Technology and the Revolt Against Centralization

By George Roche

The rapid movement of events over the past few months leaves us all breathless. Solidarity's accession to power in Poland, the opening of the Berlin Wall, the growing movement for freedom and reform in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Soviet Baltic republics — even in the Ukraine, that venerable "breadbasket of the USSR" — represents a tide of human striving virtually unparalleled in history. In China, also, where so recently the blood of young people crying for freedom was spilled, the aged Deng Xiaoping has resigned the last of his official posts. Nothing we would call real freedom should be expected there soon, since Deng will no doubt remain China's guiding spirit for the foreseeable future. But a new generation of leadership is on the rise, and time seems to be on the side of reform.

Our first response is to revel in the vindication of freedom and the free market. Marx had it wrong, after all. Now the evidence is clear. But what we are witnessing demands broader perspective. This is more than the defeat of communism. The events in Europe and Asia are part of a worldwide revolt against centralization. It is a movement not just for the freedom of nations and peoples, but for the diffusion of power within societies, for greater individual liberty and increased self-determination.

The trend is evident almost everywhere — including here in the United States — and a critical factor in its development is technology. Through low-cost computers, sophisticated telecommunications, even copying machines, the technological revolution of the past two decades has provided individual entrepreneurs, small companies, schools, advocacy groups and other organizations with access to sources of information and means of instantaneous contact once available only to governments and the very largest corporations.

The specter of Big Brother which the early computers evoked has proven to be much less threatening than was once supposed, for if technology has abetted the totalitarian impulse, it has also provided the tools for undermining central authority by helping to disperse power, by increasing the dynamism and complexity of economic life, and by vastly speeding up the pace of change. Technology, quite simply, has facilitated the capacity for choice. And the results of the choices being made are becoming as clear here in the United States as in the countries of the once seemingly impenetrable Eastern Bloc. Computers, satellite television, the ubiquitous fax machine and other modern wonders are changing American domestic politics, as surely as they have exposed the rot at the center of the communist myth and helped make Lech Walesa a household name.

As it has accelerated the loss of patience with Kremlin rantings about the ultimate triumphs of "the masses," technology has also contributed to a rejection of many Washington/Beltway schemes and promises.

This is encouraging to people who value freedom. While the struggles of people in the East (referred to not so long ago as the "captured peoples") have been far more agonizing than anything most Americans have experienced, we must wage our own resistance to the increasing intrusiveness of "big government."

Of course, we cannot be entirely sanguine about the trend which has been set in motion. Change and diversity, even freedom itself, can be exploited by the advocates of any program or agenda, of any degree of individualism or centralization, of any philosophy or moral sense. Technology is value-neutral. Its application reflects the will behind the human hand employing it. The technology that brings us inspiring images of Germans dancing on the Berlin Wall is the same that brings us MTV.

We have entered a period that offers great promise for liberty and prosperity around the world. But is is a period whose end remains to be seen. The revolt against centralization will have its price, here as in the communist world. On balance, it is for the best. At least, that is our fervent hope. ♠

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