

DISKUSSION

USES OF HISTORY FOR POLITICAL LEGITIMATION BY COMMUNIST REGIMES

Some Reflections on Eva Schmidt-Hartmann's article¹

By Fred Eidlin

Eva Schmidt-Hartmann perceives changes in historical writing in Czechoslovakia as a reflection of the regime's views on the purposes of historiography; she also adds some theoretical reflections on legitimation. Dr Schmidt-Hartmann is extremely informative in her interpretation of the Czechoslovak communist regime's evolving policy on historiography. Unfortunately her analysis ignored the broader context of the role of history in legitimating regimes in general; in addition, she does not explain how the legitimacy of communist regimes differs from the legitimation of regimes in general. The author does not define "legitimation" in concrete terms. For example, to whom are these legitimating historical writings addressed? What does legitimation mean in the political and sociological sense? What concrete political results (if any) does this legitimating history actually have? To what extent do communist regimes simply *tolerate* changes in historical writing, and to what extent do they plan and actively encourage such changes? Why is legitimation even necessary in a communist regime as long as the power system remains intact?

It is important to bear in mind the ignorance of ordinary people about very important historical personalities and events, and to ask: what is the nature of the audience and how great is their knowledge? This paper proposes to make a few remarks about the problem of legitimacy in general, the problem of history as legitimation, and specifically, history as legitimation in communist regimes.

The term legitimacy can be used in several senses. Sometimes it is used in a normative-philosophical sense. A legitimate government wields power because it has the right to do so. Its power is just since it comes from God or from the people, or because it is used for just ends. However, legitimacy can also be used in a purely descriptive, morally neutral sense, that is, to refer to the actual grounds on which people accept the authority of governments. Max Weber's categories of traditional, charismatic, and rational authority imply no judgment about the ethics of accepting authority. Adolf Hitler and Jesus Christ both possessed charismatic legitimacy. Legal-rational legitimacy serves equally well as a factor helping to explain both the Gulag under Stalin and respect for civil liberties by American bureaucrats.

¹ See BohZ 29/2 (1988), pp. 300-324.

Legitimacy in the normative sense coincides with legitimacy in the descriptive, sociological sense since one of the reasons people actually accept authority is because they believe it to be legitimate in a moral sense. The quality of the moral reasoning that leads people to see authority as legitimate differs greatly. There are also considerable differences in the kinds of premises that are perceived as moral. This is, of course, what much of political conflict is about – conflict over moral principles between people having to co-exist in the same civil society.

What makes history so important in the legitimacy of regimes is that history not only describes how states and nations came into being, it is also constitutive of states and nations. It contains accounts of exploits of rulers, arguments over constitutive principles, struggles for independence, threats to national unity, and conflicts with enemies. What citizens of states consider worthy and unworthy depends upon the kind of state or nation they would like to belong to. Hence, one person's hero is another person's traitor, one person's freedom fighter is another's terrorist. Since all historians like to think of themselves as objective („wie es eigentlich gewesen ist“), conflict is inevitable.

All regimes *use* history for purposes of legitimation, but communist regimes legitimize themselves through a particular philosophy or theory of history. Since communists have traditionally heaped scorn on the idea that a regime seeks legitimation through free elections the importance attached to history as legitimation is greater than it is for other regimes. Moreover, this theory of history purports to be a scientific theory, laying claim to absolute truth. History tells us why it is both necessary and good for the party to be in power, and since the theory is supposed to be scientific, hence objectively true, there is no need to ask the people for their consent to the party's rule or policies. "If the party and the people don't agree," to cite Bertolt Brecht, "you have to change the people." Disagreement cannot be admitted if the objective truth is already supposed to be known. To go against history (which is seen to be progressive and good) is to place oneself in the service of reaction, hence of evil.

An oft-forgotten component of legitimacy (in this mixed normative-descriptive sense) is the authority which results from respect for force and the belief that it can and will be used effectively, often together with "might makes right" theories of justice, or arguments to the effect that "what can be done is all we can realistically hope for." Such views of justice have a long tradition, from Callicles and Thrasymachus to Hobbes and Machiavelli. In this view of legitimacy, power is self-justifying. A regime loses its legitimacy, power is self-justifying. A regime loses its legitimacy when it loses power. The only sin for "might makes right" theories is weakness. When the regime weakens or appears to weaken (the two often amount to the same thing), it loses the "mandate of heaven," and will be deserted at all levels – from citizens to the leadership. Many discussions of legitimacy neglect this dimension. This is in part because "might makes right" theories of justice are not currently fashionable. Our liberal societies prefer to ignore the strain in human nature which admires the strong and detests the weak. Americans, for example, choose to forget, to paraphrase former Senator S. I. Hayakawa on the Panama Canal, that we stole our country from people who, by our own norms, legally owned it.

A second component of legitimacy is the inevitable, at least partial, identification of regime and state. All regimes, even the most pernicious, perform many state func-

tions that are widely, if not universally, recognized as promoting justice and the public good – for instance keeping the peace, providing social services, etc. Even the regimes of Hitler and Stalin performed such functions and thus enjoyed a certain legitimacy. Furthermore, all regimes are associated to some extent with the symbols of the state, for example, leaders of governments appear with flags to the strain of national anthems. They depict themselves as the natural fulfillment of the nation-state's history. It is not surprising that the Soviet-bloc states place such an emphasis on sport or that President Reagan made so much of the Olympics. Government and regime become so fused in people's minds that they often respond to feelings of patriotism expressed by otherwise unpopular political leaders.

The explicit ideological principles which constitute the official theory of legitimacy are only a narrow subset of the total set of principles constituting the legitimacy of any regime. If the first two sets of principles are neglected, we cannot possibly have a theory of legitimacy that works to explain the various phenomena that lead us to try to understand legitimacy in its entirety.

The role that the official theory of legitimacy plays differs according to the population. For example, it may make no difference at all to the stability of the regime if the most of the population is indifferent, even hostile to the regime's official theory of legitimacy as long as that theory fulfills certain functions for the ruling class. The official legitimizing ideology may assuage their consciences the unpleasant realities of the regime by demonstrating that they are justified by higher principles.

Yet circumstances can and do arise in which it makes a big difference whether or not the official theory of legitimacy is valid in the eyes of the population. Regimes can and do ignore what the people think, but sometimes regimes have to call upon the people to make sacrifices, accept hardships, or to dedicate themselves to collective efforts in support of its goals. Hence, the widespread view in Soviet-type countries that, despite all the deficiencies of communism, at least the evil of capitalism has been removed, no doubt contributes to the legitimacy of these regimes.

Under Stalin's rule the regime asserted a normative theory of legitimacy which it imposed ruthlessly on the whole of society. The Stalinist regime did not try to persuade its peoples of the truth of this theory; it simply terrorized them into accepting the official theory as gospel and systematically suppressed criticism and all alternative views. At the height of Stalinism, there were, of course, many true communists. These people were called upon to believe difficult and unpleasant truths and behave in a way that would disturb the sensibilities of most people. For them, history provided backup to the ideology that made it possible to be obedient and believe themselves to be preserving a modicum of cognitive and moral integrity.

After Stalin's death and the decline of hardline communism, a substantial proportion of the communist movements throughout the world began to perceive Stalin as a criminal madman, and with the emergence of multiple authoritative centers of communist ideology, the kind of history used as legitimation under Stalin no longer worked. Without all-pervasive fear, with even loyal communists forced to become more sophisticated in their political thinking, the kind of crude control and manipulation of history characteristic of Stalinism became less and less practicable. As the ideology that had bound the communist rank and file to blind, unquestioning acceptance of the

policies of the ruling elite weakened, historical interpretation naturally had to be increasingly promoted by argument rather than imposed. As historiography becomes more sophisticated and historians more familiar with the behavior of the regime, it becomes increasingly difficult for the partisans of a monolithic regime to decide on the criteria necessary for a total control and manipulation of history. Some historians obediently strive to produce regime-legitimizing historiography; but history has shown that some communist historians try to change and even to challenge the official party line, in order to justify their double role as communists and professional historians.

Like the Roman Catholic Church and the Inquisition, and other authoritarian systems of the past, as the communist regimes have mellowed they have increasingly made use of other sources of legitimation to supplement the weak points in their orthodoxy. As Max Weber has noted, "the transitions between orientation to an order from motives of tradition or of expediency on the one hand to the case where on the other a belief in its legitimacy is involved, are naturally empirically gradual."² This helps us make sense of the apparently contradictory observations brought out so clearly in Dr Schmidt-Hartmann's article: communist historians have not totally abandoned the fundamentals of communist ideology while recognizing the significant changes that have taken place in the use of history for purposes of legitimation in communist regimes.

² Weber, Max: *Legitimate Order and Types of Authority*. In: Talcott E. Shils, Kaspar D. Naegle, and Jesse R. Pitts (eds.): *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory*. New York 1962, p. 230.