THE POST-COMMUNIST CONDITION

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The expansion of NATO and the European Union into Eastern Europe has often been interpreted as signalling the definitive end of the Cold War. And frequently the impression is that communism, now defunct, represented nothing more than an interruption, interval or delay in the continuous ‘normal’ development of East European countries – a delay which, once it was over, left no traces other than a certain appetite to ‘make up for lost time’. Seen from this perspective, communism appears once again as the spectre of communism, the haunting embodiment of nothing that after its disappearance just evaporated into thin air. On the other hand, to speak of the post-communist condition means giving serious consideration to the historical event that communism was and earnestly inquiring what traces still remain of communism and to what degree the experience of communism still marks our own present reality – but it also means asking why communism can at all be regarded as a mere historical intermission. Incidentally, this inquiry concerns not merely former communist countries but the entire world, which currently finds itself in a condition one could term post-communist.

For a long time communism was nothing more than a promise, a utopia, an intellectual construct and a political vision. This vision looks back on an extensive history of formulation and reformulation, stretching from Plato and Thomas More to the utopian socialist movement of the nineteenth century. But whether or not this vision could be turned into practice remained an unresolved issue throughout its long history. The place of the communist utopia once lay solely in the future; today the place of communism lies in the past: communism took place as an actual event in actual history. The fact that this event has, in the meantime, been concluded is precisely what constitutes its reality. Indeed, even in the context of Soviet socialism, communism nonetheless stood as a future goal and ideological vision. Only once the history of the fulfilment of the communist vision was concluded did it assume a definitive historical reality. Concluded here, naturally does not mean exhausted, obsolete, superseded or proven impossible; what it does mean, among other things and in particular, is that it is released for historical repetition.

Again and again the claim is made that the twentieth-century communist experiment never actually spawned true communism – instead state socialism of the Soviet variety is purported to have been a betrayal of the communist ideal, to have been a totalitarian dictatorship which was more a parody of communism than its true fulfilment. Likewise it is also declared that the actual experience of socialism in fact bears no relevance whatsoever to the formulation and nourishment of the communist ideal – which is why it would be better simply to forget this whole sorry
business. Not merely from, let us say, an anti-communist perspective but from a left-wing, pro-communist point of view too, actual socialism in the twentieth century has proven to be a blank nothing, a simple delay, an interval — and in this instance, a delay in the development of the communist ideal. But this diagnosis only looks convincing at first sight. All fulfilment of an abstract ideal is by definition a betrayal of the ideal; moreover, none of the former ‘actually existing’ socialist countries ever claimed to have achieved communism, but saw themselves merely as transitional forms somewhere down the very long path towards communism.

As a real event in real history, communism is not a ‘system’ or a ‘formation’ or an ‘institution’ but a stage upon which the struggle to build communism as an actual historical option is being waged. In other words, the communist event can be defined as a transfer of the debate about communism out of the theoretical domain into the domain of concrete political action. This event is an amalgam of all kinds of communist orthodoxies and heresies, but to which anti-communism, apostasy and dissidence also belong. The termination of the communist event signifies a renewed transfer of the debate back from the domain of Realpolitik into the theoretical domain. The post-communist debate about communism is, however, fundamentally different from the pre-communist debate about communism. For, deep down, all participants in this theoretical discussion now know that, the moment certain circumstances allow this discussion to reassert its influence on the realm of political action, they will all find themselves back in the already familiar event of communism — in the same ‘stage production’ they are so well acquainted with from history. The new production of this stage play is bound to take a different approach — there will be a different cast, some things will probably be done ‘better’, others ‘worse’ — but nonetheless it will inevitably be a repeat performance of the same play. A good analogy to this is found in the endeavours of medieval monarchies to establish a Christian state. It would be quite inappropriate to reproach these monarchies for not having achieved ‘true Christianity’, since Christianity itself envisages its own fulfilment occurring only in the kingdom of God. But in the Middle Ages the question of how one might be admitted to the kingdom of God turned into a political issue, which is why medieval monarchies are genuinely Christian. For that reason Satanists and atheists were also genuinely Christian since they too were participants in the Christian event — just as the anti-communists in the Cold War were integral to the communist event because they fought, and thereby confirmed, communism as an actual political option. Today Christianity inhabits the politically non-committal realm of the ‘freedom of conscience’, but it is clear that as soon as circumstances change to reinvest religion with direct
political relevance, the medieval struggle for the fulfilment of the Christian ideal will also once more attain the same actual political immediacy.

The post-communist condition is not, however, characterized solely by the insight that the establishment of communism, rather than being equated with the coming of the absolute ‘Other’, is instead – at best – a repeat performance of the same drama with other means. Far more important than this is the fact that, increasingly, the present political situation in the West can be perceived and described in the same terms as Soviet communism once used to be – in other words, as the realization of utopia or the realization of anti-utopia. Western capitalism’s self-depiction as utopia stems from the rhetoric of the Cold War. During that period, western capitalism came under considerable pressure to prove its legitimacy, leading the West more and more to advertise itself to a global audience as superior to the communist ideal. In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, capitalism was generally regarded as being an economically efficient but morally unjust and flawed order; the only reason for accepting it was that human nature, as seen from a still intact Christian perspective, was per se similarly unjust and flawed. Only in the course of the Cold War did an unreserved apologia for the ‘actually existing’ western capitalist order gradually become audible, since it has been credited not only for being the home of economic affluence but also the true incarnation of human rights, social solidarity, individual creative freedom and the highest standard of morality.

In the era of the Cold War the West trumpeted itself as a model for the entire world – a model that could and should be exported around the globe in the just same way as the communist model was. Accordingly, the West saw itself as the true place of utopia fulfilled – in the manner of an ideological potlatch with Soviet communism. But this gesture has at the same time availed the West to the possibility of total rejection as the fulfilment of anti-utopia. Orwell's vision of an anti-utopian world of total surveillance in a permanent state of emergency was penned as a satire on Soviet society, but in the meantime, its rhetorical application has primarily come to address the current political conditions in the West. The communist demand for the fulfillment of utopia on earth dealt traditional politics a blow from which in all probability it will never recover. For this demand opens up the possibility of wholly accepting or wholly rejecting the exemplary totality of prevailing ‘society'; this choice between total affirmation and total negation denies conventional politics all room for manoeuvre. It once used to be chiefly religions whose ‘values’ could be accepted or rejected in total – society as it de facto existed only offered the political parameters for such a choice. In the post-communist situation it is
individual societies themselves that need to embody certain values as a whole and are then promoted as finished products on the international political market – regardless of whether the particular social model is American, European or Islamic. The historical accomplishment of communism lies precisely in how it transformed actual society into a political model. In other words, it refused to recognize society in its entirety as a historically evolved ‘natural’ entity, and thus as utterly singular, perceiving it instead as an artificial construct that can equally be exported or imported from country to country. The true challenge posed by the Soviet experiment was the claim made by Stalin (and then constantly reiterated by the Soviet leadership) that the Soviet Union represented the place and earthbound incarnation of utopia – if not in the sense of its total fulfilment, then at least in terms of its practical advancement. To win the competition against Soviet communism, its rivals felt compelled not only to appropriate this claim as their own but even to outdo it – and thereby redefine their own societies as universal political models. The present political and cultural situation is the consequence of this protracted one-upmanship. What has been lost is the neutral ground between the affirmation and negation of each individual model of society. The pressure to make a choice is mounting; the question of the distinction between utopia and anti-utopia has become the central political issue of our time.

To put it differently: the communist event introduced an era of the worldwide, international political market for competing models of society. Each of these models hails itself as utopia – and is denounced by its rivals as dystopia. Consequently, this also means that the original scenario of the communist event is repeated not only when communism itself is again treated as an actual option, but also on every occasion when an old or a new post-national project is launched on the international market for political projects, models and systems. These projects and models can be considered post-national in that they become disengaged from a national context and made available for international use. Thus the ‘European project’ is extolled by some as the utopian embodiment of human rights, peace and affluence – and demonized by others as the machinations of an ominous Brussels bureaucracy intent on installing a state of total surveillance and control. Islamic fundamentalism is perceived by its opponents as a reincarnation of the communist nightmare, yet celebrated by its adherents as a universal model of the kingdom of God on earth. One hears talk of the neo-Bolshevism of present-day American neo-conservatives and so on and so forth.

In historical terms, communism was the first of these post-national models of society. The ‘post-national’ character
of the communist event also explains why in the context of national history this event can at best be treated as a mere pause or interruption. Every event is an event within a particular history which requires a protagonist if it is to be narrated. Today we are still living in a system of nation states – our historiography can only function as a narrative if its protagonist is a nation or a nation state; the history of mankind manifests itself merely as the sum of all national histories. So for us, an event only becomes historical once it can be narrated as an episode in the history of a nation. Communism, on the other hand, was programmatically anti-national. Its aim was to overcome traditional national differences, to do away with existing national cultural identities and in their place foster a new, global, communist humanity as the protagonist of a new history. But this new post-national humanity never came about – or rather it dissolved at the same time as communism did. Hence the event of communism lost its historical subject, the historical protagonist to whose history it could have belonged.

This, incidentally, is the key difference between communism and fascism or National Socialism, with which communism is commonly equated. Fascism defines itself within the system of nation states as an event in the historical life of a particular nation. This is why fascism occupies a fixed place within any historiography seeking to tell the history of a nation. By contrast, communism’s advent is encountered within any national historical narrative at best as a destructive influence from the outside, as the work of the ‘Other’, of an alien force, as an invasion by spectral powers from the extra-historical non-space of u-topia. This is also why a Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past) to redeem communism, as analogous to the redemptive process of coming to terms with a fascist past, ultimately fails, since it lacks a subject that could assume responsibility for the communist past. For communism, this subject could only be the spectre of a utopian communist humanity – which has in fact evaporated, just like the ‘new class’ of communist nomenclature that historically represented this humanity. But spectres cannot assume responsibility for historical deeds of any kind.

Hence a positivist, realistic historiography aspiring to grapple with concrete facts and not spectres finds no social place for communism as such. Instead it generally prefers to proclaim communism as a mere facade intended as a camouflage for solid national interests. Basically, this kind of positivist historiography is a reiteration of the traditional Marxist gesture of demythologizing and demystifying sacred history, which in the eyes of classical Marxism served as a facade intended as a camouflage for solid class interests. However, since class interests, along with Marxism, have vanished from the sights of current historiography, there are no ‘real’ protagonists of history left besides the nations.
Accordingly, it has now become characteristic for recent historical commentary on formerly communist-dominated East European countries to view communism simply as an ideological facade for Russian imperialism.

Even if such an interpretation might appear corroborated by numerous facts, it should not be forgotten that in Russia itself the suppression of Russian national identity was prosecuted not less, but more forcefully by the apparatus of communist ideology. Besides the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian philosophical tradition, and its historiography and literature from pre-Revolutionary eras were also largely banned or rigorously censored. So it is hardly surprising that the dismantling of the communist regime in the early 1990s was accompanied and spurred on by cries on the streets for ‘Russia! Russia!’: In that period the anti-communist revolution in Russia was waged as a fight for national liberation – as a campaign to emancipate Russia from the grip of the Soviet Union and liberate it from the dictatorship of Soviet authorities. The civil war between the Reds and the Whites that first spawned the creation of the Soviet Union had been a war between the communist ‘International’ and the nationalist ‘Russia’, back then the ‘International’ won. But in the 1980s and 1990s ‘Russia’ got its revenge. For Russian nationalists today, anything connected with communism is automatically the work of others: Jews, Latvians, Georgians and so on. That, of course, does not mean that Russian nationalists take no pride in the achievements of the Soviet state during the communist era – except that these accomplishments are ascribed solely to the capacity of the Russian people to remain creative, resilient and victorious in the face of the ruinous communist dictatorship. Anything ‘good’ that arose in the Soviet era is thus ascribed to the Russian nation’s cultural identity; anything ‘bad’ is seen as resulting from the anti-national aspects of communism.

Hence from the ‘realistic’ perspective of positivist historiography (with nations as its protagonists), the universalist project of communism can be perceived in no other way than as a project of destruction, subjugation and damage. But the same also holds true for all the other post-national projects. In the context of the post-communist condition we are therefore confronted with a strange conundrum: on the one hand, various social projects, models and systems remain on offer on the international political market. Moreover, each social model is now under immense pressure to prove its worth in this global marketplace. And those social models which proclaim to be valid for one nation alone have today justifiably come under suspicion of being ultimately racist. On the other hand, we still lack a historiography that could operate as the history of post-national importable or exportable social projects and models; this would be a different historiography, which rather than
taking the allegedly naturally grown nations as its protagonists would instead turn to ‘artificial’ and ideologically produced peoples that have come together via shared political projects (such as the communist people or the European people). Only once such a different historiography has been found will the tiresome quest for a supranational ‘European identity’ become obsolete; such a historiography would instead raise the question of a hitherto unheard-of new people artificially fostered by a common political project.

Translated from the German by
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