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# A MIXED BAG: POLITICAL CHANGE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND ITS IMPACT ON PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

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The most important voices concerning the changes now occurring in Central and Eastern Europe are those that come from within, for those voices are informed not only by indifferent data and objective reports, but by personal hopes, fears, desires and needs. Without careful consideration of what such voices say, judgment can only be sterile. Furthermore, policy decisions made without the benefit of the internal perspective are likely to be flawed, and ineffectual. Policies won't work if they do not take into account the point of view of those who are supposed to be affected by them.

There nevertheless remains an important role for outsiders to play in the discussion of the impact of political change on the future of philosophical thought, especially if the outside perspective can serve as a test of the internal view.

I offer these thoughts in that spirit: as reflecting my own view of how things seem from here. I am confident that I am likely to be mistaken in some of my reading of the situation, but it is in the hope of correcting such mistakes that I present my impressions in this chapter. I am interested in the issues surrounding the great social and political changes presently taking place in Europe not only because of my more general interest in political and social philosophy, but because of my own family history.

My central premise, at the outset of these several observations, is this: while there can be no doubt that pressures antithetical to free philosophical thought have in large measure been reduced in Central and Eastern Europe, the record is inconsistent. Furthermore, in many areas old chains have been replaced with new ones, and openness to Western ideas is frequently hard to distinguish from a quest for new dogmas to replace old, discredited ones. In what follows, I hope to offer a balanced picture of the dangers and opportunities attendant upon the recent political tremors. These dangers and opportunities affect Europeans, and are bound to affect the entire world in the coming century.

Since the present discussion is well represented by scholars from Central Europe, I will concentrate in my examples on areas a bit further east. It is important, of course, to recognize the special problems faced by

Poles, by Czechs, by Ukrainians, by Russians—and so forth—in this new world. But I trust that there are also many commonalities that are worth noting. Indeed, attention both to the similarities *and* the differences is crucial if we are to understand what is going on.

### 1. The New Political Correctness

The term “politically correct” actually has its origins, so far as I know, within the jargon of leftist activists influenced by Leninist strategic doctrine. In its original setting its connotations were all positive, given the positive role that propaganda played in the full social effort aimed at shaping society in the direction of the socialist ideal.

Lately, at least in the United States, the term has come to be deployed more by those on the political right than by those on the left. It is meant as a lampoon of what is regarded by conservatives as an outdated, misguided attempt to remake humanity.

But wherever there is political dogma, there is political correctness. The demand that certain doctrines be taught in educational institutions, and that other doctrines be cast out of the curriculum, plays the same, ultimately destructive role even in those modern societies that deem themselves most free and least affected by socialist doctrine. And it certainly has not disappeared from European societies with the fall of Communist dominance.

A colleague in Minsk reports, for example, that she does not feel measurably *freer* in her academic philosophical career now that Belarus has proclaimed its independence and Communist doctrine is no longer the official ideology of her department or her university. It is true that she no longer is required to teach Marxism-Leninism, or to examine the works of thinkers outside the approved corpus only from a Marxist-Leninist perspective. All this is gone. But what has replaced it is not freedom.

For one thing, her university and her department are now charged with reviving and emphasizing the works of Byelorussian authors. The brilliance of these authors is to be trumpeted at every opportunity, whether in class or in one’s own professional work. It is not that one is likely to be *fired* if one doesn’t do this, but one’s chances of advancement are substantially diminished if one is not cooperating with the new nationalist program. Thus political correctness has only changed its face, just as has been the case, I would hold, in academic institutions in the United States. The demand for political correctness is tied to no particular ideology, arising whenever any group with a shared set of ideals gains control of social institutions.

A related problem involves the fact that, together with institutional support *for* the study of particular philosophers or particular doctrines, there has been a condemnation, sometimes tacit and sometimes explicit, of the sympathetic study of Marxist-Leninist work. In some places, a continuing

sympathy for anything resembling the formerly dominant doctrines is like the kiss of death for one’s career. In other places, it has merely been driven underground, and academic interaction has become at least vaguely dishonest, as people try to find new ways of expressing their views that do not betray their own personal philosophical sympathy. This is not academic freedom. It is a tyranny not at all superior to the previous one.

Finally, there exists a problem due not to the demand for political correctness as such, but rather to the fact that *what* is politically correct has so recently, and so dramatically, changed. In any society which makes heavy demands on its academics to further some particular ideological cause, thinkers learn over time how to express themselves in such a way as to indicate to others in the know not only *that* they disagree with the dominant dogma, but *how*. In the present situation in many Central and European societies, the change is too recent for the right codes and understandings to have evolved. Thus, for the moment, those who have doubts about the value or reasonableness of whatever ideology is currently dominant in their societies are in particularly uncomfortable positions.

### 2. The New Relationship to the West

Especially interesting, and especially troubling, are developments in Russia. A large portion of the Russian people feels demoralized at the moment. This is no less true of the academic population than of the general population. Whereas *all* the newly democratized nations must struggle with new mores, new expectations, and new ideals, Russia must, in addition, deal with the fact that its national status and power in the world has plummeted.

Among philosophers this fact is reflected in a variety of ways, as was demonstrated at the Nineteenth World Congress of Philosophy, held in Moscow in August of 1994. Everything, from an almost child-like openness to new ideas to proud rejection of everything non-Russian, was in evidence. The one fixed point appeared to be a passionate desire to be taken seriously.

Coupled with a new intellectual relationship with colleagues in the rest of the world is the new social relation that must be established between academics and the rest of the society within Russia. To understand that, it will be useful to sketch a bit of very recent Russian economic history, with which the several of my readers will be familiar to different degrees.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the onset of the effort to establish something like a “western” economy, there have functioned in Russia, side-by-side and intertwined, at least four major economies.

At the most impoverished level are large numbers of people who have worked their entire lives under a system in which they had come to believe they would be taken care of. Some presumably worked harder than others in this system, but that is neither here nor there. No one had a choice; the rewards and punishments of the system were fairly clear to all concerned, and one had to participate in it whether or not one liked it. When the old

system collapsed, many people found themselves unable for one reason or another to succeed in the new one (the very young, the very old, the ill, and the otherwise disabled were among the most poignant cases). This portion of the population *continues* to depend on the state, and the state has simply abandoned them. They live extraordinarily poorly, unable to afford even the tiny sums (minuscule by Western standards—a kilo of tomatoes for ten cents, subway tokens costing a small fraction of a cent, and so forth,) charged for services on the growing ruble economy. They have had the floor ripped out from under them.

A second economy, however—also a ruble economy—seems to be growing by leaps and bounds. At some subway stops in Moscow it is almost impossible to move from the station to the street, since the way is blocked by curb-to-curb kiosks, stands, or purveyors of this and that. Anyone who is able to bring anything at all to market appears to be free to do so, with little regulation at all of such small business undertakings. And very good livings are being made by large numbers of people who have the ingenuity and the ability to bring things to this market. The situation is much as it must have been at the turn of the century in New York City or Chicago, with few regulatory mechanisms in place to restrict people from participating in the market.

Many people are able to afford to buy these new products, newly available, so there is a growing economy producing not only wealth, but even something of a housing boom in the area surrounding Moscow. It is important to note, however, that the people who live on the *first* economy, described a moment ago, are by and large *not* able to buy and sell in this second economy. They are dependent upon the state, and the state as caregiver has simply gone bankrupt for all intents and purposes.

Two more economies bear mentioning, but which are not as important for present purposes; there is a legitimate hard currency economy, which produces in Moscow an increasing number of millionaires (and a tourist economy that is among the most expensive in the world), and there is an illegitimate underground economy which is to a large extent run—or at least successfully manipulated—by Russian organized crime. This last illegal economy has become so strong that it is in some locales not easy to tell where the Mafia leaves off and the government begins. And where government is corrupt, both old line and new line politicians are represented in the corrupt activities.

But the important feature of this situation for our present discussion is the distinction between the portion of the population that has been and continues to be almost fully dependent upon the state, and the other portion of the population that seems prepared to move quickly into the future as entrepreneurs in a market economy. Academics are included in the first group, by and large, not the second. Those scholars who move out of dependency on the state to economic independence are able to do so only by *leaving* academia. Those who continue to devote the bulk of their energies

to academic pursuits thus find themselves increasingly impoverished. This fact tends to reduce the number of academics rather severely; but it also implies that those who remain are extraordinarily vulnerable to various social pressures.

My friend in Minsk reports that the economic situation in Belarus is similar to, if not worse than, the one I have described in Russia. The state has no money. The Belarus Academy of Sciences has cut the work of most research workers to half-time in order partially to justify a decrease in salary. What researchers now earn is insufficient to buy food.

Conferences have become quite rare. In the last two years there have been just two conferences on philosophy in Belarus. In the last year, my friend reports that all Byelorussian libraries *combined* received about twenty foreign books in the social sciences.

A colleague from Novosibirsk, in central Russia, reports that political change has meant he can now teach his students whatever he deems appropriate, whereas a few years ago he was obliged to teach Marxist-Leninist thought. In addition, he is now able to communicate with colleagues abroad via electronic mail, and he is entitled to travel outside the country—even leave permanently—if he likes. While he suggests that this sort of liberation means almost nothing for most common people, it is not an insignificant change for academics. There are many new books available, he reports, including many translations of works that were not available in any form at all just a few years ago.

But academics are extraordinarily poor. Education and intellectual abilities are not held in high esteem. They do not bake bread, and they do not help to sell the foreign goods that are presently turning the fastest and biggest profits for those who are profiting from the market system. While free marketeers as young as seventeen or eighteen are able to purchase BMW and Mercedes automobiles with their profits—whether these profits are honestly earned or ill gotten—academics do not always have enough money for cheese or butter. Whereas once, when everything was managed by the state, a scholar from Siberia could manage to fly to Moscow for research affairs eight to ten times a year, now the cost of the airfare is the equivalent of three or four months' salary, and the universities are simply unable to help. Increasing criminality has not ignored the university either. Two months ago, all the computers from my friend's lab were stolen in a single night.

We can see a special irony in one aspect of the current situation for scholars in Russia.

As one might expect, since translation from Russian to English is quite expensive, the only works that get translated are by authors who are famous, thus usually old or dead. My friend in Novosibirsk is thirty-five years old, and has forty-five publications to his name, including three books. But almost nobody in the West knows about the details of his work because they were written in Russian, and his own English is not good

enough for him to translate them himself. If his work ever *does* get translated, he fears by that time it will be outdated.

That's not ironic, though—that's just the plight of authors all over the world, to some extent or another. The irony is this: in Russia *before perestroika*, there existed an *ideological* barrier which made it impossible for Russian researchers to learn about work in the West until twenty to thirty years after the original publication of the work. Now the situation is reversed. Russians have access to an increasing variety of Western work, but *Western* researchers will not learn about *Russian* research until decades have passed after the original publication. The barrier now is not so much ideological as it is *economic*.

The short summary is that academic life is no longer protected, thus no longer attractive, even no longer viable in many parts of Russia. One might predict that the academics who remain will be the most dedicated, but it hardly means they will be the best thinkers. It will be a long time before Russian society is once again able to offer substantial support to scholars pursuing such arcane disciplines as philosophy.

### 3. Conclusion

For all these dangers, the prospects for philosophical thought in the regions previously dominated by the Soviet Union seem to me to be quite good. Indeed, I'd guess that important contributions are likely to be made from there in the coming decades, although it is altogether possible that these contributions will not be coming from *academic* philosophers. This guess is based partially on my view that adversity actually *stimulates* creative thought, and partially on the brute fact that *all* these nations—these cultures, these peoples—have rich literary and philosophical traditions that have largely been ignored in mainstream Western philosophy. Even if nothing new were to emerge, the course of twenty-first century philosophy is likely to benefit from the release of these traditions from their bondage of sometimes four, sometimes seven decades.

The new challenge, both to those in the West and to those in Central and Eastern Europe, is to find a way of conducting the dialogue in the next few years.

A colleague in St. Petersburg suggests that, while the *main* sensation of many Russian philosophers is equivalent to what one would feel if one's jail cell had just been unlocked, it is not universal. Some never had the feeling they were imprisoned, and this makes the attitude of the West to the recent changes, when comprehensible at all, quite objectionable to them.

The variety of responses within Central and Eastern Europe to recent changes is really not radically different from what one would expect anywhere, under similar circumstances. There is the liberation issue, which will not seem equally liberating to everyone, and there is the collapsed empire issue. For those who feel liberated, there will be both challenges and

opportunities. For those among whom the imperial issue is most poignant, there will be differences between those who celebrate and those who mourn the new power arrangements.

The challenge to the world, it seems to me, is to use the present developments to learn how to make further intellectual adjustments in the decades to come. What happens in the accommodation of change in Central and Eastern Europe may serve as a model for much larger changes that will inevitably occur in the twenty-first century, as the global community becomes sensibly less fragmented, and as economic progress makes similar political change elsewhere inevitable. For those standing outside the developmental process, it is necessary to realize there is less we can do to help than we would like. Philosophers, like all people, need their pride and their own opportunities for self-development. To the extent that we can facilitate such self-development, we need not merely stand on the sidelines and gawk.

But we must proceed with reason and with humility. We would make an enormous mistake if we took on the attitude that *we* are the world, and these other nations have finally gotten around to joining us. That's not how it is at all. To the extent that different parts of the world have been out of touch with one another, we have *all* been raised parochially. When the parts of the world remake contact—or make contact for the first time—the prospect is that the new engagement will yield new syntheses, new arguments, a new perspective on all of the issues that occupy the attention of philosophers.

It is to be hoped not only that new opportunities for dialogue continue to open in the world, but that the people involved not be regarded merely as new participants in a conversation to be conducted on Western terms. This would profit no one, and is not likely to attract anyone to the discussion. If we can see that greater international cooperation enriches us all, we will do best. And while it is inevitable that reality will not match our *greatest* hopes for the world, we have reason to think that, in recent years, everyone's world has grown larger. There is certainly some reason to anticipate, on the basis of this experience, that we are in for a rather interesting twenty-first century.

### 4. A Personal Afterword

While I have profited enormously from discussions with a great number of people during preparation of this chapter over many months, I am especially grateful to Michael Mikeshin of St. Petersburg, Tatiana Milova of Minsk, and Nikolai Rozov of Novosibirsk, for their observations and responses to my queries. The warm collegial relationship that has developed not only through face-to-face meetings, but also via FAX and electronic mail, is enough to encourage my own hope for the future of international collaboration in philosophy.

I dedicate this chapter to the memory of my paternal grandparents, Dr. Bronislaw Strzyzowski and Adela Maciejewski, both of whom came to the United States in the 1890s and were married here, and to their son and my father, Edward Julian Strzyowski, who at the age of fifteen changed his name to Sanders. He made this decision in part because of his expectation that his life in the new world would be made easier without the baggage of a name so clearly harking back to the old. Perhaps the new century will finally bring a day when ethnic prejudice is reduced enough to make such strategic moves unnecessary anywhere in the world.