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A Call for Sacrifice

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A Call for Sacrifice

The Co-Responsibility of the West

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Four years after the fall of communism, it can be said without much exaggeration that this momentous historical event has caused the democratic West some major headaches. For all we know, many a Western politician may occasionally wonder, in the privacy of his mind, whether it might not have been a mistake to support the struggles for self-liberation within the Soviet bloc (even though that support was mainly verbal and moral) and whether the West should not have done more to prolong the existence of communism. After all, the world used to be so simple: there was a single adversary who was more or less understandable, who was directed from a single center, and whose sole aim in its final years (not counting some predictable exceptions) was to maintain the status quo. At the same time, the existence of this adversary drew the West together as well, because faced with this global and clearly defined danger, it could always somehow agree on a common approach.

All that has vanished. The world has suddenly become unusually complex and

far less intelligible. The old order has collapsed, but no one has yet created a new one. Meanwhile, the “postcommunist world” is constantly springing new surprises on the West: nations hitherto unheard of are awakening and want countries of their own. Highly improbable people from God knows where are winning elections. It is not even clear whether the very people who four years ago so astonishingly roused themselves from their torpor and overthrew communism do not actually miss that system today.

The unwitting nostalgia in the West for the old order may be discerned even in such superficial matters as how they refer to our countries. From the Czech Republic to Kazakhstan we are, and will no doubt remain for some time, “post-communist countries” and “former members of the former Warsaw Pact.” I am guilty of having used these expressions myself, but I must admit an increasing aversion to them. After all, we did not go through the trouble of getting rid of communism only to have it remain—even with a prefix—forever sewn to our

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coats. Nor did we go through the trouble of liquidating the Warsaw Pact only to bear forever the stigma of our former membership in it. (Not long ago I observed, somewhat undiplomatically, that we do not refer to the United States as a “former British colony.”)

These formulations betray both a need to categorize us and the inability to find a key to understanding us other than the old familiar one. Indeed, I sometimes feel sorry for Western statesmen when I observe the unease and surprise with which they listen to the widely divergent geopolitical and historical homilies delivered by various representatives of our part of Europe. The Pole still goes on about the 1941 division of Poland by Germany and Russia, almost as though he expected it to begin again tomorrow; the Hungarian refers to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 as a historical wrong done to his people and how, as a consequence, an enormous number of Hungarians no longer live in Hungary proper; a Czech will complain about Munich and Yalta and the other betrayals of his poor country by the West; and a Slovak will talk about what a historical injustice it was that no one ever perceived the Slovaks as a separate nation. In such moments I realize how much easier it must have been for Western politicians when they were faced with a homogenous Soviet mass and didn't have to worry about distinguishing one nation from another.

WHOSE ORDER WILL IT BE?

I well understand the unease with which the West follows what, for it, are the strange problems of all of those “postcommunist countries,” and I well understand all the real (though often unexpressed) rea-

sons that lead the West to behave reticently toward them. Still, I am strongly persuaded that this reticence is extremely shortsighted and that over time it may even become quite dangerous, for it is not, as it may seem, a sign merely of sober judgment alone but also of an inability to comprehend the essence of the new situation, and a lack of imagination and courage in the search for new solutions commensurate with the new circumstances.

If the West, along with all the other democratic forces in the world, is incapable of rapidly engaging in the common creation of a new order in European and Euro-Asian affairs—a better order than the old bipolar one—then someone else might well begin to do the job, and the order thus created could well be far worse than the one preceding it. I am thinking not so much of a new Stalin, but rather of the “order” that could emerge from the violent clash of many different and impenetrable forces that the disorganized state of the world today may bring to life, not only in the East, but in the West as well.

Such an outcome would inevitably lead to new conflicts and new suffering, perhaps far greater than what came before. Not only that, it could ultimately demonstrate that the democratic West has lost its ability realistically to foster and cultivate the values it has always proclaimed and undertaken to safeguard, and to which end it has built its arsenal of weapons. Such a state of affairs would be far more than just a crisis of the East; it would also be a crisis of the West, a crisis of democracy, a crisis of Euro-American civilization itself. Let events in the former Yugoslavia stand as a warning: this is not just a Balkan predicament.

The inability of Europe and the United States to intervene effectively in defense of the basic values of civilization that are being so drastically destroyed in the Balkans (and, what is more, in an area that was always an integral part of Europe) tells us something about the democratic world as well.

If we in these “postcommunist” countries call for a new order, if we appeal to the West not to close itself off to us, and if we demand a radical reevaluation of the new situation, then this is not because we are concerned about our own security and stability, and not only because we feel that the security of the West itself is at stake. The reason is far deeper than that. We are concerned about the destiny of the values and principles that communism denied, and in whose name we resisted communism and ultimately brought it down.

I recognize that this rather bold claim calls for an explanation.

THAT WORTH SACRIFICING FOR

Well then: many years of living under communism gave us certain experiences that the noncommunist West (fortunately) did not have to go through. We came to understand (or to be precise some of us did) that the only genuine values are those for which one is capable, if necessary, of sacrificing something. (The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, at the end of his life, devoted considerable thought to this question.) The traditional values of Western civilization—such as democracy, respect for human rights and for the order of nature, the freedom of the individual and the inviolability of his property, the feeling of co-responsibility

for the world, which means the awareness that if freedom is threatened anywhere, it is threatened everywhere—all of these things become values with moral, and therefore metaphysical, underpinnings. Without intending to, the communists taught us to understand the truth of the world not as mere information about it, but as an attitude, a commitment, a moral imperative.

I have the impression that precisely this awareness is sadly lacking in the present-day West, the “non-postcommunist” West (but with increasing obviousness, in the “postcommunist” West as well). Naturally, all of us continue to pay lip service to democracy, human rights, the order of nature and responsibility for the world, but apparently only insofar as it does not require any sacrifice. By that, I do not mean, of course, merely sacrifice in the form of fallen soldiers. The West has made, and continues to make, such sacrifices (though some instances of it may be more meaningful than others). I have in mind, rather, sacrifice in a less conspicuous but infinitely broader sense, that is, a willingness to sacrifice for the common interest something of one’s own particular interests, including even the quest for larger and larger domestic production and consumption. The pragmatism of politicians who want to win the next election, for whom the highest authority is therefore the will and the mood of a rather spoiled consumer society, makes it impossible for them to be aware of the moral, metaphysical and tragic dimensions of their own program.

Why has the West lost its ability to sacrifice? There are probably many reasons, some completely random political

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ones, others that might be called philosophical. One example of a random political reason would be a deceptive impression that has apparently gained wide currency in the United States. Since the fall of communism is considered by many an American victory, now that the Cold War is over, the impression is that the headaches it caused are over too. But the headaches are never over. If the West has indeed won the Cold War, then today it faces perhaps an even more difficult task: winning the peace as well. But there are also reasons, as I have said, that run considerably deeper. The economic advances of Euro-American civilization, based as they are on advances in scientific and technical knowledge, have gradually altered man's very value systems. Respect for the metaphysical horizons of his being is, to an increasing extent, pushed aside to make room for a new deity: the ideal of the perpetual growth of production and consumption.

This is the source of that protectionism, that fear in the West of cheap Eastern goods, that fear of getting more deeply involved anywhere where there are no immediate gains, of that caution, that lack of imagination and courage, that love of the status quo that ultimately leads many to call the part of Europe that has freed itself from communism in the name of democracy—if not “current,” then at least “former members of the Warsaw Pact,” “former members of COMECON,” “immature and unstable democracies” and, as far as possible, to lock them up in the world to which they have become accustomed.

A liberal market economy? Yes, but only for us. Security? Yes, but only for us.

National interests? Yes, but only our own. No, I am not speaking out of a sense of injury or unrequited love: if you will pardon me for saying so, I know more about the immaturity of Czech democracy than anyone in the West. I am simply making some general observations. The Western way of affirming Western values, in short, seems to me to have seriously cooled off.

Is it any wonder that in more than one “postcommunist” country, “post-communists” have done well in elections? This circumstance might even be attributable to the “non-postcommunist West,” which is doing so much to make the “postcommunist West” or the “East” itself disappointed in the atmosphere of the world in which it placed so much hope during the time of resistance to communism.

Let me make myself clear: I do not think at all that the main role of the democratic West is to solve all the problems of the “postcommunist world.” Our countries (whether those who declare themselves to be, and evidently are, a part of the Western European sphere of civilization, or others who belong to the “Central Asian” sphere of civilization, or to any other) must deal with their own immense problems themselves. The “non-postcommunist West,” however, should not look on as though it were a mere visitor at a zoo or the audience at a horror movie, on edge to know how it will turn out. It should perceive these processes at the very least as something that intrinsically concerns it, and that somehow decides its own fate, that demands its own active involvement and challenges it to make sacrifices in the interests of a bearable future for us all.

'PARTNERS' TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

The creation of a new order can have dozens of variations. It is a matter of evolution and assumes great judgment and a profound capacity to understand. No one will get anywhere these days with the designation "former members of the former Warsaw Pact"; in fact, insisting on this formulation may only cause further damage. For instance: on the matter of security arrangements, the nature and substance of the "Partnership for Peace" project will be one thing if we are talking about the Central Asian republics that are today members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and something entirely different in the case of countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Slovenia. By virtue of their entire history, spiritual and intellectual traditions, culture, atmosphere and geopolitical position, the latter countries belong to the classical European West, and any separation of them from that West would be suicidal for the whole of Europe (something anyone with even rudimentary knowledge of European history should understand).

I am not criticizing the "Partnership for Peace" proposal. On the contrary, I consider it a very reasonable starting point. (If I can fault it for anything, it would only be for not having come into existence two or three years ago.) I am merely saying that everything now will depend on how it is carried out. This alone will be the proper test of the West's resolve. Specifically, I imagine that in the case of the central European countries (and later other European countries) full membership should clearly and quickly become the goal. NATO would thus grad-

ually outgrow its present role to become a genuinely pan-European security structure. But this expansion of NATO should take place against the background of a clearly defined and genuinely cooperative relationship with Russia (or the Commonwealth of Independent States) as a great Euro-Asian nuclear power that is, in all respects, in a radically different position than the small Central European countries. The "Partnership for Peace" proposal could also provide a starting point for this specific relationship.

At this moment, however, my concern is not with concrete proposals for a new architecture of Atlantic-European-Asian relations, even though I have my own specific opinions about them, but with something different: the very unwillingness of the "non-postcommunist West" even to join in the creation of such proposals, its unwillingness to hear the warning voices coming from our part of the world. My concern is that the West come to understand that the great task of self-defense against the communist menace has been supplanted today by an even more difficult task: to assume courageously, in its own interests and in the general interest, its share of the responsibility for the new organization of things in the entire northern hemisphere.

To make my point briefly and simply: it seems to me that the fate of the so-called West is today being decided in the so-called East. If the West does not find a key to us, who were once violently separated from the West (with no great resistance on its part), or to those who somewhere far away have likewise extricated themselves from communist domination, it will ultimately lose the key to

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itself. If, for instance, it looks passively on at “Eastern” or Balkan nationalism, it will give the green light to its own potential nationalism, which it was able to deal with so magnanimously in the era of the communist threat. If it closes its eyes to the postcommunist ecological catastrophe, it will sooner or later bring on its own ecological catastrophe, and ultimately a global one. If it does not learn from our experience about where human pride can lead, the hubris of people who invent a rational utopia for themselves and try to create a paradise on earth, if it persists in its anthropocentric understanding of the earth, it will bear the consequences itself, and so will the whole world. If its own consumer affluence remains more important for it than all the foundations of that affluence, it will soon forfeit that affluence.

Today, more than ever before in the history of mankind, everything is interrelated. Therefore the values and the prospects of contemporary civilization are everywhere subjected to great tests. Because of this, the future of the United States or the European Union is being decided in suffering Sarajevo or Mostar, in the plundered Brazilian rain forests, in the wretched poverty of Bangladesh or Somalia. Theoretically, almost everyone now knows this. But how does this knowledge find expression in practical policies? In the practical politics of each one of us?

People today know that they can only be saved by a new type of global responsibility. Only one small detail is missing: that responsibility must genuinely be assumed. 🌍