



## THE POLYGLOT'S SHELF

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### *The fire that will not burn*

Properly titled **Gorbacio**v's **Russia**, this is not one more book devoted to the new Soviet leader's ambitious plans for reforming communism, and to its objective difficulties, but is rather an analysis of the political and economic aspects of the society to which Gorbachov's ideas are supposed to be applied.

The book, however, is not an introduction to the Soviet Union. On the contrary, it is basically addressed to those already acquainted with the subject. The scholar of Russian and Soviet affairs will find it an almost inexhaustible mine of extremely sharp and profound observations. Thus this slim book is very dense in ideas and hints, each one of which would have sufficed to any intellectual *à la mode*, or any other "opinion leader" as the backbone for an entire book. It is also a good example of a European approach to current affairs, having less frequent recourse to sociological analysis than to historical precedents, though filtered through the ideological elements that mark the continuity/discontinuity of Soviet present with Russian past.



The social context in which Gorbachev's reforms have to be ap-

plied "is no longer that of the many revolutions from above [of the Russian and Soviet past], based on the assumption of a total mastery of the Government over largely passive social forces. On the contrary, society escapes from public control in non-negligible sections of the economy, as shown by the growth of the underground sector, that is estimated around 10% of the GDP. This underground sector subverts the priorities of the planning system and centralized management of prices, revenues, and resources, both human and material. The Soviets marry, divorce, and reproduce, paying no attention to the State's demographic policy. The labour force moves from the north and the east towards the south and the west, instead of the opposite direction, which would be more rational from an economic point of view."

Moreover, this supposedly socialist society is characterized by an "escape towards private life" at odds with all the teaching of the ideology, but also very different from the phenomena that in the West might go under the same name. In the West, conspicuous private consumption is a sort of collective party in which everybody has

**Silvio FAGIOLO,**  
*La Russia di Gorbacio*v, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1988

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to participate, mainly because poverty - even other people's poverty - is an unpleasant sight, tolerated at the most in very small doses, under the form of Third World exotism.

In the USSR, escape into private life does not correspond to the idea of happiness "provided by sentimentalism and hedonism, that derives from the cultural model of the mercantile class of the past century." In the Soviet Union, this escape into private life "is on the other hand, permeated by the anxieties and uncertainties of a petrified society, completely absorbed in itself, where the search for individual happiness takes place outside of any collective framework"; i.e. takes place through vodka, drugs, family life, or the search for the small privileges that are the only measure of social mobility.

The latter is flatly contradictory to the central dogma of Marxist ideology - class consciousness as the way towards liberation -, and thus represents the apex of alienation from socialism. But on top of this, as this book shows, this form of social mobility, that was made possible by a certain development in the 1965-75 period, has been blocked over the last ten years. "In the '30s, a few privileges created a State bourgeoisie that could provide a dam to the social disintegration due to collectivization and industrialization... in the '50s and '60s, a growing share of wealth was allocated to the working class... but in the '80s the pes-

simism of the intellectual *élite* has spread to a much broader class of consumers." From 1965 to 1975, meat consumption per capita had grown by sixteen kilograms, but growth has been only three kilograms in the subsequent decade. Similarly, in the same two decades, milk and milk products per capita had grown first by 70 kilograms, and then by one kilogram.

Thus the "escape into private life" through the search for small privileges has become more and more difficult, especially in the Slavonic "hardcore" of the USSR, while it has remained much easier in the Muslim Republics of Central Asia, due to the survival of tribal links. It is not a coincidence that it is in Khazakstan that Gorbachev has encountered the most severe difficulty in trying to put an end to Breshnev's tolerance and to impose the leaders that could implement his revolution from above.

Acting on this peculiar social environment, introducing elements of economic rationality while at the same time combating this tendency of the society to escape State control, especially in areas populated by national and religious minorities, thus seems to be a difficult enterprise, similar to that of the Czar Nicholas II, who wanted to revitalize Russia through economic but not political liberalization, by introducing into it, as the Czar himself said, "a fire that will not burn".

If the analysis of Russian society is

remarkable for the freshness and the originality of this first rank observer, the pages where the professionalism of the author is most evident are those devoted to the new Soviet foreign policy. Gorbachev's acknowledgement that a nuclear war would have no winners is acutely seen as a victory of reason over ideology, over Lenin's manichean view according to which politics are the continuation of war with other means, an all out struggle that can end only with the total defeat of one of the two enemies. Similarly, the attachment to deterrence shown by the Soviets when faced with the SDI project, is presented as a departure from traditional Russian-Soviet military thinking and the acceptance of an intellectual approach based on game theory, typically American.

This departure from Brezhnev's neo-Stalinist line, devoted to achieving military superiority at any price, can certainly be explained, in the words of N. Ogarkov, one of Moscow's highest military authorities, as a comeback to Marxist logic - "in war, organization and techniques are dependent on material, i.e. economic conditions, on the human element, on technological development" (Engels). But it can also be seen as a withdrawal from ideological rigidity.

The latter - a form of "absolute national moralism" - is indeed "the origin of the American globalism

vs. isolationism argument, as well as of the Soviet world Communism vs. Socialism-in-one-country debate. The Monroe doctrine aimed at separating the new from the old world, The Truman doctrine the free from the Communist world, the Zhdanov doctrine at justifying Stalin's two-camps doctrine. But this is not the Russian tradition; [Russia] was a latecomer of European history, and was always flexible in matters of doctrine, in the religious - among Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam - as well as in the ideological spheres. For generations, Russian autocrats have been willing to enter into alliances with French republicans and Anglo-Saxon liberals, against hostile systems, from Wilhelmine to Nazi Germany. This is the tradition Gorbachev was continuing when, in the country of Palmerston, he stressed that countries only have permanent interests".



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Giuseppe Sacco

## *The ambivalent partnership*

Margarita Mathiopoulos,  
*Amerika: Das Experiment des Fortschritts. Ein Vergleich politischen Denkens in den USA und Europa,*  
Schöningh Verlag,  
Paderborn, 1987.

There is a simple test that would not be out of place before reading **America: The Experiment of Progress. A Comparison of Political Thought in the USA and Europe:** just to ask different people to give their views about the state of the relations between America and Europe. The answers are likely to be highly varied. Some will concentrate on security aspects. How can partnership in an alliance be appropriately organized? Others will place the emphasis on economic conflicts. Are we reaching the point where the contents of transatlantic relations can be expressed only in terms of tax on lard and steel quotas, in the terminology of escalating protectionism? And yet others will appeal to the rationale of detached self-interest. How could Europe take effective action on the world's political scene without keeping closely in step with the Americans? The traditional ambivalence of Europeans, fettered by their indecision between attraction and repulsion as far as America is concerned, will come to the fore even in these details.

Quite a few may find all these answers obvious and superficial, and after reading this book by Margarita Mathiopoulos they will feel angered by these established commonplaces of both Euro-

American dialogue and the criticism that is made of Euro-American relations. For all too often they ignore the very thing that Margarita Mathiopoulos made the subject of her dissertation: the roots of common political thinking, the tradition of common political ideas, and the different paths subsequently taken in the course of further development. The paradox of the relations between the two continents suddenly becomes clear to the reader and probably also explicable: the simultaneous pull of nearness and distance, of mutual attraction and mutual incomprehension.



The book brings out the tradition of the exchange of political ideas, makes it transparent, and thus helps take a look below the surface of transatlantic relations. The association of analysis of the development of ideas and consideration of the range of current problems constitutes the specific attraction of this book, which stimulates, provokes, calls for further thought and, above all, transmits a wealth of insights about a theme of existential importance. "Europe and America experience difficulty in changing position. There are misunderstandings, prejudices, and distortions of the

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image that people on the two sides of the Atlantic have of each other". Is it possible to put our finger on one of the central causes of this? The continuity of the American dream stands in marked contrast with the ruptures and self-doubts of European thinking: "America was brought into being on the intellectual soil of European enlightenment, by the desire to realize reason, freedom (of religion), equality, democracy and the rights of man in the New World. The belief in the progress of European enlightenment brought into being the 'American dream', which has remained rooted in the consciousness of the American people to this day and still moulds the country's policy both at home and abroad."

The book is based on an extremely rich documentation, the author having evaluated material found in widely scattered libraries. It is linguistically precise and yet formulated with brio and vivacity. The reader finds himself gripped by a subject matter that he would normally deem dry and not particularly readable, though one is sometimes left a little breathless by the intellectual agility with which the author, within the space of a few pages, covers the ground from classical antiquity to the age of television and yet finds it possible to come to grips with the Club of Rome's categorical negation of progress, touch upon para-religious sects and mention the biogenetic revolution. Harsh criticism is reserved for "the Europeans": their anti-modern turning around and

culturally pessimistic eschatological visions, their paucity of ideas and creeping disillusionment with history provoke the author to biting verdicts. The book would not have lost any of its brilliance had the author used more personal restraint in some of her topical judgments, concentrating her attention on the analysis of the basic lines underlying the development of ideas.

Margarita Mathiopoulos demonstrates the interdependence of European and American progressive thought in a subtle and differentiated manner. The American dream would not be conceivable without European philosophy. In building up the United States, the ideas of the Old World were used to create a new world. In the New World the wealth of ideas of the Old Continent were to be put into practice more quickly and more directly than proved possible in a Europe entangled in masochistic and often bloody conflicts.

And yet, even in these elementary experiences we already have the beginnings of the emancipation of America from Europe and the distance between them. In America belief in progress developed in glamour and continuity and without self-doubting critique, in marked contrast with Europe, where the ambivalence of progress has expressed itself time and time again in dogma, utopias, and totalitarianism: "American belief in progress is thus to be understood as a historical necessity in the

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thinking of the New World and an altogether original feature. America was probably not only better off, as Goethe once noted, but also chose rather better roads than Europe. The birth of America out of European principles made it possible for America to become a test case and example of applied enlightenment.

The American Re-volution and its consequences in the process of democratization, rationalization and community creation founded a national consensus whose effects are still felt today. The European revolutions in many ways had the opposite effect: the continent became entangled in national antagonisms, and it became polarized and ideologized. But this did not prevent the Europeans from continuing to look down upon Americans with the arrogance of an *élite*, and to ignore American intellectual autonomy in a world view centred on Europe.

Hegel's lecture on philosophy and history in the winter semester of 1822 can be regarded as symptomatic: "Having dealt with the New World and the dreams that are associated with it, we can now pass on to the Old World, that is to say, the stage of world history". It may well be that we have here the key to quite a few of the psychic complications in transatlantic relations during the postwar period: an old continent, which had understood itself as a universal provider of ideas, was leaving the stage of world politics.

The perversion of nationalist thinking had turned Europe into rubble, a heap of ruins. For the first time ever, Europeans found themselves really dependent on America: in power politics, economics, and charity, America held out its hand for a task of reconstruction of historic proportions. But in doing so it not only demonstrated its power and autonomy, but also the selfsame independent intellectual ethos that Europeans had so persistently ignored in their view of America.

This new experience of the Europeans, an experience grounded in their very existence, especially as far as the Germans were concerned, is probably making its full effects felt only today. For in the generation involved in the reconstruction, all this tended to be hidden by the predominant impressions of solidarity in action. But the gradual disappearance of this experience horizon, which had traumatically moulded both the war generation and its first postwar successor, led to the incipient comeback of historical patterns thought to have been abandoned long ago.

They find expression in a number of different variants: in the distance of "anti" feelings, in arrogant deprecation, and in ostentative or bored disinterest on both sides of the Atlantic. This creeping, non-spectacular taking of one's distance from the partner on the other side of the Atlantic, with possibly spectacular consequences at some time or other, probably describes the most realistic danger inherent

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in the various Atlantic crisis scenarios.

The key question for the future of Euro-American relations can probably be formulated as follows: How can we found and foster the North-Atlantic community when we think of the growing generation, which is no longer moulded by the traumatic war experiences of its predecessors? The experience of common spiritual and intellectual roots, the fascination of different ways of realizing this heritage, the aperture of one partner and the historical density of the other, the uninhibited self-consciousness of the one and the self-critical contemplation of the other - all this could provide the spiritual and psychological stimulus for new bridges across the Atlantic.

The two continents have to come to grips with similar problems of civilization and progress, albeit with differently placed accents. What is there to prevent them from perceiving themselves not only as partners for security purposes, but also as mutual apprentices, as a

community bent on learning from each other? What really prevents Europe and America today from organizing themselves as such a learning community?

Margarita Mathiopoulos sums it up as follows: "Europe and America depend on each other". This is the last word of a book that undoubtedly takes its place among the most important and stimulating publications that in recent years have sought to contribute to a proper understanding of Euro-American relations.



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Werner Weidenfeld