



The Memory of Suffering and the Pedagogy of Freedom*

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Abstract

Romanians lived under a dictatorship that cancelled the freedom of movement, all forms of free expression and oversaw the personal life of every citizen by political police surveillance. Afterwards they endured a post-totalitarian transition whose social price was heavily paid. For people of my generation, democracy is not an abstract concept and any situation that undermines democracy and prejudices freedom affects us deeply. When oppression, censorship, terror seemed to ensure a smooth future for communism, the resulting hardship turned into a true pedagogy of freedom, thus building solid characters which can tear the status quo apart. Democracy as a system for ensuring individual freedom is a fragile product that must be defended from the dangers represented by the tyranny of a unique leader, the tyranny of the majority against minorities, and even the tyranny of minorities that were oppressed in the past. For the intellectual elites who build ideologies and social projects, democracy involves a permanent choice between utopia and realism. Scientists preoccupied by social issues must not forget that in science, utopia is the mother of progress, but in politics utopia always and everywhere has been the mother of criminal totalitarian regimes.

1. Memories of a Life under Tyranny

I would like to begin with a confession. I was born in 1939. If in that year someone had to cross the Eurasian continent from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean, they would have to cross from Tokyo to Lisbon, meaning only states under civil or military dictatorships. My family lived in a town located on the Nistru River, on the Soviet border. We were twice forced to take refuge from the Red Army, alongside tens of thousands of people and my first memories are related to this desperate exodus, for those who failed to leave were mostly arrested and deported to Siberia.

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I lived until the age of 50 under dictatorship, in a country where people were not allowed the freedom of movement: you could not leave the country and you were forced to work and live in a particular place, allocated by governmental distribution. A dictatorship that would only recognize state or collective ownership, cancelled all forms of free expression and oversaw the personal life of every citizen by political police surveillance.

I lived through a post-totalitarian transition whose social price was heavily paid. For those of my generation, democracy is not an abstract concept and any situation that undermines democracy and prejudices freedom affects us deeply.

2. Peace without Freedom

The Second World War caused the death of more than 25 million soldiers and over 73 million civilians, caused huge economic losses and destructions of world cultural heritage. The atrocities of the two wars in the first half of the twentieth century proved to be insufficient to understand that Western civilization cannot be strengthened only through the assertion of a cultural superiority or by managing frozen conflicts.

At the end of the Second World War, the UN General Assembly adopted and signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first document with universal calling, meant to defend the real values of humanity. Few would have suspected that this document and its principles would be so brutally violated in Eastern Europe. What determined such an attitude?

The answer can only be found in the contrast between the facade politics of the Soviet Block member states and the communist ideology implemented by them. Communism is a devilish mechanism where the foundations of civilization have been replaced by a communist dictatorship with ideological surrogates, in a tenacious attempt to transform half a century of European history into a tragic experience for all humanity. The human person was replaced by a depersonalized individual, whose existence depended on social group affiliation. Any reaction contrary to the group principles diminished his identity down to dissolution, banishing him to the margins of society. The utopia of equal rights, the elimination of constructive competition, and removal of free expression led to the emergence of an amorphous form claiming to be a society, where ideology replaced feeling, free words were trapped in slogans, and freedom in general was replaced by concealed terror. All these changes have defined the new face of Eastern Europe, crisscrossed by the suffering of millions of people. The result of Soviet occupation was implementation of communism in Eastern Europe by violent means and bloody repression of anti-communist resistance. The removal of actual and potential opponents was achieved through torture and re-education centers, extermination prisons, forced labor camps, political assassinations, summary executions, mass deportations. Amid a precarious peace secured during the Cold War by focusing on arms race, the price paid by the citizens of the communist states in Eastern Europe was extremely heavy: millions of deaths, tens of millions of human lives destroyed, national economies in tatters.

3. Freedom, a Fundamental Human Right

Beyond the Iron Curtain, countries of the “Free World” could only assist, most often helplessly, to the struggle of those for whom communism had become a fact. The only way of helping them seemed to be to raise awareness of human rights for all of those whose

freedoms were crushed by the communist regimes. Nowhere else in the world did the Human Rights Declaration have more influence and power than in the former communist countries. It represented the lever that led to the demolition of this system in Eastern European countries. Where does this influence come from? From the fact that the principles of this Declaration represent the fundamentals of human existence, regardless of race, religion or political affiliation. Their “policy” is the policy of normality, where each person is unique in everything that he does, thinks or feels. When oppression, censorship, terror seemed to ensure a smooth future for communism, the resulting hardship turned into true pedagogy of freedom, thus building solid characters, which can tear the *status quo* apart.

On August 1st, 1975 occurred an event of historical consequences. Thirty-three European countries, together with the US and Canada, signed the Final Act of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, not just ratifying the inviolability of state borders at the end of the Second World War, but also including a so-called “third basket” concerning the free circulation of ideas and people.

The Helsinki Act was considered by the leaders of the USSR and of other communist countries in Eastern Europe to be a great victory, consecrating the borders of the Communist Empire established by force at the end of the Second World War. The democrat intellectuals however understood the chance they were being given: in August 1976, Workers’ Defense Committee (KOR) was founded in Poland. In Czechoslovakia, in January 1977, 238 personalities signed Charter 77 demanding the implementation of the third basket of the Helsinki agreement. In 1978, again in Czechoslovakia, VOWS was formed, the defense committee of those who suffered unjustly. In 1978, in Hungary, the Baltic States, and Russia reflection groups arose around dissident philosophers and writers, scientists and artists.

4. Culture of Freedom Defeats Dictatorship’s Tanks

The fall of communism was, of all things, an ideological collapse that prepared the political collapse of dictatorships in most countries of the former Soviet Bloc. Culture played a fundamental role in this context. Parallel to the official speech, an “underground” speech was created, which was meant to denounce deception and falsity and to reject those who “stopped thinking”. The danger for the super-armed Soviet Empire of a “cold” or “hot” war did not come from the West, which was otherwise successfully confronted. The danger did not come from the “American missiles”. It came from the intellectuals in their own countries, despised by the members of the communist apparatus. The danger came through the “word” of the democrat intellectuals and through their “writings” illegally disseminated to citizens of their countries, tricking surveillance and censorship.

In 1999 I awarded the gold presidential medal “Anniversary of a decade since the collapse of communism in Central and South-Eastern Europe” to Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, and His Holiness Pope John Paul II. The former President of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, joined them as well, for the role that the “Glasnost” policy played in the awakening of the oppressed nations in the USSR. However, Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempt to reform communism in the late 80s failed miserably, confirming the certainty many of the intellectuals of the former Soviet Bloc had from the first moment—that the communist system cannot be reformed, but only destroyed.

The effects of the humanist speeches of the democrat intellectuals appeared before long. Movements such as the “Polish Summer” or the “Prague Spring” prepared the final collapse of the communist regimes in the early 90s. An ideology for which human rights are almost absent could not maintain its influence indefinitely. The student riots during the spring of 1968 in Poland and the Prague Spring demonstrated that young people could no longer endure the communist lies. The echoes of these movements were felt in Romania as well, where they took the form of the miners’ riots on Jiu Valley, in 1977, or the workers’ riot in Brasov, in 1987. Suffering, long used as a terrible tool of control and oppression, had become the gateway to freedom. In 1989, when millions of workers, on whose behalf the communist dictatorships claimed to be governing, crossed this gate towards freedom, and the regimes suddenly collapsed, mostly through peaceful revolution.

5. Crossing the Post-totalitarian Desert

For those who experienced communism and had to live through the post-communist transition period, nothing is more true and instructive than the reading of *The Exodus*. We understand best why it took 40 years for the Hebrew people to reach the Holy Land, what is the meaning of the worship of the golden calf, the temptation of collective debauchery, violence and treason, the need of a Table of Laws and the punishment for failing to comply with the Ten Commandments.

The collapse of the communist dictatorships in the USSR and in South-Eastern Europe and their replacement with democratic regimes avoided military confrontations and huge casualties. For the younger generation liberated from the communist constraints, the struggles of their parents might seem an issue more connected to the past, as their present is marked by a different type of political, economic and social crisis than the hardships and lack of freedom of previous generation. Nevertheless, those who still carry the memory of that era are the main artisans of tackling the human rights issue from a contemporary perspective.

The horrors of the bygone era have left their mark in the collective memory of the entire ex-communist space. The millions of dead people from the communist camps might seem just statistical data for some contemporaries, but historical memory appears to be the element explaining why citizens from former communist countries refuse to support totalitarian approaches, regardless of the coat they are wearing. The pedagogy of freedom needs a memory of suffering because, as in the case of health, we perceive the value of freedom only when we no longer have it. The question is: what will happen when the last survivors of the gulags disappear?

6. Democracy as a Power Sharing Tool

In order to avoid the return of totalitarian systems, the need to restore or to introduce the separation of powers has been keenly questioned. The principle of the separation of power is meant to put a barrier to the desire for seizing power and safeguarding it by any means.

In 1991-1992, when I was a professor at an American University on the East Coast, I had the opportunity to visit the memorial houses of the founding fathers of the US democracy. In each of these austere and modest houses, there were Greek tragedies in the libraries and a Bible on the nightstand. I believe that a tenacious reading of the Old and New Testament made them understand the true nature of the human being. Its struggle between good and evil.

It is risky to establish, for the defense of democracy, a single consensus around the idea of good. We can suspect that, for centuries to come, each society will have its own idea of its earthly and spiritual wellbeing. Trying to standardize these ideas begs for the establishment of a unique thinking and is only multiplying sources of tension. Political doctrines, symbolic contexts, local traditions and belief systems are irreducible. There are, therefore, rightful suspicions to any syncretistic project capable of considering the uniqueness of these orations and representations as relative. Nobody—politician, thinker, religious leader or ordinary man—is willing to sacrifice their identity. We cannot discuss effectively when the interlocutor senses the danger of losing his identity. And nothing authorizes us to claim that our offer is superior in absolute terms, to that made by others. On the other hand, no one can claim today to reduce the ensemble of humanity to one's own political, economic, cultural or religious denominator.

It seems more reasonable, since we cannot always identify the common good, to identify common evil for starters. It is in the interest of all nations to meet on the rejection ground of what they consider intolerable. I am sure that the majority of us refuse war, terrorism, torture, pollution, xenophobia, racism, genetic manipulation, minors' exploitation, social exclusion, famine, and professional discrimination based on sex, religion or ethnicity. We have the duty to diagnose these pathologies together, as we can together heal the wounds they continue to cause.

Unfortunately, I found that democracy is not a perennial ideal of the human being, but rather a dream of those deprived of it. Democracy is however the best power-sharing tool. Power is one of the strongest motivations of human actions. It can become a dangerous drug for those who have it. From my life experience, I believe that power related to a head of state is merely a conjuncture or an illusion.

The moral value of power appears only in the confrontation between this formal power and the person who temporarily holds it. Is the person in power dominated by power or can he or she dominate it through wisdom and common sense? The head of state position can, in truth, transform existence into destiny only if the difficult cohabitation between ideal and real can produce a significant change in the history of a nation.

7. “Free World”: Peace through Democracy

The European Union was born as a political project at the end of the Second World War, when the destructive capacity of humans managed to exceed even the Apocalypse as it was presented. It was conceived in Western Europe, out of the need to overcome the hardship of tens of millions of people, victims of the Nazi totalitarian ideology and has shown that after Europe unleashed two world wars, democracy could ensure peace in a free world for seven decades. I had the opportunity to participate, this time directly, alongside intellectuals from Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and the Baltic States, in the democracy expansion project for Central and South-Eastern Europe. Democracy offered then a perspective for the people traumatized by the communist tyranny. Democracy based on moral principles continues to be a solution even today, where totalitarian regimes still exist, where sufferings must be overcome and reconciliation must be achieved, and I am now engaged in this project with all my strength.

Human rights are today perceived as the key to mutual understanding and acceptance. Intransigence against all discrimination, freedom of expression, excluding any attempt at anti-democratic governance, moving from condemning the ultranationalist political speech down to actual fight against terrorism, are the results of this new manner of understanding reality. In one word, the human person has reclaimed his rights, occupying again the central place from where he has been evacuated through the communist ideology. But beyond this optimistic image of the post-communist society, we must not lose sight of the fact that the perception of the ideal of freedom, achieved through long and heavy suffering, can be distorted: the excess of idealization can transfer the foundations of freedom as they are conveyed in the Declaration of Human Right in the utopian sphere; ignoring this ideal and especially the pedagogy of suffering can cause an irreparable rift between the values of the past and the desire of the present to affirm itself; its formalization can move the poles of interest and action to pseudo value, falsity and imposture. For each one of the countries from the former communist bloc, understanding the lesson of genuine freedom represents the foundation on which they can build their own identity in the new society of the United Europe. Without ignoring the past, we must not lose sight of the fact that this is more of a guide rather than a goal we need to strive for. We cannot sit motionless in a fast changing world, but forgetting the lessons of history is always a mistake.

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8. Freedom and Bread

Debating the relations between power and freedom also targets the distribution of wealth. In *The Karamazov Brothers* by Dostoyevsky, Ivan tells Alyosha that if people were asked to choose between freedom and bread they would choose bread. This is also the psychological foundation on which totalitarian regimes ground themselves, in order to obtain a consensual obedience. A significant part of the population in the former communist countries regrets the times when they had poorly paid but safe jobs, lived in miserable conditions but in houses received by government allocation and they were given minimum food rationed by cards. The most important psychological element stopping rebellion was, paradoxically, the fact that everyone was equally poor and they did not feel humiliated in relation to the others. The comeback of neo-communist parties is based on this nostalgia.

In the democratic societies with market economy, freedom is followed by a chase after material goods that creates significant differences between the rich and the poor. These differences are often not correlated with the quality and quantity of work performed and with the contribution to the general welfare of the society. Many times these realities overwhelm the ones who believed in the ideals of democratic principles in the Western World.

On the other hand, according to libertarians, anything added to the opportunities for economic growth raises welfare, and it is normal for some to win more than others. Keith Dowding, professor at the London School of Economics, distinguishes between power and chance and concludes that some groups get what they want more often than others because of the manner in which society is structured. Based on the non-cooperative game theory,

he proves that distribution of wealth brought by economic growth can be used in different ways so that it can benefit more people and that local communities can limit the systematic lack of corporations. Through greater transparency in the governing process and the “hidden relations” governments have with corporations, more fair governance methods can be reached.

9. Freedom and Democracy

To begin with, we can try to distinguish between freedom as a fundamental human right and two other concepts that mobilize the energy of the civil society, such as the rule of law and democracy. Following the experience under the communist regime, we can understand the ease of the totalitarian regimes in accepting the “rule of law” principle, by this understanding compliance with their own laws. I saw how the “free elections” slogan, voiced in front of the tanks and weapons of the communist repression apparatus, can be used to seize power by the former communist nomenclature or new oligarchs. I saw how a “showcase democracy” can disguise real democracy. I saw how the manipulation of public opinion through “free press” owned by oligarchs can be more efficient in the market economy and democracy than the communist propaganda disseminated by official media of the totalitarian regime. I saw how the authors of crimes and perpetrators against their own people can escape criminal liability by prescription because agreements on “genocide” are not applicable to them and general recognition of the “crimes against humanity” is delayed.

In a real democracy, a human being must have both freedom and responsibility. If we discuss the moral values in politics, the best form of capitalization is the one that provides the people maximum cohesion and harmony in given conditions. This does not mean a formal democracy where, through ballot, people are apparently given all powers, but they are deprived of their legitimate rights, through a set of abusive laws, regulations and state interventions.

In a good political regime, citizens enjoy maximum individual and community freedom, the state plays the role of the coordinator and referee, and selection is made based on personal merit, based on a social service and genuine commitment. Such a regime is far from the type of democracy where responsibilities are only assigned by ballot.

Freedom regained through sacrifice has created not only rights, but also responsibilities, which we gradually familiarize ourselves with, in often difficult social and psychological conditions. The citizens of the former communist countries have been deprived of all their rights, including the right to live, for half a century. Their lesson in suffering and struggle is for each of us a first step towards understanding the greater lesson of freedom: respecting each other’s freedom.

10. The Decay of Western civilization and the Vulnerability of Democracy

The Western civilization is going through a period of decay marked by the shift from a real economy to a speculative economy, from welfare society to consumer society, by the degradation of the political system through populism and demagoguery, disappearance of visionary leaders and their replacement with managers of presidential or governmental terms, concealing reality through “politically correct” language, involution from the democratization of culture and education to their massification at the cost of quality, mass-media embezzlement,

once the “watchdog” of democracy to commercial objectives, acceptance of the “positive” manipulation by the intellectual elites to the detriment of scientific truth, to provide funding for research and environmental protection. All these have a long-term effect on the democratic conscience. Individual freedom and democracy can only survive in societies represented by citizens with awareness and not by an amorphous mass of easily manipulated individuals.

Western democracy is currently threatened by the increasingly visible presence of a toxic triangle at the top: administration—corporations—mass media.

In 2012, I was invited by Jakub Klepal, executive director of the Forum, to the Forum 2000 Prague Conference, the first one to be held since Vaclav Havel’s demise. During the interactive discussion between the speakers on the stage in the conference room of the Zofin Palace, I asked one of the American political scientists there, why is there a need to spend an enormous amount, three billion dollars, for the US presidential campaign. After a short pause, he replied that this amount is required in order to communicate with the voters. A stupefying answer, considering the huge incomes that the television gets from advertising related to the candidates’ shows. A dismaying answer also came from the US Supreme Court, which decided to remove the limit on corporate election contributions. The cancelation of the “door to door” campaigns, only present in the electoral textbooks, after Carter’s term, and the supremacy of TV campaign, organized by advertising companies that sell candidates the same way they sell toothpaste or cars, narrowed the field of choice.

The presidential candidates resemble each other increasingly more, have increasingly reduced obligations towards the citizens and increased obligations towards corporations, drawing a dangerous road from democracy to plutocracy, which not only affect the American economy but also the global economy. The sideslip of the political speech is also encouraged by the lack of “culture of democracy” by the utopian presentation of democracy as power of all people, an ideal model nowhere reached to this day. We overlook the fact that on the long and difficult road from tyranny to freedom, the two classical models of democracy—Athenian and American—legislated slavery and forbade voting rights for women. Invoking the “demo”-“kratos” (people power) etymology, leads to a false perception of the Athenian model, whereas in reality the power of decision did belong only to free men and was also limited to the ones who were cultivated and paid their taxes (the poor being excluded).

The historical model of American democracy did not grant, at its beginnings, any rights not only to black slaves, but also to Jews and Catholics. If we comprehend that today’s American democracy is the result of a long evolution it is clear that many abuses lay in the way of the democracy adopted by societies that have never in their history known freedom. The assimilation of democratic conscience needs more time than the time required for the adoption of democratic laws and institutions. Let us remember that when the American system of power separation was exported to Latin America or South-East Asia, it invariably led to totalitarian regimes, until a democratic conscience capable of ensuring the functioning of democratic institutions was formed.

Another danger is the attraction of direct democracy, exercised through referendum or under street pressure, which is dangerous because it leads to quasi-totalitarian regimes. Most authoritarian leaders in Africa or Asia have obtained power through referendum and reinforced it through rigged elections. I find Robert Dahl’s approach much more appropriate

to contemporary realities. He starts from political freedom and political power relationship, suggests polyarchy as the solution, which he defines as a political regime where political power is delegated, controlled, and the fundamental rights of citizens are protected.

Democratic culture is threatened at the beginning of the third millennium also by the dominant postmodern culture that seems to invalidate the appeal of the ideals of the European Union's founding fathers. Political leaders, like ordinary citizens, seem to ignore the social significance of governance by thrift, virtue and moderation, essential moral values. Perhaps exactly a return to these values, given that the social costs of governance are supported increasingly harder, where society is rapidly being divided between the privileged and the disadvantaged, could be a reconstruction tool for politics on other grounds than the collectivism imposed during communism or the selfish individualism promoted in capitalism. A return to moral values could be an alternative to the careless or contemptuous attitude towards the needs and the requirements of those treated only as a mass of voters or producers and consumers of goods and information. Paul Valéry justly condemned a governance where politics is just "the art of consulting people in relation to affairs they do not understand and preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them".

The twentieth century has brought an extraordinary freedom for all racial, ethnic, sexual, professional and political minorities. What has been lost is solidarity. Solidarity, which is the supreme form of freedom and the foundation of social power that we need, not only starts from mutual understanding or even from peoples' sense of compassion, but from their participation in a joint work in the service of a common ideal. Reading Saint-Exupéry once again, we will remember that "love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction".

11. Freedom to Choose

Democracy as a system for ensuring individual freedom is a fragile product that must be defended from the dangers represented by the tyranny of a unique leader, the tyranny of the majority against minorities, and even the tyranny of minorities that were oppressed in the past.

Between freedom and tyranny, democracy is necessary but it is not a sufficient premise to ensure a fair division of power.

For the intellectual elites that build ideologies and social projects, democracy involves a permanent choice between utopia and realism. Scientists preoccupied by social issues must not forget that in science utopia is the mother of progress, but in politics utopia always and everywhere has been the mother of criminal totalitarian regimes.

Those elected in high leadership roles, based on free elections, find themselves, when making decisions, facing a fundamental choice: whether they want to do something for the good of those who elected them (sometimes against their own will) or want to be re-elected. Most often, the team they are working with or the party that promoted them will pressurize them to adopt those measures that would lead to their re-election, in order to perpetuate their power.

In the long run, for the survival or the quality of democracy, the essential factor is the democratic conscience of those who chose freely. In *The Karamazov Brothers*, Dostoyevsky

tells us that: “**man** prefers stillness, and even death, to the freedom of solitary choice between good and evil. Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering”. Dostoyevsky wrote these lines in the nineteenth century, from the perspective of people who never knew individual freedom or democracy.

One hundred years later, in December 1989, young people who demonstrated against the communist dictatorship in the University Square in Bucharest, did not ask for bread, or for higher wages. They voiced “Free elections!”, “Freedom of the press!”, “Freedom we love you, we die for you!” and “We will die and we will be free!” At midnight, the repression troops went in with tanks against the unarmed demonstrators, who did not threaten any governmental institution, but offered flowers to the military. Dozens of people were killed and thousands arrested and tortured. Those arrested would have been killed too, as it happened 5 days prior to these events in Timisoara, if not for half a million of Bucharest citizens who surrounded the tanks and the symbols of communist regime the next day. The incredible lack of fear and the solidarity of people forced the dictator to flee and freedom was gained. In one of history’s brightest moments, people were willing to die for the ideals of freedom and democracy.

The answer regarding the future of freedom and democracy is the choice of each generation and, in the end, is the choice of each of us.

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