

SOCIALISM, CAPITALISM, AND MODERNITY

G.M. Tamás

G.M. Tamás is director of the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and a member of the Hungarian parliament. Born in Romania (Transylvania), he was exiled to Hungary in 1978, where he became lecturer and senior research fellow in the department of philosophy at the University of Budapest. Fired for political reasons, he became one of Hungary's leading dissidents and wrote extensively in samizdat. He has published numerous books and essays, and his work has been translated into 11 languages. He was elected to the parliament in 1990, and is chairman of the national committee of the Free Democratic Alliance (Liberal opposition).

Western socialists who do not wish to be seen as apologists for tyranny may dispute whether "actually existing socialism" was socialism at all. Yet the parallels between Western democratic and Eastern revolutionary-despotic socialism are numerous enough to allow us to assert that socialism is one of the main strategies of modernity, indeed, the only one which is (or was) global. It is the only variant of modernity that East and West have in common; otherwise, the twain shall never meet.

The communist parties of Europe were born out of impotent rage against the First World War. Reformist trade unions and social democratic parties had failed to keep the international proletariat from killing one another in the service of their respective capitalist-imperialist masters. Class solidarity melted in the heat of nationalist frenzy. Marxist leaders of the social democratic center had no moral theory of war. Revolutionary antimilitarism ("defeatism") turned against social democracy in three important respects: 1) The incipient communist movement led by Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg refused to regard social equality as the main goal of the workers' movement, maintaining instead that the suppression of alienation was the true essence of socialist politics. Thus did the Zimmerwald-Kienthal revolutionaries break with the

idea of “working within the system” to achieve social justice and a better way of life for proletarians. They envisioned an immediate end to wage slavery and the division of labor as part of the revolution that would end all revolutions. 2) Because the proletarians themselves and their political representatives had proven unreliable, the “revolutionary subject” would henceforth be not the “empirical” working class itself, but rather the agent of its ideal essence as a class, the disciplined and self-conscious vanguard Party. 3) The liberal democratic illusion shared by the treacherous trade union leaders would be dispensed with, and Marx’s vague notion of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” revitalized.

The messianic-revolutionary writers of the 1920s (Aleksandr Blok, Isaac Babel, Boris Pilnyak, Andrei Bely, and others) captured the prevailing sense of anticipation of the Last Battle that would overturn all previous orders and mark the rise of a new breed of healthy young barbarians to replace the corrupt old gentlemen who had sacrificed the flower of Europe’s youth to the imperial system handed down by the Congress of Vienna. This sense that nothing was ever to be the same gripped figures as disparate as Spengler and Lenin, Mussolini and Béla Kun, Hitler and Trotsky. For their generation there was but one reality: war, a view most admirably described by Ernst Jünger, especially in his great essay *Der Arbeiter*. The skull beneath the skin of politics was armed force commanded by blind will.

War was hated, but somehow expressed the truth of things. The ennui and disillusionment of the sad uniformed assassin made him ridicule any concept of law, any hope of liberty, any attempt to distinguish between naked power and legitimate authority. The veterans who had seen the ideals of liberal individualism die on the battlefields had very simple ideas about a just society. Justice was personified by the brave lieutenant who shared his tinned meat, his flask of brandy, and his bottle of aspirin with his men, and was ready as well to share their death in a long and meaningless war of attrition. In their view, the civilian world that had sat back peacefully while they bled in the stinking trenches deserved only contempt. This idea was shared by such Westerners as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Ernest Hemingway, Henri Barbusse, Hans Carossa, Erich Maria Remarque—and John Maynard Keynes. The Bolshevik generation did not consist of Bolsheviks alone. All its members shared a disgust for what they saw as the sham ideals of liberal humanism, altruistic patriotism, and the like. A new society would have to be forged by disenchanted veterans, united by a common sense of betrayal; filled with distrust for individuality, conventional politics, conventional morality, and *la patrie*; and overcome by loathing for bankers, dukes, politicians, generals, poets, philosophers, and columnists.

Thus did radical defeatism help to shape Bolshevism, a hostile new sibling to social democracy and “revisionist” (i.e., reformist-gradualist) Marxism that hated all Fabians for their fondness for “the system,” that

vile redoubt of servility, nationalism, military frenzy, cravings for rank and respectability, prosaic notions of civic duty, and “parliamentary cretinism.”

But in spite of all these differences—the stressing of which gave the communists their impetus and explains quite well their suicidal insistence on continuing the fight against moderate socialists even at the moment of the Nazi takeover—the profound similarities remain. Above all, socialists of all colors—from pink to deep purple—were and still are progressives.

Marxism and Modernization

In Central and Eastern Europe socialists and communists alike faced a power structure based on an incomplete capitalism, where modern techniques for waging mechanized mass war (redistribution, government direction of industry and research, etc.) were grafted onto the body of a society that leftists regarded as “semifeudal” and that still featured great estates, quasi-aristocratic military castes, and old habits of social deference, religious piety, and humility toward the “superior state” (*Obrigkeitstaat*). It was not only liberal capitalism that exterminated those old ways, but the soldierly egalitarianism of the death-filled trenches.

Socialists of all shades also shared Marx’s enthusiasm for demiurgic capitalism, the demonically creative force (known as such already by Milton, Blake, and Byron) that had opened up the closed medieval world and convinced progressives from Saint-Simon and Bentham to Engels and Spencer that it was both the best and worst of all possible social and economic arrangements. Capitalism’s superiority, they thought, lay especially in its capacity to bring about a more rational organization of human resources, reduce personal servitude, break the grip of rigid status and prestige groups, and speed up scientific, technological, and economic development. It had changed a sleepy world of static provincialisms into a cosmos of unbridled dynamism. Socialists had always favored rapid economic growth, and the First World War persuaded them that a very potent central state would be the best vehicle for the rational reconstruction of society—one that would preserve the dynamism of capitalism while putting a final end to alienation. We should not forget that social democrats also advocate just such a state, though they are too cautious and humane to employ violent means of building it.

While Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian socialists were preoccupied by inequality and class prejudice, their Continental comrades from Jean Jaurès and Jules Guesde to Lenin and Georg von Lukács wanted to end reification and alienation. The socialist revolutionaries of the East wanted to abolish not only inequality, but social roles as such.

Millenarian rebels have always refused to believe that God has ordained the differences among people; their attacks on the ancient Indo-

European division of society into castes of warriors, priests, and laborers (the Aryan social trinity as shown in the works of Georges Dumézil and Louis Dumont) were not—and this is the crucial point—directed against hierarchical differences alone, but against *any* plurality of human pursuits: specialization, separate social roles, and group loyalties all contradict the old myth of Universal Man. In Russia, both Narodniks and Bolsheviks condemned both social hierarchy and social pluralism as equally *artificial*: the only “natural” state was homogeneity, the metaphysical unity of the “species being” (*Gattungswesen*), Man who is identical with Humanity.

The divine legitimization for the plurality of social roles that had been provided by the Indian, Greco-Roman, and Germanic pantheons—and with them the old Aryan social trinity—had been subverted by monotheism. Similarly, liberal pluralism was subverted by socialism. The latter’s denial of the natural givenness of plural spontaneity struck squarely at the heart of the Whig creed, which held (following Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith) that the end result of individual action, whatever its motive, is for the best, and that the acceptance of difference is conducive both to liberty and to a morally dignified state of affairs. But this view, being only moral and not theological, never had quite the authority of the older, religiously based belief in the rightness of social differentiation. (Only Hegel attempted to overcome this difficulty.)

Modern revolutionary socialism is original in making the assumption—which it does not share with Narodniks and other romantics—that capitalist dynamics will help to bring about the end of *both* hierarchy and the division of labor. In a way, Lenin and his comrades were right. Liberal capitalism, after all, has encouraged social mobility, breaking up closed status groups, fostering democratic political participation, and softening the once-rigid boundaries of various elites. Economic growth made possible a grand rapprochement between classes: the unbridgeable gulf between serf and lord has been replaced by the much smaller distance between office clerk and factory worker; the self-made man appeared as a definite social type. Romantics wanted to realize the Unity of Man by *destroying* modernity; revolutionary socialists wished to attain the same goal by *using* modernity. Scientific technology, economic expansion, and mass culture were to become the uniquely modern means for realizing the age-old dream of Universal Man, a plebeian version of the Renaissance dream.

In many East European countries, this socialist view was the most positive picture of liberal capitalism that people ever encountered. In Russia, Czarist traditionalists, Slavophiles, and revolutionary Narodniks were as one in condemning frivolous Western modernity; only Marxists called for technology, science, rationalism, and industrialization. East European adversaries of Western-style liberal capitalism had few actual liberals or capitalists to oppose, but could find one real enemy: the

Bolsheviks. The paucity of Whiggish types in Russia also helped to determine Lenin's strategy of using the socialist state instead of the capitalist bourgeoisie as the instrument of modernizing change. The new state would initiate industrial development and make social roles interchangeable among groups and during one's lifetime. Anything that might stand in the way of this utopia—the family, religion, class, high culture—would be destroyed. Everything was to withdraw into the anonymity of the collective.

What historians often overlook is that Bolshevism did forge a modern society of sorts, while modernity was refused by the Bolsheviks' main rivals. With the death of East and Central European liberalism in 1917–18, no other modernizing agency was left. Class-conscious social democrats fought capitalism because, unlike their hostile communist twins, they actually did represent the starving workers. Conservatives retreated into romantic-feudal daydreaming and anti-Semitic mindlessness. The Church entertained a romantic vision of Christian socialism that revived prejudices against banking and interest quite à la Khomeini. The disaffected officer corps wanted simple justice. The peasant parties demanded cooperatives and, like farmers' groups always and everywhere, guaranteed income. Social democrats struggled to make capitalism accept reforms designed to promote "social justice" understood as greater equality, but capitalism had scarcely come to Eastern Europe. Communists wanted to create an industrial machine in order to conquer Paradise.

East European revolutionary socialism was as confused by the dilemmas of modernity as Western liberalism was at the time, but Bolshevik thaumaturgy has to a certain extent succeeded. John Lukacs's disturbing new book *The Duel* says that we are all national socialists even though Churchill and the Allies defeated the original bearers of that name in 1945.¹ Some combination of ethnic nationalism and collectivist welfarism characterizes most of the states in the world today; the disastrous consequences predicted by Friedrich Hayek are fended off only by the dogged resistance of cultural forces left over from the past—but only in the West, if there. The dirty work of modernization, which was done in England by *laissez-faire* liberalism and in Germany by the Prussian state and military industry, was performed in Eastern Europe and large parts of Asia by various versions of state socialism. What Stalin wrought—with labor camps, forced collectivization, mass deportations, wholesale murder, and the ruthless exploitation and destruction of natural resources—is a gigantic, if terrible, achievement.

Modernity East and West

The differences within the character of modernity in many regions of the world depend chiefly on *when* modernity hit them. The end of closed

status groups, secularization, pluralism, the need for power to be of transparent legitimacy, mass education, and so on came to Eastern Europe with the advent of socialism, as did industrial technology, notions of deferred gratification and “life-plan” rationality, and scientific discourse. The problem facing Eastern Europe at this moment is not whether and how to introduce capitalism (or as we coyly call it, the “market economy”), but whether the dominant political forces here do or do not want to preserve the achievements of modernity that were brought to the West by liberalism and the Industrial Revolution—and that came to us on the bayonets of the Red Army.

Let us dwell for a moment longer on the nature of the communist utopia. I have—at the risk of being prosaic—translated the idea of an end to alienation as an end to fixed social roles. Here the communist utopia appears to be double-edged. What appeared futuristic to Western revolutionary socialists (whose overwhelming experience was of “capitalist anarchy,” “atomization,” and “aimlessness”) appeared quite traditional to their Eastern counterparts, who saw this utopia as a potential *antidote to the West*. But this antidote, in contradistinction to merely feudal-romantic views, also offered a way to defeat the West with some of its own weapons. East European antiliberalists and antimodernists of both the left and the right first saw Marxian revolutionary socialism as offering the advantage of being strong—something that the East needed because of its weakness vis-à-vis the colonizing, expansive West. But then an even greater advantage became apparent. Contacts with the Western Enlightenment under such reformers as Czar Peter the Great and Emperor Joseph II had undermined the old tribal-sacral legitimacy of the state in Central and Eastern Europe; national Jacobin and liberal nationalist turbulence (as in the Decembrist revolt of 1825 and the revolutions of 1848) sapped it further. Official legitimizing ideologies thenceforth became unhappy mixtures of sacralistic phrases and utilitarian arguments. But utilitarian arguments proved subversive of monarchic rule. Revolutionary socialism, however, could help to show that the suppression of social diversity was both useful as a tool of development and in tune with the natural (i.e., ancient) order of things.

The utilitarian character of revolutionary socialist argumentation helps to explain the sectarian struggles within communist parties. The “deviationists,” “revisionists,” and “liquidators” of communist history—most famously, the Trotskyites and Maoists—could always ask whether the twin revolutionary goals of “community” and “development” were best served by whatever tactics the Politburo and the Central Committee thought fit. The utilitarian side of socialist theories of legitimacy and authority was to become a trap for Bolshevik parties: there was no intrinsic reason why they should squash criticism, for they always said that their brand of rule was demonstrably better than others.² Both utilitarian antiutopianism and the critique of utilitarian-pragmatic

tactics in the name of utopia could be silenced only by force: socialists have always been restive under socialist rule.

Modernity hit Western Europe when the dominion of Christianity was not in serious doubt; indeed, modernity was most successful when the pagan whimsies of the French Revolution had been defeated by the bastions of the *ancien régime*, Britain and Austria. The grand narrative of Western modernity is the remarkable story of how aristocratic tradition (based on Judeo-Christian theology, Greco-Roman ethics and statecraft, and the Aryan social trinity) gradually absorbed plebeian liberal capitalism, science, technology, urbanism, and the dissolution of spiritual and political bondage. This process of absorption of the emerging bourgeoisie has done more for modern society than all the Encyclopaedists, Jacobins, *carbonari*, and Freemasons taken together. For as it proceeded in its piecemeal, unideological, chaotically pragmatic way, it never directly raised the problem of *legitimacy*, but replaced it with that of *authority*. One of the unintended results was that people west of the Rhine could not address directly the quandary of the *state* as such; they thought instead in terms of law and government. State is a characteristically German and Russian idea, not a British or an Austrian one.

British and Austrian conservatism revered religion less as dogma than as ancient custom (this is what I called elsewhere the difference between *tradition* and *canon*, that is, tradition as truth and tradition as tradition). Religion thus understood was the opponent of utopia. Gradually everything within the Christian framework had become respectable religion; urgent theological disputes were sacrificed to an effective censorship operating in the name of a Hobbesian toleration, and one of the *old* wellheads of utopianism was thus capped. The merger of chivalric-baronial aristocracy and *noblesse de robe*, of haute bourgeoisie and high bureaucracy; the domestication of Christian religiosity into pietistic convention; even the democratic gains achieved by the extension of the franchise and social-welfare legislation—all helped to make possible the deferral of doubts about legitimacy, and the burden of proof shifted. The great liberal-conservative compromise of the nineteenth-century West limited political argument to the well-educated elite, where many convictions were left unspoken and the fragile balance was maintained by English flippancy and insincerity. The odd assortment of people who did dare to think about the fundamentals of civilization—Lord Salisbury, the Tractarians, Samuel Butler, George Eliot, and that redoubtable leveller David Lloyd George—were more or less marginalized; even the agonizings of Matthew Arnold went largely unheeded. Yet this Austro-British hypocrisy could not and did not hold. Faced with the universalistic moral challenge hurled at it by socialism, it had to seek the approval of the abstract political community; the result was the rise of universal suffrage and mass democracy. These destroyed

the fragile pretense of pseudoaristocratic and pseudo-Christian liberal capitalism, while the First World War and its turbulent aftermath shattered the Burkean dream of gently gradual change. Still, this perhaps serendipitous constellation of circumstances worked for a long time to condition the idea that Westerners themselves had of modernity. A process of wild expansion, raucous dynamism, and harsh social dislocations went on under the genteel tutelage of institutions and habits of old.

But the process of unifying the upper-middle class and enlarging the aristocracy succeeded only in Britain; the Austro-Hungarian empire started down this road too late and too slowly to save itself. The Habsburgs presided over two middle classes: the so-called gentry composed of squires, senior civil servants, and army officers; and the despised bourgeoisie of private businessmen, bohemians, new professionals, shopkeepers, and those most important people of independent means (*Privatieren*). Those who belonged to this latter half of the middle class saw themselves as represented by social democracy and radicalism (if they belonged to some oppressed ethnic group), or else by anti-Semitic and chauvinistic Christian Socialism. In either case, they rejected the noble Whiggish liberalism of the cosmopolitan-aristocratic upper crust. Throughout the East, bourgeois groups were seen as aliens: Jews and Germans in Russia or the eastern half of Austria-Hungary; Muslims and Parsees in India; Chinese in Southeast Asia; East Indians in Africa and the British West Indies; Christians in Turkey or the Arab Middle East. The problem of capitalism in the East was—and has largely remained—an *ethnic and denominational problem*, just as it was in the pre-Enlightenment West. Socialism promised to suppress these disreputable social islets of capitalism, and thus easily lent itself to reactionary ethnic uses, whether indirectly (as in the case of Lenin) or openly (as in that of Hitler). Socialism promised a modernity that would replace both the stagnant *ancien régime* and the hated bourgeois-alien islets within it. Socialism promised to make capitalist-style dynamism compatible with the old-fashioned, indeed, archaic urge to suppress plurality. It kept this promise, too, but at a fearfully high cost. Far from being a surface phenomenon, socialism wrought a deep and lasting transformation of cultural and social life throughout Eastern Europe.

“Community” versus “Development”

The romantic-populist forces that dominate contemporary Eastern Europe are correct in seeing capitalism and socialism (both of which they oppose) as a single problem. When Western leftists bemoan the “universal triumph” of capitalism and “unmask” the Brave New World of McDonald’s, they do not realize that they are acting as unwitting allies of the East European far right. The latter hates capitalism no less

than they do, and its opposition to collectivist ideas is at best lukewarm.

All the attempts that were made to bring modernity to presocialist Eastern Europe failed dismally. Only revolutionary socialism made headway in this gargantuan task: industrialism and economic growth; electrification and mass transport; the division of space and time into units of equal size (East European peasants did not have watches and clocks until the 1950s); the documentation of administrative decisions; the regularization of legal procedure (even advanced Hungary did not have a penal code until the 1960s); the cessation of personal servitude (in the 1970s, a peasant in the mountains of Romania kissed my hand because I was wearing “town trousers”); mandatory education and mass literacy; the dissemination of scientific and humanistic learning; printed and electronic mass media; organized sports; modern health care and public hygiene; the separation of the workplace from the living quarters; the spread of the nuclear family; artificial contraception and legalized abortion—this whole catalogue of modern changes is one that East Europeans rightly associate with socialism.

All this was achieved through unimaginable violence wielded with unprecedented ruthlessness by those fanatical soldiers of change, the Red commissars. The zillions of “Marxist” seminars, indoctrination classes, and semimilitary professional-training courses not only served the purpose of ideological brainwashing, but also drilled masses of backward peasants in the ways of modernity, from reading a clockface and washing one’s feet daily to the doctrines of Newton, Darwin, and Marx (taught by people who might have preserved a belief or two in witches and werewolves). Labor camps, long stretches of cruel military service, interminable after-work Party meetings, mandatory self-criticism and study sessions, Young Pioneers’ summer camps, voluntary work detachments, Stakhanovite movements, and all the rest had a pervasive effect. Permanent mobilization for socialism aimed openly at the destruction of private life combined with super-Victorian prudery and cultural “conservatism” (middlebrow conventionalism); the accompanying symptoms were exhaustion, puritanical poverty, and a barbaric new lay mythology. New managerial elites were chosen on the basis of party loyalty, moral probity, and total political subservience. Every perk, promotion, and preferment was given by the party-state according to a political notion of “merit.”

When reformers tried to introduce a modicum of economic rationality into the Stalinist model of development, they were resisted by many forces—and the history of this resistance explains many a feature of the contemporary confusion in Eastern Europe. This story is very well summarized by the once famous but now forgotten debate of the early 1960s on whether or not there was alienation under socialism.

The claim that there *was* alienation in “actually existing” socialism meant two things at the same time. First, it meant that not everything

was perfect under socialism—a boldly subversive, almost seditious, thesis. Second, it meant that economic reforms, by reestablishing the commodity-money and labor-wage relationships, had reintroduced the characteristically capitalist phenomenon of reification.

This incipient criticism of “real” socialism combined both utilitarian discontent with socialism’s poor economic performance and paleo-Bolshevik discontent with the new differentiation of social roles spurred by economic reforms. Revolutionary socialism began by aspiring to both “community” and “development,” but wound up adopting reforms that bolstered the latter at the expense of the former. The communist leadership wanted reforms, but could not renounce the rhetoric of “community” that it needed to justify totalitarian control. The Party eventually silenced this debate, but the schism between the advocates of “development” and the advocates of “community” remained. Here you have in a nutshell the origins of the contemporary political party structure of postcommunist Eastern Europe. The dominant romantic-populist-collectivist forces are the heirs of the “community” side in the alienation debate, while the pragmatic “liberals” of today trace their ancestry to the “development” camp. Both are in search of a more respectable ideological past, but this cannot fool the historian of ideas.

Anticommunism and Anticapitalism

The puzzle that the countries of Eastern Europe have yet to solve is whether they want to continue on the trajectory of modern development that socialist revolution and conquest started (and in another but less important sense arrested), or whether they want to try to restore some sort of fictional community erected on the doctrines of Rousseau and de Maistre.

Here I must introduce a cautionary note owing to the phenomenon of East European duplicity. Contemporary East European governments are desperately trying to please what they imagine to be the Western boss. In Hungary, for instance, the government is trying to appear social democratic in Austria, Christian Democratic in Germany, quasi-Gaullist in France, conservative in Britain, Reaganite in the United States, and liberal in the Netherlands; it is none of these, of course, but it is more or less believed everywhere by gullible and ignorant Western observers and politicians, which is just as well. This caution is important because duplicity can sometimes confuse East Europeans themselves. The authority of Western ideas played an important part in the 1989 changes, but at the same time the old servile habit of imitation, of immediately accepting a language not of one’s own making, also plays a curious role. It creates more resentment in a region already beset by anti-Western sentiment, especially on the right.

Deciphering contemporary East European political discourse means

playing a very complicated hermeneutical game. Everybody speaks of "privatization," for instance, but most of them are really talking about renationalization through various cross-shareholding and cross-ownership schemes wherein the state remains the ultimate proprietor even as the fashionable etiquette of "the market" is being observed. Everybody also talks about getting rid of the old communist *apparatchiki*, but in practice this can mean anything from reshuffling various groups of holdover functionaries to imposing media censorship or carrying on the old fight between "development" and "community" factions by other means. All this obscures the truth of events in Eastern Europe from foreign observers and policy makers, who often wind up backing this or that political figure or group on a whim without really understanding what is going on (and what is going on is indeed quite difficult to grasp).

The main debate in Eastern Europe, meanwhile, is one familiar to those who know the history of intracommunist squabbles in the 1930s: it is the argument over heritage.

Since "communism" as such is thoroughly compromised and there is an official consensus (not shared by public opinion) that it was all bad, the debate is carried on in code. At its heart is the question of whether the old modernizing-reformist managerial elite should be replaced at the price of retarding economic change and strengthening state interference in the economy; or whether the economic reforms that began before the democratic turn of 1989 should be vigorously pursued at the price of keeping parts of the old "communist" (technocratic-professional) elite in place. Advocates of the second option argue that a British-style process of "absorption" will gradually (in a Burkean way) bring into being a new ruling class molded out of new and old elements while simultaneously helping East European society to make smooth progress toward pluralism, individualism, and greater freedom. This gradualist model is sometimes called "communist" in Eastern Europe, while the "community" faction's efforts to arrest development, erect an authoritarian state, and create from above a new moneyed class permeated by ethnic nationalism are sometimes called "conservative." The debate's sharpest cutting edge is the question of purges. Neo-Whigs like myself oppose purges and screenings and political trials in part because we know that such efforts inevitably bring a disproportionate amount of power to those who conduct them (like the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks). The resulting atmosphere of suspicion, denunciation, and lust for spoils that is already present in some countries in the region is inimical to both the principles of liberal democracy and the smooth functioning of a modern economy.

Witch-hunts are obviously only a method. Eastern Europe's plebeian new right, with its penchant for screenings, purges, secret files, unproven denunciations, and resentment toward elites of any kind, is afraid of capitalism and liberal democracy. The restoration of rural, static, deferential, and backward Eastern Europe is its program. Its roots in the

“community” side of the alienation debate can partly be deduced from the presence in its ranks of one-time “national communists” like those in Hungary who spent the 1960s attacking what they contemptuously dubbed “Frigidaire socialism.” Their critique of modernity as atomized, reified, selfish, greedy, and so on, has not changed a whit. Yet the arguments of those on the other side have not changed a great deal either. They regard capitalism and liberal democracy only as a technical means to certain utilitarian ends, as the best method for improving living standards and fostering social peace. Genuine believers in the superiority of a free society are few and far between. Those who were on the “development” side of the alienation debate now call themselves “liberal,” and there is something in this, since this side is kinder and gentler, more willing to accept impartial laws and procedures as the means for settling social conflicts, and less inclined to authoritarianism. Nonetheless, they do not generally represent what Westerners have come to expect when they hear the word “liberal,” whether used in its nineteenth-century Whiggish or contemporary American sense.

Our traditions are strongly anti-individualistic; fear of spontaneity is present all along our political spectrum. The dissolution of the late-communist state gave birth to a unique—and it now appears, all too brief—moment of liberty, innovation, and diversity. Now we once again have indoctrination, mindless militancy, anti-Western and anticapitalist xenophobia, and revolutionary disregard for law—all brought to us by movements that shouted themselves hoarse calling for human rights just a few years ago. These movements have by now established a pattern of change whose twin engines are the personnel department with its confidential files and the screening commission with its chaotic hearings and dubious accusations. Censorship, cultural philistinism, intolerance, paranoia, and authoritarian demagoguery are all rampant.

In Eastern Europe today, says one acute Hungarian political scientist, “anticommunism” means anticapitalism. Since the managerial elite has initiated—and of course profited from—market reforms, and since this is the social stratum that is nowadays called “communist,” the rhetoric of anticomunism is directed against the modernizing, incipiently bourgeois elements. All those who want a Burkean merger of elites are called “procommunist.” State-orchestrated schemes in which state companies and state banks own one another, with civil servants and politicians dominating their boards, go forward under the rubric of “privatization.” Genuine attempts at privatization, on the other hand, are condemned as “communist theft.”

The Socialist Legacy

The legacy of socialism is of course mixed, and contrary to what countless Western columnists say, nationalism is part of it. Far from

having been suppressed or destroyed by socialism, nationalism was always one of its leading features.

Bolshevik “national communism” is well known to historians, but is not taken sufficiently into account in most explanations of what is happening today. Tito and Ceaușescu embraced national communism because it served their unwillingness to share their power with the Soviet Union; Gomulka’s version defended a sort of reform (but ended in the anti-Semitic debacle of 1968). Despite what Marx himself tended to believe, national Bolshevism is a necessary consequence of the revolutionary theory of alienation. The systematic suppression of divergent social roles necessarily created a unitary community under a strong state. Most communists before World War II still believed in the suppression of the state as well—the state bureaucracy was, after all, a *separate* stratum—but this heroic consistency did not survive their coming to power. With world revolution a far-off prospect at best, the unalienated community would have to be national. The idea of pure community and its concomitant anti-Western, antimodern, romantic nationalism was adopted at first unwillingly, but later quite deliberately by the ruling communist parties of Eastern Europe, and was used by them to charm the colonial-minded intelligentsia of the East European “periphery.” Thus was spawned the very powerful strain of Rousseauian utopianism so prevalent among the “community” camp. We should keep in mind that this utopian strain is at its base hostile to institutions such as the law-governed state. Those in Eastern Europe today who call for a “community of nations rather than a community of states” (where nations mean ethnocultural groups, not political communities of citizens) are echoing those half-forgotten accents out of our murky past that made communism acceptable to both anarcholibertarians and authoritarians by appealing to their shared animus against impersonal institutions in general and the impersonal rule of law in particular.

In other words, “contemporary” nationalism in our region is really nothing new, nor are its proponents. Far from being something that was resurrected by recent democratic changes, it is a telltale sign of continuity. Civic patriotism is absent, advocated only by lonely humanists in ineffective essays.

Francis Fukuyama’s famous hypothesis concerning the “end of history” rests on the assumption that liberal democracy is about to win the game.³ Nothing could be further from the truth. The East European revolution launched in 1989 is one more rebellion against modernity (therefore against the West, which after all is the inventor of that ruthless modernizing strategy called socialism), and in this respect is similar to Khomeini’s revolution in Iran or the Islamic *intégriste* movement in Algeria.

In his sadly forgotten book *The War Against the West*, Aurel Kolnai showed how German romanticism served as a basis for National

Socialism.⁴ It is important to understand that the resistance to liberal democracy in Eastern Europe rests on no ethical arguments save one (if this can be considered ethical, as I think it can): namely, that liberal democracy is *alien*. Oswald Spengler said in 1918 that the trouble with German Liberals was not that they were liberal, but that they were *English*. This argument, I am sorry to say, prevails. Not long ago in Bucharest, Romania, there was a public demonstration against “Abroad” as such. The main complaint against socialism today—even in Russia!—is that it resulted from foreign conquest, or in other words, was a species of rule by agents of “Abroad.” (In fact, communism created the first wholly indigenous elites in East European history, replacing the cosmopolitan imperial aristocracies of old.) The innocent Orient raped by the brutal and cunning Occident—this is the image that dominates discussion of both socialism and capitalism in Eastern Europe. Fukuyama’s gray and unified world does not exist; the ancient tensions remain. The gullible West is disarming now, after the end of the Cold War’s imperial balance of power, at the very moment when war in Europe is a bigger threat than at any time since 1945 (indeed, three actual wars are going on at the date of this writing).

The Plight of East European Liberalism

Eastern Europe’s liberals are routinely accused of being in cahoots with the socialist left. They very seldom are, but the romantic-populist right sees clearly that they are both “Western” and modernist, which is enough to damn them both. The liberal movements are fighting a rearguard battle. This is not to deny that a democratic revolution did take place in Eastern Europe, but the democracy that came out of it is of the Jacobin variety: a majoritarian, plebiscitarian, antipluralistic democracy transfixed by the old socialist myth of direct participation. There is nothing about it that is liberal.

All the surveys and polling data show that public opinion in our region rejects dictatorship, but would like to see a strong man at the helm; favors popular government, but hates parliament, parties, and the press; likes social welfare legislation and equality, but not trade unions; wants to topple the present government, but disapproves of the idea of a regular opposition; supports the notion of the market (which is a code word for Western-style living standards), but wishes to punish and expropriate the rich and condemns banking for preying on simple working people; favors a guaranteed minimum income, but sees unemployment as an immoral state and wants to punish or possibly deport the unemployed. In one Hungarian poll, more than 80 percent of the respondents condemned communism as “evil,” but when asked to name their favorite politicians, listed four former communist leaders among the top five. These results could be dismissed as a reflection of

passing confusion, one of the temporary “difficulties of transition.” To my mind, however, that would be a grave mistake. The opinions summarized above are characteristic of a situation that has not essentially changed since the emergence of revolutionary socialism.⁵

East Europeans still do not want to accept the “alienated” individualism and social diversity of liberal capitalism, but are unwilling to return to the kind of harsh, even tyrannical, rule that would be needed to forge essential unity. Are they really unique in this?

Some might say that all this represents a resurgence of “conservatism,” but the rejection of modernity is not conservative. After all, it was not Burke but Robespierre who was unable to make his peace with modernity.

NOTES

1. John Lukacs, *The Duel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991).
2. As Leo Strauss noted in another context: “[T]he loathing of Utopias is conscious of its basis in more stringent intellectual discipline, in a deeper intellectual probity. The opposition to Utopia is thus nothing other than the opposition to religion. For religion too was rejected because it was held to have its foundation in wishing. Not wishing, but recognizing what is; not waiting for good fortune, but commanding fortune; therefore not making claims on fate, but loving fate; hence not making claims on men, on other men.” *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 226.
3. Fukuyama's celebrated article in the Summer 1989 issue of *The National Interest* and his subsequent book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), are obviously indirect comments and variations on themes associated with Leo Strauss and his students. Indeed, it may be said that both the book and the essay that spawned it are an expanded version of a footnote in Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 222n. That footnote, in turn, is unthinkable without the exchanges between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève that are reproduced in Strauss's *On Tyranny*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1991). The connection was noticed by Pierre Bouretz, “Histoire et utopie (Fukuyama/Hegel, Mosès/Rosenzweig),” *Esprit*, May 1992, 119-33. Cf. Dominique Auffret, *Alexandre Kojève* (Paris: Grasset, 1990).
4. Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (New York: Viking Press, 1938).
5. The only serious theoretical work on the transition in Eastern Europe is Michel Henry's *Du communisme au capitalisme: théorie d'une catastrophe* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1990). Although I do not agree with Henry's prejudices and political conclusions, his analysis is excellent. On his philosophical views, see Rolf Kühn, “Freiheits-‘Dialektik’ und immanente ‘Nicht-Freiheit’: Analyse des Situationsbegriffs nach Michel Henry,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 46 (January-March 1992): 7-23. Another interesting radical view can be found in Zbigniew Rau, “The State of Enslavement: The East European Substitute for the State of Nature,” *Political Studies* 39 (June 1991): 253-69. The radical economic program of “de-étatization” is best summarized in János Kornai, *The Road to a Free Economy: Shifting from a Socialist Society* (London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), which is still the best guide to the topic, even in this poor translation from the original Hungarian.