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Europe - how many futures?

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Europe — How Many Futures?

In den zurückliegenden Monaten ergaben sich viele Gelegenheiten, die ungemein rasch sich verändernden Zeitläufe in historischer Sicht zu interpretieren. Wer das zwischen Herbst 1989 und Frühjahr 1990 in Abständen tat, erfuhr, wie schnell die Ereignisse ihre Interpretation überholen können. Es mag dennoch erlaubt sein, in dieser Festschrift für Péter Hanák einen Kommentar zu veröffentlichen, der zu einem bestimmten Termin (23. März 1990) für einen besonderen Zweck (Podiumsdiskussion unter dem oben genannten Titel auf der Zweijahres-Tagung des Council for European Studies, Washington D. C.) formuliert wurde. Daß die Thematik Péter Hanáks Interesse findet, kann ich hoffen; es ist auch die seine. Meine Bemerkungen zu „Mitteleuropa“ wird er vermutlich für zu skeptisch halten, zu sehr von der westlichen Perspektive geprägt. Die deutsche Entwicklung seit Herbst 1989 wird im folgenden besonders beachtet. Mir ist bewußt, daß sie ohne den vorangehenden Wandel in Ungarn nicht möglich gewesen wäre: eine zusätzliche Begründung dafür, die folgenden Überlegungen dem ungarischen Historiker Péter Hanák zum Jubiläum zu präsentieren, in Freundschaft und mit großem Respekt.

I want to start with a note of caution. If we had been on a panel with such a topic one year ago, probably none of us would have predicted the current situation nor anticipated its possibility. The events of the last months took us by surprise, and there may be further surprises ahead. We do not know the future nor the futures of Europe, but we have to talk about it.

Europe — how many futures? In other words, do we expect a common, relatively unified development of the European countries and regions, or do we rather expect new disparities and divisions between different parts of Europe? Can one expect one European future or different futures in Europe at the same time?

I.

The French Revolution of 1789 has deepened and sharpened the divisions within Europe. It led to a decade of wars, and for more than a century to come, the development patterns of Europe East of the Rhine strongly differed from Western Europe, not the least

because of the fact that the French revolutionary model was not followed, but reacted to and partly rejected by most of the societies further East. Here was an early root of the "German divergence from the West", which reached its catastrophic climax in the 1930s and 40s.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was the basis for a new and even harsher intra-European divide. As one of its consequences a conflict between alternative economic orders, opposite political systems and hostile ideologies emerged, a systemic conflict, which fundamentalized the competition of the Great Powers. It reached its climax in the Cold War, it divided Europe in two parts, and this new dividing line relativized the old line of tension between most of Germany and the West.

In contrast, the East European and East Central European revolutions of 1989 have helped to unify Europe. The reintroduction of decentralized market economies and the restructuring of the political systems according to liberal, democratic and pluralist standards have so far only begun in the Eastern part of Europe, and these changes move with very different speed in the different countries. Still, even now, with respect to constitutional principles and basic political philosophies Europe is less divided and less fragmented than at any time in the last two centuries.

After all, the most recent revolutions, in contrast to those of 1917 and 1789, were not led and propelled forward by new, progressive utopias, nor did the vision of completely new alternatives emerge in the course of events. In fact, as to political theory, the deep reaching changes we have witnessed in East Central Europe have produced nothing new. There has been a deplorable lack of substance in all talks about the desirability of a "socialism with a human face", understood as a "third way" between state socialism of the East and regulated capitalism of the West. And the idea of "Mitteleuropa" has never gained a clear economic or political content. Rather, the East European revolutions of 1989 were primarily motivated and guided by democratic and liberal ideas, by the demand for basic human rights, for the principles of the civil society, for a pluralistic polity with limited government, i.e. by demands which have been part of Western political thought since the Enlightenment at least. Intellectuals did play a role in these revolutions, but new political and philosophical ideas did not. Both intellectually and with respect to the structural changes demanded and achieved, these were revolutions of catching up with the West — so far. To the extent that they succeeded they helped to promote the emergence of a general European consensus. This pattern, by the way, does not set Europe apart from North America. This new European unity is supported by supra-national communication, increasingly by economic ties, traveling and social similarities. It is also characterized by pressing common problems, in the field of ecology for instance, and with respect to the Third World.

Consequently, will there basically be *one* European future, after we have had several — related, but different — European pasts over the last decades? Not necessarily, because the breakdown of old divisions may give room for the crystallization and manifestation of new differences and subdivisions, which have survived in the past as mere potentialities. I want to say a word on "Mitteleuropa" and a few words on national identities.

II.

One can doubt whether there was much reality behind the concept of „Mitteleuropa” (Central Europe) during the last years and decades. Whether one accepted the smaller version of the concept, restricting it to Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Austria; or whether one took a more generous view including Poland and the two Germanies, in any case one got a collection of countries with different domestic systems and different military status. One may concede that these countries shared certain communalities, with respect to their lack of power, their history, culture, their location near the East—West split and a resulting accumulation of problems, perhaps a common desire to regain some autonomy vis-à-vis the respective hegemonic powers. But one may doubt how far these common features really carried, given the all-pervasive, ultimately decisive bipolar East—West divide which defined differences, alliances and tension in Europe and other parts of the world.

Once this East—West bipolarity is relativized, and if its structuring power continues to be reduced, there may be new space, enlarged scope, improved opportunities for a Central European identity to really emerge and structure the sense of belonging of those living in the region.

It would be a region East of Germany and West of the Soviet Union with a fluid line of differentiation towards the South East and the South, a collection of countries with a limited size and with a difficult history of ethnic diversity, mixed nationalities and dependence on different hegemonic powers, with common ambivalent memories of the Habsburg Empire. Most of these countries would share a relative economic backwardness compared with the Western neighbours, and consequently they would share common interests following from this economic „have-not” or „have-little” situation. These countries may define their situation by not belonging to the spheres of the big neighbours in the East and the West — Russia and Germany —, although strongly interested in friendly and profitable relations with both of them. Of course this would be a notion of Central Europe excluding the unified Germany which will be too big, too wealthy, too influential and perhaps too Western for being included in Central Europe, particularly since its inclusion would always imply the danger of hegemony. But will these common traits of the Central European countries be strong enough to overcome the strong economic, cultural and national differences and tensions between them? Will „Mitteleuropa” ever turn from a category or an ideology into a psychological and political reality?

III.

The breakdown of the East—West bipolar structure and the ensuing unification of Europe is likely to offer new opportunities for the revigoration of national differences and identities as well. It is one of the most remarkable experiences of the last decade and of the most recent months to observe the continuous vitality and the reaffirmation of old national identities in East-Central Europe, within the supranational Soviet empire, and now in Germany, too. Given the unquestioned survival of the national principle in France, England, the United States and elsewhere, this reassertion of national identities in Central and Eastern Europe can be seen as a return to normalcy. It is return to normalcy, however, which may cost a high price still to be determined. Can it become explosive again? Here I should like to confine myself to a few remarks on the German case.

The first phase of the East-German turn-over — September to November 1989 — did not take place under a national banner, rather it was motivated by and framed in liberal and democratic aims, supported by economic considerations. However, the challenging existence of another German state in the West played a major role from the beginning. It was a specific mixture of „exit” and „voice” — to use Hirschman’s dichotomy — which characterized the East-German revolution and distinguished it from what happened elsewhere in East-Central Europe. In Poland, Hungary and later on in Czechoslovakia national symbols played a larger role from the beginning, and in those countries the exitus to the West was of much less importance than in East-Germany.

Nevertheless after the fall of the wall on November 9, 1989, the quest for national identity emerged in East-Germany as well. Like in 1848 — but in sharp contrast to Wilhelminei Weimar and Nazi Germany — national aims turned out to be compatible and intertwined with liberal, constitutional, democratic aims — not with socialist aims, however. One can see the quest for East-German unity with West-Germany as a way to secure the results of the preceding revolution.

As usual there was something else behind the quest for national unity. In this case it was the desire of most East-Germans to reduce the inequality of life-chances as quickly and as thoroughly as possible, to make good for economic and social inferiority which they perceived as such by comparing themselves to the West-Germans. They want quick unification as the safest way towards economic and social improvement, and with this calculation they may be right, in the long run.

There is not much enthusiasm, not much nationalism in the West-German air, except in parts of the political class. Most people in the West seem to fear the costs of unification. But apart from a tiny minority nobody really rejects unification. It seems the natural thing to do. On the basis of a common national identity claims are raised on one side, responsibilities accepted on the other. Here is the surprise and the basic theoretical problem. In spite of the devastating experiences with extreme nationalism up to 1945, in spite of forty years of different, divergent histories in the two Germanies, in spite of the deep rupture of the German national tradition, in spite of all the supra-national hopes, institutions, ties and problems of the present age — nevertheless basic national loyalties and beliefs have tacitly survived. They have survived not only on the right of the political spectrum but also on the left, they can be used to legitimize political actions including redistribution, and they do not seem to need explicit justification themselves. Within limits still to be tested, they are self-evident, in Germany like in other parts of Europe.

History is not likely to repeat itself. In our part of the world the time of extreme nationalism seems to have gone. Still, one can never be sure. And the consequences are all but clear. Will there be a new divergence of Germany from the West? Will the process of European unification slow down? What type of international security system can replace the two alliances if they continue to erode? How can we avoid to fall back on old power politics between sovereign states which have liberated themselves from the hegemony of the superpowers? Have we observed the end of a specific type of dictatorial state socialism, or have we observed a decisive defeat of socialism in general?

There was much to celebrate last year, in Warsaw and Budapest, in Berlin, Prague and elsewhere. Progress was paramount, who could deny it. In a way we observed the vindication of modernization theory, by peaceful revolutionary practice. But there were costs and retrogressive elements involved, the relative weight of which remains to be seen in the futures of Europe.