in The New York Times Magazine, October 28, 1990, pp. 30 ff.

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