Was "Real Existing Socialism" Merely a Premature Form of Rule by Experts?


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The history of communism in the 20th century, if the current orthodoxy is to be believed, was no more than a detour in a process in which history ends in a world of civil societies organized as liberal democracies, which increasingly relate to each other following the model of liberal democracy itself, through the rule of law, collective discussion, the general recognition of human and civil rights, and so forth. In this image of world history, the worldwide dominance of liberal democracy is the culmination of a process which appears as a first draft in the Westphalian peace, which gradually spread through time, for example, through the internationalist ideology of Woodrow Wilson. In this teleological image of history, Communism appears as a developmental error, an error produced by an accidental combination of erroneous ideology and special circumstances of delayed development in certain countries that made them particularly susceptible to it.

In what follows, I propose to reconsider this version of the meaning of 20th century communism especially, but I am afraid very abstractly, with reference to Eastern Europe and Russia. My concern will be with a three part relationship, between the state, civil society, and expertise. I will argue that the system of real existing state socialism was a kind of experiment in the construction of a model of relating expertise, the bureaucratic state, and the political forces arising from “civil society”. I will ignore, or rather bracket, the problem of the Soviet system itself and also the coercive character of Communist regimes, important as these issues are. My concern will be with civil society, or rather with an important but seldom discussed aspect of the problem of civil society, the place of non-governmental organizations in processes involving knowledge and expertise.

Expertise and the State: Five Models

To clarify what I take to be the main issues here, let me simply identify four alternative structures of the relation between expertise and the state of the kind that actually existed in the late 1940s, at the moment that Eastern Europe became Communist. The descriptions are caricatures, but I trust that they will at least be recognizable. We may conveniently describe these alternatives as the Napoleonic, the German, the British, the Swedish, and the American. By the “Napoleonic” I mean to designate powerful centralized state bureaucracies with a formally separate system of specialized technical training, the Grande Écoles in the original model, in which the organizations of the state itself produced a need for expert, specialized, civil servants, typically with high prestige and pay, and a specific ethic which is connected to their special education for service in a particular bureaucracy or group of bureaucracies.
This is a model of the appropriation of expertise in which political control is exerted from the top to the top, for example where political authority comes from a Presidential political system and flows to a state bureaucracy in which careers are bound up with an internalized system of promotion and command, and are thus cushioned from politics, except in the sense of responding in a broad way to social and technical needs as defined, typically, from a national perspective. The characteristic “input” of locals to the process of decision-making is protest. The relevant bureaucracies respond to pressure, and seek to avoid protest, but they do not respond to local initiative. The end of the era in which the local notables exercised real or potential power in France came in 1848, and was decisive (Halévy 1974).

This model, minus the Grand Écoles, is relevant to the Eastern European case, for it is a fair description of the system of rule of the Austro-Hungarian empire. There were of course other differences, notably those that arose from the extent of decentralization of authority in response to the problem of nationalities. The Grand Écoles developed an internal culture of national competitiveness that provided a progressive, expert element that the Austro-Hungarian empire lacked. But both relied on central authority delegated to a class of bureaucrats without local allegiances whose careers were bound up entirely with the system itself. Expertise entered from the top or center, if it entered at all, into administration, and “politics” was something separate from expertise entirely.

The systemic problem of this scheme was protest: centralization, either in its broad French forms or its narrow, bureaucratically oriented Austro-Hungarian form, meant that policy was insensitive to local issues and problems, and the rigidities and distortions that resulted from the long lines of communication of public opinion meant that protest was the only means of getting a response. Implicitly, this meant that the bureaucracies were not merely administrative, but political, engaged in the business of responding to and avoiding protest. Freed of practical political responsibility, local political movements, such as Serbian nationalism and Viennese anti-Semitism, devoted itself to a politics in the sense of ideology, symbolism or political theatre.

The decentralization of the Austro-Hungarian empire, however, meant that a remarkable variety of self-help associations could flourish: among these were the Moravian associations of sheep breeders and agriculturalists that were central to the creation of a connected set of research institutions in Brno, eventually including university professorships and abbeys, that served as the research community in which Gregor Mendel made his genetic discoveries (Orel 1996). This central European success story of the 19th century should dispel any thought that such institutions are limited to the “west”. And this type of collective body has revived in the more recent period. For example, groups of Polish agricultural producers have played a significant role in the reorganization of the Polish meat industry and the regulation of meat products. Part of the contribution of these groups to the processes of politics is knowledge: they possess specialized understandings of the activities that the state regulates and affects through its actions, and can serve as a counter or constraint on the claims of state bureaucratic experts by distributing specialized knowledge among institutions of different kinds, operating under different constraints than those of bureaucratic discipline and careerism.

In Britain, the system was one of parliamentary sovereignty, but at the same time one in which a strong “professional” class of civil servants actually carried out the functions of the bureaucracy. Ministers came from Parliament, and they were in the
classic sense amateur politicians; men, for the most part, who were men of the world, but who also had considerable experience in the raw politics of their own political party. The political parties generally were large and complicated organizational phenomena. The realities of bureaucratic life were familiar to any experienced party man.

Experts, however, posed difficult problems for the civil service. Although the civil service was professional with respect to career patterns, with respect to specialized knowledge it was an organization of amateurs: persons who were stringently selected for, especially at the very top, on the grounds of their performance as students at Oxford and Cambridge in academic areas, such as the study of classics, that had no direct relation to the kind of task that they performed in the bureaucracy. What this meant was that bureaucratic decision making had a high level of what might be thought of as cultural cohesion which allowed for the extensive use of discretion.

The system had great strengths as an administrative tradition, but was nevertheless poorly adapted to the application of expert knowledge. In the 1930s, in particular, the technical problems of the siting of telephone and telegraph lines were critical. But it was necessary for the bureaucracy and civil service system to acknowledge and accommodate the existence of this kind of expertise, and in the system that existed this meant that someone who was part of the civil service cadre and had been promoted through the system needed to be put in charge of these technical decisions. It was not possible under the system to simply appoint an outsider with the relevant technical skills because this would have meant that the outsider would have been given a high rank and a set of privileges within the civil service system that their records did not qualify them for. Thus, either some kind of special structure within the bureaucracy and outside the civil servant traditions had to be created, with all of the many problems attendant on this, including the fact that this new bureaucracy needed to operate in terms of rules and traditions of its own, or the problem needed to be granted to a separate body of some sort, such as a commission.

The problem was similar to the one faced by the military in wartime, and the solution there was to have experts “seconded” or temporarily assigned to generals and admirals and their staff to be used as seemed fit, in effect granting considerable personal discretion on a personal basis to particular experts who proved themselves to officers. This was obviously not a permanent solution; in fact, after the war the scientists who were crucial to British success for the most part went back to academic life. Like all solutions it had weaknesses, in the sense that there were areas in which it was vulnerable to problems of particular kinds. In this case, it was prone to expert errors: made possible by the combination of expert status and administrative discretion and secrecy: and also to de facto dominance by professional associations, that used administrative discretion for their own ends to produce a system congenial to their interests, a situation well-represented by the National Health Service.

Nevertheless, this was a system which was relatively responsive to local concerns and initiative. Parliamentary sovereignty, along with the fact that parliamentarians held cabinet positions, meant that the local concerns of members of parliament could not be ignored. Ministers were directly accountable to parliament: questions could be raised, votes could be refused, and party positions could be contested, and, not surprisingly, ways to accommodate national policy and local concerns could be found. Members of parliament functioned as local notables, and constituent service and local loyalty mattered
Another solution, which we might call the German solution, served, like the Napoleonic system, to integrate expertise into government bureaucracies and turn experts into bureaucrats. But it differed both with respect to centralization and with respect to the existence of Grand Écoles. The German solution was also different with respect to the relationship between the bureaucracy and politics. The bureaucracy was typically not neutral, but in fact embodied a well developed political set of powers of its own and a considerable amount of bureaucratic secrecy and discretion, so much so that the bureaucracy amounted to the continuation of the empirical state as a kind of alternative to democratic politics rather than subordinate to democratic politics. But the German bureaucratic system had an additional flaw which was at the same time its greatest virtue, the practice of promoting on merit within the bureaucracy people who were genuinely competent and expert with respect to the tasks of bureaucracy itself.

What this produced, certainly consistent with other German state traditions, was what we might call expert bureaucracies, which typically held themselves to high standards, but standards of their own devising. The German way was often systematically different from what was done in accordance with international standards, but, most importantly, there was nothing in the character of either independent expertise or independent amateurism which could effectively counter the expert claims and critically evaluate the experts’ practices in the bureaucracy. The Grand Écoles were in some sense outside the bureaucracy; in the German case, the bureaucracies themselves monopolized expertise and defined the categories of expert knowledge.

The very fact of the monopoly on expertise held by the bureaucracy created a systemic problem. Promotion and success in a bureaucratic career required conformity with the dominant climate of opinion within the bureaucracy. Mavericks who bucked the system could not rise in the bureaucracy, there were no alternative careers which they could carry their expertise to, and there was no hope of returning to a position with a change of political leadership. This meant that there simply were no external controls on bureaucratic power, except, rather oddly, in the powers of other bureaucracies with a political base in the cities or Länder. So the German system avoided the problems of the centralization of political authority, and responded to local problems differently: the bureaucracies tended to legitimate themselves by respecting the expectations of local stakeholders directly, bypassing the formal democratic process itself, thus protecting itself from informed amateur criticism and informed criticism of associations. These stakeholders, of course, had expert knowledge as well: the monopoly of the state bureaucracies was never complete. But associations, such as trade groups, were accustomed to operating so closely with the ministries in this kind of stakeholder relationship that conflict was systematically avoided. This tended to confirm the power of the experts within the bureaucracies rather than to challenge them. Not surprisingly, the solutions that resulted from ministerial “leading” of stakeholders were not always consistent with what experts elsewhere believed, that is to say, the best science or best policy.

The Swedish case, like the rest of Scandinavia, was a variant on this model, with a greater role for citizens. Problems tended to be defined by movements of citizens in the expectation of future state action or support. Experts played a characteristic role in this process. Once a problem had been politically defined: agricultural surpluses, for
example-- and a movement with some ideas of how to solve it developed sufficient membership, experts played a role in identifying detailed policy solutions that the state could accept and implement. This model assumes both a high level of grassroots initiative, a competent body of experts, and a responsive national state. It works as well as it does because of scale and because it is possible to borrow solutions tested elsewhere. The French problem of centralization and the German problem of choosing a unique and non-comparable alternative path thus does not arise. There is nevertheless a very striking feature of this system. The role of the expert is not to create a climate of opinion, nor to serve as technical advisor to a party (though this is certainly possible and consistent with the system, and was in fact a role played by the Myrdals, for example), but rather to solve a unique problem of policy, for which expertise is useful, but not in itself sufficient. This allows for a certain amount of creativity, in that it frees the expert from the limitations of the self-disciplining community of experts, and their self-limitations with respect to what is really known, without relying on a bureaucratic consensus enforced by the discipline inherent in bureaucratic careers.

The American case is too complex to deal with at length, but as with all such comparisons, the basic constitutional fact of federalism is central. In many respects, however, it is a mixture of forms, in which there is an element of overlap and competition. Expertise is not bound to particular bureaucracies, and few bureaucracies have the kind of autonomous power found in European bureaucracies. There is often an expert culture with a strong base in universities, which competes with bureaucracies, or work under competitive contract to them. Experts often speak directly to voluntary organizations and politicians to define policy, rather than to the state, which applies policy legalistically and contractually rather than through the exercise of discretion. A wide variety of centers of expertise and initiative compete to be heard in the policy process, and stakeholders typically exert influence through expert claims, that is by asserting their expertise to a public audience, rather than in negotiations, as in Germany. Market competition is the default mode of resolving conflicting claims, rather than regulatory power, and the characteristic problems of regulation involve the control of competition rather than the assertion of special state expertise. Nevertheless this market competition occurs in an environment in which there is a large array of intermediate associations, such as trade groups and local associations of citizens, in which knowledge is transmitted. This is not a process that produces uniformity directly, but it imposes consequences on those who do not adapt, and thus places significant pressures on local governments, local associations, and trade groups to respond by acquiring expertise.

**The Party of Experts**

Leaving out the topic of ideology entirely, we can see the Soviet model-- and as I will show, this model pre-dates the Soviet era in Russia itself-- as a particular solution to the problem of expertise in relation to bureaucracy and politics. It is characteristic of bureaucracies that the mechanisms of promotion and careers back up the policies and rules by enforcing a kind of consistency in the use of discretionary power, consistency which is more or less cultural and more or less specific to the culture of the bureaucracy. Parties, whatever their aim, are themselves forms of discipline in which differences of opinion are subordinated to party goals, and party goals are themselves dependent on the
achievement of a certain level of agreement on matters of opinion. Expertise amounts to a kind of mastery of a set of opinions with respect to some specified technical activity with a specialized content. There is an inherent problem of knowledge and power, the problem for those in power of securing trustworthy knowledge, and the problem for those with knowledge of securing the trust of those in power. The idea of a party of experts, a party whose features include expertise, is a solution to this problem. The potential conflicts between the three elements disappear: the three are united into one closely related unit.

Unity of this sort, however, comes at a price. Uniformity is characteristic of bureaucratic organizations: a kind of “groupthink” emerges. Groupthink is both a virtue and a pathology of expertise--a pattern which depends on a number of forms of “soft discipline” operating together. In a system in which people exercise limited discretion under the gaze of others who judge the exercise of this discretion, it allows for consistency and avoids the reliance on punitive powers and overt authority, which would amount to simple authoritarianism, amateur decision-making, rather than decision-making backed by expertise. But if we combine the internal soft discipline of bureaucratic careerism with the discipline of subservience to party opinion and the additional discipline of the discipline of the community of experts, we produce a peculiar combination that guarantees a very considerable degree of uniformity, in which a soft system of discipline with mutually supporting mechanisms of control effectively smothers alternative opinion and excludes outsiders. Ideology is relevant here: Communism was in a peculiar sense a form of the ideology of expert rule which made as its centerpiece the full utilization of the powers of production, the conquest of nature, the claim to being scientific, the identification of party ideology with science and rationality, all of which were tremendously attractive to scientists in the west in the 1930s, so it should be no surprise that strong resistance was not the norm.

What does this have to do with civil society? A brief example from the area of agricultural history is relevant here. In pre-1914 Russia, a policy was promoted by the state to organize peasants into co-operative forms of production, credit and consumption, following a pattern that was well-established internationally. But this was, from the start, a policy in which the state sought to apply expert knowledge in order to reform peasants against the peasants’ self-perceived interests--to tutor their preferences, in the phrase used by Phillip Kitcher--in order to bring about some higher result. The problem they faced was that the cooperatives, though they involved a quarter of the peasant households, did not work very well, and were “marked by high rates of default, assemblies that rarely met, boards that lacked links in their communities, and associations that lacked active involvement of their members” (Kotsonis 1999: 137).

A few quotations will suffice to show the authoritarian tendencies in this model of expertise. At a congress of Zemstvos, one expert speaker said: “For the agronomist there can be no cooperatives as such. Cooperatives are for him only the means for achieving social and economic ends—the reorganization of the household” (quoted in Kotsonis 1999: 114). Another added that the goal was to “instill consciousness where it did not exist” (quoted in Kotsonis 1999: 114). The program required that the expert play a political role. “Who, if not the agronomist, should correct the errors of the independent activity of incompetent cooperative leaders, and defend the cooperatives from village kulaks and enemies” (quoted in Kotsonis 1999: 118). The agronomist was thus in a kind of competition for authority with local notables, defined them as enemies, and spoke for...
the “true” interests of the peasant against the peasants’ narrow individualism and profit-seeking.

The model of expertise here is one in which civil society, represented by the leadership of the local community, is an irrational obstacle to progress, which the expert must overcome. It is only a short step from this image of the role of the expert to the idea of a disciplined expert party, using propaganda to bring about the needed tutoring of preferences to enlist support and eliminate opposition, in order to bring about the full application of the expert’s knowledge. And it need hardly be added that by this logic the next need, coercion, is entirely justified. But it would be a mistake to overlook the significant role of education in this process. Success in this system for an individual came through becoming trained, and the Soviet regime put a great emphasis on literacy and technical education. This was the soft side of rule by experts, and it had a profound effect. But in the context of a coercive apparatus, education was itself a form of rule. And it is not surprising that in much of Eastern Europe, a central aim of the Communist restructuring after the war was to train working class students in such areas as economics, and to place working class scholars and party loyalists in positions of power in the educational system to assure that the apparatus of education did not turn into a locus of resistance to the state.

Yet there have been circumstances in which the kind of comprehensive application of expert power implied by this model seemed justified. An important element of the appeal of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe in the postwar period reflected the trauma of unemployment in the 1930s. The Soviet Union was seen, during the post war period as the sole success story in the face of the world economic crisis of the 1930s, and it was generally believed that this was due to the effective implementation of planning as a means of rationally organizing the Soviet economy. Of course, the idea of planning was fashionable throughout Europe and even in the United States. It was adhered to by Fascists and Nazis, but also by the Socialist parties in many of the smaller states. Hendrik DeMan, the socialist who turned Fascist in the course of the war, was an exponent of what he called planisme, and similar ideas gripped many scientists, especially in England, where a movement of scientists in support of socialist planning and the planning of science developed. This was a natural alliance, in a sense, because much of the admiration of the Soviet regime and of Communism had to do with the idea of technological conflicts of nature and the expansion of human powers. The war enhanced the reputation of planning, because under wartime circumstances all of the belligerents engaged in a massive amount of planning, economic controls, and massive programs of technological development based not on market competition or private initiative but on state direction. Planning in this sense implies comprehensiveness: there is no point to planning the economy without planning the inputs into the economy, and when these are inputs of human talent, this implies the planning of education and education for the purposes of the plan.

It is often said that the defining issue of the 19th century labor movement, and of the dominant socialist parties, was the shortening of workers’ hours. After it was achieved, the movements fragmented, especially in the 1920s. From this perspective, the great depression of the 1930s was a political Godsend: it created a new issue of equal power, namely employment. This was precisely what Communism did promise: to provide expert management of the economy in such a way that unemployment would
cease to exist. Moreover, the promise had a grounding in Oscar Lange’s famous economic theory of socialism (1938). The theory was, on the surface at least, validation of the claims that expert planners could indeed abolish unemployment and at the same time produce all of benefits and efficiencies possible under capitalism. Lange established that it was theoretically possible for socialist planners to set prices in a way that would mimic the effect of market without introducing the lags and uncertainties characteristic of the adjustments made by the market to new information in the form of prices, and at the same time enable the redistribution of the “social dividend”. If prices were defined by the experts, there would be no uncertainties, and prices could be adjusted without introducing uncertainties in ways that assured full employment.

The “planner” or expert in this model had a technical task which in practice would have been difficult to perform, but which in any case was never performed and never intended to be performed. Planners focused instead on fixing prices and distributing income in a way that assured employment. This dispensed with the market, of course, but it also dispensed with the surrogate for the market that Lange had imagined as part of his model, and in practice unemployment was avoided by simply granting state operated planned money from central funds to assure employment at levels necessary to avoid unemployment. What actually occurred, as Michael Polanyi shrewdly observed with respect to the Russian economy before the war, was a system in which planners listened to factory managers and took their estimates and integrated them into a “plan”. The system was in practice polycentric, driven more or less by self-set goals, as well as the larger goal of providing employment. Yet it was an economy “run by experts” who were governed by various forms of soft discipline, and in which the relevant expert knowledge, the knowledge of managers, was fed into a planning bureaucracy governed by the same soft discipline. There is a sense in which it “managed” in name only; it had no independent expert grounds for making decisions, but could only collate them. But the system nevertheless did allow for the influence of expert opinion to be felt, and this had important consequences in such areas as health care. It was expert opinion on a leash, the leash of soft discipline of state bureaucracies together with the harsher discipline of the party, but it was expert opinion nevertheless.

Is There a Lesson?

In one sense, this system of rule by a party of experts with control of a real administrative structure was a fulfillment of the Saint-Simonian dream, in which the enlightened actually ruled. And it worked to bring about the main results it aspired to unemployment was eliminated, and a certain level of technical sophistication and competence was reached and preserved. Why did it fail? It is easy enough to say that the experts were not really experts, they were deluded by their ideology, that their ideology was false, that the principles, for example those espoused by Lange, were not actually applied, and so forth.

But this is too simple. Utilizing, assessing, and organizing. Expertise is always a problem for politics. There is always an agency or trust problem to solve. To judge the claims of an expert or a body of experts with respect their absolute or scientific or metaphysical validity requires a God, or alternatively some sort of super expert, and not the ordinary citizens of real existing modern society. The Communist party assumed this role and failed, not surprisingly. Indeed, the Soviet model, understood purely as a scheme
of organizing expertise, seems, if not doomed to fail, to be a high risk system in which everything is bet on one order of things without mechanisms for either correction or for counterbalancing the system in case of error.

Nevertheless, the societies on which this model were tried were an attempt to reach out into a particular kind of future, a future with a significant role for expert knowledge. Perhaps the formula was, for the reasons I have indicated here, the wrong one. It is still quite unclear that anyone has discovered the right formula. Different administrative traditions and different institutional histories, some of them very particular, have enabled some countries and some political formations to handle expert knowledge successfully. But there may be some general lessons.

The Russian example mentioned above can serve us an ideal-typification of a common situation in the present development of civil society in the least developed areas of post-Communist Europe, in which a passive and resistive group of subjects respond to an institution, such as an NGO, created or subsidized for their benefit for purposes largely defined by experts who represent central authority or Western development bodies. Much can be said about this commonplace situation, but I will restrict myself to a simple case, based on a comment made by one of the many critics of the present focus on civil society, who regard it as neo-liberal ideology, and who suggest that post-Communism has been a failure: “for many citizens it is far from clear that their rights have been enhanced in any substantive way: the re-emergence of Rotary clubs is little consolation when you no longer have secure employment” (Hann1996: 9). Rotary clubs are paradigmatic bits of civil society NGO’s which fill the space between the family and the state. They serve the interests of businessmen, in that they enable them to meet socially, and cooperate on service projects. But they serve a great many other familiar purposes: people who come together and are practiced in working together can transfer this skill and the relations of trust they embody to other domains they have political potential that they would not otherwise have. They relate to one another as quasi-equals and democratically, in terms of formal procedures of decision-making, rather than in terms of competition or as members of families or parties. But they also serve as ready audiences for, and constraints on, experts. A typical Rotary Club’s activities includes luncheons with speakers. The speakers are disproportionately drawn from the ranks of local bureaucratic experts, often in relation to policy concerns. So these meetings serve as a means of the face to face transmission of knowledge, and allow for the expert and the members of the community to interact face to face as something like equals, under the rules of common membership and courtesy that the clubs embody.

Most of this is familiar from Tocqueville. But Tocqueville failed to grasp the knowledge aspect of these associations in the United States, even at the time that he wrote. To an astonishing extent, the associations which he admired had, like the present day Rotary clubs, significance as educational, or more precisely, knowledge transmission bodies. Masonic organizations such as the Eastern Star provided speakers who provided expert knowledge in a form that could be digested by the public. The famous American farmer’s movement, The Grange, was structured on the model of the Masons, complete with quasi-medieval “ranks” for its members, like the Masonic degrees. But the ranks were based on the attainment of knowledge: to achieve a rank required one to have mastered a body of scientific agricultural knowledge. So these organizations were not only a machine for the production of civility. They were part of a system of the personal
transmission of expert knowledge. And citizens with knowledge could respond to the state not only as equals but by dominating it by holding its offices, by judging its office holders, and by initiating policy.

In this role, then, they were a means of the democratization of knowledge. Why democratic? In some settings, of course, organizations like the Masons and religious confraternities have been anti-democratic in effect, serving as a means of elite dominance. In the United States, and more generally where there are a large number of such organizations, the effect is otherwise. The number of organizations makes a difference when the organizations overlap with respect to membership, so that people who found themselves excluded or out of sympathy with any one organization would belong to another organization with members from the first organization. Membership within the organizations was “democratic” in the sense that a certain degree of equality was assumed within the organization (as these organizations, which were either fraternal organizations or modeled in some fashion on fraternal organizations). “Brotherhood” was the term that many of these organizations used. A social world dense with such organizations was necessarily democratic in tone, since the overlap of fraternal memberships served to make almost everyone a member of a group that shared fraternal ties with a member of each of the other fraternal groups.

When they are sufficiently numerous and dense, they also serve as a means for producing a genuine public realm that respects the public/private distinction. A person who is a member of several organizations will be pushed by loyalty to manage, outside of the political arena, conflicts of interest, or to promote means of performing basic political acts, such as distributing political positions, on grounds that avoid conflict, such as merit. Thus these organizations can serve as a countervailing force to the kind of local political clientelism that is characteristic of state-centered political orders. And much of what they can do is a matter of knowledge and information. By serving as a means of transmitting knowledge about the technical issues facing the state, they serve as a means of producing transparency, enabling the public to respond effectively, and to recruit other experts to countervail against the state’s experts, if need be.

Thus when we discuss the absence of civil society, it is not merely a matter of the number of NGO’s, but of the capacities for political action that these organizations directly and indirectly serve to enhance: knowledge and access to knowledge, as well as the capacity to speak back to experts, are central to these capacities. It is very striking that development agencies in the Third world have been compelled to invent bodies that mimic these capacities in order to gain the co-operation of those whom they aim to help: to respect “local knowledge” claims and systems and democratize the development process by inclusion and respect for the knowledge of those affected by the development strategies, empowering them to talk back (cf. Frossard 2002: 140-41). So the Rotarians are a poor symbol of the triviality of the achievements of post-communist society. They are, instead, the paradigm of a kind of association that mediates between expertise and the people, and a creator of the kind of citizens who are capable of dealing with the state not as subjects but as competent and informed constrainers, as well as facilitators of the personal relations which allow for the flow of knowledge in both directions across networks of institutions. The state directed organizations of the Communist period were designed to provide services, but to preclude the use of the organizations to talk back to the state. Whether they can be converted to these new purposes is an open question.
One must be wary of nostalgia here. Though it is difficult to see how to replace the kind of political education the means of producing politically responsible citizens that associations like the Rotarians provide, these may no longer play the central role they once did. There may be other means of personal transmission of knowledge that will come to take the place of these older forms. The kind of civil society that may be needed today is a kind that perhaps is best exemplified by a current example. In 2001 an Airbus crashed in New York City, and questions about the cause of the crash were not easily answered. The culprit seemed to be the rudder, but it was not clear whether this was a technical flaw or a human error, and it was also unclear which kind of technical flaw or human error could have produced the crash. A typical expert bureaucratic agency in the United States, the National Transportation Safety Board, had the task of examining this question, and ordering remedies. But questions immediately arose about the validity of this agency’s initial conclusion. In response, an activist created a website which allowed for a public discussion by experts of various kinds, including pilots and engineers, which permitted the questioning on a technologically equal level, that is to say on an expert level, of the conclusions of the expert bureaucracy. This is itself, of course, a form of civil association, and one which has many more elaborate analogues, such as the World Wildlife Federation and Greenpeace. There is a sense in which these organizations are the real analogues to 19th century civil society.

Where this leaves us with respect to the larger question of development of civil society in Eastern Europe is not entirely clear, but it does pose a question about what sort of “civil society” is relevant. To the extent (and it is a large extent) to which these new forms of expert civil association are not national but are transnational and heavily weighted toward the participation of the most technologically developed countries with the largest bodies of independent experts, it suggests that becoming part of this network may be the necessary response to the 21st century expertized state. The need for the personal transmission of knowledge at the local level is not likely to vanish, however, nor is the need for forms of expertise that counter the state’s. Traditional “civil society” institutions are not the only means of doing this, but to deal with the complexity of the knowledge demands of the modern state without them requires a substantial alternative administrative tradition and structure, such as the French or German systems. The nomenklatura represented a failed solution to a genuine problem, not merely an ideological aberration. The irony is that a society that fully utilized knowledge, which the Communists aspired to, requires the independent institutions that it was so eager to destroy.

Bibliography


The phrase is associated with Irving Janis, who applied it to faulty decision-making, such as Kennedy’s decision to support the Bay of Pigs invasion and to the decision-making that went into the war in Vietnam (1982). It has been applied more recently to such fiascos as the Challenger disaster. These are American cases, but each represents a special kind of bureaucratic situation in which stake-holders function as a group and are in a position to ignore or exclude outside opinion which is usually treated as incompetent or hostile. These decisions contrast to the more typical case in the US, in which federalism leads to conflicts of policy which surface issues that outside experts as well as bureaucratic experts disagree in the public arena, often in the courts.