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In Praise of Eclecticism

Vladimir Tismaneanu

The collapse of Leninism and the end of the Cold War have changed fundamentally the nature of modern ideological conflicts. Initially, a seeming consensus emerged that proclaimed the ultimate triumph of the liberal revolution. Later, as cultural-political tensions have not subsided and even intensified, it has become clear that the counterpart to the global democratic resurgence is a search for primordial roots, allegiances, and affiliations. In other words, the postmodern condition does not escape moral and political dilemmas associated with justice, equality, and freedom. As evinced in the works of Norberto Bobbio or Jurgen Habermas, left and right have to be rethought (reconceptualized), to be sure, but they are not extinct as landmarks on the contemporary ideological map.¹

The following pages of this piece propose a very important discussion bearing on the decline of secular theologies and the widespread disenchantment with traditional ideological cleavages. Years ago, Francois Furet noticed this trend toward transcending conventional partisanship, insisting on the relativization of the dominant ideological dichotomies.² In spite of his enduring Marxist commitment, Eric Hobsbawm acknowledged the same trend when he wrote about the end of the “age of the extremes.”³ As Martin Krygier shows in his provocative essay, the search for the “Conservative-Liberal-Socialist” international community of critical intellectuals was a product of as well as a response to the quasi-homogenous totalistic hubris of communism, an avatar of the Hegelian dream of the ultimate coincidence/reconciliation between subject and object. Krygier correctly reproaches Kolakowski’s credo, not for its deliberate eclecticism, but rather its self-limiting modesty, indeed the hesitation to go far enough. Indeed, I agree with Krygier that the world after the collapse of Leninism (and the exhaustion of radicalism in general) is not the simple “triumph of liberalism,” but rather the constitution of a new ideosphere, which is by definition comprehensive, inclusive, and provisional.⁴ In fact, this is the hallmark of post-modernity about which Jacques Derrida writes in his *Specters of Marx* and whose implications are accurately analyzed by Séan Patrick Eudaily in his contribution to this symposium. What has

Grand narratives, as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Slavoj Žižek have made clear, have lost their emotional and intellectual appeals. On the other hand, new or not so new political mythologies have re-entered the scene, first and foremost discourses of ethnic identity that pretend to go beyond left and right and challenge the “conservative-liberal-socialist” consensus as an intellectual universalistic chimera.

happened in the last two or three decades, as authors like Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort have noticed, is the dissolution of the rigid boundaries of the political and the search for a renewal of political paradigms.⁵ As a matter of fact, this is a time in which all conventional visions of immanent (and imminent) salvation have been dramatically questioned. As Hungarian philosophers Agnes Heller and Ferenc Feher have pointed out,

this is the age of the decline of radical universalism, a time in which a post-modern political condition makes doubtful any attempt to restore redemptive paradigms.⁶ Grand narratives, as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Slavoj Žižek have made clear, have lost their emotional and intellectual appeals. On the other hand, new or not so new political mythologies have re-entered the scene, first and foremost discourses of ethnic identity that pretend to go beyond left and right and challenge the “conservative-liberal-socialist” consensus as an intellectual universalistic chimera.

Leszek Kolakowski’s manifesto was thus prescient in that it announced the advent of a post-ideological and post-utopian age (in this respect, his vision was not that different from some of the New York intellectuals, Dwight Macdonald, Hannah Arendt, and especially Daniel Bell).⁷ In his essay, Karol Soltan makes a strong case for the resurrection of the center and looks to Kolakowski’s program of 1978 as a premise for the more recent Western efforts to generate an international communitarian network. In the same vein, whatever one makes of the inner contradictions of the “Third Way” ideology, in its Giddens-Schroeder-Blair form, it is indicative of something new in this project of ideological reconstruction. Furthermore, Soltan notices that the new eclecticism (or ideological moderation) runs the risk of appearing cynical and uninspiring. For Soltan, what matters essentially is to create such a politics of the center that avoids instant categorizations and frozen limitations into anachronistic formulas. If I may interpret his position, he favors the baroque heterogeneity to the classicist forms of doctrinaire orthodoxy. Indeed, this was the deep meaning of Kolakowski’s jesterlike refusal of utopian (socialist, liberal, or conservative) ideals. The “end of history,” the allegedly

inevitable march of humanity in the direction of the perfect order (“progress in the conscience of freedom,” to use Hegel’s term), are precisely the opposite of what our age of different, often competitive visions of modernity has been about (this theme has been developed by S.N. Eisenstadt).⁸ In the same vein, Derrida’s call for a new International is not that different from Vaclav Havel’s emphasis on the responsibility of intellectuals and the need for political commitment on the part of those who do not acquiesce in the logic of bureaucratic-technological rationality (what Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer called “instrumental reason”).⁹ On various occasions indeed, Havel spoke about his vision of an international conspiracy of critical, i.e., democratic intellectuals. This involves a search for those forms of politics that favor and defend public spaces, and oppose endeavors to turn any institution into a fetish (markets, parliaments, parties).

Traditional “isms” sound obsolete these days (and they have sounded for quite a few decades). If there is a heritage of the Central European dissident thinking that needs to be preserved and even developed, I think this is the vision of Charter 77 as a transparent, deliberative community of individuals united by the rejection of closed societies and closed ideologies. Kolakowski’s, Havel’s, and Michnik’s refusal to be pigeonholed in one stultified ideological formula stems precisely from this knowledge that, as Max Weber used to say, politics is a tragic territory of competition between many rival gods and demons, and none has the right to claim infallibility. So this discussion is about the role of ideas in an age of global communications and interactions, and the possibilities for recreating a universe of symbolic participation in which individuals can make rational choices in favor of opening the public space to more and more actors. The new eclecticism is thus rooted in a vision of post-nationalist inclusion, of civic universalism, and opposes any form of ethno-religious monistic fundamentalism. Fifty years ago, in an immensely influential essay on “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” published in *Foreign Affairs*, Isaiah Berlin courageously formulated the need for overcoming ideological rigidities. In his view, what our age requires, “is not (as we are often told) more faith, or stronger leadership, or more scientific organization. Rather, it is the opposite—less Messianic ardor, more enlightened scepticism, more toleration of idiosyncrasies.”¹⁰

The new International of the critical/democratic/post-ideological/cosmopolitan intellectuals will not advocate any arrogant solutions to humanity’s problems, but, at the same time, it will not shy away from recognizing that the roots of barbarism are located at the very core of modernity. It draws inspiration from the tradition of unregimented thought, including the long-forgotten searches for eclectic combinations between socialism and liberalism.¹¹ As Derrida once put it, the slogan of such a new International should be “Liberty, Equality, Hospitality.” This is

not to say that the new International should automatically embrace inchoate visions of “liberal capitalist” universal domination. As a matter of fact, the anti-totalitarian struggle in the East, including the Warsaw student movement in March 1968, did not oppose or despise “bourgeois liberties” as “fictitious” rights. On the contrary, it defended those rights as truly substantive and found in them a cause worth living, fighting, and suffering for. From the revolutionary tradition associated with the *annus mirabilis* 1989 we have learned that civic and human rights are the foundation of any form of decent society. Thus, there is a liberal minimum in the effort to rethink the traditional paradigms, and in its absence the new social movements can easily derail in the direction of nihilistic anarcho-populism. It is a minimum that ought to permeate all the components of the nascent hybrid and therefore truly dynamic “conservative-liberal-social-democratic-anti-fascist-anti-communist” International.

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Endnotes

1. See Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Jurgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
2. See Francois Furet, “La passion révolutionnaire au XXe siècle,” in the collective volume *Ecrire l’histoire du XXe siècle: La politique et la raison* (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1994, pp. 11–44).
3. See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994); for a thoughtful exploration of the crucial role of radical ideologies in the twentieth century, see Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999).
4. See for instance Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford, U.K., and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995).
5. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *Domaines de l’homme* (Paris: Seuil, 1986); Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique: XIXe–XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).
6. See Agnes Heller and Ferenc Feher, *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1991).
7. See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On The Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, with a new afterword by the author (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).
8. See S.N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 1–29.
9. On the topic of intellectuals, politics, and morality, see Ira Katznelson, *Liberalism’s Crooked Circle: Letters to Adam Michnik* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Vaclav Havel,

The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice New York: Knopf, 1997; Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *Civility and Subversion* Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Adam Michnik, *Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999; as well as my review-essay "The Strange Normalcy of Post-Communism," *Partisan Review*, Winter 2000, pp. 162–66.

10. Quoted by Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* New York: Henry Holt/Metropolitan Books, 1998, p. 198.

11. On such a fascinating attempt to reconcile socialism and liberalism in the 1920s and 30s, see Stanislaw Pugliese, *Carlo Rosselli: Socialist Heretic and Antifascist Exile* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).