THE REVOLUTION OF 1989: THE UNBEARABLE BURDEN OF HISTORY

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One of the East European revolutions' primary concerns is the past. Mass graves of the victims of the ancien régime are searched out in forests; once uncovered, their remains are scrutinized, honored, and finally reburied in consecrated ground. Monuments are abolished and demolished, plans are made to replace them with new ones or with those that were removed from their place half a century earlier. Former names of streets, occasionally of towns, are restored. Despised emblems are cut out of national flags, and portraits are knocked off walls and trampled. The Polish White Eagle regains its lost crown. Leaders whose names are connected with a memorable national defeat or a national upheaval are welcomed back, dead or alive, as a covenant between the old and the new times; some of them who are more alive than others hurry to rebuild their political parties, long crushed and outlawed. Analogies are drawn between new statesmen and old: Havel and Masaryk, Mazowiecki and Paderewski, Wałęsa and Piłsudski. An ousted king sends a message to his former and perhaps also his future subjects in Romania. The Polish president-in-exile awaits a solemn declaration of independence, after which he will return to the country he left half a century ago, only to vest the legal instruments of power in the hands of his democratically elected "successor."

Symbolically, the new Polish republic will be regarded as a direct continuation of the prewar republic: what existed in the period between them will be enclosed in historical parentheses, as if the Poles had spent all that time in a coma or a state of insinquent resistance to the regime imposed by Moscow. Contemporary history is to be rewritten, truth unearthed, children re-educated, responsibility established, justice done. The newly emerged parties will no less fiercely argue about who is entitled to call himself the heir to the political legacy of Peasant Party leader Wincenty Witos or National Democrat Roman Dmowski than about what is to be done here and now.

What a golden age for historians. Unemployment will not threaten the East European historians, even if some of us will have to move to a field of research that lies closer to the interests of a larger public. But, more seriously, what is the reason for this East European preoccupation with the past? Why do people get so excited when trying on this or that antiquated
garb or disposing of the garbage of the past?

One answer is that all revolutions arouse historical consciousness. First, because a revolution is by its nature a re-evaluation. Second, because, no matter how paradoxical this may appear, the bigger the leap forward we are about to make, the more anxiously we look backward. We assimilate the unknown to the known and persuade ourselves that the unprecedented enterprise we have just embarked upon is but a repetition of an old and familiar pattern.

But other factors also play a role in the post-communist zone. So much of recent history had been so distorted or doomed to oblivion that the moment of revolution becomes a moment of revelation, of truth. Nations are winning back their own history, regaining their memory, discovering their soldiers' graves scattered all over the world, reconstructing their broken traditions, singing their sacred, long-forbidden songs, and, unavoidably, creating new myths and legends in the process. Thus, our present revolution is no less conservative than it is radical, and its Janus-like face looks both ways: into the future and into the past.

But what if historical patterns indeed recur? After all, how many times in the last two centuries did the Poles (or any of the other nations, for that matter) fight, gun or pen in hand, for their national independence? How many democratic manifestoes have been written by the Central/East Europeans (may I call them "Ceastropeans"). at home or in exile? How many times has press censorship already been abolished? And how many times did each of these countries take off on a brand new path of economic growth and modernization? Indeed, if any universal experience and common wisdom of all these peoples destined to live in the narrow space between the Russian, German, Austrian, and Turkish empires emerges from it all, it boils down to this: no victory is ever final, no peace settlement is ever conclusive, no frontier is ever secure, and the efforts of decades and generations do not add up. There is no linear development in history, only sisyphian ups and downs, building and wrecking, in which ingenuity and perseverance do not always mean much. This sort of mild resignation--social psychologists call it "learned helplessness"--has been conditioned by a very real historical experience, and it has nothing in common with fatalistic Eastern metaphysics.

But this is not at all the general mood. There is certainly no shortage of resourceful, energetic people in political and economic life. And yet, this attitude of passivity born of the conviction that it is always "they" who decide our fate is common enough to create a problem in the present phase of revolutionary transformation. So far, many Poles have little confidence in the future. Some are not yet fully convinced that
they are free to choose, now that their nation is no longer a pawn in the hands of the great powers, or an object of their patronage, but has become an autonomous entity in both domestic and international politics.

And yet, this is exactly what has happened. Of the three main targets of all the national revolutions in Eastern Europe—independence, democracy, economic change—the first one, long regarded as the most distant and most utopian, was reached with surprising ease, almost imperceptibly, thanks to Big Brother's weakness and his newly acquired human face. Now that the Warsaw Pact's military control of the member states' armies is about to be formally renounced, it can be safely said that the former Soviet satellites (unlike the seceding Soviet republics) are free at last of the Soviet grip, even if some of them grudgingly consent to tolerate the presence of Soviet troops on their territories for a limited period of time.

Still, the joy of regaining sovereignty is overshadowed by feelings of insecurity. Some Poles fear the Russians: has history not taught us that they have never abandoned what they conquered? Forced to withdraw today, they will return and retaliate at the first propitious moment. The Poles also fear the Germans: has history not taught us that their ruthless imperialist nature never changes? To many, the phantom of a new Rapallo appears as the greatest threat of all.

Some American commentators on Eastern Europe regard these fears as the irrational residue of old prejudices fed by historic events which are long past. But, of course, they consider their own worries and warnings legitimate. Is virulent nationalism in Eastern Europe not on the rise again, as it was in the 1920s? Is Balkanization of the Balkans not imminent? Will two dozen nationalities and ethnic groups, having burst out of the chains of communist unity, not rush at one another with their centuries-old grievances? Are not the Poles born and unrepentant anti-Semites? Does history not teach us that Eastern Europe, for all its admirable striving toward freedom, remains a red-hot cauldron one should stay clear of?

Of course, history teaches us all this and much more. It teaches us also that the Spanish are all extremists inclined to slaughter one another in bloody civil wars, that German patriots love their Kaisers and Führers and have no notion of democracy, and that the British cannot live without oppressing Ireland and their colonies. On top of all this, however, history teaches us that historical conditions change, and that nations' dispositions change, too.

And yet, I cannot say that Eastern Europe is safe for democracy. As Bronisław Geremek rightly said about Poland, "the prospects for freedom are secured, but those for democracy remain
uncertain.2 This is so, however, not because the eastern part of Europe lacks a tradition of democracy. Even if this were true—and it is not—an argument drawn from history would not provide a strong enough foundation for predictions. Nations can learn democracy. They can also sometimes forget what they have once learned.

The drive to democracy seems strong in all of Eastern Europe, but there are still many people for whom this word means little, if anything. In the Polish elections to local self-government on 27 May, 58 percent of those eligible to vote did not go to the polls. This low turnout is disturbing: such a mass of people alienated from politics could one day become prey to populist demagogues.

These demagogues are already on the spot. In Poland, freedom of association and of the press has brought a whole array of phantoms out of the past to the surface of political life. Founders of dozens of rightist parties are attempting to attract followers with nationalistic, populist, or slightly veiled anti-Semitic slogans. The enlightened public opinion is alarmed by their reappearance: on 7 May, following the initiative of Jerzy Turowicz, the widely respected editor of the Catholic weekly Tygodnik Powszechny, forty-two intellectuals prominent in politics, journalism, the arts, and science met in Cracow and signed a public appeal against chauvinism, anti-Semitism, and the abuse of Christian values for political purposes;3 the appeal found broad support among the intelligentsia.

It is understandable that Western academics and journalists are sensitive to the undeniable threat that a resurgence of nationalism would pose to political stability and incipient democracy in Eastern Europe. One only wishes that they would pay equal attention to the resolute resistance offered against every public declaration of nationalist bigotry. After all, in the recent local elections in Poland, all the right-wing parties (as well as the divided and renamed communist party) won little of the voters' confidence. The Poles overwhelmingly gave their votes either to independent candidates or to those supported by the mainstream Solidarity citizens' committees.

"Of course", writes Adam Michnik in his "Notes on the Revolution," "the rejection of totalitarian communism must entail, to some extent, a return to the roots of national identity. This is precisely why one must ask what sort of roots they are and what sort of identity it is." Consequently, he distinguishes between two intellectual or spiritual cultures in opposition to each other in the twentieth-century history of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The first is the rich tradition of xenophobia and intolerance, based on social fears and resentments, which can only lead to national isolation and stagnation. The second is the tradition of liberalism and open-
mindedness, the idea of a "return to Europe." 4

Return to Europe! Every day the Polish press brings new articles about the conditions of our return to Europe. We are returning to Europe because we just had our first free elections. We are returning to Europe because we expect Poland to become a member of the Council of Europe. And yet, we cannot return to Europe as long as our towns are dirty, our telephones dysfunctional, our political parties reactionary and parochial, and our mentalities sovietized. Europe is a measure, a purpose, a dream.

A very old dream, one should add. It was dreamt as early as the second half of the eighteenth century, when the Polish intellectual elite perceived Poland as being left far behind the West in every area, agriculture and trade as well as the structure of government. It is at that time that the geographic notion of the West acquired a special meaning as a center of the fast-changing world, of which other countries, Poland or Russia, Greece or Spain became more or less remote and neglected peripheries. Similarly, the notion of Europe began to shrink to the size of its few most advanced states, while in all the other countries it remained more of an idea than a reality.

The East Europeans responded to the challenges of modern civilization in two ways. Some acknowledged its superiority, and eagerly learned from it as they imitated its achievements and borrowed its knowledge, ideas, institutions, machines, fashions, and customs. At times, however, this gave them contempt for their own national cultures as something lower and less creative or, at least, less mature. The other, defensive, way was to look at Western civilization as "false," cold, and morally corrupt, since it was materialistic, godless, mercantile, and mechanical. Our own Slavic civilization and our own native culture, even if less sophisticated, was organic, spiritual, humane, and based not on greed but on true Christian values.

This dichotomous model is best known from the history of Russia, but in one form or other it was omnipresent throughout Eastern Europe. Yet in the course of time the Romantic apology for native cultures, perceived as resisting the uniform and debased Western civilization, gradually waned. It gave way, among the intelligentsia, to a strong sense of belonging to a European cultural community, which also embraced the overseas countries settled by Europeans.

There is no doubt that the intellectual elites of all the East European countries belong to the all-European family, even though they have often been treated as the poor cousins and felt that they were. But what about their native countries, where did these belong? The Westernizers were forced to acknowledge their countries' economic backwardness, civilizational primitivism,
poverty, and illiteracy, all the accumulated results of slow peripheral development from the fifteenth or sixteenth century on. For it was in this early-modern period that the reinforcement of serfdom in most of Eastern Europe resulted in the petrification of feudal social structures. The landlords who monopolized both international trade and political power did not allow an entrepreneurial and commercial middle class to grow, thereby hampering the development of towns and industry. Consequently, the eastern part of the continent practically ceased to participate in the creative work of European civilization, its pioneering in science, technology, medicine, social organization, the theory and practice of law, political thought, and so forth. Polish scholars, for instance, lost touch with Western science and philosophy in the important era of Newton and Locke. Later, it was extremely difficult to make up for the lost time. When closer relations were re-established in the second half of the eighteenth century, the influence could only flow in one direction: from West to East (or South) of Europe.  

There is no need here to recapitulate the efforts undertaken to overcome the underdevelopment of this part of Europe by their intelligentsias, entrepreneurs, and national governments. Their efforts were not in vain. As a result, they brought the very different standards of what today is called "semi-modernity," a peculiar blend of modern and archaic cultural traits, bound to generate powerful social conflicts and authoritarian temptations. Whatever the effects of repeated spurts of industrial and educational growth in Eastern Europe, they seemed unable to overcome the negative impact, first of its extended national and political dependence, then of the destruction of two world wars. There seemed to be no way to narrow the gap between the two parts of Europe, and to heal the acute inferiority complex of its less advanced half.

A new order, named "people's democracy" despite the fact that it was imposed by force, was introduced at the end of World War II as an apparently efficient means of modernization. In Poland, the communists (who at that time carefully avoided this name) implemented the long overdue agrarian reform and nationalized industry, then generally regarded as the precondition for economic growth. They guaranteed the universal right to work, organized free reading and writing courses for illiterate adults, opened new schools, universities, theaters, and factory clubs, built modern steelworks, and launched a quick reconstruction of the Polish capital, almost completely destroyed by the Nazis. In sum, they made a tremendous effort to be seen as a sincere party of progress, capable of mobilizing the nation's energy and compensating for centuries of backwardness and social wrongs.

No wonder that many of those who shared progressive and
democratic ideals were attracted by the communist program, even if they had good reasons to fear and distrust the Polish, let alone the Soviet, communists. Once again there appeared the hope that Eastern Europe would have a chance of catching up with—why, even overtaking—the West in terms of the material conditions of civilization, and yet creating a new society, free of the exploitation of man by man. The hope soon proved illusory, and the price paid for this mirage was exceptionally high. The communist practices, instead of erasing the civilizational division of Europe, fixed it in all its dimensions. This is the crucial paradox of an extreme radicalism which starts out by defying the world and ends up as an ossified system of thought and institutions, immune to change and reform.

Now the communist countries have come full circle. No matter what indicator of the quality of life one applies, these countries are still near the bottom of the European scale. In the 1980s they even lagged behind the fast developing Mediterranean countries, Spain or Greece, to which they were once compared. Statistics aside, every traveler coming to Poland from the West is hit by the difference right away, unfortunately no less clearly today than in the eighteenth century. This is not only a result of poverty. Nor can the communists be blamed for everything, dirt and neglect, drunkenness and bribery included. After all, the differences in level of civilization between, for instance, Czechoslovakia and Poland cannot be explained away by variations in the communist system, which was certainly harsher and more rigid in Prague than in Warsaw. They are, in part at least, the legacy of the ages which neither capitalism nor communism, neither "organic work" nor revolution, neither economic incentives nor evangelistic exhortations have as yet been able to overcome.

So now, once again, we are trying "to return to Europe," to the Europe of our dreams. These dreams are diverse. Many of us dream simply about European (or for that matter American) wages, cars, and all the exciting Western gadgets we have seen or heard about; the "populace," the latest CIA report on Eastern Europe informs us, "is increasingly hungry for Western-style commodities." Politicians and economists dream about our joining a united Europe, while Zbigniew Brzezinski warns the impatient Poles against creating a new myth: the inequalities among nations, he claims, will not disappear in the common European home.

Intellectuals once in opposition now in the government have been dreaming, like Jiří Dienstbier and Václav Havel, of a "better Europe," which they conceive of as "a friendly community of independent nations" and an embodiment of certain values that we in the East have in short supply. "I believe," writes a Polish author, "that it is not so much our material or civilizational conditions, as our weakening or even loss of those
values which form the foundation of the European culture and tradition, that have pushed us away from Europe."10 But from which Europe? "Europe," reminds us Adam Michnik, "is not only Mitterrand but also Le Pen; not only Weizsäcker, but also the German Republican Party. The idea of a return to Europe may carry with it radical anti-Russian rhetoric...but it can also stand for faith in the Europeanization of the entire part of our continent, including Russia itself."11

Czesław Miłosz, who has spent the last forty years in France and America, is disenchanted. He simply cannot believe that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, all similarly afflicted with communism, should now recognize the supremacy of Western values: "Will the years of suffering under totalitarian rule be obliterated, erased and the people start from scratch? Should the thinkers, poets and artists join their Western colleagues in the somewhat marginal role assigned to them in societies busy with selling and buying?"12

So this guidepost which points in the direction of Europe or the West is rather equivocal. There is only one thing that the poor Cestroleum know for sure: they have to start from scratch. And, of course, all of them want to leave behind, as soon as possible, the drab barracks of the "real no-longer-existing socialism." But which way to go, this is by no means clear.

Tadeusz Mazowiecki's government was the first to make the decision: back (or forward) to capitalism, a free market, Europe, and the World Bank, as fast as possible, or even a little bit faster than possible. Many foreign advisors commend Poland for its valiant leap forward. First, say experts from Harvard, Chicago, and Oxford, it is generally agreed that denationalization of industry is the precondition for economic growth. Second, they tell the Poles, since you have neither the time nor the resources to experiment, you should choose the system that has been tested with positive results elsewhere: free market capitalism. There is no viable alternative; go ahead and one day you will reach, Jeffrey Sachs assures the Poles, an economy "very much in the style of the United States and even more closely in the style of Western Europe, [your] neighbors."13

By God, do not listen to the sirens' songs luring you to the cliffs! warns another group of advisors. You want capitalism? But what kind of capitalism, because there are many? A free market? There is no such thing as a free market. In the nineteenth century something close to it existed, but certainly "for Eastern Europeans," cautions John Kenneth Galbraith, "pure and rigorous capitalism would be no more welcome than it would be for us." So this free-market rhetoric betrays "a mental vacuity of clinical proportions." Nor should one listen to those "who see the promise of prompt economic betterment arising out of
short-term shock and hardship." "This is a moment," Galbraith continues, "of great and welcome liberty in Eastern Europe. It would be tragic indeed were liberty to be identified there with unacceptable economic deprivation."14

Others are even more sarcastic. "Most of the free-market supporters in Eastern Europe would be utterly shocked at the poverty and social injustice imbedded in American society," writes Bogdan Denitch. In fact, the existence of a large underclass of outcasts living outside all civilization does not seem to enter into the calculations of those who like to see the world in black and white. "Nor does it help the prospects for democracy," Denitch continues, "that many of the reformist intellectuals in Eastern Europe have fallen in love with the idea of free market. From love of that idea almost as much suffering may be visited on Eastern Europe as has been for the abstract idea of centralized planning."15

Furthermore, warn other critics, Ceastropeans have no chance of competing with any of the advanced modern economies, whatever their shortages. They will not be able to catch up with the West, forget it. Poland has fallen back into the Third World, and not even to the top of it. And "as for the Third World," writes Lawrence Weschler, "go ask Brazil or the Philippines or Mexico about the Triumph of Capitalism."16 Indeed, the question whether the economic reconstruction launched in Poland would not bring about its "Mexicanization" has given rise to anxiety among the Poles. In one recent discussion two prominent Polish politicians went so far as to wonder if the German-Polish border would become a European Rio Grande.17

This may easily happen. And if it does happen, we will see again the invincible Polish smuggler cross the Rio Oder under cover of night, to barter butter for VCRs in the street dust of the Potsdamer Platz; or smart people of all ages and professions crossing that river to seek the seasonal menial work despised even by Turks or Moroccans. Joining them, however, will also be talented Ceastropean mathematicians, biochemists, and sociologists whom we already export by the hundreds, free of charge, to European and American universities and laboratories.

Should the division of Europe become permanent, there will be no hope for stabilization, and all the ghosts of the past will haunt the European house. There is no better nourishment for parochial nationalism than economic stagnation, the feeling of helplessness, and the fear of tomorrow.

What future, then, can a skeptical Ceastropean intellectual predict for his country if he plays prophet or fortune teller (which he, or she, is so often asked to do). First of all, he remembers what Burke and de Tocqueville knew so well, that there are many things revolutions cannot revolutionize, economic
structures, work habits, cultural patterns, beliefs, and prejudices. We carry the burden of the past on our shoulders, as both a curse and a gift.

There are precious values in our historical legacy. There are also bad, useless habits hampering our progress. It is impossible to get rid of them all at once, and one should not even try. But the Censtropeans should not yield to an all-excusing historical fatalism. If so many efforts aimed at modernization have failed, the only legitimate conclusion is that one must start again, especially now that the external conditions appear to be more favorable than ever before.

The task is by no means confined to economic recovery and transformation, however important those are. In order to keep pace with the more advanced part of Europe, Poland and its neighbors must radically change and develop their systems of communication, financial services, environmental protection, city management, health services, welfare, education, research, and countless other areas. All these areas will badly need new and massive injections not only of capital, but also of human energy, ideas, and skills. Both enthusiasts and enemies of free trade should keep these civilizational needs and desires in mind when they discuss the role of the state in the East European national economies.

It is obvious that the communist centralization of all resources and decision-making has un-taught people to take the initiative into their own hands, even when their neighborhood was concerned. Only now do we witness the beginning of a slow revival of voluntary associations. It is too early to tell whether the newly elected city and community councils will be efficient enough and able to sustain the incipient self-government and public spirit in Poland.

Nonetheless, one must beware of falling into the opposite extreme of the libertarian-conservative doctrine which wants to limit the state's initiative, means, and rights to a minimum. In the East European conditions of poverty and underdevelopment such a practice would result in blatant social inequalities and a breakdown of the cultural infrastructure.

If the Censtropeans really want to "return to Europe," they will have to find and keep the balance between disruptive party politics and a strong, stable, constitutional government; between liberated market forces and corrective redistribution of income; and between national sentiments and a European identity.

Even in optimal circumstances and with massive foreign aid, the traps on this road are many, success very uncertain. This is quite a challenge indeed, especially for the younger generation which is now rebelling against the historical legacy it has
inherited. Whether the best and brightest among them will try to make something of it, and not just escape the burden, remains to be seen. Anyway, it may soon turn out that to raise our standards of civilization—technological standards as well as moral standards—requires more wits, enthusiasm, and endurance than it took to cut barbed-wire fences, pull down walls, and drive out dictators.

NOTES

1. This essay's focus is on Poland. The author believes, however, that some of his propositions may also refer to some of the other post-communist countries.

2. Gazeta Wyborcza (Warsaw), 8 May 1990.


5. For more on this subject, see Jerzy Jedlicki, Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują: studia z dziejów idei i wyobraźni XIX wieku (The civilization that the Poles need: studies in the history of ideas and imagination of the nineteenth century) (Warsaw, PWN, 1988).


11. Michnik, loc. cit., 44.


