

They Just Said 'No'

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Our courageous contemporaries in Eastern Europe had clear ideas about the urgency to do away with a malignant growth which usurped their self-powers and which claimed to be indispensable to social well-being. They were less clear about what, if anything, might replace it. The toppling of governments in Eastern Europe was the opposite of a palace coup. Did the people who came out to challenge the entrenched regimes realize how insecure the position of the bureaucrats was?

These were no revolutions imported from abroad. True, the CIA has been on the job overtly and covertly for 45 years, but the much-publicized attraction to U.S. "democracy" surely has its origin in the "Soviet" rulers' propaganda machine—just as dissidents in the "democracies" have found "Soviet" posturing seductive. I remember many of us in the 1960s using a similar logic in response to the government's denunciation of China and other regimes that refused to accept U.S. hegemony. We considered that Mao's (or Ho's or Fidel's) rule must be benign because the bullies wielding authority in the U.S. hated it so. Choosing as friends those whom my enemy defines as its enemies is appealing. In time, becoming "friends" of Democracy may help the Eastern Europeans judge Western society more accurately.

Various old guards were ousted from Eastern European governmental palaces, but no identifiable new guards can claim to have roused a population to action.

Drastically different—even contradictory—desires brought protesters into the streets. Obviously bananas and VCRs appeal to many; rock music and passports motivate others. Some want to finally put in practice the socialist principles so shamefully perverted in the course of four decades. Others, yearning for the good old days, hope to reestablish the moral and economic authority of religious institutions. Having a familiar rallying point makes these demands coherent and articulate.

The variety of resentment against the old regimes is impressive. One measure of this variety is the difficulty which aspiring politicians are experiencing; none seems able to find the slogans needed to rally a population. Forty-five years of political humbug in Eastern Europe have nurtured skepticism toward political leaders.

We North American political observers were aware that those deprived Eastern Europeans were skeptical but, until a year ago we were too credulous of their rulers and ours. Theirs, because we believed that the population was acquiescent, even if not content; ours, because we believed that the evil, repressive regimes were in total control. None of us seriously questioned the myth of the regimes' strength.

Could the protesters have sensed the fallibility of the government? It seems unlikely. There weren't many parties poised in the wings to carry on governmental functions. (Walesa may be an exception to this observation, but then he's been preparing himself for a decade.) The negativity of the demands and the ensuing vacuum are what excite me.

I suspect that the majority of people were amazed at the speed at which their rulers slinked away. A vacuum of authority makes many uneasy. How and where does one begin to regain powers alienated for decades, if not generations? Who will organize everything that the state was accustomed to meddle in? Also, no one likes to think the decades of fear and oppression were based on so little. Even now, a year after the Czechoslovak communist rulers

were ousted from their offices, fear of the hated rulers' collective omniscience remains. Two correspondents (Czech intellectuals) from different cities both recently assured me that the whole government downfall was planned and carried out by the diabolical communist rulers. My Czech friends don't describe how those officials expect to regain power, but remain convinced that it's all part of the master plan. [1]

Could it be that Western political rulers are as vulnerable as the Eastern European old guard was? Some of ours, too, have been content to slink away. But in the West, the real rulers are the faceless corporations—and their authority is rarely questioned. Our usual daily routine depends on their dispensing electricity, fuel and food. Corporate leaders as well as much of the North American population are conscious of the relative unimportance of the current office-holder, so most any Twiddledum or Twiddledee can serve as figurehead. No longer merely lusting after new frontiers east of the Danube, the corporations are quickly making themselves at home over there.

Western Commentary

In this country, most political commentary about Eastern Europe has been fragmentary and condescending. The establishment's self-celebration is too disgusting to bother debunking. But many who consider themselves Western dissidents, in their eagerness to analyze and judge, trivialize the popular participation in the upheavals. It's obviously safer for them to predict a grim conclusion; statistics are on their side. And, if the resulting society comes to resemble Western capitalism more closely, they will have a larger sphere in which to practice their dissident expertise.

Certain leftist commentators treat the Eastern Europeans as suckers and knowingly offer them a dire prediction: "Just wait and see what you've got ahead of you." There's even a reproachful suggestion that by participating in street actions, the activists do Capital's work. Sometimes a Western critic expresses indignation that the Eastern Europeans take so lightly the sacrifices imposed on their populations in order to amass the requisite primitive accumulation of capital and that they appear willing to hand their economies over to Western corporations. For some commentators, even the exhilaration is irksome; others are saddened that courageous actions by sincere people can lead to a consolidation of the capitalist system. Their bitter conclusion is that the Triumph of Capitalism is inevitable.

I'm relieved, but not surprised, that the Eastern Europeans don't take inevitability too seriously. (For forty years they heard assurances that internal contradictions would bring about the "inevitable" crumbling of Western capitalism.) In any case, few Eastern European dissidents express the wish for a society where corporations (or even The Economy) govern. Their call is for Riddance, not for imported CEOs.

No doubt we can offer our European counterparts insights acquired from living in a ruthless society where Commodity is King. In exchange, they can surely alert us to some of theirs regarding a State-administered society. For example, lots of sincere and trusting people west of the Danube advocate world-wide peacekeeping forces and a society equitably managed by public functionaries. The slogans and principles of such a world government would no doubt be irreproachable.

Western pundits seem surprised at outbursts of racism, religious fervor and nationalism. Did they suppose that Marxist-humanist ideology was so thoroughly implanted, that the educational system had been so effective, that those sentiments had been eradicated? In a mass society, even an ersatz community has some appeal and people cling to sentiments that promise a sense of belonging. Now that they feel safer to openly express outlawed—even anti-social—views, I'm not surprised that people try them out. Do the shocked Western commentators think that for such people the repression should continue?

Four decades of repression certainly served to enhance the appeal of these banned views. And it is distressing but true that individuals still can find unwholesome comfort in identifying with historical wielders of power—whether they be despots of a Holy Roman Empire, Nazi perpetrators of genocide or post-feudal potentates they can claim as ancestors.

An Unrestrained Populace

Criticisms made by many Western leftists come with a built-in, yet unacknowledged, position on appropriate rebellious activity. Some are disappointed that Eastern Europeans aren't ready to renounce commodities, others wonder about the absence of factory committees, yet others, fearful of possibilities open to an unrestrained populace, feel due credit wasn't given to the good intentions of ousted rulers. Some even used to be friends of the old regimes.

East of the Danube there are millions of individuals who were (are?) willing to stand in the streets in opposition to men and women who claimed (claim?) to rule in society's interest. Although the mass media furnished images and actions of others- like themselves, the media's favorite techniques for revolt (violence, hostage-taking and instilling fear) were ignored. Also ignored was Lenin's formula for revolution which calls for subservient, disciplined cadres who obey the mastermind central committee.

We know that some of the rebels consider themselves anarchists. Also among them are surely students of the human condition and those committed to protecting nature. Many must fear, as we do, the prospect of World Government, whether it be under the aegis of the U.N., the U.S. or any other U-abstraction.

Worry that one might be serving as Capital's spearhead is debilitating. The anxiety generated makes one judge public actions more and more severely. By doing nothing, there's no risk of being a political dupe. One must merely tolerate the status quo—a known situation. Though I often welcome their critiques, I don't admire radicals who demand of actions that they simultaneously abolish money, sexism, division of labor, alienation, racism and pollution. Radical purists wait long before getting off their asses. Long-suffering in the face of indignities, they are quick to detect ignoble motives in potential collaborators.

The possibility of being dupes of an alternate ideology or regime probably didn't occur to many of the Eastern European demonstrators and such a fear did not deter them from the goal of ousting those whose positions of power made life miserable. Toppling a state apparatus without offering a replacement is no small achievement. Precedents of this sort are too rare.

If we in the West who live under real domination of Capital and whose lives depend on the commodities dispensed by faceless, profit-driven corporations could succeed in breaking free of one or more of these pervasive grids, we might be as surprised and as disoriented as the Eastern Europeans in 1990. This is the sought-after context that makes personal and relevant the questioning of progress, technology and familiar ways of social adaptation.

Their actions did not transform Eastern Europeans into a community (either a large-scale or intimate one). Only the negativity of the actions unified them. This is what I applaud. North America is in woeful need of such negativity.

Note

1. Similar apprehensions exist in our frustrated community. Black activists accuse the U.S. government of introducing heroin into the urban ghettos in the 1970s in order to squelch the growing political militancy. Another conspiracy theory has it that AIDS resulted from a virus perfected and disseminated by the U.S. military.

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