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What did we lose after 1989?

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FULL TEXT

WHAT did we lose and gain after the 1989 upheaval? A short answer sounds rather paradoxical. We gained something that we do not regard as valuable anymore, and we lost something we did not hold in high esteem at that time, something that was natural and obvious for us then. Expressed in the form of an equation, this experience would seem awkward. I will try to illustrate my point with a true story-and yet I, myself, am starting to find it absurd.

In 1989, the once and today again famous actress, Vlasta Chramostova, who was forbidden to appear on stage at that time, managed to take a trip to Vienna. Upon her return, some fifteen people gathered in a country cottage (today, most of these people are important personalities in Czech political life), and for the entire weekend she told us what Vienna was like: whom she had met, where she had lived, how the postal service worked, what computers can do, what exhibitions she had seen, what reviews these had received in the local press, what theaters she had visited. She described everything in detail. We all shared her experience; we discussed, made comments, and felt happy that the world was opening up, even for us. What we regarded as valuable was the opportunity to see, to learn, to travel, to be in contact with the rest of the world.

We appreciated neither that we had the time and felt the need and desire to meet, discuss, debate nor the close friendships, openness of heart and mind, and sincerity that existed between us. We did not think these were valuable.

Sometimes, we could not meet because of police repression, at other times because our pets developed a sudden animosity toward each other.

Today, we face different obstacles. Not only the lack of time, but also discrepancies in opinion and membership in different parties and lobbies. If you want to give a party for your old friends, it is good to run through several dailies and find out how they feel about each other and what kind of controversies are going on among them.

It is impossible to separate the gains and the losses of '89 from each other. Certain values swapped positions, and without understanding this change of preferences the equation does not make sense. What was negative became positive and vice versa. Is it at all possible to account for this?

Empirical sociological, economic, and political research in many studies analyzes the losses and gains of different groups of inhabitants in the process of transformation. Gains and losses are dependent on several variables, such as newly acquired social status, income, credit, social prestige, and so on. And though I am familiar with most of these studies, I have deliberately decided on a different approach. Instead of bringing up statistical data that are subject to quick change, I will write about socio-psychological and socio-political factors that cannot be summed up in similar statistics. However, the inhabitants of the countries who in 1989 got rid of the protective shell of totalitarianism and did away with party and state paternalistic supervision are plagued, like the Egyptians facing the seven curses. Now they are at a loss for their soft bodies are exposed; they feel naked, and they do not know how quickly or in what suit to enter the new society to which they are just being invited. They both desire and refuse this invitation!

In many postcommunist countries, there are again people playing with the possibility of a return to the times of "real socialism." Alas, they forget that the "merciless wheel of history" (a typical favorite Marxist definition) had

long ago destroyed the staircase that leads there. Should it still exist, there would be nowhere to return. People tinkled their keys and bells in Vaclavske square in Prague, they lit candles in Bratislava, Budapest, Sofia, and Warsaw, and they immediately acquired the feeling of potent history makers. If, then, the position of the communist parties had been backed by the real power of the socialist economic system, these candles, keys, and bells would have been of no help. In Peking, in Tienanmen Square, people were holding hands -and yet they were crushed under tanks. Those wiser among us can already understand that the "Year of Miracles," as Timothy Garton Ash (1991) calls it, came about primarily as the result of the preceding corrosion of socialism caused by exhausted economic resources and a non-functioning system of production. This is another reason why this retreat staircase no longer exists, and should somebody in Eastern Europe include the renewal of socialism in a political program, the person would be either naive or a fraud. What actually happened in the East is-paradoxically enough-victory of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the main postulate of which goes: should the way of owning a means of production become an obstacle to its development, the entire economic formation-that is, social system-is doomed. It may happen, though, that on the dead branches of such fallen systems fresh leaves can grow for a while. Everybody over the age of twenty-five studied this formula, but neither common people nor orthodox communists paid necessary attention, for most likely nobody had read the famous Plechanov book, On the Function of Personality in History. This is why even today groups of both right-wing and left-wing intellectuals and representatives of both past and current political power keep discussing what the fate of their countries might have been, should they have changed this or that resolution of the communist party congress or delivered a different speech in Parliament and influenced their parties. Most of the active personalities of '89 undergo further painful-humanly painful-challenges and suffer because of this process, while pragmatists of both the old and the new regime keep stealing what remains of the once collective socialist property.

The wiser among us have already given up self-deceiving illusions of victors and revolutionaries and get satisfaction from the knowledge that maybe thanks to them bloodshed in November '89 was prevented. This feeling may also provide them with a false excuse for not having to accept responsibility for future developments. You may ask why I put formerly prominent communists, former underground activists, and current representatives of conservative and liberal parties in one category. The reason is that all of them belonged and still belong to the group of politically active members of society that makes changes (both for the better and for the worse), and because both groups tend to think, in certain cases, in a similar way. Later, I will concentrate on the "victors of today," for I know this group rather well.

What we primarily lost is our clear notion of "we," our self-definition, ideology, eschatology, or something that goes beyond us. When I asked some people from the past underground movement and exile, "What did we lose," they answered with a new question: "Who is this we?" We who lived in exile or we who stayed underground? Or we Slovaks and we Czechs? Or we representatives of the average citizen or we on the top? Or we-all of the people of postsocialist countries? Or does this "we" mark only this group of people who know each other well and so far are not quarreling with each other?

Before '89, this "we" designated anybody outside the state establishment. Our definition of "we" was based on a common enemy-"them." Their power increased our dignity. They defined themselves through hatred toward us, and this hatred had its sharply cut geographical border. I believe (I cannot say I am acquainted with the problems of this milieu) that even "they" were held together by fear and anxiety. This is how all of us lost this rather simplistic "we," this ready-made identity and integrity. The superficiality of this division can be seen only today when we ask ourselves questions that should have been answered long ago.

To find a new identity according to one's real interests, needs, and independent ideas, not only through denial of the past regime, is rather difficult. Definitions of our current adjustment are changing quickly, and so it is probably impossible to get simply adjusted. Simplified pragmatism is applicable and potentially successful only in a fully consolidated society.

Then, both as individuals and as a whole, too, we lost our special charisma, the glory of being refused and persecuted and having the sympathy of the world and the more or less expressed approval that goes with the

former. We lost our identity given to us by our protest and, at the same time, the possibility of rather easy "self-identification." We have grown up and are being asked about our intentions, programs, ideas, solutions. The protected area around us slowly melts away. We are being exposed to competition, both as individuals and as a group. We want to be successful, to enter the ring as equals-and, simultaneously, we are scared of such confrontation. For so many years, we have nurtured illusions concerning our abilities and denied possibilities. Now, the time has come to prove our valor! We want it and fear it. What if we fail? Should we expose ourselves to possible injury?

One can find satisfaction in narcissism, in suffering and compassion that is being lavished on one's self. The Bible speaks of the narrow gate of entry, which we took for our "privilege." Another privilege that was eventually lost. Special features of individuals, their weaknesses, neurotic lack of ability to accept a certain system and succumb to it, had its political meaning-and, thus, sanctification-under the communist rule. Today, many of those who used to belong to us are again individuals incapable of "normal adjustment."

We also lost our qualification for political struggle. It is lost on both sides-former underground activists and our enemies in the communist establishment. Party officials were able to pass decisions of the central politburo of the communist party on to the lower stratum. This way does not work today, should one want to win communist voters. Similarly, the experiences and habits of the ideologically diverse and highly tolerant underground and its elaborate strategies cannot be transferred from the past to today. Today, political life happens through a system of political parties, and it is necessary to establish a new bureaucracy. This Rubicon, this transgression from long years of creative improvisation, is hard to cross for all former underground activists in all postcommunist countries. This also may be the reason why they did not become major leading powers in the new postcommunist establishment. Politics is not created on the basis of friendship and feelings of anxiety, but on the principle of power. And all former underground activists in all socialist countries had a rather ambivalent relation toward power. Because they did not desire power wholeheartedly, they did not gain it in any of those countries. I do not blame them; I just bring up this fact, and it is a surprise for me that some are amazed.

Another loss comes from the transformation of the "community" (Gemeinde, according to Tonnies), made up of underground activists, into mere Gesellschaft society. Close and closed community laws and "face to face" relations are not valid in a Gesellschaft, in a society run by common principles of civic co-existence.

The ultimate breakdown of inter-generation consensus and the cooperation between various opponents of communism both here and abroad stands for another painful loss today.

In the past days of socialism, people persecuted in the early years of communist rule (after 1948) had excellent relationships with those persecuted after 1968. They trusted and supported each other. Pressure coming from the communist camp was so strong that both generational groups, in the republic and abroad, could easily relate to one another. It was only after '89 that both generations, Earlier and Later, defined their identities. Today, opponents of the communist regime from 1948 get into bitter arguments with those ostracized some twenty years later, when some of the latter participated in the suppression of the former. Who suffered more? Whose benefits are greater? Who is entitled to a higher degree of moral satisfaction?

Recorded sins of the past, modified history, and screening had their impact on the personal interpretation of biographies of hundreds of thousands. Reactions vary-from moral flagellation to the re-interpretation of one's life, to silence about certain periods of one's life, to bitterness. Without censorship, new blank spots are being created in our history and experience of the fifties; Stalinism and dedicated celebrations of communist top personalities will be openly discussed only in some ten or twenty years.

The situation in Germany after World War II was rather similar. Silent agreement between children and parents was respected, and adult children would not ask questions or search for many years. Victims were also silent, for to mention their fate would sound like moral blackmail.

Many become cynical, lose interest, or develop a fear of adopting some new idea which is not distant enough from reality. This might be the reason why Eastern Europe welcomes with such eager interest new religions and sects. Underground activists, according to Jacques Rupnik, represented the ghetto of virtue in the years of socialism.

This ghetto now undergoes secularization-and this is a loss as well. A sacral community changed into a profane one, and while floating between the Scylla and Charybdis of political stratification, many did not resist the lure of the siren's song and moved directly into politics. For the original value scale of the underground is still alive in them, including a disbelief in a party system, in power, and in materialism. These new politicians feel a strong urge to defend their newly acquired political pragmatism-even when nobody asks them to do it.

They keep hurting themselves and often their friends, too. Those who could stand side by side in underground opposition cannot do the same in one open party competing for power. But because-in the not so recent past-they have been together through many important events, they understand each others' party preferences, changes of opinion, and often even betrayal of old friendships. What they do not understand is that emotions have nothing in common with politics. It is necessary to grow up. And this is another reason why it is impossible today to roast a duck, bake a cake, and invite friends for a chat.

Watching from the distance how the remaining group of communists divides into more and more splinter parties (official representatives have been long time members of newly established parties in power), I can sense that a similar process of differentiation and transition is happening. As a human being, I can understand their confusions and believe that many of them suffer too. This new process of searching for an identity brings groups of communists closer to their recent opponents. Pragmatists do not suffer from these scruples and happily embark on new political success.

Not only those who shape history, people consciously working for change in society, but also common people-cooperative farmers, shop assistants, plumbers, or locksmiths-lost much of what used to bring them satisfaction, prestige, and a feeling of social integrity in "Bolshevik times." Such people did not care for politics, they would only loudly and constantly criticize communists (they could afford to; in their social stratum no direct political control existed), and yet they had more power as free citizens and voters than they have today. The common man used to be the one who, for example, was able to get bricks, roof tiles, or spare car parts for a person much higher in the social hierarchy, such as a doctor. To pay back for such a service, a doctor would supply the common man with imported medicine, thus skipping the waiting list. Not all those in need could be satisfied in this way, so many things were sold, distributed, or exchanged on the basis of familiar acquaintance. Both sides would gain from such transactions but there was more to it-emotional satisfaction arising from the feeling of integrity, equality, a "plot" against the state and the party similar to what children experience in their rebellion against a teacher or a parent. We were walking in the same boots!

In the period of harsh competition and abundance of goods, our common man loses his prestige and power. We gained democracy but lost that egalitarian sensation-which is also a value. Our image of justice that comes hand-in-hand with freedom was somewhat disrupted.

To sum up, we were living in a state of strange adolescence, and the 1989 upheaval removed us from this collective prolonged childhood devoid of dignity. Are we any happier now?

The big child moved a bit, the shabby system collapsed, and the child believed for a second in its own omnipotence and mistook it for a catharsis. There is no other miracle waiting for us, and I, for myself, only add-thank God!

Everything we gained in the real world we lost in the sphere of wishes. We lost our childish innocence, illusions about our own potential and ability that could no be proven, and lack of responsibility for ourselves and the world around us. To our amazement, we found that compared to many other countries, we were quite rich, and we were no longer the ones who needed help.

We have to make peace with this new reality, accept our adulthood, including our bodies and faces, that will not change from now on. Geographical position, raw material supplies, color of eyes and complexion are constants that cannot be changed easily, but we can build on them and gain from them. Is, then, reflected awareness of our given reality a loss or a gain? I cannot say.

Sometimes I feel like being back at school, working on a sugar beet or potato field. It is early in the morning, chilly, misty, my shoes are covered with mud, I have a rake in my hand and an endless furrow in front of me on which to

work. I know that before this endless field is empty, we will not go home; we will not go anywhere and nothing will change. At such times, there was nothing else to do but bend one's back, find a good rhythm, and start working. It may sound unbelievable, but my own experience tells me that the work always got done somehow. It was only in the morning, at the beginning of the furrow, that I felt depressed.

Footnote

Notes

Footnote

1 I refer to Mateju and Rehakova, 1992, 1993; Vecernik, 1993, 1995; Mateju, 1993; Machonin, 1994; Kabele, 1993; Matiju and Vlachova, 1995; Mateju and Kluegel; Mozny, 1995; Flek and Buchtikova, 1995; Tucek, 1995; Kabele and Potucek, 1995.

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