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Gorbachev: Dramaturge ?!

Participative Democracy vs. Participative Drama: Lessons on social transformation for international organizations from Gorbachev

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Abstract

Explores the dramatic dimensions of Gorbachev's actions as a source of lessons on social transformation in the future. It is argued that transformative moments in society result from the identification of people with an evolving drama. These may then lead to real change of lasting significance, beyond what is normally achieved by international organization programmes. Questions are raised about the extent to which such dramatization is already used and the opportunities for using it to a far greater extent in the future, whether for good or for ill. The link between such drama and the use of metaphor is explored in relation to world governance.

1. Social change wrought by international programmes

It is a sad truth that international organizations are often the last to implement within their own operations and programmes the techniques of social transformation which they advocate or which are explored by others. It is sadder still that such organizations often aspire to function as pale imitations of bodies like the United Nations, themselves faced with severe problems of sclerotic structure and the thinking that reinforces it. This is most clearly symbolized by the limited (and increasingly sterile) vocabulary used to describe the majority of international organizational structures: general assembly, conference, committee, programme, project, and the like. More obvious, perhaps, is the reflection of such thinking in the limited diversity of forms of international meetings.

It is no wonder then that there is an increasing loss of credibility of international bodies, with a corresponding lowering of expectations on the part of those sensitive to the unlearned lessons of the past. Unfortunately, for those unaware of those lessons, expectations easily become inflated, spurred on by a healthy natural enthusiasm for new opportunities. The 1992 UNCED Earth Summit is one such example, readily exploited by factional interests under the guise of remedial initiatives for planetary ills.

2. Learning from the Eastern European surprise

It is within this context that we can marvel at the real changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and especially at what is to be learnt from the actions of Mikhail Gorbachev in facilitating these changes. What are the lessons for world governance, for international programmes, and for social transformation within international organizations?

It seems quite apparent that no international organization contributed any insight, scenarios or models to facilitate such changes. None has been mentioned in this respect. At best it can be said that many organizations provided contexts in which interaction between representatives of Eastern and Western bloc countries occurred. No discipline is cited as having made a significant contribution to the change -- although some are obliged to make that claim. International organizations and disciplines remain embarrassed, many months after the events, by their inability to respond creatively to the changes in Eastern Europe. In the midst of waning euphoria and rising doubts, the level of disappointment at the inadequacy and irrelevance of Western thinking is yet to be fully acknowledged. Western imposition of ever more stringent conditions, is a poor and dangerous substitute for proactive responses.

3. Social transformation as participative drama

The key event in the final breakthrough in Eastern Europe was the reactionary coup against Gorbachev and the response to it. The word most frequently used in relation to these events is 'dramatic'. After many other explanations from which relatively few lessons have been learnt, it is therefore worth exploring social transformation as a dramatic process in which dramatic moments are themselves catalysts of transformation.

The question to be asked is whether the sterile vocabulary of 'participative democracy' is appropriate to a period during which voter apathy is significantly increasing, most notably in the Western democracies, and especially among the young. Specifically is it 'participative democracy' which leads to sustainable social transformation? The words and structures used do indeed reflect understanding of the need for change. But can it not be argued that the most significant current product of 'participative democracy' is heightened levels of tokenism and 'lip service' in all its forms -- notably in international organizations? The plethora of unimplemented, and quickly forgotten, resolutions (over which large conferences agonize at great expense for long periods of time) is a prime illustration. The extent to which governmental bodies, and others, renege on solemn commitments, often by 'watering down' their interpretation, is another.

It is therefore worth exploring the dimensions of a new world order based on 'participative drama' as the key to sustainable social transformation. This is a step beyond what is now widely accepted as 'news management', although it was Richard Nixon who was the first to establish an Office of Communications devoted to managing executive imagery with a specific focus on the 'line-of-the-day' and the 'image-of-the-day'.

At the highest level, there is already continual scripting of media 'photo-opportunities', where 'scenarios' are prepared down to the minutest detail, and much effort is made in 'casting' people for 'roles'. There is now a seamless loop of theme-orchestration, sound-biting, leaking, polling and opinion-making, all feeding into policy formulation (1).

Because of its very nature, the degree of media management may never become clear. One striking example is the recent revelation that General Schwartzkopf's much publicized announcements during Operation Desert Storm concerning the destruction of Scud missiles and their launching sites were largely fabricated. US forces did not destroy a single mobile launcher during the Gulf War (2). But is that really relevant when he gripped peoples imagination by putting on such a good show?

To what extent has such thinking sustained the kinds of participative drama which triggered the changes in Eastern Europe? And what do such dramas mean for democratic processes?

4. Beyond cause-and-effect explanations: aesthetic participation

Is it really useful to attempt to arrive at the truth of whether Gorbachev 'master-minded' the social transformations which his actions appear to have facilitated? The attempt raises questions as to whether he was a part of some more or less enlightened conspiracy, a victim of events, a 'puppet', unable to control what he set in motion -- and whether he became a 'has-been' and a 'loser' through the process. The social transformation process is however to be valued whether he 'controlled' events or was controlled by them.

Much more interesting is to shift the perspective and explore the lessons of Gorbachev as a dramaturge, however 'conscious' he was of the changes he was setting in motion and whatever his degree of personal interest in emerging as a 'winner' according to the conventional criteria of the political arena. Hans Magnus Enzensburger has, according to John Berger (3), named Gorbachev as 'a genius of withdrawal, the great master of retreat'.

From this perspective it is much less relevant how consciously he controlled events. **Of far greater relevance is the aesthetics of the drama and, above all, the level and kind of participation that it engendered and focused.** It can be readily argued that it was the final drama of the coup and counter-coup which unleashed the full force of social transformation. Can the programme of any democratically participative international organization focus involvement to achieve such levels of social transformation? And how are the aesthetics of the drama to be related to the assessment of the transformation as beneficial or not?

From an aesthetic perspective it is irrelevant what personal problems a playwright has in mastering his material. Any personal tragedy suffered by the playwright only serves to increase the poignancy of the drama. The playwright may both 'manipulate' his material and be 'possessed' by it. The playwright experiences a highly personal drama in relation to the material, through which his or her personal transformation may occur, leading possibly to greater levels of insight and understanding. It is then inappropriate to focus on whether the playwright 'won' or 'lost' -- 'losing' may be the only route through which a really great play takes form. There is a truth in the

superstitious recognition that a playwright must 'lose' something in 'payment to the gods' for the success of the play.

Gorbachev was a successful change agent precisely because he held to his belief in the possibility of reforming the Communist Party, and so convinced his comrades, identifying thus with elements of the unfolding drama. But as John Berger put it in a remarkable article: *'He failed to imagine only one thing: that due to all the other changes he'd brought about or stage-managed, the CPSU would overnight be declared illegal. At the end of the third week of August, he turns to the audience, which is a world set free, and at the same time finds himself empty-handed'* (3).

Gorbachev appeared to experience a series of major personal dramas -- people identified with the 'betrayals' to which he was exposed, whether real or imagined. Is it useful to seek some explanation of a long-term policy based on 'linear' thinking by which his performance should be evaluated for consistency?

5. Human sacrifice and social transformation

From this perspective, it is valuable to review social change in the light of the drama of 'human sacrifice'. It can be argued that nearly all legislative innovations have only been brought about following an appropriate level of human sacrifice. This is true whether the legislation concerns the safety of children's toys, mercury pollution, or the independence of a country. To put it very bluntly, children have to be sacrificed before it is accepted that safety regulations on children's toys should be formulated. (It would not be impossible to count the number of such sacrifices associated with each piece of social change legislation.) Leadership too may call for personal sacrifice. How can we ever know what Gorbachev, or his colleagues, sacrificed -- whether or not they originally intended to do so in the way in which they appeared to do so.

It is only of incidental interest to know whether the Soviet Emergency Committee of eight were willing or conscious participants in the drama, or how conscious Gorbachev was in placing them in positions from which they could instigate the coup. It is they who provided a dramatic focus for the reactionary forces. They were turned into scapegoats who could be sacrificed, thus liberating others from the thrall of the repressive mode of thinking. The three young men who were sacrificed (or who chose to sacrifice themselves) in the defence against army tanks were of dramatic significance in bringing about a realignment of the military forces -- perhaps only to be matched in that period by the lone individual who, in a much-publicized video sequence, disrupted the movement of a column of tanks in Beijing in 1989. Indeed it is possible to argue that it was the human sacrifice in Tianamen Square which effectively set the stage for the manner in which the drama was able to unfold in Eastern Europe.

6. Dramatic cover-ups in international organizations

How does this perspective relate to the structures and policies of international organizations? For a start it might be asked whether official attempts to suppress the dramatic dimensions of factional in-fighting are precisely what makes the activities of international organizations so boring and irrelevant to the wider world.

There are truths to be learnt from the media focus on the scandals of the United Nations and its agencies (4), their development programmes (5), and on the naked ambition of those who aspire to their highest offices as feudal fiefdoms -- with some even obliging their subordinates to address them as 'Excellency'. Until such all-too-human dramas capture peoples imaginations (as in the BBC 'Yes, Minister' series), there is little hope of understanding what really needs to be 'restructured' in international organizations in order to move towards a more enlightened form of world governance.

Within the dramatic metaphor, what then is to be made of an international conference panel session aligned on a podium in a manner that bears a remarkable structural similarity to the widely publicized Soviet Emergency Committee press conference -- especially when the subject is the future of democratic processes? Does this alignment comfort the political reactionary in each of us?

It is frequently assumed that conference sessions involve a high degree of spontaneity. In fact most conference sessions are heavily pre-scripted with the roles cast long in advance. Good conference 'organization' tends to imply a high degree of control over the scenario as it takes form. Why not then structure the conference as an enthralling drama -- at least to some degree? And to what extent is this already done? Opposing viewpoints could then interplay more effectively to draw the participants into a more profound appreciation of the dynamics -- touching the emotions as well as the intellect. Was this not one purpose of classical Greek drama? There is merit in exploring the 'marriage' of what conventionally occurs on a conference podium with the dynamics of actors 'interacting' on a stage.

Is there not something rather quaint in the efforts to capture a conference on still photographs, press communiqués and in 'minutes', at a time when reality is being redefined and understood through video-clips and CNN-style presentations?

7. Participation in dramatized realities

Is it important to the outcome whether Gorbachev was really (a) isolated under house arrest or (b) whether he allowed it to appear so? The limitations of Western either/or logic may be preventing us from recognizing the two other possibilities accepted in Buddhist and Japanese logic. These would point to situations in which (c) both 'a' and 'b' are correct and (d) neither 'a' nor 'b' are correct. These capture some of the perceptions voiced by Shevardnadze on the matter.

In a period when politicians can be destroyed by reports (whether false or not) on their association with call girls, at what point will it become useful to stage dramas to position a politician for electoral purposes -- whether or not some people have to be 'sacrificed' to achieve credibility? Already the status symbols of a plethora of bodyguards and security controls may be used to good effect as a happening, even in the absence of any commensurate threat. In the light of the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan (or on the current Pope), what level of organization would be required to emulate such drama to focus public interest in support of a lackluster presidential candidate? Are the flesh wounds needed for credibility too high a price for the candidate to pay to achieve the highest office? And how

easy it would be to diminish an opponent by implicating one of his former supporters as the assassin. How should the distinction be made between 'dirty tricks' and good dramatic effects?

Has it not already become convenient to stage kidnappings, attempted assassinations and other happenings to capture media headlines and make a strong political point? Is it any longer possible to distinguish through the media between a bomb planted by 'terrorists' and one planted by 'establishment' groups (and attributed to terrorists) in order to position repressive policies more effectively? Is it useful to attempt to distinguish between Boris Yeltsin as the 'political genius' in shaking the tank driver's hand (prior to using the tank as a podium) and as the 'dramatic genius' who seized that opportunity, whether or not it was deliberately staged?

Such possibilities will naturally be skilfully exploited by the self-seeking to great effect. Beyond traditional image building, they offer a prime strategy for the next presidential election in the USA --especially since 'the intrinsic drama of political conventions has been lost forever' (6). Substantive issues in isolation only attract factional interest. It is the dramatic interweaving of these issues as the backdrop to a comprehensible scenario, casting the candidate in a dramatic or heroic role, which enables individual voters to buy into the vision the candidate's party endeavours to sell. The challenge is an aesthetic one with aesthetic risks. For the drama can fail on aesthetic grounds and be perceived as a farce -- politicians can also be bad actors.

8. Dramatizing international organizations

The question for international organizations is whether this is a route to be followed. Is the aesthetic condemnation of such organizations as providing 'bad drama' in monotonous conferences compensated by the social change that they do indeed make possible at their own pace -- even though the boring nature of the drama they provide reduces the credibility of their initiatives?

Can we possibly expect those who seek office in intergovernmental organizations to be capable of taking their audience through the kind of transformative process that Gorbachev (stage-)managed --by accepting various forms of personal sacrifice? Clearly a key post in this respect is that of Secretary-General of the United Nations. Such sacrifice seems unlikely in a period when the candidates were selected for quite different reasons.

Perhaps more should be made of the possibility of dramatizing such environments along classical imperial lines, recognizing the reality of baronies and dukedoms and all the social drama with which they are associated. The United Nations might capture public excitement far more effectively if its function as an imperial court was highlighted. How different to the popular imagination is the EEC institutional system compared to the court of Louis XIV -- both with their courtiers and courtesans, and with pomp and ceremony? Is it not intriguing that a number of key international bodies now find it appropriate to attribute prizes and honours along imperial lines?

Greenpeace is the organization which has moved furthest in this direction and with greatest success in seeking positive social change -- the Rainbow Warrior incident could not have been better designed (again, whether or not this was the case). According to Médecins sans Frontières, Oxfam stage-managed a 'famine' in Cambodia in 1986 to force the hand of donors. Through such initiatives people are drawn into participative scenarios with which they can identify. It is through this identification and its exposure to the dynamics of the drama that orientations are shifted. This can have dramatic political consequences for good or ill -- however these can then be distinguished in that context.

9. Escaping from metaphoric traps

The problem would appear to be that international organizations tend to get trapped in metaphors which may be adequate for their survival but are not however adequate for their sustainable development as learning organizations -- or for their contribution to the sustainable development of a complex planetary society. Worse still, George Lakoff argued that 'metaphors can kill' and that metaphorical thought played a central role in providing justifications for the Gulf War (7).

The focus needs to be taken off tinkering with the structuring and restructuring of organizations. This is only stimulating to the few, and often for quite inappropriate reasons. Such restructuring may be perceived as offering a tinker-toy understanding of organizations through metaphors of structures of connected boxes (reinforced by organization charts) or as mechanical devices. 'Radical' restructuring is then perceived as moving the boxes and connectors into a different pattern. This is ideal for creating the impression of change within the current fashion for tokenism. Unfortunately such changes have little real impact on the erosion of the credibility of such bodies -- and are increasingly viewed with a cynical eye as just another consultant's dream.

There is an alienating sameness to the democratic procedures of international organizations. These are typified by procedural manoeuvring, lobbying and electoral manipulation, that provide a stage on which the ambitious are anxious to strut. This is a fundamental problem with 'actors' in both the political and dramatic arenas.

Both in politics and drama, power is an illusion. As Dorothy Rowe states: *'Power is an illusion because it is no more than a meaning which the powerful have created and which the powerless accept as reality.... Seeing power as a game means knowing that power is a construction, a fiction, for the rules which make up any game are fictions: but there are many people who take game-playing as seriously as those who regard their political creed or their religious beliefs as the Absolute Truth.... The illusion of power is maintained by unawareness and silence.'* (8) There is increasing recognition that the dominant institutions, whether governmental or intergovernmental organizations only continue to function due to the conspiracy of silence. Like the Emperor in the classic tale, they have in fact 'no clothes'. From this perspective, is the international community to be compared to a fashion conscious nudist colony?

Dorothy Rowe argues that the aim of political rhetoric is to influence the audience so as *'to prevent us from finding alternative ways of constructing our reality, and the language it uses is intended to obscure not to clarify. It relies on metaphors which are presented as accurate descriptions and give to its believers an illusion of power which they can express in the rhetorical language which they have learned. The metaphors used by the State in rhetoric may have been used initially as no more than vivid pictures, understandable by and*

appealing to their audience, but when these metaphors harden into dogma they become the means by which reality is perceived and responded to, and they become part of the network of causes....So often what appears to be political revolution or an individual conversion in effect no change, the titles given to the authority and the followers may have changed, but the relationships and the metaphors to describe these relationships have not changed.' (8)

As Rowe states: *'The problem for all practitioners in the media is how much in their rhetoric they will present the structure of meaning which the State, the Church, and the international financial institutions want to be presented as absolute reality, and how much they will present alternative structures of meaning.'* (8)

10. In search of guiding metaphors

It is not however a question of escaping from all use of metaphor. Metaphors remain a major unexplored device for redefining alternative realities and facilitating participative identification with them (9, 10, 11, 12, 13). Other metaphors, notably the dramatic one, need to be given greater attention as a means of ensuring new and more meaningful forms of involvement in collective initiatives.

It is a question of shifting from a reliance on fixed (and progressively alienating) organizational structures to participative scenarios, and from bad drama to drama of the highest kind. For it is precisely the dramatic form which can more adequately capture and recontextualize the factional conflicts which reflect the levels of complexity with which society has to deal. The assumption that consensus procedures can be found to encompass this complexity is both naive and totally vulnerable to tokenism. Consensus procedures tend to give rise to the most boring forms of drama.

This suggests that the key to the future lies in the imaginative way in which essentially incommensurable policies (and the factions promoting them) are interwoven. The point is made by the unpreparedness of the international community in response to the desperate need of the ex-socialist countries for some way of blending command and market economies. As emerged so clearly at the Beijing WFSF Conference, no 'models' are available precisely because the challenge to the imagination transcends the world of model building by which futures studies has been so heavily influenced. This suggests that exciting opportunities for international organizations exist beyond the policy incompatibilities within which they become entrapped.

11. World governance and imagination building

World governance in the above sense is then a question of 'imagination building' rather than of 'institution building'. The role of international bodies concerned with policy-making should be to focus attention on the emergence and movement of policy-relevant metaphors that are capable of rendering comprehensible the way forward through complex windows of opportunity. The transformation of Eastern Europe illustrates the role of drama in focusing participative understanding of rightness and appropriateness to create a 'transformative moment' during which real change actually occurs.

To sustain such development, the challenge lies in marrying new metaphors to models to ensure the embodiment of new levels of insight in organizational form. In this sense the United Nations could become a kind of caretaker for the metaphor 'gene-pool' on which the international community can draw in formulating responses to new crises. In effect this is one of the functions that it already performs -- but unfortunately it does it badly by reinforcing the many outdated metaphors underlying the programmes of its various specialized agencies.

This vision of world governance does not call for a radical transformation of institutions -- which is unlikely before the next major catastrophe. Rather it calls for a shift in the way of thinking about what is circulated through society's information systems as the triggering force for any action -- catalytic and recontext. At present, governance in the international community is haunted by a form of collective schizophrenia -- a left-brain preoccupation with 'serious' academic models and administrative programmes, and a right-brain preoccupation with the proclivities of public opinion avid for 'meaningful' action (even if 'sensational'). Hence the fascination with the drama of Operation Desert Storm which combined both in a dramatic, and deliberately dramatized, scenario.

12. Towards higher orders of consensus: the crop rotation metaphor

A number of rich metaphors can assist in this shift in perspective. In earlier papers the merits of ecological, traffic, and resonance hybrid metaphors have been highlighted (9, 10, 11, 12, 13). But their power and relevance to policy-making may be best illustrated by 'crop rotation' -- a process intimately known to peasant farmers around the world.

The farmer knows that, to ensure sustainable development of his field, he can grow one crop in that field for a period but must then replace it by a different crop to remedy the degradation of the soil caused by the first. He may have to grow a third and a fourth species before finally returning to the first again in his crop rotation cycle. **It is the cycle which guarantees sustainability, not any particular crop.**

Is it not also correct that, to ensure sustainable development, policies need to be alternated like crops to correct for each others damaging effects on society and the environment? This is the implicit message of democracy. However, no political party or faction would accept the need to sacrifice a cherished policy as part of such a process or to relinquish power to allow alternative parties to perform their function in any such cycle. But the distinct policies of appropriately opposed parties do succeed each other in a kind of chaotic cycle as each endeavours to articulate and respond to the defects in its predecessor's initiatives. It remains to be seen whether such chaotic cycles provide the 'sustainability' required through the crises to come.

13. Imaginative weapons of the future: binary metaphoric dramas?

For a country of chess players, the obvious, first-order strategies would not be considered a key to success by its elites. Political

success in the social systems of the future may be better understood by speculating on other possibilities in the relationship between Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Consider the possibility of collusion between them through which they agreed to take on alternately the roles of 'political heavy' and 'democratic saviour' -- corresponding to the 'bad guy / good guy' interrogation strategy through a planned sequence of phases.

Change is then effected by out-maneuvering factions locked in out-moded forms of thinking, whether reactionary or idealistic. The art would be to ensure that such factions identified with actors opposed in the drama -- Gorbachev or Yeltsin in this case. It is the phases in the dramatic relationship between the actors which transforms the system by reframing the context. In this sense two political forces can be used in ways similar to binary chemical weapons (in which two innocuous components are lethal when appropriately combined). Even subtler strategies might be designed through phasing the combination of three or more such elements over time. Would it be possible to learn from the sense of configuration and timing of a team of confidence tricksters in order to design transformative moments through which out-moded forms and factional thinking are by-passed -- as some Sufi teachings imply. Maybe society could be 'tricked' into some more sustainable mode.

In a perceptive article, Norman Myers (*The Guardian International*, 24 July 1992) sees this kind of thinking as vital to prepare for the unforeseen problems of the future, the 'unkown unknowns' which are 'waiting in the wings to leap out at us'. His concern is with 'environmental synergisms', namely the interaction of natural processes so that the product of their effects is greater than the sum of their separate effects. He regrets that little is known about them. The same may be said of 'social synergisms', especially when they take the form of 'synergistic social strategies' as envisaged above, whether for good or for ill.

14. Beyond winning and losing

To focus on whether Gorbachev 'lost' or Yeltsin 'won' then completely misses the strategic point. Such a focus might be compared to media preoccupation with the result of a particular fight televised professional wrestling, where the outcome of a sequence of fights may in fact be fixed by contract between the opponents.

It is through indifference to being cast in a winning or losing role that the key actors together achieve a larger objective. The opportunities for collusion between apparent opponents in the political arena need to be seen in this light. The question is whether this can be used to effect valued social transformation -- and whether it is not already being used to inhibit such transformation, as some studies imply (14).

15. Implications

A major reason for exploring this metaphoric dimension is that society is highly vulnerable to good drama, whatever the morality or principles that it implies. Is it not reasonable that the bad drama furnished by annual General Assemblies (and notably those of the United Nations) should run the risk of being 'upstaged' by other dramas (such as the 'hostage drama') of little social merit? The initiative will always tend to be with those who can furnish good drama -- as Goebbels knew so well!

Much drama, and especially comedy, is built around the dynamic relation between information and disinformation. Jacques Attali, now President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, has argued that the criterion for truth in the media-permeated society of the future will be primarily aesthetic, if not 'seductive' (15). As is shown in a recent study of the USSR during the period of critical social transformation (16), a striking fact is the fascination of people with the uncontrolled mass media, having had hardly any contact with free speech or the idea of open discussion. For truths to have any hope of evoking responses to the issues of sustainable development, they will therefore need to be seductive -- and participative drama with which people can identify is one way of achieving this.

Orrin Klapp (17) makes the point that 'Man's second life is now in the public drama. His dreams are taped, filmed and projected'.

The lessons of social transformation in Eastern Europe raise questions about the appropriateness of the metaphors through which social transformation is envisaged. Maybe politicians and change agents of the future should not only seek advice on how to dress and act in front of the camera during photo-opportunities, but also on crafting the 'dramatic-opportunities' through which they can be repositioned. Politicians and their public relations advisors may benefit from attending drama courses. But people have seen a great deal of televised drama, so it is going to have to be both realistic and good.

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