

When the Iron Curtain Melts

The democratic revolution in Eastern Europe has proceeded at a pace marked by startling swiftness and surprising ease.

In Poland, the Solidarnosc gained political ascendancy by electoral means. In the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, the ruling communist parties have conceded to popular pressure from the streets, and reorganized for free elections. In the Soviet Union, the constitutional guarantee for party supremacy is in the process of being repealed, opening the door to political pluralism. In Romania, a popular revolt successfully smashed the Ceausescu dictatorship.

Within weeks from the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, German unification has become not only inevitable but stunningly imminent.

The political map of the Cold War has become obsolete as the Churchillian "Iron Curtain" melts before intense popular political activism. That obsolescence unveils the essential madness that once propelled the arms race and validated dictatorial means on either side.

The categories of "East" and "West" have lost their utility in helping explain the significance of recent events: what we see is not the triumph of the "West" over the "East", of "capitalism" over "socialism". What we see is a transcendence from precisely those categories that once inhibited our view of the future.

The motors of contemporary developments in Europe are not the same as those that animated the Cold War. The vested bureaucratic interests and paralyzing

orthodoxies that have long stifled popular will are now being overthrown by mass actions. The democratic revolution in Eastern Europe is not the consequence of Cold War politics; it is its negation.

Central planning, in an earlier period, achieved measurable success: it eliminated poverty and gross inequity, modulated consumption, and concentrated the surplus product to finance industrialization. It achieved what no other regime form could: the rapid and massive mobilization of the productive forces to meet both the contingencies of war and the demands of industrial transformation.

Central planning brought the Eastern European societies up from primitive production to modernity, but not without torment. A state-directed economic development required the centralization of decision-making and political over-determination by the state. It created large numbers of technological workers, those that John Kenneth Galbraith described as the hitherto "unnaturally and unwillingly silent". This now articulate, innovative, imaginative, and increasingly numerous sector is the real force behind the unrest, the final source of discontent with a regime model that is at odds with the requirements of technological society.

What we witness in Eastern Europe today is an authentic revolution -- not against a nebulous vision called "socialism", but against the harsh and incompetent reality of statism. As such, it shares much with the popular upheavals against bureaucratic authoritarianism that have swept across the Third World in the preceding period.

Both the democratic revolutions in the Third World and those now jolting the centrally planned economies call forth the limits of state direction in assuring popularly acceptable forms of social development. The present technological phase can proceed only on the basis of the free activity of information processors and agents of productive innovation. Statism, whether in the form of state ownership of the means of production, authoritarian direction of productive activity, or fiscal restriction on innovation in a mature capitalist setting, has proven dysfunctional and attractive merely as the focus of discontent.

The comparison between the phenomenal events in Eastern Europe and

the dramatic upheaval at Edsa has been drawn – often haphazardly and unfairly. At the superficial level, there is, indeed, similarity: regimes were dislodged by mass political activity without much resort to arms. The Marcos regime, as a directive state, has become dysfunctional to social development, in the same manner that the central planning regimes in Eastern Europe have become liabilities to the efficient pursuit of prosperity.

But the Eastern Europeans are waging their democratic revolution from the grounds of effective social equality. Our popular democratic struggle has yet to advance to a point where there is full consciousness of the oligarchy as the principal target of the rebellion.

