

IDEOLOGICAL STORMS

Intellectuals and the Totalitarian Temptation

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The Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies (under the directorship of Professor Vladimir Tismaneanu) at the University of Maryland (College Park) and the Romanian Cultural Institute in collaboration with the Cold War International History Project (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars) began, in 2007, a series of conferences in Washington D.C. focused on providing, by means of reflection on watershed moments of post-1945 history, an overview of the global dynamics characteristic for the 20th century and its lessons and impact upon the 21st. In the previous years, the central topics were centered on the Sovietization of Eastern Europe, the promises of 1968, the meanings of 1989, and on the process of overcoming a traumatic past in post-authoritarian societies.

In 2011, the organizers wish to create a thematic framework that will provide an overview of the main issues raised by the temptation of the extremes in the 20th century and their weight upon the contemporary world. We aim to create a forum that will discuss the political passions, radicalism, utopian ideals, and their catastrophic consequences in the twentieth century's experiments in massive social engineering. This initiative is an attempt to chart the map of and explain what Hannah Arendt called "the ideological storms" of a century second to none in terms of violence, hubris, ruthlessness, and human sacrifices.

Generations of intellectuals hastened to annihilate their dignity in an apocalyptic race for ultimate certitudes on either side of the political spectrum. The whole heritage of Western skeptical rationalism was easily dismissed in the name of the revealed light emanating from the various revolutionary circles expounding salvific dreams founded upon the all-out transformation of human society. The Revolution was idealized into a cathartic event, the advent of a new age of social justice or of a new international order. Ideological claims of scientific infallibility were added into the mix. The result was a gnostic vision that explained history and society in almost geometric formulas. All these factors indeed revealed the process of intellectuals' becoming blind by love of determinism in an age of extremes.

At the same time, the intellectual history of the twentieth century can be written as a series of political disenchantments with doctrines that promised universal emancipation or national rebirth, but led instead to terror, injustice, inequality, and abysmal human rights abuses. The twilight of grand recits is, at least in its implications, a grandiose fin de partie: we see the final agony of a hopeless attempt to overcome the limits of human nature by imagining a total break in the chain of those often strange and inexplicable occurrences that for want of a better term we have come to call "history".

The 20th century was ravished by those projects that attempted to obliterate the distance between the political and Utopia. Fascism, communism, as well as various types of ethnocentric, palingenetic nationalisms advocated radical anthropological projects that ended up in dictatorship if not altogether genocidal regimes. Indeed, the memory of 21st century democracies is one unavoidably marked and altered by the trauma of mass murder. Many a times intellectuals were central actors of these historical dramas: as central decision-makers or legitimators; as victims or apostates; or, as by-standers or observers. The last century can be described as a story of the demise of certainty as politics. Intellectuals have constantly struggled to provide answers to the challenges of modernity. From both extreme left and right, the yearning for an absolute reshaping of human condition inspired the frantic endeavors to transcend what appeared to be the philistine carcass of liberal institutions and values. Ideology was there to justify violence, to sacralize it and to discard all opposite views as effete, sterile, dangerous, and fundamentally false. A fundamentally binary logic was at work: the Other was by definition not only outsider but an enemy too. Moreover, his/her potentially disturbing effect or influence upon the imagined perfect order where Utopia had materialized into politics imposed exemplary solutions. In these readings, the achievement of modernity was premised by the plasticity of human nature and by the possibility of transforming it in accordance with a utopian blueprint.

Despite decline of fascism and communism, the utopian reservoir of humanity has not been completely exhausted: refurbished ideologies have resurfaced, among them populism, chauvinism, and fundamentalism of different shades. The ghost of the future conjured up by young Karl Marx in the Communist Manifesto has been replaced by revamped specters of the past, summoned into the present by disconcerted political actors, unable to come to terms with the hardships of the democratic project and the challenges of (post)modernity. A world full of dangers has come about with traditional lines of demarcation completely disintegrated, and new forms of radicalism simmering under the carapace of pseudo stability. With the breakdown of communist regimes a crucial threshold was crossed, but the readiness to indulge in ideological fallacies is not totally extinct. Historical hubris has not vanished, anguishes and malaise remain and can lead to new follies.

The present conference aims to approach last century's ideological storms on a global level. Despite a bias toward Europe, the organizers wish to situate the dynamics on this geographical area in relationship with the passion for Utopia and the revolutionization of the political in the US, China and Latin America. Following the direction of our previous events, we wish to promote a transnational, comparative, and interdisciplinary dialogue among the participants. One of the main effects of the turn of the century de-radicalization across the world was the need to redefine the relations between intelligentsia and the liberal tradition, including the legacies of Western humanism. Post-ideological age allowed for a reconsideration of the political and moral responsibilities of intellectuals, including a refusal to indulge in long-cherished fantasies of absolute repudiation of the liberal democratic status quo. The conveners believe that the lessons of the twentieth century apply regardless of country or political system. Understanding the temptation of radical ideologies is inextricably linked to the role of recent history in a globalized world. Contemporary dilemmas of a globalized world can only benefit from being perceived against the grain of forgetting the fallacies of the past.

Last but not least, following the practice of the past four conferences, the organizers wish to integrate the case of Romania within the larger discussion of the role of intellectuals and their relationship with fascism, communism, and nationalism. Since 2004, this country has experienced resurgence in the process of dealing with its traumatic and guilty past. The creation of the International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust and the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship have produced two fundamental documents that opened a new phase in this country's inquiry of its history. Far from being an exceptional case in the region, the Romanian one is symptomatic of the responsibility and impact upon the country's development of local intellectuals' involvement with the follies of radical thought during the last century in Eastern Europe. Romania, just as the other cases we wish to discuss, reinforces the argument for a unitary, cross-cultural history of the intellectual involvement with, departure from, and opposition to the extremes of the recent past.