

November 9, 2009

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

20 Years of Collapse

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TODAY is the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. During this time of reflection, it is common to emphasize the miraculous nature of the events that began that day: a dream seemed to come true, the Communist regimes collapsed like a house of cards, and the world suddenly changed in ways that had been inconceivable only a few months earlier. Who in Poland could ever have imagined free elections with Lech Walesa as president?

However, when the sublime mist of the velvet revolutions was dispelled by the new democratic-capitalist reality, people reacted with an unavoidable disappointment that manifested itself, in turn, as nostalgia for the “good old” Communist times; as rightist, nationalist populism; and as renewed, belated anti-Communist paranoia.

The first two reactions are easy to comprehend. The same rightists who decades ago were shouting, “Better dead than red!” are now often heard mumbling, “Better red than eating hamburgers.” But the Communist nostalgia should not be taken too seriously: far from expressing an actual wish to return to the gray Socialist reality, it is more a form of mourning, of gently getting rid of the past. As for the rise of the rightist populism, it is not an Eastern European specialty, but a common feature of all countries caught in the vortex of globalization.

Much more interesting is the recent resurgence of anti-Communism from Hungary to Slovenia. During the autumn of 2006, large protests against the ruling Socialist Party paralyzed Hungary for weeks. Protesters linked the country’s economic crisis to its rule by successors of the Communist party. They denied the very legitimacy of the government, although it came to power through democratic elections. When the police went in to restore civil order, comparisons were drawn with the Soviet Army crushing the 1956 anti-Communist rebellion.

This new anti-Communist scare even goes after symbols. In June 2008, Lithuania passed a law prohibiting the public display of Communist images like the hammer and sickle, as well as the playing of the Soviet anthem. In April 2009, the Polish government proposed expanding a ban on totalitarian propaganda to include Communist books, clothing and other items: one could even be arrested for wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt.

No wonder that, in Slovenia, the main reproach of the populist right to the left is that it is the “force of continuity” with the old Communist regime. In such a suffocating atmosphere, new problems and challenges are reduced to the repetition of old struggles, up to the absurd claim (which sometimes arises in Poland and in Slovenia) that the advocacy of gay rights and legal abortion is part of a dark Communist plot to demoralize the nation.

Where does this resurrection of anti-Communism draw its strength from? Why were the old ghosts resuscitated in nations where many young people don't even remember the Communist times? The new anti-Communism provides a simple answer to the question: "If capitalism is really so much better than Socialism, why are our lives still miserable?"

It is because, many believe, we are not really in capitalism: we do not yet have true democracy but only its deceiving mask, the same dark forces still pull the threads of power, a narrow sect of former Communists disguised as new owners and managers — nothing's really changed, so we need another purge, the revolution has to be repeated ...

What these belated anti-Communists fail to realize is that the image they provide of their society comes uncannily close to the most abused traditional leftist image of capitalism: a society in which formal democracy merely conceals the reign of a wealthy minority. In other words, the newly born anti-Communists don't get that what they are denouncing as perverted pseudo-capitalism simply is capitalism.

One can also argue that, when the Communist regimes collapsed, the disillusioned former Communists were effectively better suited to run the new capitalist economy than the populist dissidents. While the heroes of the anti-Communist protests continued to dwell in their dreams of a new society of justice, honesty and solidarity, the former Communists were able to ruthlessly accommodate themselves to the new capitalist rules and the new cruel world of market efficiency, inclusive of all the new and old dirty tricks and corruption.

A further twist is added by those countries in which Communists allowed the explosion of capitalism, while retaining political power: they seem to be more capitalist than the Western liberal capitalists themselves. In a crazy double reversal, capitalism won over Communism, but the price paid for this victory is that Communists are now beating capitalism in its own terrain.

This is why today's China is so unsettling: capitalism has always seemed inextricably linked to democracy, and faced with the explosion of capitalism in the People's Republic, many analysts still assume that political democracy will inevitably assert itself.

But what if this strain of authoritarian capitalism proves itself to be more efficient, more profitable, than our liberal capitalism? What if democracy is no longer the necessary and natural accompaniment of economic development, but its impediment?

If this is the case, then perhaps the disappointment at capitalism in the post-Communist countries should not be dismissed as a simple sign of the "immature" expectations of the people who didn't possess a realistic image of capitalism.

When people protested Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the large majority of them did not ask for capitalism. They wanted the freedom to live their lives outside state control, to come together and talk as they pleased; they wanted a life of simplicity and sincerity, liberated from the primitive ideological indoctrination and the prevailing cynical hypocrisy.

As many commentators observed, the ideals that led the protesters were to a large extent taken from the ruling Socialist ideology itself — people aspired to something that can most appropriately be designated as "Socialism with a human face." Perhaps this attitude deserves a second chance. Op-Ed Contributor - 20 Years of Colla...

