ACCESS PROVIDED BY NYPL RESEARCH

ACCESSIBILITY LOG IN

PROJECT MUSE BROWSE OR Search... MENU

Journal of Democracy
Volume 10, Number 1, January 1999
Johns Hopkins University Press
Article

Viewed | Save | View Citation | Related Content

Additional Information

Share

Eastern Europe a Decade Later

Victory Defeated

G.M. Tamás — (bio)

A Hungarian émigré historian, Miklós Molnár, professor at the University of Geneva, called his important book on the 1956 uprising *Victoire d'une défaite*. In his view, although Hungary was defeated by the Red Army, the world communist movement was robbed of its most precious asset, its legitimacy: The purest proletarian revolution in history had been directed *against* the heirs of Lenin. The tide turned. The mesmerizing ideological force of radical socialism was broken. It became morally impossible for Enlightenment humanism to remain in cahoots with the butchers of Budapest. Sooner or later, radical socialism would have to lose the historic battle.

Is it possible to argue that what we now see, ten years after 1989, the *annus mirabilis*, is the moral exhaustion of liberal capitalism brought about by its global victory?

To offer at least a partial answer to this alarming question, we must first clarify the difficulties apparent in the Western understanding of the so-called new democracies, difficulties that have a perverse impact on the self-understanding of East Europeans themselves (by East Europeans I mean people from the former Warsaw Pact countries, including the former Soviet Union). It also has to be taken into account that East Europeans do not understand one another's languages, and are aware of one another only *via* the West, usually the United States and France. That, by the way, has always been the case. I read T.G. Masaryk in German, not in Czech. **[End Page 63]**

The role assigned to East Europeans in the retelling of their own story is *bearing witness*. Our job is to furnish anecdotal evidence, the raw material of the *analysis* supplied by Westerners. I, for one, was more than happy to play the role of the *native informant* in the period when—due to censorship—Eastern Europe did not have its own voice. But now that it has got one, "martyrology" (*martyr* means "witness" in Greek) ought to stop. The voluminous political literature on contemporary Eastern Europe, with a few exceptions, pretends that East Europeans do not think about the changes in their own countries, that no theories are presented and no debates and quarrels are taking place. Once upon a time, the slightest stirrings in the Central Committee and the Institute for the Scientific Study of Marxism-Leninism were reported in excruciating detail by myriads of Kremlinologists; the infinitesimal signs of nascent baby heresy were scrutinized as portents of great events. Since the demise of communism, however, East Europeans have given up celebrating altogether—at least as far as Western observers are concerned.

Yet the most interesting phenomenon in Eastern Europe today is the *new press*. Irreverent, raucous, passionate, invective-laden, pugnacious, it is perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the new democracies. While in New York there is only one quality broadsheet and two tabloids, Budapest has six broadsheets and three tabloids and Bucharest about thirty dailies, and people are queuing up to buy them. Hungarian intellectuals publish their theoretical-cum-polemical essays in national weeklies with a readership of around 100,000 (in a country of 10 million). Of all this, not a whisper is heard in the West.

It seems that things keep happening to East Europeans, but they are totally passive and do not think about them. Events in Eastern Europe seem to be either economic in nature (i.e., "objective" in some sense) or "ethnic" (again, a tragedy arising from what is "given" [race], that is, something "objective"). East European parliaments do not seem to legislate. There do not seem to be left-wing or right-wing governments, only pro-market "experts" and anti-market lunatics. Skinhead-style (i.e., marginal) antisemitic incidents are reported, but the centrality of the Jewish question (as Leo Strauss said, *the* social problem *par excellence*) is ignored. Western political scientists do not read novels, although the paramountcy of literature in Eastern Europe is unchanged; it is still the best source for understanding the region, far better than collections of footnoted scholarly articles by the usual suspects. **[End Page 64]**

In general, the parts of the story where East Europeans play an active and central role are relegated to the background. A bit player like Mikhail Gorbachev (who was an important but incomprehending and passive figure, indeed somebody to whom things kept happening) occupies center stage, while Solidarity is slowly forgotten. It is characteristic that the name itself by which the events of 1989 are known, to wit, "the collapse of communism," conveys passivity (the building just crumbled), while the crowds taking over civic edifices, smashing the Wall, remain unexplained. The sheer chronological fact that the story begins in 1976 in Poland has disappeared.

Also, the ideas that preceded the changes get short shrift. Imagine a history of the French Revolution without a mention of Voltaire, Rousseau, Linguet, Dom Deschamps, Condorcet, Turgot—we do not have anything of comparable magnitude, of course, in Eastern Europe, but this does not mean that Rudolf Bahro and Robert Havemann in East Germany, for example, have not lived. The thinkers and orators who inspired and harangued the more or less peacefully rebellious masses are still with us, but apart from the half-true cliché of bearded, impractical, bumbling dissidents (and I am all that), not much is known about their ideas. Yet, for better or worse, their ideas were the ones people had at their disposal when faced with the daunting task of mapping out some new arrangements in the novel, astonishingly free world. Aleksandr Zinoviev, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, or Igor Shafarevich may not enjoy the respect of Western liberals or, indeed, of their own compat-riots right now, but at the time they were people's inspiration and hope.

It is rather telling, I think, that the greatest success story of the region, Poland, is so much ignored. Poland is different from the rest because what happened there, both good and bad, was the result of a genuine and profound revolution—one that was extremely original, full of flashes of political genius and authentic heroism, as well as authentic skulduggery and *Schweinerei*. Poland showed us that the Soviet threat was not absolute; that Soviet power was tired, lacking in energy and self-confidence; that the absence of strong local democratic traditions was not fatal; that the germs of liberty under communism could be transformed into a lush vegetation of modern, original civic initiatives conducive to democracy; and more recently, that the controversy about the market economy need not be fatal to a new democracy and its governance. The great media stories in the West were about Yeltsin and the Stasi files. These are sideshows.

The "collapse of communism" or *die Wende* ("the turn") was the outcome of a treble exhaustion: an exhaustion of ideas, of economic efficiency, and of integrative power in the societies of "really existing socialism." Communist tyranny, unlike hidebound military dictatorships, saw itself as and, to a certain extent, really was the embodiment of a utopia. The obsolescence of utopian faith proved fatal, since the **[End Page 65]** legitimacy of the regime depended on the realization of a prediction and on the veracity of a doctrine—the consequence of communism's enduring Enlightenment legacy. When the promised state of affairs failed to materialize, the specifically communist claim of authority was rendered void, and it was clumsily and awkwardly replaced by Brezhnevite borborygms of the status quo. Beginning in the late 1970s, the Soviet bloc underwent an economic crisis more severe than the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s. The East European economy still has not completely recovered. (Unfortunately, many people see the present predicament as a result of, rather than the reason for, "the turn.") Ethnic conflicts within and between communist states demonstrated that the regime was no longer capable of integrating society; people sought other foci of identity than what the system was willing to offer. The new ethnicity and proletarian protest, the mass emigration of Soviet Jewry, the flight of the intellectuals, the sudden rebelliousness of popular culture, and the ever bolder human rights groups were all signals that the communist party had lost the initiative.

The exhaustion of the old order is naturally always a cause for change, but the exhaustion of a regime of revolutionary origins is a different kettle of fish. For distaste for a utopian-revolutionary regime means distaste for utopia and revolution. Resistance to late communism meant antipathy, not hope: The language of joyous hope and radical change was exhausted too. East Europeans thought not that capitalism and liberal democracy were excellent, but rather that the publicly professed ideas of Bolshevism had failed—ideas like "equality," "community," and "civic duty."

The "delegitimization" of "real" socialism succeeded without the onset of a new legitimacy because the very language or discourse of legitimacy had become unacceptable; it was irredeemably tainted by decades of mendacity. The majority was glad to be rid of one-party rule, gagged speech, servility, and fear. But what most people—minus an enthusiastic but vocal fraction of the population—thought about the new dispensation soon became painfully clear: It was something alien, perhaps efficacious and comfortable, but also bewildering; one had to put up with, adapt to, become accustomed to the unusual logic of the new victors, the West and its local allies.

In other words, what we *did* was to do away with the remnants of the old regime—and what *happened* to us, in the absence of a new social idea of our own, was capitalism, which is supposed to be the even older, presocialist regime. Modernity in the East European imagination is linked to socialism—the whole area, including Bohemia, Moravia, and eastern Germany, was pretty backward prior to 1945—and capitalism is linked to the past. At the same time, this return to the past was not a return to tradition (which is local and happened to be more rural and feudal than bourgeois and capitalist) but to the historic past of the West, which is **[End Page 66]** also its present. The warmly welcomed defeat of the "radiant future," of *"les lendemains qui chantent,"* ushered in something certainly fitter for human consumption, but woefully mundane, prosaic, materialistic, and selfish.

In the autumn of 1989, just after I had been "reintegrated" to the university (which caused a stir, especially as I was running a parliamentary election campaign at the same time), a beautiful young student told me, "What do you want, Professor? Morality is finished, we'll have to face real life." I asked her, "But what *is* real life, my dear?" "Don't you know? Well, I guess, money, power, and sex." Of course this was mostly reverse youthful romanticism, nothing more; nevertheless, this is what we have been hearing ever since. There is a sense of sobering up, of lost illusions, and this is strange since nobody had seemed to believe the old communist bromides any longer. If you would like to coin the most successful slogan in Eastern Europe, surely it would be, "No slogans!"

This is why even ethnic nationalism, the bogeyman of the early 1990s, has ultimately failed—at least in the sense of a desire for a new, autonomous political community as opposed to sheer *pogrom*. It failed because nationalism, too, is an idea. "Real" socialism insisted on an absolute, unconditional commitment, on loudly affirmed loyalty and duty-driven conformity. Hence the total demise of commitment. Ideas requiring actions are utterly unpopular. Politics by other means usually means no politics at all. People do not turn up when drafted into the army, do not pay their taxes, and do not give to charity. These three fundamental varieties of social or national solidarity cannot function when an ultranominalist doubt concerning institutions is dominant.

Belief in the impersonal fairness of institutions (the "rule of law," *Rechtsstaat,* and their cognates) is possible only if you are willing to make a leap of faith, to believe that there is a Church in spite of your delinquent vicar, to believe in science in spite of your bibulous schoolmaster, in literature in spite of Danielle Steel and Barbara Taylor Bradford. Not many people are willing today—anywhere—to make that leap; Eastern Europe has joined the "free world" at a particularly unpropitious, although quiescent and prosperous moment. East Europeans, make no mistake, are eager to learn the rules of the new dispensation; they want to make the most of it and wish to succeed. After all, they tried to use the old regime too for their own personal purposes, and even that unyielding, rusty, obsolete machinery quite often had to give. **[End Page 67]**

But accepting and using a set of circumstances when there does not seem to be any alternative is not the same thing as believing it to be right or just. A phrase like "You can't do this here, this is a free country," would be greeted with derision. At the same time, East Europeans will sue if their privacy or their rights are violated. It is always difficult to draw the line between healthy skepticism and rampant nihilism. Post-Soviet political attitudes have a big dose of both, I think. Institutions adorned with grand principles invariably calling for sacrifice have traditionally been distrusted by peasant populations uninvolved in and unconsulted about decisions taken "at the top." My compatriots do not believe the leopard called the State will ever change its spots, but they still will cast their vote, mostly to chase away incumbents and to annoy "the leadership." "They" should not feel too secure—and "They" do not, which is delightful. The *negative* side of democracy, like the ingrained distrust of modernity, works like magic.

As to the positive side, there is little encouraging to report. The problems facing post-Soviet democracies are nothing new. Poverty, corruption, abuse of power, chauvinism, and lack of sympathy for the unfortunate are not unknown in older free societies either. But it is one thing to believe, as Marxists did (and do), that this set of facts is endemic in class societies but will disappear under socialism, or to think (as does the worldwide liberal establishment, from social democrats to neoconservatives) that these are matters for reform and moral betterment reconcilable with the system. Well, in Eastern Europe there is no doubt that all this is the price we are paying for the only genuine novelty perceived there—that we no longer have to shut up. Any state of affairs that can be designated as economic and political inequality (i.e., there are leaders and there are those who are led) is construed as proof that freedom is a joke, and the mere existence of political power is interpreted as evidence that "nothing has changed" (the single most frequent political utterance in Eastern Europe, a hyperbole immediately followed by the second most frequent one, namely, "We never had it so bad"). So we can confidently assert that the validity of radical anticapitalism and antimodernism is not doubted. Capitalism is accepted as the honest and straightforward application of original sin as a political blueprint.

Liberal democracy in Eastern Europe is on sufferance. There is no radical alternative, like, say, militant Islam on the horizon. But it is clear that what began as an exhaustion continues as an exhaustion. This has its nice sides. There is a refreshingly unsentimental view of the human and political condition, bereft of seriousness concerning obligations and patriotism. The political talk is often very funny, disrespectful, savagely satirical. One cannot, however, fail to notice the accents of despair.

I was once asked on Hungarian public radio whether I, as a former dissident, would say I am happy now. I replied, democracy is rather an odd thing to be glad about all on one's own.

G.M. Tamás

G.M. Tamás is currently E.L. Wiegand Distinguished Visiting Professor of Democratization at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He was one of Hungary's leading dissidents and wrote extensively in samizdat; he was also among the founders of the Free Democratic Alliance and served in parliament during 1990–94. He is the author of L'Oeil et la main, Les Idoles de la tribu, Másvilág (The Nether World), and other books. A two-volume collection of his philosophical papers was just published in Hungary.

Copyright © 1999 National Endowment for Democracy and the Johns Hopkins University Press

Previous Article

Eastern Europe a Decade Later: The Postcommunist Divide

Next Article

Eastern Europe a Decade Later: Reassessing the Revolutions of 1989

Additional Information

ISSN	1086-3214
Print ISSN	1045-5736
Pages	63-68
Launched on MUSE	1999-01-01
Open Access	No

Project MUSE Mission

Project MUSE promotes the creation and dissemination of essential humanities and social science resources through collaboration with libraries, publishers, and scholars worldwide. Forged from a partnership between a university press and a library, Project MUSE is a trusted part of the academic and scholarly community it serves.

ABOUT
MUSE Story
Publishers
Discovery Partners
Journal Subscribers
Book Customers
Conferences

WHAT'S ON MUSE
Open Access
Journals
Books
The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot
MUSE in Focus

CONTACT
Contact Us
Help

POLICY & TERMS
Accessibility
Privacy Policy
Terms of Use

RESOURCES
News & Announcements
Email Sign-Up
Promotional Materials
Presentations
Get Alerts

INFORMATION FOR
Publishers
Librarians
Individuals
Instructors

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@jh.edu

©2023 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Now and Always,
The Trusted Content Your Research Requires

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus