

Marie-Janine Calic / Dietmar Neutatz /
Julia Obertreis (Hg.)

The Crisis of Socialist Modernity

The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia
in the 1970s

Schriftenreihe der Frias School of History

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Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht



Schriftenreihe der FRIAS School of History

Edited by
Ulrich Herbert and Jörn Leonhard

Volume 3

www.frias.uni-freiburg.de

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Umschlagabbildung:

Paul Michaelis: Lebensfreude, 1977, Öl auf Leinwand, 150 × 200 cm,
Gewerkschaftlicher Dachverband FDGB © VG Bild Kunst, Bonn 2010.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind
im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-525-31042-7

ISBN 978-3-647-31042-8 (E-Book)

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Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht LLC, Oakville, CT, U.S.A.

www.v-r.de

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Printed in Germany.

Satz: Dörlemann, Lemförde

Druck und Bindung:  Hubert & Co, Göttingen

Redaktion: Christopher Reid, Jörg Später

Redaktionsassistent: Jonas Wegerer

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier.

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Marie-Janine Calic, Dietmar Neutatz and Julia Obertreis

The Crisis of Socialist Modernity – The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1970s

Introduction

‘What a sharp contrast between the confident advance of the socialist countries and their historical optimism on the one hand and the present state of the capitalist world on the other! The noose of the general crisis of the capitalist system is tightening with an ever-increasing force. The grave crisis of imperialist policies, the constant economic convulsions, anxieties about the future, the profound crisis of morality – these are the key features of contemporary capitalism. And no reformer, no doctor, can heal these organic infirmities and maladies.’ With these dramatic words Leonid Brezhnev evoked the ‘crisis of the capitalist system’ in his speech to the Eighth Party Conference of the German Socialist Unity Party (SED) on 16 June 1971.¹ His self-assured comparison of the optimistic and prosperous socialist countries and their doomed capitalist counterparts of course seems absurd from a contemporary perspective. Yet Brezhnev’s diagnosis of the industrialised West was in part fairly accurate at that time: Two years after his speech, the West did in fact experience a crisis in the shape of an oil price shock precipitating other economic problems. But were the socialist states not also in a state of crisis – without, perhaps, being aware of it? After all, 20 years later they collapsed (in Europe), while the Western economies and societies proved flexible and better able to adapt. The present volume approaches this question by looking at the cases of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

1. The 1970s as a ‘Threshold of Change’

From the perspective of the industrialised Western countries, the 1970s are generally associated with a series of developments marking the end of the post-war period and the beginning of a new era. The world economy under-

1 Brezhnev’s speech at the Eighth Party Conference of the SED, 16. 6. 1971. See Breschnew, *Auf dem Wege Lenins*, 430.

went dramatic changes in the early 1970s, with the ‘third industrial revolution’ ushering in the transition from classical industrial modernity to a high-tech communication society. ‘After the boom,’ doubts were expressed about the prevailing unquestioned paradigm of progress, while new social movements rejected the grand narratives of the predicted future of industrialism. There was a growing awareness of the costs of unchecked growth, such as energy dependence and mounting ecological problems.² The oil crisis of 1973 was one of several events that brought home to the Western world, particularly the US government, that the world was now an increasingly interdependent place, prompting recent claims that the 1970s were marked by the ‘shock of the global.’³ Overall, the 1970s are seen today as a ‘threshold of change’ (Lutz Niethammer).⁴

If we now ascribe epoch-making significance to the 1970s, we are faced with the question of the spatial reach of this idea. Do the observations on which such interpretations are based apply only to the industrialised Western countries or to the Communist countries as well? Was the Eastern bloc also affected by changes that may be understood as part – or at least as the outcome – of major transnational processes? One common interpretation works on this assumption. According to this view, the postwar process of ‘catching up’ with the West began to falter in the 1970s. Planning crises and economic blockades, the oil price shock and debt trap, mounting social problems and new nationalisms heralded a profound systemic crisis in the Communist world. The transition to postindustrial society put the socialist systems under tremendous pressure. Important sectors such as mining and heavy industry, the mainstays of the planned economies, lost their pre-eminent position in world markets. Aside from the consequences of global upheavals, the socialist systems also suffered from inherent problems such as bad planning, mismanagement, lack of investment and technological backwardness, which made it difficult to shift focus to new industries. The Communist countries’ terms of trade worsened, while their trade deficit and dependence on foreign borrowing grew. At the same time, individualisation and changing values brought about a shift towards consumerism and Western mass culture. There were also signs of social and political fatigue: Campaigns of mass mobilisation no longer worked as they had in previous decades and were no longer staged on any large scale; the party leadership was

2 Doering-Manteuffel, *Nach dem Boom*.

3 Ferguson et al., *The Shock of the Global*.

4 The editors would like to thank Lutz Niethammer for the inspiration he provided at the conference held in March 2009 at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), which preceded this volume.

visibly aging and embodied the past rather than a shining future. The regimes increasingly suffered from a loss of trust and legitimacy.⁵

What is indubitable is how things turned out. In the late 1950s Khrushchev could still proclaim that within a decade the Soviet Union would overtake the United States in every field. A generation later there was nothing left of this dream. The communist regimes in the Soviet Union and the other countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe collapsed between 1989 and 1991. There followed a period of transformation and reorientation that took quite different forms in the various countries and often replaced socialist models with those of the market economy.

With these findings in mind, the present volume applies the above-mentioned concept of the 1970s as a 'threshold of change' to two very differently structured communist countries, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, in order to sound out whether they were already in crisis in the 1970s and if so, to determine the nature of this crisis. To what extent was any crisis the result of a world historical phenomenon, namely, the decline of classical industrial modernity? And to what extent was it inherent to the communist system as such? Did the decline of industrialism usher in an irreversible loss of legitimacy for the socialist regimes, a loss that prefigured the later collapse? Did the 1970s thus mark the beginning of the end for communism in Eastern Europe?

2. 'Socialist Modernity'

The contributions in this volume assume the existence of a 'socialist modernity' as a variant of industrial modernity. Here, 'modernity' is understood not as a normative category, but as an analytical framework that helps us describe the profound transformation of traditional agrarian societies into fully developed industrial ones, something that first occurred in the countries of Western and Central Europe and eventually in the 'backward' East as well. No-one proceeding from empirical findings could uphold the automatic equation of 'modernisation' with 'democratisation,' but would have to concede that many countries, particularly those of Eastern Europe, achieved progress and development through dictatorial means.

Ulrich Herbert has described 'high modernity' not as 'an ensemble of fixed principles but rather an open process of transformative dynamism, triggered and driven by all the extensive changes in science, technology, cul-

5 See Berend, *Central and Eastern Europe*; Altrichter, *Kleine Geschichte der Sowjetunion*, 149–158, 172; Hildermeier, *Sowjetunion*, 79–82; Hildermeier, *Geschichte*, 877–899 (on the Soviet economy) and 950–958 (on propaganda and ideology).

ture and society in the course of the advance of industrialism in the decades around 1900.⁶ High modernity begins at the point where the specific features of modern industrial society, as they had taken shape in the 19th century, are no longer restricted to particular groups, but rather transform the lives of the vast majority of the population and confront society with new challenges requiring new political and social responses. Urbanisation, rural-urban migration, electrification and technological progress, bureaucratic rationalisation, scientific and medical advances, new forms of public life associated with mass movements of a political and ideological character – all of these brought about a transformational momentum of historically unprecedented intensity.⁷

The dynamism of industrial modernity came into conflict with traditional ways of life in both rural and urban areas and transformed them within a generation. This did not occur without great upheaval and ensuing criticism. One of the main results of these changes – and of the mounting pressure to act – was the growth of radical ideologies on both the right and the left, which countered this unchecked momentum with constructs emphasising control, the aim being to direct developments into certain channels and towards a defined goal.⁸

This interpretive model may be applied to the socialist countries, albeit by an indirect rather than direct route. In Russia, the first country to set off on the communist path in 1917, high modernity had not taken hold in any comprehensive way by the end of the nineteenth century. So Soviet communism cannot be seen as a response to problems caused by modern industrial society in Russia. Bolshevik policies were in fact an attempt to catapult a country perceived as backward into industrial modernity. How the Bolsheviks did this and the goals they had in mind were determined by three interconnected factors: Marxist ideology, longstanding conditions in Russia and the Russian perception of the capitalist world. In light of the crises of capitalism, they came to the conclusion that Russia must follow a different path in order to avoid the peaks and troughs of capitalist industrialisation, while at the same time benefiting from its technological blessings. This must be seen against the background of long-standing, pre-Communist reservations about private enterprise widespread within Russian politics and society, and the leading role of the state in the process of industrialisation and against the background of the older idea in Russian history of being able to avoid mistakes Western countries had made in their development.

6 Herbert, "Europe in High Modernity," 11.

7 Ibid., 10.

8 Ibid., 10–11.

The communists of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, who took power just under half a century later, were equally intent on transforming their backward agrarian societies into modern, enlightened, industrial ones while avoiding the social upheavals of capitalism. The Soviet Union served here as role model and stimulus.

From the time of the First World War at the latest, other hallmarks of modernity, namely, mass politics and mass mobilisation, had taken hold in Europe, including Russia and the rest of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, albeit in a variety of different forms. After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks vigorously asserted their transformational values, deploying very modern, innovative propaganda techniques, especially posters and films.⁹ After 1945, communists in other countries emulated them.

In what follows we refer to this approach, which involved creating or forcing through industrial modernity within the framework of a developmental project, as 'socialist modernity.' This approach did not remain limited to the Soviet Union; after the Second World War other countries adopted it too – or did so on Stalin's orders. But somewhat different paths were followed in different places, as the social, economic and cultural conditions all varied from one place to another. Nonetheless, it seems to make sense to subsume these projects of transformation and visions of the future under the generic term 'socialist modernity.'

Specific to socialist modernity was a high degree of correspondence with certain general principles of Western modernity such as secularisation, the claim for universal validity of ideas and the conviction of the transformability of society, people and nature, combined with an emphasis on both the sciences and the communist worldview.¹⁰ The origins of these things lay in the ideas of the Enlightenment and the social reformers of the nineteenth century; here, as in other European countries, these reformers pushed for increased social interventionism from state and rulers, an interventionism that deployed new techniques such as censuses and medical examinations, and advocated values such as hygiene, efficiency and sobriety. The idea of linear progress, which moulded the historical ideas found in Marxism-Leninism, was also significant. The notions of history, time and the future held by the Communists of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, particularly the Bolsheviks, were absolutely linear, goal-directed and anchored entirely in Marx-

9 See Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, 7–10 and passim. See on film the example of Sergei Eisenstein's films: Antoine-Dunne/Quigley, *The Montage Principle*. On posters see the seminal study: Kämpfer, *Der rote Keil* (including a long chapter on the early Soviet poster, 161–312); see also: White, *The Bolshevik Poster*.

10 For the principles of Western modernity see Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, 66–72. See also: Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*.

ism-Leninism.¹¹ The Communists emphasised a scientific approach as a means of legitimising political action (though what they espoused was in fact pseudoscience). The cult of technology and a mania for remaking the world were other key characteristics of modern state power that came to fruition, unchecked, in the socialist countries.

Western research has taken a highly sceptical view of what these attempts to implement 'socialist modernity' actually achieved. Stefan Plaggenborg takes the view that Stalinism merely created an imitation of industrialisation that was tacked on to Russia's agrarian structures with brute force. According to this view, Stalin copied the West's path through a form of imported modernisation, in order to inject the material civilisation of capitalism into socialism.¹² Plaggenborg was the first to attempt to examine the whole of Soviet history as an 'experiment in modernity.' The distinguishing feature, he concludes, was an 'integralist modernity' organised along centralist lines, in which processes of differentiation were obstructed and different spheres of power and politics were linked together by force. He also characterises Lenin as the personification of 'conservative modernity': Before the October Revolution, he was out of touch with the latest developments in science and theory in Europe, something later reflected in the marginalisation of certain scientific fields in the Soviet Union.¹³

Rather than reducing 'socialist modernity' to a failed attempt to copy the material achievements of capitalism and to the main political and ideological project of socialism, the present volume understands it as a complex entity and thus as a comprehensive countermodel to capitalist modernity – a version of modernity in its own right. With its vision of the communist way of life, socialist modernity had a special dynamism; it was a powerful source of identification and had great appeal, and – for a time – these aspects had an impact far beyond their country of origin, the Soviet Union. This is not to claim that the mass of the population in the relevant countries was united in an enthusiastic support of this socialist project. Yet we also miss something if we view communism solely as a coercive system decreed 'from above' and enforced only with repressive means. Even individuals who rejected the Soviet regime and its terrorist methods eventually internalised the 'socialist project,' at least to some extent.¹⁴

11 Plaggenborg, *Experiment Moderne*, 81–119. See also: Plaggenborg, *Revolutionskultur*, 21–46.

12 Plaggenborg, "Macht und Ohnmacht," 73–74.

13 Plaggenborg, *Experiment Moderne*, 47–79 (on Lenin) and 323–369 (on integralist modernity).

14 On the ambiguity between Stalinist terror and the Soviet construction of norms and mass enthusiasm, see Schlögel, *Terror*. As one of Jochen Hellbeck's inspiring contributions

There are many dimensions to the construct of ‘socialist modernity.’ Industrialisation, linked with the notion of a centrally planned and guided economy, is undoubtedly one of its core elements. But socialist modernity also includes the idea of the ‘new man’ and of ‘cultural refinement,’ and of the ‘masses’ and their ‘mobilisation’ as a factor in – and object of – all politics.¹⁵ It includes a faith in technology and progress coupled with the idea that humanity can master nature and transform it at will – an extremely important factor with a powerful appeal that can be traced from Lenin’s electrification programme through Stalin’s ‘Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature’ of the late 1940s to the euphoria surrounding the space programme in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁶ In Yugoslavia, a mixture of optimism about progress and planning euphoria catapulted the country after 1945 into an era of epoch-making sociocultural innovation, aided not least by modern social policy, education, the spread of technology and the media, as well as changing aesthetic standards of modern arts. Socialism committed itself explicitly to the attempt to introduce modernity by comprehensive social intervention, assisted by massive ‘agitprop’ machinery.¹⁷

The fascination with the human capacity to control and remake the world had its social counterpart in ‘social engineering’: the attempt to transform society in a conscious and goal-directed way, in line with principles that, rather than being left to the market or other uncontrollable authority, are based on science and defined by ideology as ‘true.’ This includes efforts to create clear social categories and thus ‘order’ in society, which sometimes culminated in violence towards population groups that did not fit into this kind of order.¹⁸

Another element that clearly distinguished socialist modernity from its Western-capitalist counterpart, and that came into play particularly from the 1960s on, was the effort to achieve a specific kind of social justice and welfare (paternalism, to put it in negative terms). This was welcomed by large sections of the population as a source of security and stability. But the state’s all-embracing aspiration to provide welfare, coupled with the corre-

on the Stalinist ‘self,’ see Hellbeck, “Fashioning the Stalinist Soul.” See also an earlier report based on the account of Soviet emigrés: Inkeles/Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen*, 291.

15 On ‘cultural refinement’ in the Soviet Union, see Kelly/Volkov, “Directed Desires,” 291–313. See as an overview on these topics Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*.

16 On faith in technology and mastery of nature, see Gestwa, “Das Besitzergreifen von Natur und Gesellschaft,” 105–138; see also his monography on technology cult and environmental perspectives in the postwar period: Gestwa, *Die Stalinschen Großbauten des Kommunismus*; on the cult of space travel, see Gestwa, “Kolumbus des Kosmos”; Scheide/Richers/Rüthers/Maurer, *Cosmic Enthusiasm*.

17 Calic, *Geschichte Jugoslawiens*, 186–188.

18 Baberowski/Doering-Manteuffel, *Ordnung durch Terror*; on ethnic groups in the Soviet Union: Martin, “The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” 813–861.

sponding expectations among the population, placed huge strains on state policies – a problem made all the worse in the communist countries by economies that were unable to meet the growing demands over the long term.

3. The Crisis of Socialist Modernity in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia

The contributions in the present volume do not focus primarily on those periods during which the socialist project was forcibly advanced – in the Soviet Union the 1928–1933 period, when the Stalinist ‘revolution from above’ was forced through industrialisation (with an emphasis on heavy industry), and in Yugoslavia the 1944–1948 period, which witnessed the implementation of a similar transformative approach. Instead, they examine the extent to which the last great advances were followed by crisis in the 1970s. By ‘crisis of socialist modernity’ we mean two things: In a narrower sense, we have in mind a situation in which the political leadership came to realise that they must change course in order to stabilise the country. This applied in the Soviet Union in 1962, as Stephan Merl argues in his contribution. More broadly, ‘crisis’ also includes latent or concealed structural problems that were not perceived as symptoms of crisis by contemporaries and that therefore did not result in pressure for something to be done, but that may be considered (at least partly) responsible, in the medium-term, for the final crisis of the communist systems in Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Whether contemporaries perceived and discussed these events as a crisis is not the key criterion here, though it is an important question that must be posed with respect to the countries at issue.

Any examination of crisis symptoms in communist countries must surely focus on the economic realm, as the proper functioning and efficiency of national economies was the precondition for the system’s long-term survival and its international competitiveness in the context of the East-West conflict. But other important dimensions of crisis must also be taken into account: the legitimisation and appeal of the socialist project and its integrative force – and ultimately the overall dynamics of society. In view of the multiform nature of the crisis, the contributions in this volume present case studies to enhance our understanding of the communist societies.

These can be divided into three broad categories. The first group investigates the field of political economy to determine whether there was a fundamental economic crisis as well as the extent to which contemporaries – both the leadership and the population – were aware of such a crisis. The second group examines the culture of everyday life, consumption and entertain-