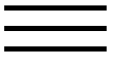


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JEREMY T. PALTIEL*

The Cult of Personality: Some Comparative

The Cult of Personality: Some Comparative Reflections on Political Culture in Leninist Regimes

The cult of personality is one political phenomenon which has been interpreted with reference to political culture. Typically this has meant the attribution of a predisposition to a cult of personality to political cultures with autocratic traditions. However, autocracy has been the historical rule to which Western Europe provides the sole exception. Therefore, such historically biased explanations simply beg the question of why political organizations tend to autocracy. Moreover, even a resort to historical precedent does not explain the growth of the 'cult' in a Leninist context nor its more extreme manifestations. Furthermore, it is now clear that the 'cult of personality' in the Leninist regime is a phenomenon of limited historical duration. It is therefore important for the political scientist searching for the genesis of this problem to address the question of timing, a question outside the analytical framework of political culture *per se*.

The question for the political scientist to answer is: under what circumstances do traditional themes become salient outside their original setting? This article seeks to do two things: first, to sketch out a preliminary explanation of the importance of autocracy to traditional political cultures; and second, to relate this explanation to the growth of personality cults under very different circumstances in the Soviet Union and China under Stalin and Mao. In the process of explaining the growth of the 'cult' in these two countries, we will show how it emerges from a particular developmental crisis of Leninist regimes which gives rise both to the cult and its associated terrorist manifestations.

In referring to the 'cult of personality' we do not mean simply leader-worship or hero-worship. Such phenomena are commonplace in any mass movement, especially ones which have achieved important results under extremely difficult conditions. It should not surprise us at all that this phenomenon arose in the communist movement, with its militantly atheist and this-worldly focus. We should remember, however, that leader-worship as hero-worship gave rise not to a single, but to a plural cult of a whole pantheon of personalities—even in China, where Chu Teh and Mao Tse-tung were

* This article is based on a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, 3 September 1981. The author would like to thank Professor Kenneth Jowitt whose criticism and comments contributed substantially to this paper. Professor Lowell Dittmer, who contributed his criticism to an earlier version of this paper, and by whose grace the author found himself on that panel, is also due a large measure of thanks.

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