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## What is Fundamental?: A Reply

To have elicited both praise and criticism from four scholars whom I admire gives me real satisfaction. All of the critical points made by Professors Rigby, Starr, Barghoorn, and Breslauer deserve careful attention. Unfortunately, space considerations allow brief comments only on the two groups of questions raised, in one way or another, by all of the commentators. The first involves my “capacious” treatment of Soviet reformism and conservatism since 1953: Are my generalizations and underlying concepts too broad? Do they take into account other important cleavages? And do they adequately characterize the politics of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras? The second group of questions concerns, alas, the future.

I am among the last to underestimate the great array of political opinion that exists today in Soviet society and officialdom alike.<sup>1</sup> I began my essay by warning that “the terms ‘reformist’ and ‘conservative’ do not embrace the full diversity of political outlook—ranging from far left to far right—that has emerged so dramatically in the Soviet Union since the 1950s.” My aim was not to “flatten” this diversity into one polarity, but to find and analyze, in the cauldron of Soviet opinion, the most important mainstream clusters of conflicting attitudes—reformism and conservatism. This is obviously a broad generalization. The question is whether it locates the fundamental conflict in Soviet political life since 1953. I believe that it does; and I see no evidence to support Professor Starr’s suggestion that these “main axes” have been altered fundamentally in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

The issue is sharpened by the question of other cleavages in Soviet political life. My commentators seem particularly concerned that I have overemphasized “subjective,” “attitudinal,” or “ideational” factors at the expense of “objective” ones? But is this really the central issue? I tried to indicate, however elliptically, the great importance of objective circumstances—be they economic, class, or institutional—and their relation to the trends I was analyzing. But there is a more basic issue in operation here: the longstanding Sovietological habit of focusing on political factors at the top of the system, while virtually ignoring social factors below. I have argued this point more generally elsewhere: “It is generally char-

1. Two years ago, I argued that “the diversity of Soviet opinion is probably equal to that in any ‘open’ society (though more private, of course)” (see Stephen F. Cohen, “Soviet Domestic and Foreign Policy,” reprinted in Fred Warner Neal, ed., *Détente or Debacle: Common Sense in U.S.-Soviet Relations* [New York, 1979], p. 14).

2. Much of the evidence I cited relates to the late 1960s and 1970s, when Professor Starr believes Soviet opinion became “less polarized.” It is true that the conflict has been less vocal in recent years, but this is partly attributable, as he admits, to censorship. It reflects also the fact that conservative periods are normally characterized by an apparent broadening of political consensus and the “political center.” But, just as the apparent “consensus” of the Eisenhower years did not prepare Americans for the 1960s, these outward manifestations tell us little about underlying tensions or about what will follow.

acteristic of our scholarship on Soviet history to explain social and political developments after 1917 almost exclusively by the nature of the party regime and its aggression upon a passive, victimized society. Authentic interaction between party-state and society is ignored. Not surprisingly, the literature of academic Soviet studies contains little social history or real social studies; it is mostly regime studies."<sup>3</sup> The regime approach is now being revised somewhat by political scientists whose focus has shifted downward, from the very top of the Soviet political system to, for example, interest groups and regional officials. But the descent is slow and limited. In attempting to treat reformism and conservatism as trends that exist both below and above—that is, in Soviet society, throughout officialdom, and in leadership politics—I was trying to draw attention, as Professor Breslauer says, to “both the political and social bases” of the system. The full nature of objective factors, including the oligarchic and bureaucratic order at the top, can become clear only in this broader context, which compels us to rethink the whole relationship between state and society in the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

The example of competing interest groups, cited by my commentators as an “objective” cleavage that eludes my generalization, is pertinent. Interest groups play a central role in the making of Soviet domestic and foreign policy. They are not, however, simply rival monoliths that exist, or can be understood, apart from the more fundamental conflict between Soviet reformers and conservatives. Western specialists on Soviet interest groups tell us that “every occupational group is divided into opinion groups and that ‘reformists’ and ‘conservatives’ are to be found in all of them except perhaps the security police.”<sup>5</sup> (I see no reason for the inverted commas or to exclude the police.) In short, interest groups are themselves arenas of this underlying struggle; they illustrate, rather than elude, my generalization.

Regarding my characterization of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, I tried to demonstrate the swing from reformism to conservatism by pointing out the basic differences between the two administrations. Professor Breslauer, whose work I cited in this connection, agrees. Professors Barghoorn and Rigby see contradictory evidence, but because they do not flatly disagree with me, I shall be content with making two points: First, politics is never unidimensional. There were, of course, exceptions to Khrushchev’s reformist policies, just as there are exceptions to Brezhnev’s conservative ones. But these remain just that—exceptions to the general spirit, the political ethos, of the two eras. Second, a historical understanding of the changing nature of reformism and conservatism is essential. “Yesterday’s reformism,” to repeat Professor Starr’s fitting aphorism, “is the conservatism of today.” I offered the crucial example of official “economic reform,” and, as contradictory evidence, Professor Rigby mentions, among other things, the continuation of “law and order” slogans after Khrushchev. But “so-

3. See Stephen F. Cohen, “Bolshevism and Stalinism,” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1977), p. 7.

4. This point has also been argued by Jerry F. Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), p. 3.

5. Skilling, in H. Gordon Skilling and Franklyn Griffiths, eds., *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics* (Princeton, 1971), p. 395. The same point is made by Juviler, in Peter H. Juviler and Henry W. Morton, eds., *Soviet Policy-Making: Studies of Communism in Transition* (New York, 1967), p. 54.

cialist legality” under Khrushchev was a clarion call for the major legal reforms of the 1950s and 1960s. Today it is promoted in a different, more conservative spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, my commentators push me to be more predictive. This makes me uneasy. Sovietologists have been overly indulgent, not to mention frequently wrong, in predicting the Soviet future. Consequently, it is preferable to concentrate on the past and present. Moreover, space constraints prohibit enumeration of all the mixed prospects and accompanying qualifications. Thus, having raised evasiveness to a principle, I will conclude with a few elusive replies to this question.

I see real possibilities for further reform in the Soviet system, which, after Stalin’s death, demonstrated its capacity for meaningful change. By reform I mean change for the better, toward some kind of “liberalization” (if Professor Breslauer insists) in various areas, and not reversion to Stalinist practices, which cannot be ruled out. Such reformist change can come only from above, which is why, in reply to Professor Barghoorn, I did not focus on Soviet dissidents. They may deserve sympathy, but they should not obscure our analysis of real possibilities.

Many, though obviously not all, objective and subjective conditions of reform already exist, including problems that cry out for remedies and proposed solutions. In other words, I agree with Professor Breslauer about the presence of “potential institutional bases of reformism.” And I disagree with Professor Starr’s implication that a full-fledged crisis is necessary (another unfortunate axiom of Soviet studies) for Soviet reformism and conservatism “to harden into conscious programs”; this process occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, I must dispute Professor Barghoorn’s statement that “there has been nothing like” East European reformism in the USSR. Reforms of these dimensions have not taken place, but the same, or very similar, ideas—the “ism”—have circulated among Soviet reformers since the 1950s.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, my position is that Soviet conservatism is now a powerful social and political force, ramifying throughout the system and nourished by it, and thus a towering obstacle to further reform. This means that the reformist cause has become more difficult than it was under Khrushchev, especially in the 1950s. But the force of the conservative trend also makes me doubt Professor Rigby’s gloomy prognosis that there remains “the likelihood” of some new revolution from above. Conservatism means opposition to any significant change—in a Stalinist or anti-Stalinist direction. Furthermore, as Professor Barghoorn emphasizes, reformism has fewer political advantages in the Soviet Union than in “polyarchic” systems. I noted several examples of this kind of disadvantage; there are other kinds as well. Conservatism everywhere, for ex-

6. See Robert Sharlet, “Legal Policy Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev: Continuity and Change,” in Donald D. Barry, George Ginsburgs, and Peter B. Maggs, eds., *Soviet Law After Stalin*, part 2: *Social Engineering Through Law* (Alphen aan den Rijn, The Netherlands, 1978), pp. 324–25.

7. As I pointed out in my essay (p. 201, note 52), the interaction between Soviet and East European reformers is an important part of the story; and attacks by Soviet conservatives on East European reformers are often aimed as well at similar proposals at home (see, for example, Yu. Georgiev, “Yugoslavia: ‘New Variant of Socialism,’” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 20, no. 52 (January 15, 1969): 3–8, 24.

ample, frequently draws on populist strains in the political culture;<sup>8</sup> but Soviet conservatives seem to have been particularly successful in stigmatizing proposed reforms as an elite intelligentsia's contrivances against the working class.<sup>9</sup> The social and political dimensions of the problem are evident in this regard as well.

In my essay, I tried to point out both the comparative and the more specifically Soviet aspects of the problem of change.<sup>10</sup> The Soviet aspects led me to suggest in my conclusion that some guidance from the nineteenth-century struggle between tsarist reformers and conservatives would be in order, and I regret that Professor Starr did not pursue this theme. I am not persuaded by Professor Rigby's assertion that Russian political history has been "dominated" by revolutionaries and reactionaries, rather than by reformers and conservatives. This was true at exceptional historical moments, as in 1917 when revolution and counter-revolution obliterated the middle, but not during normal times—that is, most of the time.

Surveying recent scholarship on the tsarist government, Marc Raeff tells us: "Russian officialdom from the middle of the nineteenth century divided into 'liberal' and reform-minded administrators and conservative, though not necessarily reactionary, officials."<sup>11</sup> It is my thesis that something similar has happened in the Soviet Union. If Byron is correct that "the best prophet of the future is the past," we should have another look.

8. See Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), chapter 2.

9. See, for example, the political novels of the conservative writer and former high official, Vsevolod Kochetov, and especially his *Chego zhe ty khochesh'?*

10. In thinking about the comparative dimensions of their problem, Soviet reformers themselves look foremost, of course, to the Communist countries of Eastern Europe. But they have also written, though more Aesopically, on contemporary reformist efforts in non-Communist settings (see, for example, M. P. Mchedlov, *Evoliutsiia sovremenmogo katolitsizma* [Moscow, 1966]; and Fedor Burlatskii, *Ispaniia: Korrida i kaudil'o* [Moscow, 1967], to which Aron Katsenelinboigen drew my attention).

11. Marc Raeff, "The Bureaucratic Phenomena of Imperial Russia, 1700–1905," *American Historical Review*, 84, no. 2 (April 1979): 408.