Peter Ferdinand

Ghița Ionescu and Comparative Communist Politics

GHIȚA IONESCU'S MAIN WORKS ON COMPARATIVE COMMUNIST POLITICS were The Politics of the European Communist States¹ which appeared in 1967 and Comparative Communist Politics² which appeared in 1972. They generalized upon the more historical and empirical studies which had appeared earlier in the 1960s: Communism in Romania,³ The Reluctant Ally: A Study of Communist Neo-Colonialism⁴ and The Break-up of the Soviet Empire.⁵ They established his reputation as one of the foremost scholars of communist states in Central and Eastern Europe. This article will consider the main ideas of the two key works and relate them to broader trends in the evolution of his thinking. Chiefly, though, it will concentrate upon his 1967 work, since the 1972 one was much shorter and it also largely recapitulated the same ideas.

When he was writing these works, the comparative study of communist regimes was expanding rapidly. During the 1950s the academic literature on them had tended to be dominated by the totalitarian paradigm, most famously associated with Friedrich and Brzezinski, and with Hannah Arendt. These writers had drawn out what they regarded as the key features of the regimes of Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany, as a way of highlighting what for them was a new form of rule, qualitatively different not only from democracy but also from autocracy and previous forms of dictatorship. As long as Stalin was alive, and indeed for a few years after his death, this model was still seen as characterizing the basic features of all communist regimes. The idea that any of them might be significantly different from the USSR was generally played down,

¹ London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
² Basingstoke, Macmillan.
³ London, Oxford University Press.
not least because Moscow had imposed uniformity upon all of them only a few years earlier, and the rulers who were in power obviously needed the support of the Soviet Union.

This uniformity of approach was also reinforced by the tendency of the few academics who specialized in the politics of communist states to concentrate upon one of them, in part because of the linguistic challenge. Thus little serious comparative work could be attempted.

From the 1960s, however, this began to change quite rapidly. In part this was because of changes in the communist world itself. The Sino-Soviet split dramatically alerted observers to the differences which leaders of these regimes themselves regarded as crucially dividing them. And the emergence of the beginnings of détente between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries suggested that the approach of communist leaders to socio-economic change at home increasingly resembled that of Western politicians. The possible convergence of previously antagonistic social systems was hotly debated. Thus communist regimes, at least those in Europe and the Soviet Union, began to seem more different from each other and more similar to regimes in the developed world. The problem, however, was to capture these impressions of diversity more systematically and to theorize about them.

Of course many still argued that these changes in the communist world were either superficial or even faked. There was still no doubt that the regimes would not tolerate open opposition, and the memory of the suppression of protests in East Germany in 1953 and in Poland and Hungary in 1956 was still fresh. If the regimes were still prepared to use terror to enforce their will, then totalitarianism could still be regarded as valid.

In addition to changes in the communist world, however, there were also changes in the academic community in the West. New generations of political science students, many of whom had been partly trained in the new techniques of political science as applied to Western democracies, now began to experiment in applying them to communist states too. Some regarded theories of totalitarianism, as well as its defenders, as old-fashioned and methodologically unsophisticated. Their ambition was to integrate the study of communist regimes into the broader field of political science. This led to the introduction of new, and in some respects more rigorous, methods of analysis.
Thus during the 1960s a variety of new approaches to communist regimes began to emerge. Some writers applied theories of political development to them, trying to identify both common features of their historical origins as well as similar patterns of development. Others tried to apply political systems theory to the 'black box' of communist governments. Others focused upon the emergence of groups which checked the power of ruling communist parties, often using the term 'interest groups' as a shorthand for their activities. Yet others characterized communist regimes in the post-terror era as enormous bureaucracies, with characteristics similar to those of large bureaucracies in other countries and in large corporations. And yet others tried to apply the increasingly sophisticated statistical methods developed in Western social science to aspects of communist regimes, e.g. studies of elites, content analysis of articles from official newspapers or journals, etc.

THE POLITICS OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNIST STATES

Underlying Principles
By the time, therefore, that Ghita Ionescu came to write his chief work on comparative communist politics, there was already a ferment in the field. In many ways he sympathized with the aspirations of the newcomers, and at least in part this explained why he was able to attract new students to study and do research upon communist regimes. Yet there was a paradox about this. He personally was only too familiar with the brutality of communist leaders. He was bitterly opposed to communist doctrine — it was the coming of the communists which had made him emigrate from Romania — and he had no illusions about the methods which they had used to seize control. He might easily therefore have been expected to remain sympathetic to the totalitarian model of analysis for communist regimes.

Yet his own research on the erosion of Soviet control over the East and Central European states had shown him the increasing diversity that was beginning to emerge there. Even if he was not in sympathy with the regimes, he was not blind to the changes which had taken place. This was one of the defining features of his new work. He argued that it was now possible to write a genuinely comparative study of the communist regimes in East and Central
Europe. This book was therefore one of the first to embark upon such a project and to show that it was both reasonable and feasible.

Its basic direction, therefore, was in keeping with the ambitions of the renovators of the study of communist regimes, in that he wished to bring it closer to the mainstream of political science. On the other hand, the approach which he adopted owed more to traditional concerns and foci of political science than to the use of new-fangled statistical techniques almost for their own sake. As he put it, he wanted to keep politics, rather than political sociology, or hybrid fields of study such as 'communist systems' or 'communist nations', as the basic focus of his work.

What he argued was that the state should be the prime object of research, as it was for the most general studies of the political systems of other countries too. This was contentious. Marxist-Leninists argued that the state was itself only a transitional feature of societies on their way to communism, and therefore study of it was unimportant. And the practice of such regimes had certainly been to play down the importance of the state in political practice. Those established in the late 1940s had called themselves people's democracies, yet they were neither popular nor democratic. There the forms of rule were intended to mask the real activities of the ruling parties and especially of their ruling elites. Previous commentators had emphasized this only too strongly.

Ionescu on the other hand argued two things. First, the state remained the overall frame within which all political activity took place and was organized. So any fundamental comparative research on communist regimes ought to take this as the starting point. This did not preclude the use of sophisticated statistical analysis of appropriate empirical data, but it should be subordinated to the overall concern of the study. Statistical techniques should not be allowed to drive the research for their own sake.

Secondly, a focus upon the state could now bring out the differences between the various communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe. Leaving out Albania, since so little was known about it, the poles were set by Yugoslavia on one side and Romania and Bulgaria on the other. Formal Yugoslav concern with laying the foundations for the withering away of the state contrasted strongly with the personalized rule of both Zhivkov and Gheorghiu-Dej. These differences were real, substantial and worth studying and they would be likely to increase as time went by.
Two other basic principles underlay this book. The first was that there was a fundamental difference between the Soviet Union and the communist states of Eastern and Central Europe. Although the former had created most of the latter and kept them in power, there was a basic difference in the form of rule. This was the result of the different sizes of the states, the USSR being so much larger. Often such differences in size have led to propositions that rule in superstates is more complex and therefore more likely to be contested. It might be expected, for instance, to lead to greater demands for federalism or some kind of decentralization of power. But what Ionescu emphasized was something different. This was that great powers exercise dominant influence in their part of the world. So 'they feed into their own political institutions and systems some national and... popular substance' (p. 9). Though this was formulated a little vaguely, it reflected his belief that great powers, even if they are dictatorships, enjoy some degree of domestic legitimacy because their people derive satisfaction from their international status. In a sense citizens of superpowers collectively have a greater impact upon the rest of the world, even if they have no impact at home. Thus not only may democracy be more difficult to achieve in superpowers, but it may also be less strongly desired by their citizens. Smaller powers cannot rely upon this factor to bolster their legitimacy, so they cannot so easily ignore domestic criticisms and protests. Thus they may be more likely to become democratic.

This was an unusual point to make. The United States after all is a bastion of democracy. Critics of Russia have often alleged that the meagre democratic achievements in its history are owed to its 'oriental' rather than 'European' tradition. Yet the experience of Russia since 1991 has confirmed Ionescu's perceptiveness. Once the dust had settled in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, spirited debates over Russian national identity and Russia's place in the world began to surface regularly and one line of argument which was often heard was that Russia needed a strong state to maintain both its great size and also its place in the world. This, it was argued, is a fundamental element of Russian political culture. So democratization was not or should not be such an absolute priority, if it meant weakening Russia's national power.

Indeed it was even argued that a strong state was needed to keep open the opportunity for democracy later. Many Russians are still prepared to accept this. The other states of Eastern and Central Europe are smaller, more ‘European’ and therefore more susceptible to general European influences, which include democracy.

The second basic principle underlying the book is the impact of social and economic development upon political change. This Ionescu both took for granted and also saw vindicated in his analysis of the evolution of the European communist regimes, as well as the Soviet Union. They had all gone through a phase of radical social engineering based upon collectivization of agriculture, industrialization and the first Five-Year Plans. Already by the 1960s, however, these phases were over. The original focus upon extensive growth had begun to be replaced by intensive growth and concerns about economic efficiency rather than radicalism. He did not go into much detail about the precise reasons for this or its timing. Why for instance had it occurred in Eastern Europe after communists had been in power for less than twenty years, whereas in the Soviet Union it had taken nearly forty years and even then the commitment to economic reform was much less secure? He was guided by the observation that reformist economists, such as Ota Šik in Czechoslovakia, had already become influential because of the unanswerability of their critiques of the old command economies, even if they had not yet actually risen to key posts of economic responsibility. The old methods of economic management could no longer bring the growth to which the leaderships had become accustomed, and therefore they no longer enjoyed automatic ascendancy. They no longer offered a long-term prospect of success.

All of this had necessarily changed the character of rule, especially in East and Central Europe. The regimes were coming to be ruled by managers rather than mobilizers. And one consequence of the concern with efficiency was greater interest in popular opinions, at least insofar as these might present obstacles to economic growth. The result was, as he pointed out, that already by then most of the regimes in East and Central Europe had introduced the practice of regular public opinion surveys as at least one major element in

policy-making. Once this had started, then the habit of listening to the people would grow.

**Basic Ideas.** The state, then, was the focus of his analysis, and he divided the book into three parts. These dealt with the framework and network of power, the plural checks upon it, and the manifestations of dissent.

The chief innovation of the first part was his coining of the term ‘Apparat state’ to characterize the nexus of political elites which ran communist states. Ionescu identified eight sub-apparats: the ruling party, the army, the state administration, the political police, the bureaucracy, the youth organization, the planning commission and the trade unions. These sub-categories, though, were linked by the nomenklatura, the list of official elite positions throughout the regime, which required appointment, or at least confirmation, by the ruling party’s secretariat. Ionescu was relatively early in highlighting this importance of the nomenklatura — indeed he identified it as an area where more research was needed. Nevertheless although control over personnel was obviously an important tool for the top leadership to try to keep charge, he also emphasized that it did not prevent circumstances occurring where individual sub-apparats were able to assume a dominant position themselves. Sometimes it was the army, in the past it had often been the political police, future economic reform might lead to a higher profile for the economic bureaucracy. The regimes themselves allowed sufficient flexibility for these relative positions to shift over time.

It was, however, the second and third parts of the book which showed more clearly his differences from other writers on communist regimes, and, given the time, his innovation. This was especially true for those who had based their work upon the concept of totalitarianism. By definition the latter had asserted that communist rulers exercised total control over their people, or at least that was their aspiration, even if there were practical reasons why this could not be completely realized. Consequently, there was no place in either their theory or practice for any kind of opposition.

At the formal level Ghiță Ionescu agreed with this. It was indisputable that there were no officially accepted oppositions in any of these states. Indeed he coined the term ‘oppositionless states’ to describe them and he again did so with an eye to comparative politics. Communist states after all were not the only ones which banned oppositions. Many in the Third World did so too. In this
respect communist states could be incorporated into a wider universe of states to allow for broader comparisons and theoretical research to be carried out. It raised for instance the fundamental question of the importance and functions of formal oppositions, and Ionescu himself soon afterwards co-authored a book on opposition in general. And orthodox theories of political organization in communist regimes could also be compared with other kinds of political ideology which in this respect overlapped. He himself, for example, had also noticed similarities between communist and populist doctrines, in that both rejected the legitimacy of opposition and of the institutions of opposition. Indeed in Eastern Europe both populism and communism had become political forces as the societies emerged from traditional rural ways of life. So almost immediately after this book he contributed an article on populism in Eastern Europe to a book on populism in general which he edited with Ernest Gellner.

Yet although the communist regimes of Eastern Europe allowed no formal opposition, Ionescu argued, they were increasingly aware of checks and limitations upon their power which came from within their own societies. The mood of the leaders had now changed. They recognized that these checks could not be simply swept away, as had been attempted during the mass mobilizations of the collectivization and industrialization drives. He rejected the claim that there was no public opinion in communist states because the government would not allow it. As he put it:

This attitude is unwarranted now in most of the European communist states because in all these countries the party in power knows now that people react to its behaviour and measures with sufficient speed and impact to force it sometimes to alter them; and from a more special point of view, the majority of the European communist states, unlike Soviet Russia, have permanently established public-opinion polls.

Once this new attitude of consulting the people was generally accepted, the importance of these checks would continue to grow. Nevertheless to write a comparative book on communist regimes in 1967, two-thirds of which were devoted to checks on power and to dissent, was a striking affirmation of their importance, as well as

---


further rejection of the totalitarian model, when it was still unusual. It should be remembered that this work predated the ‘Prague Spring’, and that the most recent attempts at open opposition to communist rule in Poland and Hungary in 1956 had been brutally suppressed by Moscow only ten years previously.

The second section of the book was devoted to what he called the ‘plural checks’. These were divided into three categories: a) other apparats, i.e. an elaboration of part of the first section; b) socio-economic groupings; c) legislative organs, the judiciary, the media and cultural organizations. In practice Ionescu was focusing upon what other analysts were choosing to call interest groups or groupings, borrowing the term from Western political systems. But he refused to use the term himself, arguing that this would be misleading, for it would suggest a higher degree of pluralism than was actually warranted.

As far as the socio-economic groups were concerned, he concentrated upon the place of the peasants and the workers. He pointed out that in Poland and Yugoslavia the peasants had been sufficiently powerful to require the state to abolish collectivization, although their resistance had been magnified by the support of the Catholic Church in Poland, and by the reluctance of the army to impose and maintain collectivization with the same brutality as in the Soviet Union. Yet he also noted that the leadership themselves usually felt most vulnerable to potential opposition from the workers, and he felt that dissatisfaction among workers, and indeed ordinary citizens, was likely to grow as the cadres of the ruling parties came increasingly from the intelligentsia and became alienated from the rest of society.

But in the third category of the more organized groups, he noted a common emerging theme, namely the reinstitutionalization of social life. Individuals and groups wanted more stability in their relations — more predictability — which would in turn lead to greater demands for legality. Lawyers within the regime were cautiously beginning to make the same point. In turn the rulers themselves to some extent accepted the same trend as they called for greater regularity in the management of the economy. Thus both the regime and its citizens were responding to the same collective psychology — a further indication that the regimes would evolve in the direction which he predicted. Already the parliament in Slovenia had rejected a government bill on social security in 1966.
Ionescu looked forward to more examples of this in the future.

The third section of the book was devoted to more overt and more organized manifestations of dissent. In some ways this was the section of the book which contained the most empirical material, but it was more suggestive than comprehensive in its outline of the manifestations of dissent. He identified five main centres of the aggregation of dissent, and for each category he gave a few examples drawn from some of the states. The main 'centres' were: churches, especially the Catholic Church; students; literary reviews; the army, especially the partisan legacy; and individual personalities, such as Gomulka, Nagy and Djilas — though he also noted that whilst some individuals actually mobilized dissent, others, e.g. Nagy, responded more to popular moods than structured them. He noted that because of the authority of the Catholic Church there, the literary reviews which supported it, and the small Znak group which spoke on its behalf in the parliament (Sejm), Poland was the country which seemed to have the strongest dissent.

The book ended with the declaration of 'two irreversible trends'. The first was that pluralization would lead to the dissolution of the apparat. Already the channels for political dissent were multiplying as even the ruling parties came to be affected by factionalism and parliaments gradually extended their influence. In time the informal checks upon their power which already existed would grow into institutional checks. Under those conditions, even if many of the leading figures in the state remained the same, they would have to operate in such a different context that they would not be able to govern in the old way. He noted that once relatively free debate became legitimate in national parliaments, the character of debates changed from what might have taken place within the ruling party, even if those participating in them were the same. Institutions acquired a life of their own and this changed the character of politics.

The second 'irreversible trend' was more striking for it had been more implicit than closely argued in the body of the book. This was that European communist states would become more European than communist. By this he meant that the habits of institutional pluralism and democratic political culture which had come to predominate in Western Europe would gradually spread to the East. Part of this trend, therefore, he explained as an extension of the first trend, i.e. general institutionalization and democratization. But what was more original was the belief that trends at work in
other parts of Europe would gradually spread eastwards, because the challenges to national policy-making were now as much international as internal. In particular he pointed to the processes of supranational integration which were taking place in the European Community. He believed that Eastern Europe would not be able to stand aloof from them. Indeed he believed that states in both Western and Eastern Europe would find that they would need to work together to tackle the challenges of international competition and that in the process the habits and practices of policy-making in the West would spread eastwards. He envisaged, for instance, a Europe-wide economic plan and a joint technological corporation that would disseminate new technology over the continent. He was more cautious, though, over the extent to which these processes would reach and change Russia. He looked forward to a united Europe, which would be separate from, and collectively at least equal to, the USSR.

CONCLUSION

It is now time to turn to an assessment of *The Politics of the European Communist States*. This can be done at two levels. The first is a judgment of history and it is the most demanding. It concerns the evolution of the regimes themselves. Given that all of them have now collapsed, how well did the trends identified in this work actually lead to the downfall of the communist states? This is of course an extremely challenging test, since it would have required a crystal ball, and it is one which relatively few political scientists have to face. Nevertheless it stands up very well to the test of time.

It must be admitted that *The Politics of the European Communist States* is not very specific about the particular ways in which it envisages that the regimes might be transformed, although it raised expectations that a transformation would occur. However, Ionescu did seem to imply that the transition would probably be peaceful and relatively smooth. He looked forward to increasing acceptance on the part of the rulers of the checks on their power which are in the hands of the people. Ultimately they would recognize the need to rationalize this relationship by reinvigorating parliaments and then accepting official opposition. Once that happened, then the regimes themselves would be qualitatively different. To a certain
extent, of course, that is what happened in Poland in the 1980s, when General Jaruzelski agreed to negotiate with Solidarity, although the subsequent imposition of martial law showed that the process would be far from smooth.

Nevertheless what actually happened was collapse or implosion, not transition. Yet the forces which brought this about were already highlighted in Ghita Ionescu's work in 1967. Although the regimes had been weakened by economic stagnation, the catalyst that brought them down was direct action by large numbers of citizens, i.e. the social forces and the dissident groups to which he had already paid such attention. It was true that a further element in the interplay of factors in 1989 was the changes in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, the official enthusiasm for the concept of a 'Single European Home', and the reluctance of a state with such aspirations to employ the 'Chinese' methods of suppression of dissent which had been demonstrated around Tiananmen Square. In that respect the Soviet Union showed itself, albeit temporarily, to be more 'European' than Ionescu had anticipated.

The relatively spontaneous and unorganized political demonstrations before the world's cameras in the autumn of 1989 showed with extreme clarity the strength of the forces which he had described twenty years previously. It was citizens' movements, not political parties or legislatures, which brought down communist rule. They may have appeared amorphous and difficult to analyse, yet the same lack of structure prevented the regimes from suppressing them. Thus Ionescu's perceptiveness in paying such attention to them in 1967 was justified by the role which they ultimately played.

The second assessment of the book is more academic. It concerns the contribution which it made to the development of the field of comparative communist politics. This book was a landmark in the study of communist regimes. Leaving aside the question of whether it had ever been valid, it showed that the totalitarian model could no longer be applied to the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. It demonstrated that it was possible to apply the comparative method to such regimes using the more traditional approaches of political science. It was a warning from the voice of experience to researchers against the risk of becoming too obsessed with novelty and new techniques of analysis for their own sake. And it also showed almost for the first time that there was sufficient variety in the states of
East and Central Europe to allow meaningful contrasts and comparisons to be made.

Yet although it was primarily focused upon East and Central Europe, it was not an analysis which was necessarily limited to Europe. The core of it could have been applied equally well to communist regimes in Asia and Latin America. The apparat state could be found in, say, China or Vietnam, and even though other communist regimes were less economically developed than those in Europe, nevertheless the pressures of adaptation to maintain economic growth could be presumed to be equally important there too. Indeed the experience of the ‘open door’ reforms in China since 1978 and of ‘doi moi’ in Vietnam since 1985 only confirm this general requirement for communist states to adapt radically if they are to survive. The ruling parties there clearly do recognize the need to take the wishes of their peoples more into account. Thus the scope of this study could easily have been extended more widely.

Ghiță Ionescu returned to some of these themes in his brief monograph *Comparative Communist Politics* five years later, but this was not a field that he developed further. This is not to say that he ever abandoned his interest in Eastern Europe or in change there, because he certainly did not. He observed it keenly and he continued to encourage graduate students to do research on it. And at a practical level, he remained indefatigable in fostering dialogue between academics and policy-makers from both sides of Europe. Even though he never hid his distaste for communism, he used his formidable charm and the diplomatic skills with which he was originally trained as a mediator between the two sides of Europe. In that sense he played an indispensable part in the thickening of détente which developed in the 1970s and the 1980s. And then, once the communist regimes had collapsed in 1989, he was extremely generous in time, advice and resources in assisting groups and individuals who wished to smooth the process of transition to democracy.

But the reason why he turned his energy in other directions academically is implicit in the final chapter of *The Politics of the European Communist States*. Ultimately, he believed, the Eastern European states would ‘rejoin’ Europe, but they would do so all the sooner if the European Community and its member states knew how to adopt the right policies towards them. He recognized that the two Germanies could have a particular role to play in bringing this about, at a time before Chancellor Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*. He toyed
with the idea of West Germany's legalizing the communist party, and East Germany's legalizing a socialist party, as a way of introducing the principle of the right of opposition into Eastern European regimes. And in his own career he turned his attention to studies of the EC, a particularly timely decision given the UK's accession to the Treaty of Rome soon afterwards. This did not mean his turning his back on Eastern Europe. It was as much a redirection for the sake of Eastern Europe. In the process he was able to realize academically his own 'European-ness', just as he hoped that the states of Eastern Europe would be able to do the same in time politically.