

Veljko Rus

Between Anti-Communism and Post-Socialism

(Med antikomunizmom in postsocializmom, Knjižna zbirka Teorije in prakse, FDV, 1992)

The incredible social dynamics of the last few years undoubtedly demands quick reflexes. Veljko Rus is in the "top category" when it comes to such books. His interpretations of concentrated Slovenian history and reactions to it come to readers with the speed of newspaper presses, or even with the electronic speed of other media. His interpretation was so swift that it often appeared provocative. The most characteristic example of this is his appearance on national television before the end of the ten-day war, when he called attention to the fact that in modern societies, two complementary processes of differentiation and integration are constantly in progress, which is why even in moments of secessionary victory, integrative processes must be taken into consideration.

The urgency of interpretation is proportionate to the influence on events and Rus is undoubtedly fully aware of this. He is therefore not content with mere observation, i.e. with contemporaneous publicist pronouncements, but wants to act at a moment when his interpretation can still change the course of events. The decision to publish such swift interpretations is something of a risk as it enables a "post factum" verification of their adequacy. With the exception of some texts - which were written to have a contemporary political influence - most of the texts are still relevant. This undoubtedly indicates a depth of interpretation as well as the fact that we are dealing with matters that cannot be settled overnight, as these are long-term processes determining the structure of Slovenian society.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter entitled "Between Reform and Revolution" contains urgent, politically motivated texts which are familiar to all those who follow Rus contributions in the "political press". The second chapter, "Privatisation and Participation" deals with the central theme of post-socialism. Just as important is the third chapter, "Socialised Society" which deals with some innovative concepts such as "social services". In the fourth chapter, "Education as a Private and Public Good" the author deals with the "social service" which is in the long-term undoubtedly the most important.

The book contains texts dealing with "epoch-making" changes of the last few years, without inappropriate pathos on the one hand or dull academic discourse on the other, but rather in a way that is attractive to "lay" readers. This quality of style is especially important as the author's aim is obviously to translate the knowledge of the academic community to the political public. The translation of academic knowledge into the more readily understandable language of publicism is in my opinion the best means of putting academic knowledge to use. In this fashion the necessary system interpenetration is carried out, which makes such writing even more worthwhile in transition periods when consistent interpretations of complex social events are even rarer and as such all the more desired.

Despite the great heterogeneity of the published texts, the author's guiding light is clear - an attempt to prevent "history from repeating itself", i.e. to provide the Slovenian post-socialist society with a better starting position. The author's analysis of "the past and the present" is thus directed into a productive eclecticism, attempting to selectively screen the heritage of the former "transition" period so that the current "transition" period would not remain in an empty space of a general anti-communist sentiment of those who are incapable of evaluating social institutions in any way other than through the simple two-way ideological black and white selectivity.

It is in this light that Rus also discusses post-socialist "taboo" subjects. When dealing with non-economic aspects of property he stresses Tawney's thesis according to which the same form of property can carry out different social functions. He also takes this into consideration when dealing with the utopian social property. He connects the discussion of participation as a very important innovation of modern (non-socialist) systems with selfmanagement, which is well known to us yet almost erased from our memory. He even discusses such institutions as self-management interest communities and also often cites Marx. In short, his method is uninhibited and for many of the cautious "present-day dogmatists" is perhaps even "suspiciously pluralist".

A further quality of the books is also the author's critical attitude towards the so-called magic words (Europe, privatisation) which are ideological and yet so attractive as to appear even in more "serious" writing. According to Rus this occurs above all because reflection is still most often oriented towards a critique of the past and anticipation of the future and less to the conceptualisation of the present. The flight from the present is a consequence of the transition from eschatological, Bolshevik and Catholic patterns of thought and the lack of a pragmatic Protestant sense of active thought, i.e. of shaping the present. Frequent negative definitions, which are also a consequence of a lack of orientation towards the present, and an inability to provide positive definitions are also an integral part of this context. The use of the prefix "anti" is a sure sign of powerlessness or of the inability to inhabit the space vacated by the sudden collapse of socialism. At this point Rus offers a less propagandist or a more neutral prefix "post", which is surely a more acceptable solution. Even though discussions of post-communism, post-industrialism and postmodernism derive from a negative definition or from the presupposition of a certain end, such a neutral attitude nevertheless creates a beneficial climate for uninhibited combinations of the past and the future in the present.

This lack of inhibition is most evident in the chapter on privatisation and participation where the author deals with non-economic functions of property, subjects which are marginal in current debates even though it is patently obvious that these questions cannot be dealt with inside one subsystem, the economy. Rus does not accept such simplifications, but the question remains whether his efforts for a widening of the debate can ever be successful. It seems that the general climate is inclined to simplifications and the sudden adoption of the privatisation law is an indication of this. It is obvious that the "refolution" (Rus' term for a variant between revolution and reform) has already achieved such a high degree of

complexity that even possible improvements, which presuppose a further increase in the complexity of the social system, will be understood above all as a disturbance. For this reason one might think that among the very heterogeneous themes and levels of discussion, these issues would deserve a more central place in the book. There can be no doubt that this theme is crucial to unravelling the intense processes in the space between anti-communism and post-socialism.

This review cannot address all the different subjects dealt with in the book. This is especially true of the first part, made up of politically critical texts and touching on all the basic dilemmas of post-socialist Slovenia. Because of their polemic nature the texts sometimes lack a more comprehensive definition of particular questions. For example, Rus criticises discussions of the necessity for the opening of Slovenian society, which is most often reduced to the demand to "join Europe". Discussion of this crucial question seems thoroughly inadequate to Rus, hence his emphasis on the need for a more comprehensive strategy of international integration transcending cooperation on the bilateral level in order to develop the direct participation of various social institutions. This question, which is undoubtedly essential to Slovenian society, deserves greater elaboration in the book.

A similar conclusion holds with regard to another relevant thesis, namely that a multiparty system does not do away with the monopoly of the political subsystem over other subsystems. The author seems to point to one of the most fateful post-socialist misunderstandings. Relying on the presupposition that the political system is capable of solving complex problems of modern societies can lead to a disregard of the non-political social activity of civil society. Rus stresses the necessity of an operative protection of individual human rights, as only this creates the conditions for the development of modern decentralised systems or the basis of a liberal democratic society. In this context he gives a radical critique of "abstract non-political humanism", which was supposedly incapable of instrumentally articulating human rights, which led to their severe transgression in its name. This is undoubtedly a theme which calls for a more detailed analysis, for it seems to me that - with the exception of narrower academic circles - speaking of a "retarding role of humanism" could lead to substantial misunderstandings.

As I mentioned at the outset, the book is not intended solely for experts; its purpose is to forge a link between professional circles and the interested public. Some of the formulations it contains could therefore hardly be categorised as expert. What is also obvious is the varied level of theoretical substantiation. Some texts are motivated by day-to-day politics and consequently short-term, while others are more theoretical and long-term. The author does not try to hide this nature of the text; on the contrary, he draws the readers' attention to it in the introduction.

Attention should also be drawn to the author's somewhat surprising yet nevertheless contagious optimism when he deals with the postmodern elements of Slovenian society. Even though these theses are based on some empirical data, it seems that such discussions are more the result of a positive "wishful thinking" syndrome than of genuine analysis. The

author's comparison of Slovenia to the Scandinavian countries could be evaluated in a similar fashion. The same is also true of his meagre analysis of the accentuated nationalist dimensions of current Slovenian social affairs; this would quickly lead him to the most obvious traditionalist, i.e. pre-modern elements of post-socialism in Slovenia. Lastly, the author's publicist work can be understood as a basic and continuous reaction to manifest and latent traditionalism as articulated by those political protagonists who are most often the target of his critiques.

"Between Anti-communism and Post-socialism" is a document of a critical sociologist attempting through his published writings to be at once "inside and outside". Only rarely do people succeed in maintaining this undoubtedly very difficult position. More common modalities are cynicism or distance from often quite burlesque events. This is why this book cannot be evaluated by professional criteria alone. It has to be seen in the context of the conditions which shaped it and which it in turn shaped and continues to shape. Precisely this duality, so characteristic of critical sociological texts, is strongly evident in this case and is undoubtedly one of its main characteristics.

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