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Book Review: The Quest for Legitimacy and the Withering Away of Utopia

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Tarifa, Fatos. *The Quest for Legitimacy and the Withering Away of Utopia*. The Hague: Smiet, 2001. 113 pp. (Paper).

Many who live in the West have a myopic view of the world and of recent history. They understand the transition from the end of the twentieth century to the start of the new millennium as the replacement of one “evil” with another. The Cold War and the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union have been replaced with the War on Terrorism and the battles being waged against Al-Qaeda, Hizballah, and the many other terrorist organizations worldwide, as well as nation states like Iraq and Iran that are said to sponsor terrorist groups. Indeed, the expression “rogue state” has become part of our lexicon.

For Fatos Tarifa, the current Albanian ambassador to the United States and the author of *The Quest for Legitimacy and the Withering Away of Utopia*, this view has not gone unnoticed. Although rogue states and terrorist networks are not addressed in *The Quest for Legitimacy*, they can become relevant if the notion of legitimate authority is extended to such states and networks as a basis for justifying retaliatory measures against them. Among recent studies of political legitimacy, *The Quest for Legitimacy* stands out as a succinct, insightful examination of this topic as it pertains to the countries that once made up communist Central and Eastern Europe. Tarifa surveys the literature on legitimacy and communist Europe and guides the reader through the ideas of such figures as Max Weber, Alfred Meyer, Leszek Kolakowski, and Samuel Huntington in arriving at his own interesting conclusions.

What makes this work so important for those interested in current international affairs, as well as the slightly removed areas of political theory and applied ethics, is the sort of analysis Tarifa engages in and the conclusions he arrives at, as well as the fact that the world community is facing a resurgence in interventionism, particularly the actions and policies associated with the war on terrorism. Tarifa engages in a comparative analysis that explores the political legitimacy in what were once the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and challenges the orthodox view long held by some Western academicians, policy makers, and politicians that the communist countries in this part of Europe comprised a coherent entity and that their governance by communist party officials and their elites was illegitimate. Indeed, Tarifa finds this view to be highly suspect.

If we add to this the call for interventionism that has swept through the halls of power, then the significance of this work becomes more apparent to the reader. If it turns out that a strong case can be made for the former Soviet Union as having had a certain degree of political legitimacy, a legitimacy that would have been unheard of during the height of the Cold War—and political legitimacy is an important condition in determining whether the use of coercive intervention, military or otherwise, is justified against a country that is branded to be as politically illegitimate as the Soviet Union once was—then *The Quest for Legitimacy* can be read as a challenge to those who would make the case for intervention in the affairs of so-called rogue states. In short, political legitimacy may be more widespread than has been previously acknowledged, thereby constraining justificatory arguments for interventionism to an even greater degree.

The Quest for Legitimacy opens with an introduction, followed by five sections and a list of references. In the introduction, Tarifa makes it clear to the reader that the question of legitimacy of communist-ruled states has gone “under-researched and marginalized.” Perhaps the primary reason for this has been the fact that conventional wisdom dictated that state socialism was not capable of any significant degree of political legitimacy, a case of ideological bias influencing the intellectual landscape. Not falling victim to this orthodoxy, Tarifa focuses on the meaning and nature of political legitimacy, the determining factors and actors of political legitimacy, and the conditions under which legitimacy is challenged and withdrawn as expressed in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. His approach involves a comparative analysis that brings together literature on the historical, political, and economic conditions of this part of Europe, as well as theoretical principles of political legitimacy. As the rest of the book shows, Tarifa questions the conventional view of a monolithic Eastern Europe, “a single, coherent region” composed of communist states that lack any sort of legitimacy. Not only are there existing differences various countries in Central and Eastern Europe that undermine this monolithic view, but the legitimization processes were such that it would be difficult for communist Europe not to possess a significant degree of political legitimacy.

In section one, entitled “Applying the Concept of ‘Legitimation’ to the Formerly Communist-Ruled States,” Tarifa leads the reader on a journey to understand the nature of legitimate authority. From its early appearance in the form

of the divine right theory to its current secularized conception, wherein legitimacy is obtained if a governing body's subjects *believe* that body to *deserve* obedience (which amounts to "moral approval" on the part of the subjects), political legitimacy has been an important aspect of the political fabric of every society. Tarifa surveys the extensive literature on legitimacy and with some insight notes that the concept contains an objective as well as a subjective connotation. The former is a title to rule through certain established political processes and procedures, whereas the latter is the general acceptance or recognition by the citizens. This acceptance is most important, according to Tarifa, because it amounts to the governing body having a moral right to be obeyed by the populace. Furthermore, if that body is to be able to effectively exercise authority, then there must be legitimacy, which is a moral concept. It is because of this that Tarifa makes it clear that legitimacy will always be a challengeable proposition. Differences in moral frameworks may give rise to differences in judgments concerning legitimacy.

Without probing into the moral basis for legitimacy, Tarifa moves quickly to focus on the historicity of legitimacy of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, and contends that an assessment of their legitimacy needs to include an examination of whether (1) these regimes were established by *indigenous* revolutions or were the result of Soviet power; (2) these regimes were established by *legitimate means* or by coercion and terror; (3) communist parties in these countries acquired and maintained power on behalf of *legitimate principles* or through ideological persuasion and indoctrination; and (4) prevailing *social structures* or opposing *social groups* were essential to the establishment and legitimation of communist power. It is from this framework that Tarifa arrives at three propositions, the assessment of which make up the rest of the book: (1) the different historical circumstances of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe were such that each had a different level of initial legitimacy; (2) there were elements of legitimacy in each communist state; and (3) the erosion of legitimacy occurred at different rates throughout these communist states.

In section two, "Initial Legitimacy of East European 'People's Democracies,'" Tarifa concludes that the initial legitimacy of these states was dependent on the interaction of endogenous and exogenous factors that played a role in the establishment of these communist regimes and that these factors interacted in different ways in the various countries. With the exception of two Balkan countries, Yugoslavia and Albania, the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe entered the post-war period with popular-front governments that included communists in key ministerial positions. Tarifa makes it clear that the inclusion of the latter group was not the result of happenstance, but of Soviet presence in these countries. This meant that in some of these countries (e.g., Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Hungary), the resulting revolution was more artificial than genuine, the presence of the Red Army a deciding exog-

enous factor in the fate of these countries. On the other hand, Yugoslavia and Albania were not militarily occupied by the Red Army but were dominated by communist-oriented resistance movements that became instrumental in building communist regimes. As a result, these revolutions, which had a more endogenous component to them, were of the genuine variety. The reader might get the impression that Tarifa's highlighting the Soviet role has unknowingly provided support to the orthodox view that finds these communist countries to lack legitimacy. This is not the case. This is because Tarifa takes what he calls a "social history approach" rather than a "political history approach" to understanding the legitimacy issue. He focuses on social changes that reflect a gradual or ongoing process, rather than concentrating on certain political events that are indicative of a "drastic rupture with pre-communist development."

In a sense, Tarifa is acknowledging the importance of endogenous factors in the creation of these new societies. Each society has its own historicity, its own set of identities, including historical experiences, economic arrangements, and legal traditions. These factors supposedly play a crucial role in the formation of legitimate states. If the reader is hoping to find Tarifa specifying the moral concept of legitimacy in terms of endogenous factors, he or she will be disappointed. The author makes no effort to synthesize. In fact, he complicates the discussion by introducing another causal factor in the legitimation process, which is that during times of war and revolution, the legitimation of power may derive from "the people" or "the revolution," as well as from "the lack of legitimacy of the system they replace." Granted, the Soviet presence did contribute to limiting which groups could viably participate in the public sphere, but these societies were already in such a terrible state that they were ready to undergo change. The communists were a valuable group that had helped to thwart the Axis powers and had the power to get things done in post-war Europe. However, the question of legitimacy, and which moral standards figure into legitimizing the various regimes, is left unanswered. Again, a government's right to rule must not only be legitimate in the eyes of its subjects so that the leaders can effectively achieve their political, social, and economic goals, but members of the government must also be led to believe that they are holders of morally-sanctioned authority. But how, for example, does the charismatic leadership of Josip Broz Tito in Yugoslavia and Enver Hoxha in Albania translate into legitimacy? How is this cast in terms of an ethical framework that justifies legitimacy? All this is left unsaid.

The third section, "Coercion, Indoctrination, and Legitimation," is crucial in undermining conventional wisdom about communist Europe, for it *limits* but does not discount the causal efficacy of both ideology and terror as means of acquiring and maintaining rule over a country. Tarifa contends that to differentiate communist rule from other forms of authoritarian or totalitarian rule, as well as to account for the longevity of communist rule in Europe (and, I suggest, in other parts of the world, such as Cuba), other factors must be considered. No matter the degree to which a system uses

force, the force must be accepted and legitimated in order for the system to work effectively. Of the factors that are cited from the literature on this topic, three seem to be emphasized by Tarifa: (1) a citizenry that identifies with the goals of the ruling elite; (2) a utopian faith of building a more egalitarian, just, and prosperous society; and (3) the meeting of expectations, resulting in the enhanced acceptability of the ruling elite. Such factors tend to be overlooked in favor of the coercive and indoctrinating aspects of ideological rule, which make it an almost foregone conclusion that communist regimes lack legitimacy. It is a tribute to Tarifa's work that it attempts to broaden our understanding of the process of political legitimacy.

The fourth section of *The Quest for Legitimacy*, which is entitled "Legitimation Crises of State Socialism," begins to capture the eventual demise of political legitimacy in the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Tarifa's opening paragraph gets to the heart of the issue:

Depending on the initial level of their legitimacy, the changes of historical circumstances among different nations, the degree of ideological persuasion and terror, the effectiveness of different governments and the ability of the ruling elites to adapt their governing strategies to new situations and demands, the emergence of a critical public sphere and the role of civil society, and finally, the increase in people's frustration and distrust of realizing their goals through the socialist state, the legitimacy of the communist regimes has put into question and, indeed, was undermined...long before the whole system collapsed.

Although the factors discussed in the third section were important determiners of legitimacy, at least initial legitimacy, the crisis of legitimacy came to these communist countries in the form of the "withering away of the utopia." The implementation of the Soviet system, with its ruthless consolidation of power, made a mess of anything even remotely resembling an egalitarian, just, and prosperous society. With the notion of political legitimacy having not only an objective component, but a subjective component as well, the latter pertaining to the existence of an acceptable regime, it is understandable that the communist regimes of this part of Europe gradually lost their legitimacy. Losing faith in their leadership was the bottom line.

The insightful differences that Tarifa highlights between Central European and the South East European countries led to differences in the susceptibility of state socialism in these areas. On the one hand, the countries of the former Habsburg Empire were especially susceptible to an erosion of legitimacy because (1) the communist parties in Central Europe did not have a great deal of popular backing; (2) the indoctrination process was a superficial one; (3) there was an absence of harsh repression; (4) there was a shortage of charismatic figures; and (5) these countries were less agrarian and "backward" than other countries, such as those found

in the Balkans.

The causal connections that Tarifa makes between these factors and the decline of legitimacy are extraordinary, particularly when Yugoslavia and Albania are examined. In the case of Tito's Yugoslavia, the large peasant population created a strong base of support for the communist-led partisan movement against Germany and its allies, as well as a group that made economic improvements look all the more dramatic. Tito's charismatic leadership and his own brand of federalism, Yugoslavism, made this Balkan country less susceptible to the disruptive effects of opposition movements. Albania was in a similar position because of its strong agrarian base, its rapid economic growth, and the charismatic leadership of Hoxha. However, when the legitimization crisis broke through, there was wide-spread disappointment felt by the masses.

The last section, "The Erosion of Legitimacy of 'Real Existing Socialism': Economy vs. Ideology," begins with a quote from Hannah Arendt's 1963 work *On Revolutions*. In discussing legitimate authority as a government's capacity to maintain the confidence in the system of power, Arendt states that "no revolution ever succeeded, few revolutions ever started, so long as the authority of the body politic was indeed intact." Although Tarifa is quick to point out that the crisis of legitimacy in communist Europe was brought about by a host of factors, including political, ideological, economic, and cultural, he pays special attention to Kolakowski, who argues that the two main causes of the crisis for state socialism deal with "the mind" (i.e., ideology) and "the body" (i.e., the economy).

The common view in current scholarship on what undercut political legitimacy and led to the collapse of the communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe is "the inefficiency of Sovietism as an *economic* order and its repeated failures to fulfill people's increasing expectations and even their basic economic demands." Tarifa is correct to point out that such a view reflects the belief in the "primacy of the economy *vis-à-vis* politics." In short, political success is closely associated with the health of the economy. As Tarifa writes,

communist party-states based their claim to legitimate authority on their ability to promote economic growth, to provide a steady and improving flow of goods and services, and even promising their citizenry to catch up with and overtake the standard of living of advanced capitalist societies. When, after some initial economic and social achievements, it became clear that the socialist state was unable to deliver on economic promises, the argument concludes, its legitimacy was threatened and undermined. This implies that the socialist state failed to sustain the right to rule.

However, there is a second line of Kolakowski's argument that Tarifa cites to help explain the demise of state socialism, "the loss of *faith* in, and *ideological* failures of, state

socialism.” The crisis of beliefs, a crisis in people’s “mentality,” led to the crisis of the moral legitimacy of the state.

As a social scientist, Tarifa concludes this section and the book by stating the explanatory hypotheses of ideology and economy are not subject to standard verification or Popperian falsification, for

it is impossible to state firmly whether it was the failure of Communist ideology that led to irrational and wasteful socialist economies thereby delegitimizing state socialism, or the consecutive economic failures in all socialist countries which delegitimized the communist ideology and the political system in which this ideology was embodied.

Yet they are not parallel hypotheses, but hypotheses that are dialectically related to one another. Neither explanation is sufficient to render the demise of state socialism transparent. That can only be achieved by acknowledging the merits of both, as well as additional empirical research into the causal nexus of political legitimacy.

The debate over the rise and fall of communist Central and Eastern Europe is ongoing, that rises and falls depending on the current state of affairs in the world. Tarifa’s book draws upon the extensive scholarship and personal insight in distilling the essential features of the debate, analyzes different perspectives including traditional wisdom and its alternatives, and provides valuable insights into a holistic and dialectical explanation of political legitimacy within the context of the communist regimes in this part of Europe. Even the nonspecialist reader will find this book to be both readable and informative. Yet *The Quest for Legitimacy* is not without its flaws, one being that the moral edifice upon which political legitimacy rests is left unanalyzed, with some questions treated superficially or their answers assumed. The value of the work is in its offering the reader an opportunity to take this insightful discussion of political legitimacy as a stimulus for a broader challenge of conventional wisdom concerning interventionism and rogue states. Readers who deal with such concerns should seriously consider reading this book to render suspect the hackneyed view of authoritarian regimes.