Why Communism Lacked "Information Flow": A Theoretical Analysis

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Formulation of the Problem

Every political authority, both in democratic and undemocratic regimes, needs information in order to efficiently exercise the duties of governors or rulers, and reproduce the status quo to maintain power. However, there is a significant difference between democratic and undemocratic regimes with regard to information flow and with respect to how power-holders are kept informed.

In this paper I intend to answer two questions: firstly, what factors, if any, influenced information flow under the communist regime; and secondly, the methods used by communist elites, those in charge of decision-making processes, to collect information to aid those decision-making processes themselves.

I start my analysis by briefly enumerating the main sources of information used for governance in a democratic regime. Then, employing Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems, I approach the problem of information flow in a communist regime, starting with the description of the communist system and the role of the Party. Afterwards, I will look at the communist economy and analyze its structure as well as the status of money (a means of exchange) and the failure of its role in the socialist market as an "informative device of society" (see Friedrich Hayek). Secondly, The sphere of formal organizations is then analyzed and how these organizations have replaced the institutions of civil society. In this section I will refer by and large to Edmund Wnuk-Lipinski's works on the monocentric mass society. I conclude the essay with brief enumera-

tion of the main informative channels (institutions) which were at the disposal of the communist rulers.

Information Flow in an Open Democratic System

One of the many attributes of open democratic systems is the easy and inclusive access to information. Many people and organizations, both private and commercial, make a living by selling information. Information is also a side effect of the everyday performance of many organizations and institutions, especially economic ones. Of course, such information has to be gathered and properly computed in order to be rendered intelligible to a wider audience, including the unemployment rate, flow of capital on the stock market, and the increase or decrease in market prices. Apart from the economy, the institutions of civil society work as mechanisms which generate information, by aggregating the will and interests of society and transmitting them upward.

If we assume, for the simplicity of this analysis, that the main goal of every government is to maintain power, then it is very likely that we agree on the fact that the attainment of this goal depends on the informative feedback that power-holders receive regarding their policy. In the case of democratic regimes, which are based on the competition of contradictory interests expressed by different groups and institutions, it seems to be a relatively easy task, especially if democracy is accompanied by a free and open market economy. In such regimes the power-holder has to rely on four main sources of information: 1) the free media, which plays an enormously important role as a 'watchdog' of democracy as well as being responsible for the distribution of democracy; 2) the institutions of civil society independent from government, such as trade unions, churches or political parties, which bridge the microlevel of social organization (families, peer groups, etc.) and the macrolevel (nations, states) by transmitting the interests of individuals upward; 3) political opposition; and 4) the free economy, probably the most crucial spring of information, which if uninterrupted by political intervention, generates a large amount of information through the mechanism of markets, through the circulation and accumulation of capital or the increase and decrease of prices.

In such cases, all governments have to do is be sensitive and open to criticism, voiced from competitors in the political sphere and press, as well as observe the main trends in the economy and match them with the interests of society. No matter how naive it may sound, in the context of information flow, democracy provides more comfortable circumstances for governments than undemocratic systems. How then does the information flow in a communist regime differ from the one in a democracy?

Communism: The Party's Inclusion into The System

According to Niklas Luhmann (1994: 30-42), society is a system which organizes every possible communication connection between people. This system can be divided into subsystems including politics, economies, science, religion and many others. In an open democratic society, these subsystems are independent from each other, in the sense that one cannot be substituted for the other. However, they are also interdependent since they reproduce themselves. Yet, in order to reproduce, subsystems must communicate with (react to) their environment, namely other subsystems. This communication has a very peculiar character. Each subsystem has its own, typical code of communication. Every piece of information which enters a subsystem is transferred into its own code, and by the same token, information which leaves a subsystem, is expressed by means of the same code. Such codes are bilateral, which means that they are built on a pair of opposite, mutually excluding values. For example the code of a political system would be 'maintaining power - losing power'; the code of economy would be 'benefit - loss'; the code of science would be 'true - false'. This situation is typical for an open democratic system. How then, if at all, can a communist system be described in terms of Luhmann's theory of social systems?

At first glance, one can say the nature of communism lies in the hierarchical and central character of the system. However, this explanation does not exhaust the whole complexity of the communist system. The identity of communism as a social system was built on the total inclusion of the communist party into any sphere of public, and, to a limited extent, private life. Using Luhmann's theory, we could say that the party code (communist - hostile) was introduced into every subsystem: politics, economy, science, civil society, etc. This party inclusion may be

analyzed in many possible dimensions: as the inclusion of the ideological discourse; as the inclusion of party social capital (the system of the so-called nomenklatura; understood as the approval of people appointed to the most important posts in the state and public administration as well as the economic infrastructure); and as the inclusion of different social institutions which originated from communist ideology, like common ownership in economy (which was in fact state ownership) or state initiated formal substitutes of civil society. All those dimensions of party inclusion, in both the state and public spheres, resulted in an ontology of communism, which subsequently contributed to the difference in information flow between communist and democratic regimes.

Non-quantitative (Communist) Economy

> *If we are content to justify capitalist economies in terms of success rather than nature, the main argument of Marxist analysis that sets it apart from other economic theories remains, namely that the economy conceives its own self-description, represents itself in its own theory, and from this regulates internal and external references. The disaster of the socialist planned economy only teaches us that there are no exceptions* (Luhmann 1998: 9).

Alain Besancon (1984) divides the communist economy into three roughly autonomous sectors. The first one, where the whole sector of military production was located, was given priority by communist rulers. The status of the Soviet bloc as an international superpower relied mainly on that sector. According to Besancon, this sector was governed in accordance with the rule of maintaining power, which in economic terms meant that costs of production were disregarded and did not play any role in calculations. The second sector provided for the needs of Soviet citizens within which, as Besancon argues, the great social experiment of building the communist system was being brought about. The third sector, unlike the two previous ones, was not subjected to the rule of communist ideology. This consisted of the remains of the capitalist economy under communism and was temporarily accepted by the communist rulers (Besancon 1984: 19-27).

Only the last sector was regulated and shaped by a logic, which slightly resembled the mechanisms of a market economy, while the first two were governed in accordance to a completely different logic, namely that of political economy. This logic included such phenomena as different prices for the same commodity. In the communist economy, the price depended on who was the receiver of the product, not on the cost of production. For example, the price of coal depended on whether it was exported outside the Soviet bloc, exchanged in barter for different goods within it, delivered to another state-owned economic entity or sold to a private purchaser. The same product could have four different exchange rates.

Moreover, money, as a means of economic exchange, was administratively divided and rigidly assigned to different budgets and funds without any flexibility and possibility of transfer. For example, it was centrally decided how money, transferred from the central budget to a local economic entity, would be spent and on what. A local entity having different budgets (one for salaries, one for development and investment, one welfare and leisure activities) could not move money from one to another. According to Jadwiga Staniszkis (1989: 28), this phenomenon contributed to the fact that money was a means of exchange but could not be accumulated in a form of capital due to its diversified character.

Owing to the administrative division of the economy, the socialist market lacked one important feature: it was not quantitative, since the political decisions could not be conveyed by a means of economic variables. The prices of goods were not calculated in accordance with the costs of production, but were determined by political decisions. Money lost its role as capital and its circulation could not represent the transactions conducted within the market. As a result, the market ceased to perform its function of the informative device of society (see Friedrich von Hayek).

This had very serious consequences for the central governing of the whole state economy. First of all, statistics had a purely figurative meaning and did not resemble the actual state of affairs — the highly politicized economy — since it could not be conveyed in the language of quantitative economic variables. This made the economy unmanageable due to the complexity and amount of variables and factors, which had to be taken into consideration, along with unavoidable pathologies. In this

context, the fact of forging official statistics, which was a common practice, became a secondary importance.

Luhmann (1998: 9) sums up this part of the analysis perfectly: "Whatever is economics can be determined only within the economy. If politics wants to be informed, then it has to let the economy work. Otherwise it can see only the reflection of whether its own economic plans have been accomplished or not."

Official Substitute for Civil Society

Apart from the fact that the socialist economy was non-quantitative, it also ceased to serve as a mechanism of class structuring. This, accompanied by the ban on freedom of association, resulted in the emergence of a particular type of society, which Wnuk-Lipinski (1989; 1991) calls 'monocentric mass society'.

According to Wnuk-Lipinski (1989: 10), a perfect monocentric mass society can be characterized by: 1) central control over organizational structure; where only formal, officially approved institutions can exist; 2) blockade of social dynamics, which in the capitalist system is activated by a free market, and the consequent atrophy of class structure; 3) isolation of small social groups resulting from the ban on freedom of association; and 4) the pathology of the group-generating process in formal institutions.

Such a situation had significant consequences on the information flow in the Soviet communist regime. The lack of a free market and the total incorporation of the public sphere by the officially approved and initiated set of formal organizations and institutions erased civil society from the communist system. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, civil society plays an important role in the coordination and regulation of group interests. This role is performed by the set of institutions which aggregate and transmit the wills and interests of different groups upward. The institutions of civil society bridge two levels of social structures: the microlevel, where interests are being originally formulated and shaped, and the macrolevel, where aggregated interests are converted into policy and, in the form of laws, implemented downward. In the context of information flow, civil society channels communication between the elementary units of each society and its political governors.

However, the communist system lacked this 'natural' layer of grassroots institutions (so-called mesolevel of social organization), because it was replaced with a set of formal organizations, which were totally subordinated to the communist party. This situation had a large impact on the characteristics of the microstructures in the communist system and indirectly on the information flow.

According to Wnuk-Lipinski (1989: 15-16), under the communist regime, microstructures were 1) isolated from each other; 2) informal structures started to appear within formal organizations; 3) microstructures provided a forum for a 'behind-closed-doors' articulation of group interests; and 4) pathologies of informal groups existing within formal organizations were quite common. These characteristics of microstructures resulted in the phenomenon of a sociological void, as (see Stefan Nowak in Wnuk-Lipinski 1989: 17). According to Nowak, Polish society in the late seventies was a federation of primary groups within a national community since identification with the formal organization and institutions ceased to exist.

Wnuk-Lipinski (1989: 17-18) argues that the phenomena of sociological voids can be interpreted as "severe crises of institutions, or, more precisely, as a growing contradiction between the restrictions imposed from above on the institutional forms or collective life, on the one hand, and the interests and aspirations of various more or less structuralized social macrogroups. This was the most influential factor, which contributed to the sharp split between the spheres of public and private life. Wnuk-Lipinski (1989: 18) called this split social dimorphism.

Social dimorphism had one important consequence for the information flow. First of all, as mentioned above, communism lacked the channel of communication in the form of independent institutions of civil society. Secondly, the independent, alternative, unofficial process of communication and interest formation took place on the level of microstructures within informal small primary groups ('behind-closed-door' articulation as Wnuk-Lipinski puts it). Due to the fact that these processes could not enter the structures of official organizations, a so-called second circulation of political, cultural and economic ideas appeared. These types of circulation protected themselves from the intervention of the party apparatus by a means of conspiracy, widening the gap between the public and private sphere.

It is worth mentioning that in the case of the sphere of civil society and social structure we can observe a very similar tendency as the one in the economy, namely the disappearance of its communicative function. The radical implementation of state-approved and initiated organizations, on the one hand, and the dismantling of civil society, on the other, resulted in the withdrawal of the articulation of group interests from the public to the private sphere, and the emergence of the structures by and large inaccessible by state agents.

However, it is worth mentioning that the dividing line between the official and the unofficial sphere existed also within formal institutions, resulting in overwhelming and omnipresent corruption. Antoni Z. Kaminski (1991) calls this phenomenon privatization of the state. According to Kaminski (1991: 248-261), under communism, individuals or groups exploited existing opportunities and resources provided by the state and its institutions for their own purposes. These people might have been politically active, overtly accepting the state ideology, but they used their political positions to promote the interest of their families and of allied primary groups.

It is especially important to realize that the interests gave birth to informal alliances and groups built on kin and peers relations, which also served as communication networks. These informal networks facilitated the information flow along the horizontal dimension of communist society, between different entities of the public sphere. They were especially crucial for the reproduction of the socialist economy, which permanently suffered from the shortage of goods, not always efficiently distributed by the Central Planning Committee. However, it is somewhat paradoxical and, by the same token interesting, that these functional mechanisms were considered by top party and state rulers to be syndromes of the anarchisation of the middle rank party and state apparatus. It would be extremely interesting to analyze the extent to which rulers of communist regimes were aware of the functional role of these informal networks in the reproduction of the system. Moreover, it would also be beneficial to investigate to what extent the central party apparatus intentionally allowed their existence and to what extent it was an uncontrollable phenomenon, existing beyond the scrutiny of the Central Committee of the communist party.

Two features of communism which influenced the information flow have to be pointed out again. Firstly, civil society was, by and large,

incorporated by the official, formal set of institutions approved by the Party. Secondly, the process of the formation of interests was blocked on the level of small social groups. In this case, the lack of an independent, free press is of lesser importance, since there were no institutionalized groups, which interests in the press could represent. Nevertheless, the press and other types of media of mass communication, like TV and radio, existed but the whole sphere was a thoroughly censored system. The censorship of official media indeed contributed to the deformation of the information flow. As mentioned above, the phenomenon of the second circulation appeared as a counteraction to censorship. However, it is intriguing that even the power-holders were interested in the content of the independent political press issued by various opposition movements. For example, in the 1980's, in the special office called Biuro Studiew (The Bureau of Studies) located within the structure of Sluzba Bezpieczenstwa (the main part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which used to scrutinized Polish society), the opposition press was thoroughly analyzed, and eventually summarized in a form of a short resume, which was later distributed to the top communist elite (Widacki 1992: 15-16; Beres, Skoczylas 1991: 196, 206).

How The Communists Knew What Was Going On

I shall now change my perspective and try to briefly tackle the question: *by what means did communist elites manage to collect information?*

According to Alain Besancon (1976: 23), communist rulers lived in the world of ideological fiction. The real state of affairs was beyond their consideration since what mattered to them was the full implementation of the ideologically designed project of communism. It is worth pointing out that Besancon's reasoning is based on at least two assumptions, both very vulnerable to critique. First of all, it appears to be a rule of thumb that in any political system, there are individuals who are cynical and use ideology as a facade for maintaining power and attainment of their own private goals. Secondly, the strength of communists' beliefs in the emancipating power of communist ideology varied along the process of the system's evolution, which weakened toward the end (see Zybertowicz 1994).

Moreover, one cannot be satisfied with Besancon's explanation, since it does not fit the assumption concerning the main goal of power-holders

in any kind of regime. It was assumed that maintaining power is the main task of any type of political elite. To a limited extent, this goal is to be achieved by receiving necessary information feedback. As it was pointed out in the analysis above, the communist elites lacked such feedback due to ontological peculiarities of the communist system, such as a planned economy and civil society which was replaced with a set of formal organizations loyal to the communist party. In the case of communism, "natural" (spontaneous and grass-rooted) information flow did not exist, and therefore, it had to be artificially simulated by institutions especially designed and used for that purpose.

In Poland there were three main central institutional structures which used to work as informative channels, upon which the communist elites relied on:

1)The party channel, which at least in the case of Poland was located within the structure of the Organizational Faculty (Wydzial Organizacyjny). This channel collected information about economic situations in local factories as well as social situations and 'moods' of the workers and local communities. It was a highly hierarchical channel, which on a daily basis transferred information from the local party apparatus, like Town Committees or Village Committees, to the Central Committee;

2)Governmental institutions and administrations, which mainly collected economic data, such as the Central Statistical Office (Glewny Urzad Statystyczny) or certain specific ministerial channels;

3)The Secret Police (Sluzba Bezpieczenstwa), which was a part of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. The Secret Police should be distinguished from other government structures due to it size. It is estimated that in the 1980's SB —popular abbreviation of Sluzba Bezpieczenstwa — had around 24, 000 employees, who used to work with up to 100, 000 informants (see: Zybertowicz 1993, 1998, Los and Zybertowicz 2000). Owing to the sharp split between the public and the private sphere and as a result of its confidential character of information exchange (the so-called second circulation), the Secret Police seemed to be the most effective instrument for collecting information. This may explain the size of this institution, as well as the importance attached to it by the communist elites. However, it must be realized that its role was not bound to invigilation and oppression of independence movements, but included gathering information on a wide scope of issues, from economic data to public

opinion (for more about the role of the secret service in communist systems see: Los and Zybertowicz 2000).

However, the set of institutions (informative channels) varied among countries as well as during the evolution of the system. For example, in Poland, after the martial law was imposed in December 1981, different army structures were extensively used in order to gather information about society. It is also worth mentioning that in Poland in the 1980's, one could observe a radical shift in the rulers' attitude towards information. At the beginning of the 1980's, the new elite, and especially General Wojciech Jaruzelski, introduced a completely new policy towards information. A lot of attention was devoted to that matter. New institutions were established to serve the informative purposes of power-holders — such as the Centrum Badania Opinii Spolecznej, the first soviet block state-affiliated public opinion research center that worked for the communist elite. Existing institutions were enlarged, and for instance, a new Faculty of Information (Wydzial Informacji) was established within the Party structures. The secret police (SB) was also reconstructed and enlarged. There was also a great amount of consultant and analytical boards affiliated with the government, the communist party or other central institutions (for a complete description of the informative channels at the disposal of the communist elite in the 1980's see: Nalaskowski 2000).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the phenomenon of the information flow in the communist system. It was pointed out that the information flow in communism was influenced by 1) a lack of a free market economy, which was substituted by central-planned economy; the market in the central-planned economy failed to perform the role of informative devise, since the prices did not represent the cost of production but political decisions; and money was administratively divided, which hindered the processes of accumulation and circulation; 2) an abscence of a civil society, which was erased from the system and replaced with a set of institutions totally loyal to the communist party; consequently, the articulation of group interests was blocked on the level of microstructures, like families or groups of fellow colleagues. All in all, it resulted in the peculiar information flow, upon which communist elites had to rely on with specialy

designed informative channels (institutions) in order to collect information and feedback on their policies.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that the role, performance, structure and effectiveness of the informative channels is a fascinating field of study hitherto completely neglected by scholars.

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