

VIEWPOINT

Uncivil society

By John Feffer

From the Hungarian uprising to the Solidarity trade union movement, the struggles of Eastern Europeans in the '80s provided inspiring examples of the extraordinary influence that "ordinary" people can have on the flow of history. Although drawing from varied intellectual and political sources, these movements from below all wished to avoid the evils of contemporary ideological systems and to infuse a higher social responsibility into civic activities, as in Vaclav Havel's exhortation to "live in truth."

Today, sadly, much of the spirit of '89 has dissipated. Most Eastern Europeans are presently living not in truth but in despair. Yugoslavia, as we know, has been torn apart. Racism and xenophobia have surged throughout the region. From Poland to Albania, economies are being cattle-prodded toward capitalism, with the predictable result of rising unemployment, declining living standards and all the proliferating ills of divided societies.

Even democratic elections, those precious victories of 1989, have yielded insulated parliaments and declining voter turnouts, as indifference has rapidly replaced civic activity. Liberal authoritarians—from the increasingly confrontational Boris Yeltsin to the always unpredictable Lech Walesa—

have left Moscow in flames and Warsaw on a political see-saw.

How has the situation managed to take such a turn for the worse?

The most readily identifiable culprit comes from outside the region, from the industrialized world's organizations that control the funds pouring (or not pouring) into the region, always with strings attached—the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

But the blame does not rest entirely on outsiders. The revolutionary movements themselves made choices that guaranteed the worst of all possible worlds: the emerging problems of Western consumerism, the lingering headaches of Soviet-style communism

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and the convulsive bloodletting of omnipresent chauvinism.

The central political idea of Eastern Europeans prior to 1989 was "civil society," a space independent of official life, an arena that pulsed with citizen action, cultural activity, even economic ventures. Those pre-revolutionary days were filled with unofficial "flying" universities and *samizdat* publications, underground political parties and irreverent cabarets. Ecological groups in Bulgaria, unions in Hungary, guerrilla theater troupes in Poland: these "antipolitical" organizations deliberately avoided formal political participation. But they were political in a broader sense—engaging in protest, re-imagining social life.

Civil society functioned as both a revolutionary tactic and a prefiguring of "society-to-be." In creating an independent space free of government control (though not of harassment), reformers gradually mobilized sophisticated mass movements that toppled regimes throughout Eastern Europe efficiently and, to a remarkable extent, they did so nonviolently.

Unfortunately, however, the alternative society that existed during the pre-1989 era did not translate into a society-to-be. Many of the leaders of the 1989 revolutions, and many of their less-inspired successors, saw the civic activity of the revolutionary days as merely *tactical*, to be called into play for a short time only against a hated regime.

What was less understood was the need not simply to reconstruct government—a task of filling bureaucratic slots, reviving some forgotten ministries, re-establishing a functioning legal system—but to reconstruct *society*. This much larger goal required a continuation of civic activity—of civil society in the broadest sense—not its attenuation.

But the newly anointed political leaders established a technocracy, in part staffed by former government and

party officials. This group of experts set into motion economic reforms that were largely removed from public debate and withheld from public referendum. This brand of reform—a shock therapy devised and directed from above by putative experts—was presented to the people as irreversible and ineluctable. Alternatives were put down as irresponsible and ill-informed.

As a result, in post-revolutionary Eastern Europe, the ideal of a politically active citizenry diminished—much as in our country—into the citizen as mere voter (if that). A gulf opened up between the “ordinary” person and the emerging political expert. The economic sphere, meanwhile, became dominated by the free market, an arena of burgeoning but often illusory choices that contrasted ironically with the shrinking range of economic and political options.

Whatever the political calculations of the new leaderships, the sad fact is that most people in the region have consented to their own withdrawal from public life. After many years of restricted privacy, it is not difficult to understand such an abandonment of the public sphere. But with all the tasks of social reconstruction so in need of energy and attention—from community renewal and social advocacy to political oversight and labor struggles—such apathy is fatal.

The IMF plan of structural adjustment—so familiar to the peoples of other regions of the world—requires just such a limited sense of citizenship. An empowered populace would vote against economic plans clearly opposed to their own interests, but an apathetic public is the perfect accompaniment to top-down economic reform of the shock therapy variety.

The only compelling alternative to this atomistic vision of society now prevalent in Eastern Europe is nationalism. This world-view defines citizenship by blood, soil, language, religion or some combination of these elements and offers a more compelling rationale for civic participation. While it is true that nationalist movements can take a measure of credit for contributing to

the downfall of the region’s communist governments and for preserving culture during the homogenizing years of Soviet influence, the current nationalist definitions of citizenship are indeed troubling.

According to the nationalist, a citizen does not have to *do*, simply to *be*. Only when the purity of the society is threatened must the citizen act: men taking up arms, women bearing children. According to the logic of this nation-building, political tasks such as constructing unions, health care facilities, watchdog organizations or recycling centers are secondary. It is naive to suggest that nationalism should not exist. But the polis would be much healthier were the nationalist definition of citizen to merely coexist alongside, rather than obliterate, other definitions.

The nationalist conception of citizenship and that of the international economic community share certain traits, chiefly an incorrigible simple-mindedness. For the nationalist, the citizen can be reduced to genes or some other form of spurious pedigree. For the shock therapist, a citizen is no more than a faceless rational actor, familiar to all readers of economics textbooks. The communities—of blood, of consumerism—provide a curious balance for each other: the nationalist preventing the predations of the international, the international economy eroding the nationalist barriers.

A world given over to this new bipolarism is as unpleasant as the one that shrugged off the dichotomies of the Cold War. For neither of these communities, populated as they are by cardboard citizens, ensures a rich civil society.

Yet civil society is not dead in the region. Trade unions continue to struggle for workers’ rights. A new wave of activists is working on behalf of beleaguered minorities. Environmental groups, women’s groups and peace groups have reconstituted themselves without anti-communism as their chief objective and are now courageously fighting for better societies.

Throughout the region, citizens are

protesting against both the new political elites and their economic nostrums. Witness the recent elections in Poland and Lithuania in which voters reinstalled the former Communists in power, not because these populations have suddenly decided to embrace communist ideology but because frustration and desperation have driven them to choose the only parties championing their interests. Such are the pragmatic decisions made by an electorate in a democracy.

Meanwhile, in Russia, most of the population is disgusted with the polarization of politics that led to the recent White House confrontation. If not offered sensible economic reform and a real opportunity to participate in its formation and implementation, Russians will abandon Yeltsin’s form of liberal authoritarianism and turn to a pure and simple nationalist authoritarianism, of the variety now flourishing in Georgia, Moldova and parts of Central Asia.

The former Communists, the liberal authoritarians and the ethno-nationalists: heaven help the democracy that provides choices only between these groups. The need for democratic movements that fundamentally respect human rights but listen very skeptically to the advice of international financial institutions has never been greater in the region.

Such a task will therefore require a citizenry more attuned to global problems, one that conceives of economic reform as a democratic process and not simply the juggling of economic indicators by a well-trained and articulate elite, one that recognizes political action as a continuing responsibility rather than a means of last resort or a once-a-year trip to the ballot box. ◀

John Feffer is the author, most recently, of *Shock Waves: Eastern Europe after the Revolutions* (South End Press). An earlier version of this article appeared in *Global Visions: Beyond the New World Order*, a collection of essays edited by Jeremy Brecher, John Brown Childs and Jill Cutler (South End Press). (For ordering information, call 1-800-533-8478.)

I N T H E A R T S

Spinema vérité

About halfway through

The War Room, a documentary about the 1992 Clinton campaign, there's an extraordinary scene in which the honchos of the candidate's staff put the finishing touches on a TV spot for their man. The commercial is designed to remind voters of George Bush's infamous "read my lips" promise.

The debate in Clinton's "war room," where the consultants not the candidate shape his image, is entirely concerned with the nuances of how many times to repeat "read my lips" and whether to have the announcer say "no," "no, sir!" or "uh-uh" before closing the commercial with the line, "This time we read the record."

The scene is a vivid reminder of the degree to which modern campaigns are disconnected from questions of policy and gover-

nance. It's also a funny and seductively intimate peek at history on the hoof. And it's got a star of Hollywood proportions—James Carville, Clinton's chief strategist.

It's Louisiana-born Carville, with the face of an apprehensive elf and a motor-mouth drawl, who in that scene coaxes his "media people" on the other end of the speaker phone to go along with his last-minute fine tuning of the spot. He's smart, witty and philosophical—but at heart he's just a good ol' boy. He's generous with praise to his staff, but he also clearly relishes twisting the media knife into Bush. Carville generally comes off as a camera subject no camera (and tape recorder) can get enough of.

But Carville proves to be a slippery subject for filmmakers D.A. Pennebaker and his wife, Chris Hegedus. Pennebaker is most famous for the film portrait of Bob Dylan, *Don't Look Back*, and for his role in establishing *cinéma vérité* in the United States. A French documentary movement of the '50s, *cinéma vérité* sought to manipulate reality as little as possible, to catch it fresh and whole. Its ideas

migrated to these shores in the '60s as "direct cinema," whose leading proponents were Robert Drew, Ricky Leacock and Pennebaker. Its subject was often politics.

But times have changed, and now the political image-makers seem quite capable of using even the cool editorial eye of *cinéma vérité* for their own purposes. It appears that in this film Pennebaker and Hegedus succumbed to Carville's Cajun charm, and to the poised sincerity of boyish George Stephanopoulos, the campaign's director of communication.

Carville and to a lesser degree Stephanopoulos are responsible for whatever success the film will have, and the credits (which manage to misspell the name of benefactor Martin Scorsese), implicitly acknowledge that. Carville and Stephanopoulos are listed under "cast" and given special billing above the rest of the staff.

Clinton, by comparison, is just a visitor in *The War Room*, and a pale presence indeed compared to Carville and his co-star. The film's producers, R. J. Cutler and Wendy Ettinger, initially set out to follow a candidate through the election process, but no one was quite stupid enough to grant them access.

The Clinton campaign initially said yes, then no, and ended up acquiescing in their request to follow the



The War Room
Directed by D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus

The War Room
set out to capture the truth about political image-makers. But truth proved no match for the spin doctors.

By Pat Dowell