

LETTER FROM POLAND: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF CONSERVATISM IN EASTERN EUROPE

Conservatism in general is a tricky concept and has been ever since the term was first used about two centuries ago. Conservatism in Eastern Europe is a still more complex matter, if only because of the wrenching historical discontinuities of the twentieth century. It follows that anyone who writes about conservatism in Eastern Europe is doing something that no sensible person would ever attempt. The subject is nevertheless an intriguing one—not only for those of us who live in the formerly Communist states of Europe but also for our friends in the West.

At the moment when the Communist regimes were falling apart in 1989–1991, several distinguished American and European intellectuals expressed their hopes that the Eastern European countries might provide an antidote to what many observers then regarded as a self-destructive tendency in Western culture. Precisely because of the conservative inclinations that were leading the nations of Eastern Europe to throw off the yoke of a revolutionary and progressive political ideology, it was hoped that those countries (and their intellectuals) would take the lead in standing against the new ideologies of progress and revolution that were animating large areas of Western culture in the forms of postmodernism and

multiculturalism. As the venerable anti-Stalinist critic William Phillips wrote in *Partisan Review* in 1991:

If there is any historic reason for not accepting the inevitability of postmodernism, it is that intellectual fashions, particularly in this country, do not last, and, at bottom, postmodernism in the academy is an intellectual fashion, a bandwagon. In the arena of popular art and opinion, however, we may be entering a new phase in Western culture, one not entirely foreseeable, and, as usual in these matters, America seems to be leading the way. If, however, we are looking not for a return to the past but for some restoration of traditional values and distinctions, would it be too farfetched to expect that the uprising in Central Europe against oppressive movements that parade under the banner of revolution may lead us similarly to question those postmodernist theories that pres-

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ent themselves as radical and liberating? It would certainly be one of the great historic ironies if the countries that have just freed themselves from communist rule were to set an intellectual example for us.¹

Phillips was not the only one to speculate in this way. There were similar pronouncements from Gertrude Himmelfarb, from Thomas Pangle, and from dozens of others who were unhappy with contemporary Western intellectual and cultural life. Those hopeful opinions, flattering as they are, sound entirely fantastical today, and they are as remote from reality as ever. Not only was Eastern Europe unable to inspire the Western world spiritually and intellectually, but it accepted, almost unconditionally, the dominant Western patterns of thinking and the dominant cultural idioms. Whether one calls it “postmodern” or something else is a different matter. Almost entirely without dissent, the voice that was heard from the newly free parts of Europe was one that said we must adjust and accommodate to the dominant currents in Western culture—to accommodate was the only wise and beneficial path, since in any event it was unavoidable.

Whence, then, this hope expressed two decades ago about the role Eastern Europe might have played? To my knowledge, no explicit explanation was given, but one may of course speculate and try to provide some plausible answers. Undoubtedly many of these hopes reflected an assumption—probably embraced unawares—that in popular language was called the *freezer hypothesis*. In this view, Communism had blocked spontaneous social development and put iron curtains around its territories; as a result, it “froze” the minds and habits of its captive peoples at a certain historical moment. This was, of course, a most unfortunate situation for Eastern Europeans, preventing them from

partaking of many of the benefits of modern civilization. On the other hand, there was, arguably, also a good side to this fate. Not only were we not contaminated by the trivialities of modern culture; we also managed to preserve the classical frame of mind, complete with a sense of the tragic. Living under Communism was no joke—though it was often a grotesque—and therefore we were closer to the basic human experience, and we dealt with this experience in a more conservative, classical, and premodern (or at least pre-postmodern) way. Hence the rediscovery of this experience and the reappearance of the classical forms of articulating that experience could, as William Phillips put it, set an intellectual example for the West.

It does not require much clear-sightedness to observe that whatever chances such a scenario might have had, it is not what happened. We in Eastern Europe did not set the example, and we turned out to be surprisingly prone to becoming enchanted with everything in Western culture we were supposed to avoid. Our conservative-minded Western friends had apparently misconceived our situation, and a lot of this misunderstanding had to do with the freezer hypothesis—though that does not mean the freezer hypothesis was entirely false.

THE COMMUNIST FREEZER

Before I explain my point, let me introduce some definitions and provisional distinctions, beginning with “conservatism.” I try to understand this term in a rather uncontroversial manner so as to avoid quibbling over words. If conservatism is primarily an attitude to conserve rather than to reject in an act of revolution, then one must ask what it is we intend to conserve. We conserve—this is the standard answer—what is *real*, and in doing so we also reject what is ficti-

tious, hypothetical, artificial, etc. A conservative prides himself on being a defender of *reality*, of what has come to be by itself, naturally as it were, what cannot be constructed by an act of will. The conservative accuses his liberal and socialist adversaries of putting a greater value on what is *not* real, or at least not *yet* real, of praising only that which can be constructed.

The next obvious question would be: What is real? Here my answer is rather simple-minded, and I apologize for this. I see three basic directions of conservative thinking in this respect. The first direction would be to identify the real with the eternal. What truly exists is what does not change. This is a Platonic or a quasi-Platonic answer. The second direction is to identify the real with what is historically, culturally, and socially grounded. What really exists is what has come into being through a long process of historical, cultural, social, and spiritual experience, through a slow process of largely invisible and only partly conscious selection and adjustment. This is a Burkean or a quasi-Burkean answer. The third direction is to identify the real with what constitutes a basic part of an individual's lifetime or a group's existence in a short time perspective. In other words, what is real is what has existed during *my* lifetime; what is real is what I have myself gotten used to. This is an answer that could not be traced to a particular thinker, perhaps not to any thinker at all—but it is also an answer that accords with the inclinations of the vast majority of mankind. We are all conservatives to a greater or lesser degree in this sense. It is not a particularly noble kind of conservatism, but it is very human and, one might say, natural.

One of the mistakes committed by those who criticized Communism was their belief that the Communist regimes could not develop the third kind of conservatism—that Communist practices and ideas, being abso-

lutely artificial, coercively imposed, devoid of any living experience, could not generate any form of affection or loyalty. To our surprise we have learned that such conservatism does exist in the post-Communist lands and that it is quite powerful. The perfidious thing about it is that what we have absorbed from Communism rarely goes under the name of Communism. The name is discredited and very few want to keep it. But the Communist “package” contained a lot of things, and some of those things are still cherished. There was something for the peasants, something for the workers, something for the intellectuals; there was something for the body, for the mind, and for the soul.

If I were to give a short sketch of the contemporary Eastern European soul—a Polish soul, to limit myself to what I know best—I would say that it has two major characteristics that are in only slightly modified continuity with what we acquired from our exposure to the Communist experience. Those two characteristics seem at first to be in contradiction, but they are not. The first is the conviction that everything can be constructed, that there is nothing natural in the world, that competing interests create different and substantially arbitrary ideas, worldviews, moral perspectives. It's like the Siberian rivers that were said not to have a natural current, but no matter what currents they took, they could be reversed by an act of willful engineering. This way of thinking is profoundly anti-essentialist and anti-absolutist. On the other hand, there is a widespread belief in the inevitability of history. History develops according to necessity, and no human effort can change it—at least no Polish, and no Eastern European, effort can change it. Modernity and post-modernity have their implacable mechanisms and their inexorable laws to which we all must conform if we do not want to find ourselves in the dustbin of history.

These two views seem contradictory, but they need not be. One can believe that there is nothing natural about the family, that human relations can take any form we choose, that being a man or a woman is a merely cultural fact that can be changed at will, or almost at will—but at the same time one can believe that the world we are going to live in will be more and more constructed, and that it is futile and dangerous to try to turn back the clock of history and defend (much less seek to revive) certain archaic or superseded constructions.

At this point one can see a certain convergence between Western experience and Eastern experience—convergence as regards the effects, not the origins, of the underlying processes. For the dominant atmosphere of modern times in the West, too—the West that did not live through the Communist experience—has been largely determined by similar presuppositions: everything has been claimed to be humanly constructed, not spontaneously or, heaven forbid, naturally developed. Yet history is inevitable, and there is no way of turning back the clock (whatever that might mean).

If my view is correct, then an important consequence follows. Contrary to what many people still tend to believe, the Communist system was *not* primarily some kind of a new version of feudal order, nor was it a re-creation of older despotisms in a new form. *Communism was an exercise in modernity par excellence.* We should remember that if we want to identify its impact in our lives. Its basic influence was not in teaching people to accept allegedly natural inequalities or to adjust to natural barriers. No, Communism was a monstrous performance in a drama long ago written for Western civilization, a drama in which the actors become more and more “emancipated” even as they are aware that they are following a script no one in the world can change.

Thus whatever the archaic and repressive elements in the idea of Communism, its real impact—still acutely felt in this part of the world—is not its backwardness but, no matter how distorted, its modern and progressive message. Former Communist apparatchiks should therefore be seen not as dinosaurs but rather as pioneers—misguided, to be sure, but pioneers all the same. They managed to achieve long ago what the cutting-edge social theorists with their most chic arguments have only recently achieved in the West. They made large segments of their societies believe that all social institutions, moral norms, philosophies, and spiritual ideals are more or less arbitrary constructions serving political purposes and that there is nothing essentialist or natural about any of it. The Communist freezer was, then, rather selective. It froze something, to be sure. But on the other hand, it inflamed certain processes, especially those that constitute the essence of modernity.

PLATONIC CONSERVATISM

For this reason, Platonic conservatism has long been considered obsolete, naive, not respectable intellectually. There is nothing more distant from the contemporary Eastern European mind, both among academics and among the less educated, than claims about the existence of eternal things. This claim was long ago discredited by Marxism, but those who have rejected a substantial part of Marxist doctrine nevertheless preserved its hostility to Platonism, apparently believing such hostility to be a matter of common sense, not a consequence of any specific theory.

Even religion—a most obvious habitat for Platonic or quasi-Platonic sensibilities, one would think, a state of mind in which one must have faith in things eternal—

has been touched by this almost Marxist or Nietzschean or some other spirit of doubt. True, the priests—at least priests in Poland—are the only large group that still seems to take absolute ethics and classical metaphysics seriously; they regularly preach that experiencing the eternal is a constitutive dimension of human nature. But we now experience an enormous pressure to

lectual and spiritual climate in Eastern Europe, but neither do I think that the war is lost. My opinion is that in the present climate, Platonic conservatism exists and in fact can only exist as a philosophic or quasi-philosophic movement. Only occasionally does it find access to the general public—for instance, with the abortion issue or in sexual ethics. But in general we have been exposed



Touched by the Marxist spirit

give religion a more therapeutic and social dimension, to talk more about forgiveness, sharing and caring, dialogue, toleration, and encounter, and less about a judgmental God or absolute standards or souls striving for eternity. The spiritual atmosphere is one in which absolute ethics is on the whole less convincing and less appealing than its opposite.

I do not foresee any scenario in which there will be a sudden reversal of the intel-

lectual and spiritual climate in Eastern Europe, but neither do I think that the war is lost. My opinion is that in the present climate, Platonic conservatism exists and in fact can only exist as a philosophic or quasi-philosophic movement. Only occasionally does it find access to the general public—for instance, with the abortion issue or in sexual ethics. But in general we have been exposed

not be a religious thought (the tradition of natural law being an obvious example). In short, if Platonic conservatism has a chance today, it has this chance only as a highly intellectual and elitist movement.

If the assumption of an emancipated human being in the constant process of deconstructing and reconstructing the social world has been the principal impediment to Platonic conservatism, then the other presupposition of the modern mind, that of historical inevitability, is a serious obstacle to Burkean conservatism. The belief that we are actors in a drama that has already been written is particularly powerful in Eastern Europe. Politicians' speeches, media reports, learned essays, public debates, private conversations—all are full of it. It sounds Marxist, but its origin is Marxist only to a limited degree. In fact, conviction about historical inevitability dramatically strengthened *after* the fall of the Communist regimes, when we found ourselves facing the necessity of catching up with the developed West.

Let me be clear about this. I do not deny the value of “catching up” in many areas of life. But a practical decision to catch up and to readjust in this or that area is something entirely different from a psychological state in which you believe that a complete script has already been written for you and that all your energies should be invested in enacting that script. It is the latter, not the former, that shaped the Eastern European mind after Communism. Paradoxically, it is not the Marxists who today carry the banner of historical necessity but rather all sorts of modernizers, of whom liberals are probably the most eloquent and the most influential. The future of civilization is liberalism, and whoever has any doubts about that is not worth listening to.

The paradox has another side to it. The new situation after the fall of Communism

is not what many people naively thought it would be—namely, a situation of freedom and opportunity, a situation where human initiative and human experience matter and can make a difference. It is, rather, a situation where all roles, functions, and ends have been clearly predetermined and preassigned. Determined and assigned by whom? By Brussels (the E.U.), by European standards, by John Rawls, by enlightened public opinion, etc. The language of liberalism today is therefore not a language of *freedom* but a language of *necessity*. The gods (or idols) that are invoked to express the gospel of necessity may differ from case to case, but the message is always the same. For Americans it may sound strange, but for those in this part of the world it has become routine. No matter what questions you raise, whether about school or university, social policy or the constitution, the media or child rearing, the answer is always the same: there are certain standards with which we must comply. If one asks—*why must we comply?*—the answer is also the same: because it is the direction in which the modern world is going.

I would therefore argue that today it is conservatism, and conservatism alone, that stands for freedom and human experience against necessity and ideology. The contemporary conservative vocation is to reclaim or re-create a certain type of attitude that is otherwise without support in our time. This is the attitude of one who sees the world as open to human initiative while tempered by experience, practical intelligence, and a sense of propriety. There are no grand plans or projects that one “must” obey; rather, one should follow one’s own knowledge, moral upbringing, and communal loyalty. We are not responsible for the earth, universal emancipation, universal equality, international human rights, a new world order, a new sexual order, or any of the rest. No, we are responsible for

our families, our friends, and our communities, small and large. Our basic virtue should be that of *sôphrosunê*—temperance—and the vice we should absolutely avoid is hubris. No progressive ideology, no moralistic crusade, can take our responsibility from us by dictating how to organize our lives and set our priorities. Whether there is any predetermined destiny for mankind is not for us to say, and no person or group can usurp the right to speak in its name—the most pernicious form of hubris.

There is nothing extraordinary about this attitude, and there is little in it that people of various inclinations could not espouse to some degree. One might even say that it is a commonsense attitude, one only eccentrics would call conservatism. The problem is that nowadays it has no respectability and is fiercely opposed by ideologies of emancipation and equality. Popular culture is against it. The media are against it. Those who support it openly are ridiculed or charged with absurd accusations. The basic leitmotif of those attacks is that such an attitude is anachronistic. Cultural and social conservatives are standing in the way of progress, it is said, but they have no chance of winning. Homosexual marriage, for example, will soon be universally legalized no matter what conservatives think and no matter how hard they work to prevent it. Sooner or later the conservatives will find themselves in the dustbin of history. And this attitude toward conservatism is not unique to Eastern Europe. The view about homosexual marriage being a historical inevitability is not taken from a progressive Polish newspaper but from the *New York Times*.

THE WEAPON OF MEMORY

One may still wonder how we, the Eastern Europeans, stand in relation to this conser-

vative attitude. Do we have a chance to contribute to its survival? Do we have a chance to contribute to its growth? I have mixed feelings about this and so will offer two arguments, one negative and one positive.

On the negative side, one cannot help but observe that you can disregard the idea of historical necessity only if you have *self-confidence*—that is, only if you believe it is *you yourself* who makes history (with a small, not a capital, *h*). Such self-confidence is sadly lacking in the formerly Communist lands. Eastern European societies suffer an inferiority complex and believe it is in their interest to follow those who are more experienced in the ways of the modern world and who in any event are more powerful. This is a deeply seated impulse, and I do not know how it can be overcome in a short time.

Nor are we alone in this disabling lack of self-confidence. Europe as a whole is absolutely infatuated with the idea of historical necessity—which is why all Europe stands aghast when any country attempts to exert its sovereignty “against the grain” of elite consensus in the midst of the current debt crisis. Such gestures, it is felt, are futile: our destinies are not in our own hands. Today, even despite the massive economic problems, it is only the Americans—at least some of them (let’s not forget the *New York Times*)—that have sufficient self-confidence to imagine an open future in both individual and collective perspectives. Europe, and Eastern Europe in particular, has lost the pioneering spirit.

On the positive side, one might adduce the freezer hypothesis but in a much more qualified sense than that which underlay the hopeful speculations of two decades ago. It is not that certain premodern attitudes were frozen in historical amber by Communism but rather that these attitudes were kept alive and active as forms of *conscious resistance* to the brutally modernizing forces of

those regimes. And so if we look around in Eastern Europe today, we can still find a lot of people who habitually resist progressive ideologies. In this we have an advantage over our Western neighbors.

We—the Poles, that is—are still a largely historical nation. Memory abides and still shapes our decisions. Maybe—I repeat, maybe—this will in time make many of us hostile to the idea that we have been given preassigned roles in the global progressive play. I say “many” to indicate that this attitude should not be restricted to an elite but may be shared by far larger segments of society. Memory is not something abstract, and it does not depend on formal education. Our apostles of progress usually say that memory makes us slaves to the past and unable to cope with the challenges of the future. They therefore preach historical amnesia as a prerequisite to future success. I do not agree.

One can also be a slave to the future—or rather to the ideologies that tell you what “inevitably” awaits you and how you “must” prepare yourself. Memory is, in our situation, the best weapon against the idols of an ideological age.

In summary, then, if the modern and postmodern attitude consists of freedom from absolute standards coupled with absolute obedience to historical inevitability, then the conservative attitude would be the reverse: obedience to absolute standards and freedom from historical necessity. Perhaps it is true, after all, that thoughtful conservatives from Eastern Europe really are uniquely well placed to recognize and respond to the common difficulties that beset the modern West as a whole.

- 1 William Phillips, “The Crisis of Our Culture,” *Partisan Review* 58, no. 2 (1991): 203.