8
THE LEGACY OF DISSENT

G.M.Tamás

Political philosopher G.M.Tamás was one of the main personalities of the Hungarian Democratic Opposition in the 1980s. After 1989 he remained politically active as a major figure of the Alliance of Free Democrats and author of numerous thought-provoking and deliberately controversial essays and commentaries. In this article he proposes an original explanation of the post-1989 mass disenchantment with the once presumably admired dissidents. His two-fold argument is that dissent had always been unpopular and that the dissidents' subcultures were fundamentally isolated from the population at large.

Tamás's approach tends to extrapolate the peculiar conditions of Hungary's dissident community and overlooks the exhilarating appeals of a mass social movement like Solidarity in Poland. Whatever one thinks of his bitter diagnosis of the dissidents' alienation from the societies they claimed to speak for, Tamás's essay captures accurately the ethical dimension of the critical intellectuals' calls for a new politics rooted in truth and respect for individual human rights. Particularly significant are his reflections on the ambivalence of the key strategic concept of "civil society" and the contrast he highlights between its East European and traditional Western liberal interpretations. Tamás concludes, in agreement with Poland's Adam Michnik, that the heroic times are over and that one of the legacies of dissent is a deep sense of ambiguity including a healthy suspicion regarding all political dogmas.

* * *

The dissidence of the 1970s and 1980s is rather unpopular in the Eastern Europe of today. With the exception of Poland (where there was an almost uninterrupted revolutionary tradition from 1976 on), former dissidents play but a token role in real politics, and their proudest symbols, like Walesa, Havel or Konrád, are decried as "communists," "traitors," "agents." In the Hungarian parliament, any mention of the erstwhile dissidence is greeted with hoots of laughter, catcalls,

and jeers from the government benches. Its very existence is denied sometimes by official journalists and historians. Apart from the understandable fight for a respectable pedigree and the embarrassment felt by today's democratic leaders, who nearly without exception were collaborationists, former communist party officials, or at best pusillanimous "sleepers" who spent the last fifty years saying nothing, the antipathy felt for dissidents calls for some explanation.

Dissent was an anomaly. Dissidents, as we shall see, led a life where satisfactions, successes, defeats, and frustrations were very different from those felt by the population at large. While our academic or other intellectual colleagues looked for preferment, authorial fame, international travels, second homes, and the like, our pride lay in our work appearing in smudgy, primitively stencilled little pamphlets called by the Russian word "samizdat," and success was distributing a couple of hundred copies before the secret police arrived. "Why not fifty thousand copies?" a writer asked me in the early 1980s. "If you weren't such an idiot to have put yourself on the black list, you could now have a real impact, even if you couldn't perhaps flatter your adrenaline levels by cursing Andropov." A secret police officer—unforgettably dressed in a University of Texas T-shirt—asked me once, "You consider yourself an intelligent man, I suppose. Then how do you explain that you are acting against your own interests?" How indeed.

The minority of the body politic that was aware of "dissident activities" felt ambivalently about them. First, dissidents challenged the efficacy of reforms, seen by almost everyone as the only possible salvation. Second, with their emphasis on "rights" and "liberties," the dissidents challenged the dominant political discourse, which was based on interest and naked power. Third, they challenged the tacit assumption that all resistance was so dangerous that it was impossible. Fourth, therefore, dissidence challenged the moral stance of those who were silently opposed to the communist regime but did not dare to do anything about it.

This last challenge is the source of the most deep-seated prejudice against dissidence. "If it is obviously impossible for *me* to be a resister, how is it possible for *him?* He *must* have some sort of spiel with the authorities if he is not arrested or deported, since if *I* did the things he does *I would be*." These intellectuals in the so-called "reform dictatorships" believed that the essence of dissent was Silent Reproach. According to this view, the message of the dissidents was not so much "Go to Hell!" directed towards the leaders of the regime, but more "Shame on you!" directed towards the majority of bystanders. I have always hotly denied this, but I was so frequently accused of it that I started entertaining some doubts about the motives of my dissident acts.

There was a fifth reason for ambivalence. "Dissident activities" challenged another assumption of the populace, namely the common Eastern European view that all politics is filth, that *civisme* does not exist, that law is for the strong, etc. If people were visibly prepared to make sacrifices for their political beliefs, the world being what it is, they must be bonkers. My old arch-rival, the prime

minister of Hungary, was certainly in tune with at least a part of popular opinion when he called my party, which emerged from the dissident tradition, "psychiatric opposition."[1] Do not think for a moment that the notion of "political psychiatry" in the Soviet Union and Romania was wholly cynical. The powers-that-be (and that now, thank God, have been) were puzzled, nay, appalled by the mere phenomenon of dissidence. Non-conformism and eccentricity are conflated with madness even in freer and more permissive societies than were those of Eastern Europe. Dissidence was regarded as an expression of anomie by many and, well, I could not deny that there were a few strange types among us, as fond as I may have been of them.

The dissidents said strange things. They began to talk about "parallel polis," "parallel public sphere," "dissident sub-culture," and the like, as though they were content with the quirky and murky underworld of political, artistic, and moral avant-garde. Their sit-ins, hunger strikes, civil disobedience were reminiscent of New Left tactics. Dissidents wore beards, did not save up to buy East German automobiles, spoke foreign languages, and were the first to carry their children in pouches. Many were Jewish. In 1968, when many good Hungarians and East Germans drunk themselves into oblivion with happiness at the sight of the humiliation of their ancient foe, Czechoslovakia, the dissidents took the side of the foreigner. In short, they were a pain in the neck.

Although dissent did not cause the collapse of the communist regime, beyond doubt it was an important historical phenomenon, and not only for Eastern Europe, Russia, and China. At a moment when the "thaw" and détente were making Soviet systems almost acceptable, when Admiral Gorshkov's fleet steamed gaily around Africa and Army General Yepishev's guerrillas installed "revolutionary dictatorships" all over the Third World, when Lieutenant General Markus Wolff's terrorists nearly forced West Germany to its knees, when peace (that is, unilateral disarmament) movements fostered an atmosphere of "moral equivalence" between the superpowers, and when, all in all, the intellectual initiative was on the socialist Left, it was then that the lonely voices of dissenters from behind the Iron Curtain made a difference.

They were feeble voices, of course, but they proved by the sheer fact of having spoken that the quest for liberty and justice remained universal, that state socialism was not a permanent fixture rooted in the ineffable traditions of the East, that the problems of mankind were at least interrelated. They showed that the curious, warped modernity imposed by Stalin and his followers was at last being resisted and criticized in the very place where it was dominant.

As in the West from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, it all began with a seemingly marginal battle for freedom of expression against censorship. Then, audacious French and English books were printed in the Netherlands, the freest nation of that age. Pseudonyms, false datings, smuggling ventures abounded. Similarly, in recent times, the authors of bold books that could not get past home censorship played to both a domestic and foreign audience. At the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial, the first important trial against dissident writers, the defendants were

"unmasked" as the smugglers of their own pseudonymous novels to the West. The proceedings of this trial (and those of Joseph Brodsky's trial) were published in France. And while samizdat copies were distributed, without Western dissemination dissident authors could not have been effective; in some cases, Western fame even meant a little protection.

Dissidents came to understand that it was not enough to foil the communist secret police and to find an enthusiastic domestic audience ready for sacrifice. In order for them to get international clout, they had to please Western "civil libertarians," publishers, editors, journalists, academics, NGO (nongovernmental organization) functionaries, diplomats, spies, and other assorted busybodies who naturally wanted to make their own political points as well. And let us not forget that during most of this period—broadly speaking, the last thirty years—cold warriors and staunch anti-communists were not at all respectable in the West. CIA funding was necessary for launching the liberal anti-communist journals *Encounter, Survey, Preuves, Der Monat,* most of which are, alas, no more. Cold warriors were regarded as a nuisance by both Kissingerian *Realpolitikers* and the Left Establishment.

On the whole, dissident rhetoric shifted from the substantive, moralistic, and politically socialist oratory of 1956 and 1968 to a jargon of rights-centered liberalism. It became a self-conscious defense of the virtuous minority that lived on a bohemian reservation called "the parallel polis," and so the emphasis switched from workers' councils and selfmanagement to exit visas and toleration of underground seminars on Heidegger.

At first glance, the interest of the Western Left in East European dissidence is a strange fact. But, the Left was always internationalist and had a quasi-religious interest in the great socialist experiment and its problems. The Left's local prestige depended on it. After the bloody crushing of the Hungarian revolt in 1956 and the Sino-Soviet split shortly thereafter, it was difficult to maintain the myth of world revolution led by a few, maybe bullyish, maybe harsh but nonetheless dedicated armed prophets who were the strict parents of their refreshingly naive and docile peoples. It was crucial to see whether there was still any hope of a Red Dawn from the East, even if it could not come directly from the Kremlin.

And indeed, the most profound analyses of 1956 came from the heretic ex-Trotskyite Cornelius Castoriadis and his magazine, *Socialisme ou Barbarie,* which presented the argument that the Hungarian revolutionary workers' councils of 1956 offered a non-capitalist solution to the woes of the Soviet system. The workers' councils were revolutionary, anarchosyndicalist, democratic, anti-capitalist, and heroic—and they were really and truly all those things. The interpretation *Socialisme ou Barbarie* gave to the Hungarian uprising (accidentally coinciding with Hannah Arendt's views) was a vitally important, if subterranean influence on the rise of the New Left and the inception of a socialist critique of totalitarianism. The radical Left (still very strong in the 1970s) could keep some of its revolutionary faith, dissociate itself from the

despicable communist parties, and unlike the decrepit social democrats who were ever dewy-eyed about Soviet "reforms" could attack *all* the established powers in the industrial world. The New Left began to take exception at Western governments' complacency about us brave fighters for democracy. One of the most influential Western periodicals reporting faithfully on the development of dissent was Sartre's *Les Temps modernes,* hardly known for its liberal-democratic leanings. (Similar periodicals in the U.S. were doing the same.) And, of course, the intellectual Left, which in those days had a dominant position in the media, the universities, research centers, think tanks, and increasingly in the civil service, foreign service, and other related bureaucracies, had an enormous stake in finding out whether those brave and glamorous freedom fighters and "human rights activists" in the East still subscribed to the general philosophy of the Left.

The traditional leaders of the Western nations were mainly interested in those conflicts within socialist societies that could have resulted in strategic realignments or even in *renversements des alliances.* Thus, the people to watch were the diverse factions within the ruling communist parties, the people who—in the memorable phrase of Prime Minister Thatcher (as she then was)—Western leaders "could do business with." At the same time, of course, the Western democratic powers mildly grumbled when really untoward things happened in the East.

This situation changed radically with the advent of neo-conservatism. Unlike home-grown American paleo-conservatives, the U.S. neo-cons had an internationalist tradition of their own from two sources. One was a continental social democratic, radical tradition opposed to both main forms of totalitarianism; these adherents had already fought communism ideologically from a left-liberal standpoint in the 1950s and 1960s and came to conservatism partly as a result of reflections on international politics. The other source was from the influence of Leo Strauss and his secret armies. Both sources were strongly German in heritage and greatly affected by the experiences of both Auschwitz and Kolyma.

Traditional conservatives are by inclination *Realpolitiker,* cautious and disillusioned schemers. But post-Auschwitz neo-conservatives were different. They were able to use the main weapon of the Left, namely a moral critique of politics, for unheard-of conservative purposes. You never saw crusading conservatives before. But the twin influences of Hayek and Solzhenitsyn changed this, perhaps forever.

There was, therefore, an audience for East European dissenters not only on the Left, as earlier, but also on the Right. Both New Left and New Right were influenced by the testimony of dissidence and, in terms of the history of ideas, they have a common origin: all three are reactions to modern socialism, just as the older kinds of conservatism and liberalism were reactions to the French Revolution. The history, and indeed the fate, of East European dissidence, the New Left, and the New Right are intertwined and mutually dependent in many

respects. I shall try to show how this odd, distant symbiosis has fashioned the political thought of the dissidents themselves.

How are we to understand political thought expressed under duress, threats, and persecution? This thorny problem of cultural history was first examined by Leo Strauss in his classic book, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), where he contended that our acuity of analysis of the past was blunted by three centuries of free speech in the West. Most of cultural history has taken place in societies where the state was invested with an authority to fashion morality and to persecute vigorously all who were perceived as immoral or heretical or seditious. But even in free societies, a breach with received opinion can lead to social ostracism, marginalism, and isolation, or at least obloquy. Leo Strauss deduced from his studies of medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophy that practically all ancient thinkers had esoteric teachings that were sometimes hidden between the lines; Leo Strauss construed inconsistencies, wrong inferences, and strange lapses by authors of genius as discretely veiled allusions to heretical or perilous ideas that the authors did not dare express with point-blank candor. In the title essay, he says that

> [p]ersecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage—that it reaches only the writer's acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage - capital punishment for the author.

The further twist in this story is that samizdat turned exactly against such debilitating self-censorship and double-entendre and practiced what the Hungarian dissident philosopher János Kis called "the conspicuous exercise of rights." Dissidents committed defiant acts when they thought they were within their rights guaranteed by international agreements, constitutional provisions, or even, some would argue, by natural law. This is what gave samizdat, and dissent in general, its moral force, pride, and dignity.

Still, if truth be told, there were limitations to the absolute truthfulness and sincerity of the underground literature and of other dissident pronouncements. First, openly seditious appeals would have been meaningless in a non-revolutionary situation. Second, if samizdat was to be effective, it had to be grafted on the body of existing social criticism, historical awareness, and conceptual vocabulary. (There was a sharp difference in perceptions between those of my contemporaries who read George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, Arthur London, Boris Souvarine, and Isaac Deutscher for the first time only in 1990 and those of us, like myself, for whom these books, together with Solzhenitsyn, were inspirations during our adolescence in the 1960s. The word "gulag" was

unknown to most of my non-dissident academic acquaintances in the 1980s. You could not allude to these things—even *officially* published accounts of Stalinist terror, like the wonderful stories of Jozsef Lengyel, tended to be carefully ignored outside a very narrow circle of committed people.) Third, it was a conscious tactic of dissidence to intentionally blur the boundaries between dissident and "reformist" criticism in order to woo potential allies and encourage a more timid readership. Fourth, what we said had to be comprehensible and more or less acceptable to a Western audience of patrons, benefactors, and well-wishers. They were the only people able to offer fame and protection and thereby indirectly influence policies here and more directly the human rights policies of Western democratic governments.

This last influence on dissidence was not wholly conscious, naturally. But writers and public speakers learn from reaction, and it was easy to see which dissident authors were celebrated and famous in the West. Dissidents knew that Mr. Solzhenitsyn was barred from the White House, while a small stretch of street was named Sakharov Plaza near to the Soviet embassy. So, when erstwhile ironies and ambiguities have been forgotten along with the context, and when dissident writings are considered "moralistic," "naive," and even "rationalist-liberal" owing to a growingly literal-minded reading, we shall have to very carefully extricate out of all these hermeneutical difficulties what I believe to be the real meaning of dissident political thought, and only then assess what its consequences are today.

Both the darker strands and the innovation of dissident thought have been hidden. The reason for this lies in both the content of dissident teachings and their simplified contemporary post-communist reading; and it is devilishly difficult to tell the two apart. Leo Strauss, in another essay of the same book, "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise,*" writes:

> To understand the words of another man, living or dead, may mean two different things which for the moment we shall call interpretation and explanation. By interpretation we mean the attempt to ascertain what the speaker said and how he actually understood what he said, regardless of whether he expressed that understanding explicitly or not. By explanation we mean the attempt to ascertain those implications of his statements of which he was unaware. Accordingly, the realization that a given statement is ironical or a lie, belongs to the interpretation of the statement, whereas the realization that a given statement is based on a mistake, or is the unconscious expression of a wish, an interest, a bias, or an historical situation, belongs to its explanation.

In what follows, I shall attempt both interpretation and explanation mainly of three concepts or notions that, in the wake of the velvet revolutions of 1988–1990, have received a new lease on life and are currently, quietly changing the character of liberal political thinking (the first time since Lenin and Trotsky that

Eastern Europe has had such an influence). These key notions are, not surprisingly, civil society, human rights, and democracy.

Civil society

We inherited our concept of civil society from Locke, the Scottish Enlightenment, Burke, Hegel, and de Tocqueville. On the European continent, the latter three were the most important; it was their idea of a civil society that, in a simplified version, captured the imaginations of East European intellectuals. According to this idea, in a liberal society, where in comparison to the absolutist historical precedent the power of the state is inordinately weak, the conformity, loyalty, obedience, and initiative necessary for selfgovernment is assured by voluntary associations. Civic order in a liberal society cannot be sustained without the activity of the citizens. Before the intercession of the state becomes necessary, competition between individuals for wealth, fame, status, imposition of moral preferences should be conducted in an orderly way among groups linking together people of similar inclinations, interests, or other common features of their lives. Civil society, in a way, was a price to be paid for liberty. The informal pressure of egalitarian public opinion threatened a new tyranny, and only the plurality and diversity of civil associations was presumed to be a defense against it—for that meant a public opinion *divided.* Stendhal's fear, expressed in *Lucien Leuwen,* that in America you had to flatter your shoe-maker if you wanted to get on was partly assuaged by the fact that there were many different cobblers of variegated religious and moral opinions. The problem for Burke, Hegel, and de Tocqueville was how to obtain cohesion, order, and civic virtue in a society both free and democratic— that is, egalitarian and lacking in chivalrous heroism, aristocratic panache, divine authority, or a religiously underpinned commitment for the common good that made civic and social altruism appear natural. The key question was how to keep society together in the absence of a preordained hierarchy.

East European intellectuals critical of the communist regime had completely different headaches. Their society seemed to be—at least this was the prevailing view—regimented, conformist, exacting, and possessing a more than desirable degree of cohesion, order, and discipline. Here, a coercive morality demanded sacrifice and altruism for a common good that was unequivocally identified by the rulers; here, quasi-religious doctrines forced themselves upon private citizens who were not free to follow their own sensibilities, inclinations, or beliefs. Burke, Hegel, and de Tocqueville had to ponder whether and how it was possible to make the autonomous individual in a free society be a citizen beyond mere passive law-abidingness; what, indeed, would hold together the body politic. My generation in Eastern Europe had to counter the crushing preponderance, the all-pervasive omnipresence of the police state, central planning, capricious autocracy, and the rest.

These two situations make for rather different ideological strategies. The Eastern Europeans' worry was not that without voluntary associations, superogatory benevolence, and non-coercive co-operation, individuals would become "atomized," disoriented, amoral, and oblivious of duty. These are the permanent anxieties of free polities. On the contrary, our worry was that without diversified, pluralistic, voluntary associations, the dutiful citizens of the totalitarian state would become automatons, soulless executors of orders from on high. The problem was not the peril inherent in *too much* autonomy, but in *too little.* We do not need to debate whether this was or was not a realistic assessment of late socialist society; this was the dominant analysis.

Thus, the East European notion of civil society was pitched against the state, whereas the Whig idea was to complement the enfeebled state, to find new reasons for obedience and conformity after the wane of divinely anointed authority. The Whig idea was that voluntary, self-governing entities help to build a relatively non-coercive order, while the East European dissidents' idea was that they might help to destroy an overly coercive order. In a word, the Burkean-Hegelian-Tocquevillian, or Whig, idea was a *political* one; the East European dissident idea was *anti-political.*

What does "anti-political" mean in this context? The East European idea was, as seen in the works of Václav Havel and György Konrád, to escape politics altogether with the aid of a commonplace morality stressing the beauty of humdrum everyday life, small-scale integrity, a sense of humor, self-deprecatory modesty, and above all, authenticity. Everything grandiose was suspect. The nifty vivacity of the black market was favorably compared to the grandeur of the Siege of Leningrad; healthily promiscuous sensuality was shown to be superior to doctrinaire fanaticism.

The anti-institutional slant of the dissident idea of civil society made it "anti-political," although it was not a-political. Dissidents thought that the bigger chunk of human life was non-institutional anyway; this is where we should conquer and realize our independence. It was the old Stoic idea. Dissidents somehow imagined that the totalitarian state would whir in an abandoned back room like a washing machine, while the *real* things would be happening in the salon and in the bedroom. There were lyrical effusions about the civic virtue of lazing in the sun and surveying pretty girls from the pub door.

This utopia, of course, contradicted the dissident analysis of the totalitarian state. If the state was so all-pervasive, how could it be only a washing machine? No doubt, like all politics of authenticity, this was an expression of weakness. But, the consequences of this weakness were ruinous. According to the dissident view, morality had become an exclusively private affair, so private that all general normative or prescriptive judgments are unable to be brought to account for it. Institutional discourse, codes of behavior, lists of virtues and sins, ideas of justice, a sense of obligation, codes of propriety, and the abstract, universalistic language reminiscent of the dread Marxist-Leninist science were all rejected. Only disjointed, fragmentary talk would do. Morality at best can be expressed by

paradox, by a wry joke, by an oblique allusion. So, we did it again: by adapting a Western, liberal (well, Whiggish) concept, we used it to reject the whole Western political tradition. The echoes of this in the deconstructionist-postmodernist mode of approach are no mere coincidence.

For the anti-institutional idea of East European dissidence was eagerly seized upon by disgruntled exponents of the Western Left. Its proponents could at least argue that their attack against the main Western political tradition was coming from sources above suspicion. Distrusts of ethics, ideology, and politics can mean different things. But the idea of a society where nothing good can be achieved by institutional means, where there is no authority, where every political act is voluntary, where education is impossible and obligation is always subject to individual analysis, where even contractual relations are subordinated to whim, this idea is irreconcilable even with anarchism. Civil society without a state would be a Hobbesian state of nature. But dissidents presupposed a state, a totalitarian, dictatorial, autocratic state that would, as if by magic, be made irrelevant by the strengthening of voluntary associations and a non-political diversity of lifestyles. The ambiguously expressed idea of civil society was liked by adversary-culture radicals and neo-conservatives alike. Neoconservatives liked this idea of civil society because it seemed to them that it paralleled their own distaste for state intervention; radicals loved it because they could sniff the fragrance of their anti-institutionalism.

The dissident idea of civil society was the body politic, subtracting the politics.

Human rights

If civil society was the human entity that dissidents wanted to represent, human rights were the principle according to which they wished to represent it. Marxism proper was critical of such universalist Enlightenment notions, but communist revolutionaries, the true heirs of the Jacobins, could bring themselves occasionally to speak this language while signing documents such as the U.N. Charter or the CSCE's Helsinki Final Act, and similar covenants, pacts, and agreements. Between 1933 and 1945, the human rights discourse was directed against the Nazis, who had turned most overtly against natural law and other universal moral criteria. The communists committed the same crimes, but did not justify them by openly changing the basic rules of morality (see Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours*), and instead excused them by rather conventional references to history and to the ends sanctifying the means. The communists, unlike the Nazis, never deviated consciously from the grand tradition of the primordial unity of mankind. Indeed, they did not think that the existence of the Gulag made their subscription to such lofty declarations look rather odd.

Still, "human rights," although not operative, have been a recognized principle, coming down from the venerable intellectual treasure of the American and French revolutions. It was an antidote to oppressive positive law (statutes) and was unencumbered by the metaphysical questions that beset natural right in its

classical form. The first most important right for dissident intellectuals was the right to freedom of expression. But freedom of expression meant a license to tell the truth, especially the truth about the communist system, the truth about the martyrdom of East European peoples under the Gulag regime. The moral attitude that sprung from this simple idea of uncensored truth-telling was bearing witness: the chief genre of dissident writing is neither philosophical treatise, nor poetry, but testimony. Martyrs are—even etymologically—witnesses. The elocution of their martyrdom, where the whole community was martyred, created a new symbolic community: the community of those who suffered and lived to tell and were ready again to suffer for the right to tell.

The irresistible force of this surge of testimony was lethal because, in spite of denial, in spite of a sometimes almost psychotic refusal to know, half-consciously everybody knew what happened. After all, this testimony was the basis of the Secret History of the communist avant-garde elite as well: the heroism a *rebours* of the show trials so well described by Arthur Koestler, Arthur London, and Bela Szasz. There was no apparatchik in the Soviet Union who did not know that Alexander Solzhenitsyn was right.

In the struggle for the right to historical truth, for the right to bear witness, where history and morals become one, dissidents were harassed, persecuted, and punished. They went on documenting these new abuses—one of the chief tasks of the dissident movement was to write its own chronicle, a testimony this time about the witnesses themselves— and more or less quietly protesting against them in a non-violent way. Dissenters did not at first demand the usual set of fundamental human rights: the stress was on the word. They did not set up political parties or organize conspiracies. They wanted to expose unspeakable, unimaginable crimes and to show the continuity of the Great Terror with the servility and mendacity of the present. They said to the rulers, "These communiques and declarations signed by you guarantee the right to free speech, peaceful assembly and the like. Why cannot we say what we believe to be the truth?"

There was no good answer to this question for the very simple reason that communists in principle did not condone mass murder, or even the radical deprivation of people's liberty. Hitler never said he was a humanist, but Bolsheviks did. And this was their undoing. Liars are not heroic; exposed liars lose their authority. The incipient reformist criticism of the achievements of the socialist economy combined with the corrosion of moral self-confidence brought about by dissident testimony proved too much. Few people in the West are aware of the peculiarities of the communist aristocracy, the descendants of the Old Guard. Their radical forebears were motivated by what one could call critical passion, the passion that comes from a moral critique of politics. Radicals are always and invariably right when they say that life is disgusting. The rejection of this unsavory world is the reason why revolutionary radicalism is so alluring. Radicalism, however, cannot be sustained without the proof of sacrifice, without bearing witness. But the heroic testimony was offered *against* socialism. The

communist elite could not help but realize that this time dissidents and "deviationists" experienced the same passion with which the heroes of the *Narodnaya Volya* went to the scaffold. The elite understood only too well, and it is but little wonder that their sons and daughters joined in the dissident movement in very significant numbers.

The West understood little of this passion for historical-moral truth, but its shaky faith in the universality of its own basic principles of human and civil rights was challenged by the East European dissidents: people were putting themselves at risk for the pious and dull commonplaces of the Helsinki Accords. "Will you live by your principles?" they asked. This unsolicited support for Western constitutional principles by people whose integrity was proven by their willingness to suffer for those very principles gave a new force to the idea of natural right and to the ideas of the American Revolution, which were put onto the political agenda once more. This was a universalist discourse common to both systems, and the debate conducted within that discourse was won by the West and its allies, the dissidents. *Realpolitik* could have never won that debate.

We should not forget, however, that this universalistic Enlightenment discourse is not really part of the East European tradition. Moreover, it was used for very peculiar purposes; the set of rights that counted most referred to the moral interests of committed people engaged in public speech and the pursuit of historical and moral truth. This pre-eminent set of human rights was selected so as to be anti-political, to interfere as little as possible with existing administrative, economic, military, and cultural structures of power. The demand for independent, non-Marxist-Leninist philosophical inquiry, for example, did not imply the replacement of the official dogma with apparently truer theses. But freedom of expression, of course, silently presupposed liberalism. No clamor for free speech is ever innocent of politics. But this was liberalism for people *outside the institutions,* with no expressed preference for institutions of any kind. The grand revolutionary narrative had been exposed as fraud and a space for free debate inaugurated. And while the human rights strategy did not condemn politics outright as immoral, it definitely turned its back to it, a result of communist might combined with a Western unwillingness to change the status quo.

But politics was not the only thing being rejected. Civic community, the state, and the law were suspect for most dissidents. These smacked of regimentation, indoctrination, and domination. Freedom seemed to reside in individual moral action. Human rights would leave the space of public action to a very small state manned by administrators, with all the "real men" being outside. The ever-increasing list of human rights, a universal phenomenon, will finally make nil any conceivable claim of the City on its citizens: the exodus of the citizen from the City is completed. Dissidents, leading this exodus, this desertion of the City, now find themselves in the wilderness, faced with a body of opinion that fails to recognize any institutional authority, any civic duty, any political obligation, any idea of the common good, and is ever impatient with disorder and squalor. The universalism of human rights (maintained by most dissidents with a true Gallo-

American revolutionary fervor) concealed the fact that Western civilization's success did not rest only on liberal-democratic constitutional arrangements, nor merely on the market rules characteristic of liberal capitalism. The cohesive elements of Western civilization—the classical republican heritage, civic patriotism, Biblical religion, and an institutionalized political tradition—were necessarily ignored.

Government could not very well defend the civil rights of individuals and minority groups if it were not already held in high esteem by obedient citizens convinced of the natural authority of the polity they were ready to serve and were prepared to die for. One of my most frustrating and bitter experiences under communist dictatorship was the difficulty of identifying with my own political community and the lack of shared symbols. It was a state of affairs that made virtually every honest man and woman into a social recluse and an emigré in one's own country. "Internal exile," "inner emigration"—these were no empty phrases. They have cut across natural loyalties and make post-communist societies today into foci of disorder. Dissent could not possibly help it; the de-politicizing effect of modern tyranny has touched everybody, even those who resisted it. Tyrannical pseudo-politics, and the exercise of self-abasement before the mighty, has made real politics unpalatable.

And there is another, more subtle factor here. Liberal capitalism is the first and only political regime in history that is profoundly *controversial,* against which a permanent cultural revolution has been waged and traditionally by the best minds of their time. Liberal capitalism commands no authority, since both Christians and radicals regard it haughtily as materialistic and selfish to the point of being bestial. Since the ideal of the dissidents was the liberal-democratic West, they had no ideal, for the Western political order was far from being the West's own ideal. Unlike other revolutions in history, the East European revolutions did not and do not have a utopia of their own, owing to this Western-Eastern "dialectic" and the culturally controversial nature of liberal capitalism.

It is small wonder that Western influence was limited to that idea of Western civilization seemingly unaffected by the corrosive Marxian and Nietzshean critique of liberal societies, namely dissent, whereas the culturally undefended foundations of Western societies, those that allow them to function but which are derided and blushingly disavowed, could not play a role. The reluctance of conservatives in the West to defend the Western order—expressed most aptly by Michael Oakeshott's distaste for theory—is characteristic. Even conservatives can bear the reality of liberal capitalism only if it is cloaked in the garb of "What Is," tradition as such, with the unpleasant details grandly removed. Paradoxically, liberal capitalism is in better odor now with conservatives after the collapse of "real socialism" because an authentic revolution appears to have legitimized it. But that cannot hide that the Western inspiration for the East was that of the adversary culture, most of Western high culture being adversarial by nature and opposed to liberal society in substance, tone, manner, and taste.

Democracy

In 1988–1989, when it was certain that the communist system was finished and, unnoticed by the West, when there were great demonstrations demanding the ouster of the incumbent regime, free elections, a new constitution, and the departure of Soviet troops, we shouted on the streets of Budapest, "We Want Democracy!" Not "We Want the Rule of Law," mind you, not liberty, not justice, but democracy.

What people's idea of democracy was in those dizzy, exhilarating days, can be safely reconstructed from what people now consider nondemocratic or anti-democratic and as such reject. Imposition of political will by an elite (law) is anti-democratic. Coercion used to elicit uniform behavior (public order) is anti-democratic. Political deliberation through public controversy conducted by a specialized group of people (representative government, a.k.a. parliamentarianism) is anti-democratic. Interference with private wealth (redistribution through levying of taxes and duties) is antidemocratic. Unequal concentration of wealth, fame, and influence (liberal capitalism) is anti-democratic. Indoctrination according to elite preferences (education) is anti-democratic.

Even what appeared at first sight to have been democratic nationalism was nothing but regionalism and autonomism based on crude a-political (racial or cultural) ethnicity, with the now obvious horrors resulting.

The East European democratic idea basically envisions a society without a state. The anti-institutional curse that seems to plague us leaves us the choice of a barbarous dictatorship or boundless chaos. In order to prevent either from happening we should understand why all the conventional expectations are being left unfulfilled. Nobody dared to confess that liberal democracy is *not* government by the people, that economic decisions are *not* to be taken by plebiscite. Nobody dared to point out that in liberal democracies there is a conspicuous, loud, assertive political elite (the butt of satirists since Aristophanes), that democratic conformism will be the rule rather than the exception, and that not only are these new elites dazzlingly and deafeningly *obvious,* but also *common.*

The aristocratic/anarchistic contempt for the bourgeois, for rich and vulgar plebeians, for perspiring and shouting demagogues is more or less blunted in the West by force of long habit; but this contempt flared up with unprecedented vehemence in the East. Without respect for impersonal institutions and without esteem for the rulers, political coherence and law-abidingness is nearly impossible to achieve. If Western analysts want to understand the roots of the East European debacle, they should open the latest issue of *Private Eye, The Village Voice,* or *Le Canard Enchaîné.* All the sentiments are there, only they are rendered ineffectual in the West by constant repetition and the feeling that attacks on liberal capitalism are somehow part of the political system, and nobody wonders anymore why the regime is not defended at all.

Westerners think that their political system is universally attractive, but they will not offer arguments on its behalf. The Western political order is fundamentally mute. This silence was the dissenters' inspiration. Thus, the work that is cut out for their heirs is not very different from what awaits those faithful to liberal democracy in the West: the apologia for liberty still has to be found.

After only a few years, Eastern Europe has reached the last consequence of both modem liberalism and modern socialism: an overwhelming desire for the obliteration of the public realm. It is best described by Hannah Arendt in her *Human Condition* (1958):

> A complete victory of society will always produce some sort of "communistic fiction," whose outstanding political characteristic is that it is indeed ruled by an "invisible hand," namely by nobody. What we traditionally call state and government gives place here to pure administration—a state of affairs which Marx rightly predicted as the "withering away of the state," though he was wrong in assuming that only a revolution could bring it about, and even more wrong when he believed that this complete victory of society would mean the eventual emergence of the "realm of freedom."

The French Revolution ended a situation so ancient that it seemed eternal: the condition of citizenship as a distinction or privilege reserved mostly for gentlemen of leisure. Citizenship has become the universal condition of mankind, made possible by the liberal, but anti-democratic artifice of representative government. Citizenship, though universal, was diluted, and politics became a profession, even if a strange one. The East European revolutions opposed a political order where citizenship was declared to be universal but was in fact non-existent. The activist grandeur of Bolshevism equated citizenship with "being mobilized," and the *populus* was replaced by the fanatical *plebs,* the reinvented crowd. The dissident withdrawal from politics, the exodus from the City, the idea of civil society as "private" society (a seductive oxymoron) this all led to a cult of the "private" conceived as the exclusively personal. It is unprecedented.

Hannah Arendt writes later in *The Human Condition:*

> This enlargement of the private, the enhancement, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public, does not constitute a public realm, but, on the contrary, means only that the public realm has almost completely receded, so that greatness has given way to charm everywhere; for while the public realm may be great, it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to harbor the irrelevant.

Dissident literature seemed "charming" in this sense; it had given up grandeur, heroism, magnanimity, a passion for civic felicity, all of which seemed compromised. The very idea of duty, let alone sacrifice was reminiscent of

tyranny. Growing up in an artificial childhood forced upon us by tyrannical rulers meant a loss of faith, not the acquisition of a new (or for that matter, an old) one. I find it quite ironic that the most resounding literary success of the last few years in Eastern Europe was an autobiographical novella of that conspicuously non-dissident Czech writer, Bohumil Hrabal, who tells us the story of how he became a half-hearted informer for the communist secret police in exchange for an exit visa. He just wanted to see Greece, he says. After all, we are all humanists. The courage and altruism of that obnoxious little posse called dissidents could only offer the long-suffering East European societies absolution. We were all part of the great web, weren't we?

The heroic times, thank God, are over; a new world begins, a world of creative disorder. We cannot describe it, since the public words capable of speaking of things that are not personal were exiled together with all of us when we left the City, all together.

Note

Source Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Uncaptive Minds* 7:2 (Summer 1994): 19–34.

1 Since this article was written, the prime minister referred to, Jozsef Antall, who was leader of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, died of cancer.

First published 1999
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publicaiton Data
Tismaneanu, Vladimir.
The revolutions of 1989/Vladimir Tismaneanu.
p. cm.—(Rewriting histories)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Europe, Eastern—Politics and government—1989– I. Title.
II. Series: Re-writing histories.
DJK51.T57 1999
947′.009′048–dc21 98–34372
CIP

ISBN 0-203-97741-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-415-16949-6 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-16950-X (pbk)

THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1989

REWRITING • HISTORIES

EDITED BY VLADIMIR TISMANEANU

ROUTLEDGE