

Khrushchev's Ears of Corn and the Expectations about the New Local Soviets

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In Soviet studies the elitistic democracy concept has run aground and the administrative theories don't necessarily work as expected. In fact, we know no theory capable of explaining the changes within the local level. This article argues that the shortcomings of existing theories are no reason why one shouldn't study social phenomena in the Soviet Union.

When Nikita Khrushchev visited Finland in June 1957, he also paid a visit to a farm in Orimattila, about 80 km north-east of Helsinki. Since he had been promoter of agricultural affairs, he benevolently wanted to offer his help to the farmer, and advised him to start growing corn. He even promised to send over ears of corn and an expert from Moscow to provide the necessary tutoring¹.

In reality, Khrushchev was no expert on agriculture at all, although otherwise known to be an honorable man. Luckily for Finland, the advice he gave was meant as suggestions. Nevertheless, the times were such that at least one courteous attempt had to be made, when such a high authority had suggested it. Within the Soviet Union however, Khrushchev's directions were carried out — with sad consequences².

THE NOMENCLATURE IS STILL THERE

Uninitiated instruction no longer prospers in today's joint-creaking Soviet Union — although the Kremlin leaders don't always want to admit it. The commanders of yesterday are no longer welcome at the local level, not even when they try to appear in the shape of modern administration consultants. Also within Soviet studies the old elitistic concept of democracy, according to which a struggle for power between elitistic groups could replace civic participation, has stranded.

The representatives of the uppermost party elite don't seem to be experts of any branch other than the nomenclature. It is in this light that Gorbachev should be regarded, because he has given his support to many of the central economical and political reforms only when he has been forced to. Besides, Gorbachev is above all the representative of the central power and a guarantor of the credibility of the CPSU.

The 'progressive' Boris Yeltsin is often regarded as Gorbachev's counterpoise. In fact, Yeltsin's expertise lies in the same skills that were used by all the rest of party elite in the mid 80's: using their elbows. What other way would there in fact have been to ascend to the party elite in those days? Yeltsin's goals, presented mostly in Shatalin's 500 day programme, have been unspecific, and rather seem to resemble Khrushchev's ears of corn³. After his victory of June 1991 Yeltsin is more powerful than ever. Now he has to show how to carry out his radical promises. For the time being, though, he seems to be doing just the opposite⁴.

Could even the economist Gavriil Popov be called a radical? A few years ago already he wondered who could be against the Perestroika, since everyone was supportive of it. Popov now rules over the City of Moscow, but he has made no serious attempt at implementing any programme which couldn't be supported by the Russian or alternatively the Soviet government. Apart from radical and cajoling talks about a market economy, Gavriil Popov has few real achievements to show⁵.

The ruling elite consists of the representatives of the CPSU nomenclature as well as their radical rivals for power. Credit has to be given to the radicals for pointing out the sore points, but at the same time their existence undeniably legitimizes another existence — that of the nomenclature. The programmes that both parties have set forth so far have been mere

Khrushchevian ears of corn, and the situation is not likely to change very rapidly. Without a CPSU, the changes promoted by the central power won't happen. Therefore, attention should now be focussed on the areas outside Moscow where the ground is being laid for future changes.

ADMINISTRATIVE THEORIES DON'T NECESSARILY WORK

In the Soviet Union, there were local soviet elections in March-May of last year. The local soviet members elected in these elections received a yet unknown power of discretion, providing the basis for the creation of a new political order in the USSR. Not only is the power monopoly of the CPSU falling apart, giving way to a large variety of different opinions. The great change is that local problems will now be solved at local level, by virtue of the new laws⁶. It is a matter of creating a whole new political system, the equivalents of which in the rest of Europe were often created already in the 19th century⁷.

A study of the local level brings information not only on the processes in the USSR, but on the formation of societal phenomena in general. The changes taking place in the local authorities also raises interesting questions with a larger significance to social sciences. One can say that recent research on the USSR can be characterized as a large diversity of theories on the present state of things, none of which has strong evidence. Everyday routines of the local soviets easily remain distant to researchers, and many of its features are still obscure.

Another state of things making it difficult to see what is really going on is the rapidity of the changes taking place within the formal machinery and among political practices. Existing administrative theories and models do not necessarily work as expected. So far, we know no theory capable of explaining the changes within the Soviet local administration.

A FEW ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF GLASER AND STRAUSS

What shape the new political system will take depends on the decisions made and the measures taken by the new members of the local soviets. Old political practices are giving way

to new ones, which can be seen empirically. Thus the position of the local administration changes, and its scope of action changes by virtue of its new tasks.

That is precisely why the activity of the members of the local soviets is of crucial importance. Their political goals as well as their means for reaching these determine the contents of the new political practices and the position of the local administration. The members of the local soviets indicate the direction of the changes, but also their own inherent potential.

Problems are rising, when the administrative theories do not necessarily work the way one expects. Thus, research will find it difficult to adopt a logical-deductive approach, because a situation might come about where the epistemological assumptions do not correspond to reality. For this reason, a logical-deductive approach doesn't seem fruitful now in Soviet studies.

Since it seems difficult to use analytic concepts in a logical-deductive way, methods such as eg. Barney G. Glaser's and Anselm L. Strauss' Grounded Theory method become interesting. This method is based on regularities found within an empiric body of data⁸. It has been described as a systematic research on how to collect and analyse qualitative data for the purpose of creating a theory. I am not saying here that the Grounded Theory would be the only and conclusive method for Soviet studies. What I mean is that the shortcomings of existing theories are no reason why one shouldn't study social phenomena in the Soviet Union.

A STRONG INFRASTRUCTURE OR THE KHRUSHCHEV'S EARS OF CORN

We know rather little about the changes outside Moscow. Therefore it would be all the more important to create a system which would enable us to evaluate how the intended reforms come true. In this context, the difference between the expectations of the local soviet members and the way things really turn out becomes an important target of research. It may seem a modest thing to start with. That may be the case, but the generating of a theory will come in its wake.

Discharging the old elite from their offices seems to be one of the rare tools of structural reforms. To create prerequisite for permanent influence, the local bodies need most of all time

to make mistakes and learn what freedom from implementation means. Only a solid infrastructure controlled by the local level can serve to guarantee the possibilities of controlled privatization.⁹ This principle, which makes a strong economy possible, is not directed from above by administrative decrees. The prerogatives of a durable development are created on the local level.

The ones responsible for this development are the new members of the local soviets. When the elitistic democracy concept no longer works within research, attention is focussed — also on the local level — on other things than the conflict between the progressive and the conservative. It becomes more important to find out what steps and measures are contributory to a solid infrastructure and what measures are only Khrushchevian ears of corn.

REFERENCES

1. Helsingin Sanomat 11.6.1957
2. Alexei Adzhubey has described Khrushchev's work in novel »Te desjat let«, published in Znamya 6 and 7/1988.
3. See Shatalins program. The supreme soviet gave support to this program last September meanwhile the authors disclaimed it.
4. See Pravda 24.4.1991. Gorbatshev, Jeltsin and eight republic leaders made an appeal, in which they disapproved economical and political strikes.
5. Gavriil Popov's most popular reforms are very symbolic, like changing the names of streets. See also a study by Oleg Saveljev, who is responsible for research of public opinions for the city soviet in Moscow.
6. New laws concerning local self-administration and economy (zakona o mestnom samoupravlenii i mestnom hosjaistve). Still, we should keep in mind Bahry's and Silver's conclusion, that perestroika, glasnost and democratization are directed at reshaping traditional regime norms. See Bahry, D. & Silver, B.: »Party Reform in the USSR« (Comparative Political Studies 2/1990).
7. See Gross, Feliks: The End of the Communist Parties, pp. 17—18 (Il Politico, 1/1990).
8. Glaser B. & Strauss, L.: The Discovery of Grounded Theory, pp. 3—5 (The Aldine Publishing Company, USA 1980).
9. see Pravda 12.9.1990. Gorbatshev is said to prefer Shatalins program to Ryzhkov's, but he still seems trying to implement the latter.