

Tales from the Public Sector

Humor in Handcuffs

The citizens of the socialist countries of eastern Europe are the world's greatest connoisseurs of Tales from the Public Sector. In the absence of an independent press, of any untrammelled organized opposition party or of free and objective social investigation, anecdotes based on personal experience are the key source of people's everyday knowledge of the nature of socialism. It is through the telling and re-telling by word of mouth of anecdotes based on true incidents that people become aware of the full extent of bureaucratic bungling, economic inefficiency, ideological idiocy, and political oppression in a socialist society. Furthermore, in a society that is all public sector, such anecdotes are not merely cautionary tales about the failings of particular institutions but statements about the essential nature of their social order. Perhaps it is for this reason that the peoples of eastern Europe have also become so skilled at devising "master tales" about their public sector. These master tales extract the crucial implicit messages from the thousands of particular tales in circulation and re-express them in a highly compressed and witty fashion. In this way the anonymous satirists of eastern Europe have learned to express the unhappy predicament of their people through a highly developed genre of political jokes, which can express the fate of an entire society in as little as a single line. Yet when we laugh at these jokes we should remember that for those who tell them they are as much a vehicle for truth as for mirth.

A Soviet economist visited France and told the French Economic Minister, "Your economy is in a terrible state. I have never seen such poverty." "What do you mean?" replied the Frenchman, "The shops are full of all kinds of goods and produce." "But," replied the Russian, "no one can afford to buy them. During the whole of my visit to France I haven't seen one single queue."

When will the Cubans know that they have achieved the same level of socialist development as the Soviet Union? When they start importing sugar.

What is three miles long and eats potatoes? A Polish meat queue.

Soviet economist: "The reason why Canada and the United States supply the Soviet Union with so much grain is due to the catastrophic over-production of capitalism."

What do the American and Polish economies have in common? In neither country can you buy anything with zloties. (The zloty is the Polish unit of currency.)

A Polish economist has defined the difference between capitalism and socialism as follows: under capitalism you get rigid discipline in production and chaos in consumption. Under socialist economic planning you get rigid discipline in consumption and chaos in production.

At the May Day parade in Moscow, Brezhnev and the other party bosses watched as usual the long destructive parade of Soviet military power—tanks, missiles, guns, and so on. At the end of the parade was a little truck with three dingy elderly men sitting in it. Brezhnev turned to one of his generals and asked, "What on earth are they doing in the parade?" The general replied, "Those are our economists. You have no idea the destructive power that they possess."

Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev were travelling in a train when it ground to a halt in the middle of nowhere. "Leave this to me," said Stalin as he left the compartment and went to the front of the train. A few minutes later he returned and told the others, "I have shot the engine driver." The train naturally refused to start and a few hours later Khrushchev strolled down to the front of the train. On his return he said confidently, "Everything's under control now. I've had the engine driver rehabilitated." The train remained stationary. Brezhnev now got to his feet and pulled down the blinds on the window, "There," he said confidently, "now the train is moving."

The insightful mockery with which eastern Europeans so accurately and succinctly attack the socialist economic structure of their society is applied with equal force and parsimony to its political and ideological superstructure. Here again is the biting truth about the political face of socialism:

The Soviet Union has a two-party system. One party is in power and the other is in jail.

Can there be an opposition party in the Soviet Union? No, because if one were allowed everyone would join it and there would still only be one party.

A Russian went to work in the Soviet embassy in London. A week later he telephoned the British Foreign Office and said, "I would like to go to Manchester."

"I don't understand the problem."

"I would like a travel permit to go there."

"You don't need a travel permit. Just get on the train."

"But I want to go by car."

"Well then get in your car and drive up the motorway."

"But what about petrol? I haven't any petrol coupons."

"You don't need any. Any service station will sell you all the petrol you need."

"What an impossible country," gasped the Russian to himself, "what total anarchy."

The political and economic muddle and oppression of socialism only survives because of the preponderant military might of the Soviet army and police. Yet even the vast unpleasant fact of Russian hegemony is compressed into tiny devastating master comments by those most heavily oppressed by it.

Polish description of trade with the U.S.S.R.: "We export our coal to Russia and in exchange they take our steel."

Hungarian-Soviet treaty on the navigation of the Danube. "The Soviet Union may navigate the Danube lengthwise and the Hungarians breadthwise."

Intourist advertisement: Visit the Soviet Union before the Soviet Union visits you.

These are not anti-Russian jokes, for the Russians are as much victims of the socialist system as anyone else. Indeed they have been victims for far longer than anyone else. The length of their plight and their feelings about it were recently succinctly summed up by an elderly man answering the questions of a sociologist in Leningrad:

Where were you born? St. Petersburg.

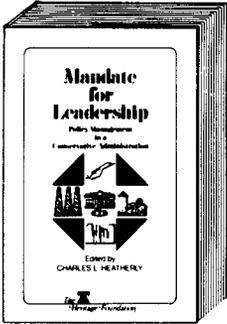
Where did you go to school? Petrograd.

Where do you live now? Leningrad.

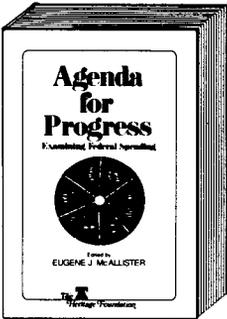
Where would you like to live? St. Petersburg.

Christie Davies

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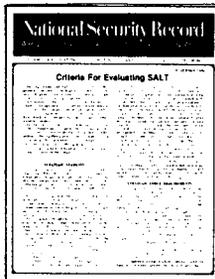
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Book Reviews

Such Men Are Dangerous

GOVERNING AMERICA. *By Joseph A. Califano, Jr.* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1981)

A LIFE IN OUR TIMES. *By John Kenneth Galbraith.* (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1981)

We are living in the long run, and Keynes is dead. His legacy of economic understanding, regnant in federal government policy for a generation, was interred in November 1980. Now, less than a year later, even stalwart Democrats of the old school recognize the need to couch their old nostrums in the new supply-side terminology. Gone are the static models, the macroeconomic assumptions, and the efforts to effect "fine tuning" of the economy. Gone, too, is the ancillary political style, made possible (if not inevitable) by Keynesian economics, in which various interest groups compete for their shares of a growing federal pie.

Unfortunately, although Keynesianism is dead, not everyone has noticed the obituary that the national electorate supplied. Both Joseph Califano and John Kenneth Galbraith remain uninformed. So each has produced a set of personal reminiscences into which the reality of political change never obtrudes. Professor Galbraith was one of the earlier acolytes in Keynes's service; Mr. Califano was one of the premiere practitioners of the Keynesian political style. The two sets of memoirs, covering as they do a similar set of issues and an overlapping period of time, together provide a useful insight into the thoughts of the generation now making its exit from the political stage.

Interestingly enough, although the two men dwell on the same problems and deal with the same characters, they only brush past each other in these two books. Professor Galbraith does not appear in *Governing America*, which is primarily devoted to the Carter administration, since Professor Galbraith was (for a change) not active in that Democratic regime. Mr. Califano appears in a cameo role in the Galbraith account. After the 1967 coup in Greece, Professor Galbraith marshalled various intellectuals to support the cause of Andreas Papandreou, who was arrested by the junta. He called Mr. Califano — who was then serving as a White House aide — to convey his concern to President Johnson. In the morning, Professor Galbraith heard the reply, relayed by another White House functionary: "Call up Ken Galbraith and tell him that I've told those Greek bastards to lay off that son-of-a-bitch — whoever he is."

Such blunt messages from the President are, of course, exactly what the reader hopes to find in political memoirs such as these. The major attraction of such books is the inside information they provide: the glimpses of the unvarnished truth about political wheeling and dealing at the higher levels. Mr. Califano's book relies heavily on this voyeur-