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## **The Intellectuals and Socialism: As Seen from a Post-Communist Country Situated in Predominantly Post-Democratic Europe**

1. I take it for granted that this audience knows the slightly provocative (because mercilessly generalizing) but very powerful and important, now already 56 years old article **“The Intellectuals and Socialism”**. This audience certainly knows as well that it was written by F. von Hayek and that it was published in **the very confused and very pro-socialist post-second world war era, when the overall belief in the benefits of social engineering and of economic planning and, at the same time, the disbelief in free markets were at their heights.**

I suppose that many of us still remember Hayek’s definition of intellectuals (we would probably say public intellectuals nowadays) as “the professional second-hand dealers in ideas”, who are proud of not “possessing special knowledge of anything in particular”, who do not take “direct responsibility for practical affairs” and who need not “even be particularly intelligent” to perform their “mission”. Hayek argued that they are satisfied with being “intermediary in the spreading of ideas” of original thinkers to the common people, whom they consider not being their equals.

**Hayek** was – more than half a century ago, which means before the current prevalence of electronic media – aware of the enormous power of intellectuals to shape public opinion and **warned us that “it is merely a question of time until the views held by the intellectuals become the governing force of politics”**. This is as valid today as it was when he wrote it.

The question is what kind of ideas is favoured by **the intellectuals**. The question is whether the intellectuals are neutral in their choice of ideas with which they are ready to deal with. Hayek argued that they are not. They do not hold or try to spread all kinds of ideas. They have very clear and, in some respect, very understandable preferences for some of them. **They prefer ideas, which give them jobs and income and which enhance their power and prestige.**

They, therefore, look for ideas with specific characteristics. **They look for ideas, which enhance the role of the state because the state is usually their main employer, sponsor or donator.** That is not all. According to Hayek “the power of ideas grows in proportion to their generality, abstractness, and even vagueness”. Hence it is not surprising that **the intellectuals are mostly interested in abstract, not directly implementable ideas.** This is also the way of thinking, in which they have comparative advantage. They are not good at details. They do not have ambitions to solve a problem. They are not interested in dealing with the everyday’s affairs of common citizens. Hayek put it clearly: “the intellectual, by his whole disposition, is

uninterested in technical details or practical difficulties.” **He is interested in visions and utopias** and because “socialist thought owes its appeal largely to its visionary character” (and I would add lack of realism and utopian nature), the intellectual tends to become a socialist.

In a similar way, Raymond Aron, in his famous essay “**The Opium of Intellectuals**”, analyzed not only the well-known difference between the revolutionary and reformist way of thinking but also – and this is more relevant in this context – **the difference between “prosaic” and “poetry”**. Whereas “the prosaic model of thinking lacks the grandeur of utopia” (Roger Kimball), **the socialist approach is – in the words of Aron – based “on the poetry of the *unknown*, of the future, of the absolute”**. **As I understand it, this is exactly the realm of intellectuals**. Some of us want to immediately add that “the poetry of the absolute is an inhuman poetry”.

2. As I said, the intellectuals want to increase their own prestige and power. When we, in the communist countries, came across the ideas of Hayek and Aron, we had no problems to understand their importance. They gave us the much needed explanation of **the somewhat peculiar prominence of intellectuals in our own society of that time**. Our intellectuals, of course, did not like to hear it and did not want to recognize it because their peculiar prominence coexisted with the very debilitating absence of intellectual freedom, which the intellectuals value very highly. That was, however, not the only argument. **The communist politicians needed their intellectual fellow-travelers. They needed their “dealings in ideas”, their “shaping of public opinion”, their apology of the inhuman, irrational and inefficient regime. They needed their ability to supply them with general, abstract and utopian ideas. They especially needed their willingness to deal with the hypothetical future instead of criticising the very much less rosy reality.**

The intellectuals at that time, and I do not have in mind the life in the years of Stalin’s terror, were not happy. They were deeply disappointed with their own economic well-being. They were frustrated by many constraints they had to face and follow. Their position in the communist society was, nevertheless, relatively high and, paradoxically, very prestigious (I have, of course, in mind their relative position). **The communist rulers, in their arbitrary and voluntaristic way of dealing with people, used and misused the intellectuals and were able to make them up for it. This brought the intellectuals in a very tricky position. They were not “valued” (or evaluated) by the invisible hand of the market but by the very visible hand of the rulers of that society.** To my great regret many intellectuals were not able (or did not want) to understand the dangerous implications of such an arrangement.

As a result of this, and, again, it was no great surprise to me, **after the fall of communism, in our suddenly free society, where many (if not all) previous constraints were removed practically over night, the first frustrated and openly protesting group were the intellectuals – “journalists, teachers, publicists, radio commentators, writers of fiction, and artists” (to quote Hayek). They were protesting against the unpleasant constraints created by the market. They found out very rapidly that the free society (and free markets) may not need so much of their service as they were used to in the past.** They especially understood that their valuation by the impersonal forces of supply and demand may be not only less favorable than their own self-valuation (and Robert Nozick is right when he says that “intellectuals feel they are the most valuable people”) but even less favorable than that of politicians and bureaucrats of the old regime. **They became, therefore, the first visible and noisy critics of our new free society we had been dreaming of having for decades.**

In their elitist criticism of the market, of the insufficiently “human” laws of supply and demand and of the prices, which were the outcome of nobody’s explicit decision and deliberation, they were – I have to admit – relatively successful. It should be made known that – especially at the beginning, but I am afraid it has not changed much – **they have been more critical of the market economy (and of the lack of redistribution in their favour) than the rest of our society** because – to their great surprise – the standard of life of ordinary people has been raised, at least relatively, more than theirs. Schumpeter was right when he, in 1942, in his “**Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy**”, made his well-known point that “the capitalist achievement does not typically consist in providing more silk stockings for queens, but in bringing them within the reach of factory girls in return for steadily decreasing amounts of effort.” That simple truth is something many intellectuals have not been ready or willing to accept.

**We, who are here today, know that the free market system does not reward most neither “the best nor the brightest” (John K. Williams), but those who – in whatever way and form – satisfy the tastes and preferences of others.** We agree with Hayek that “nobody can ascertain, save through the market, the size of an individual’s contribution to the overall product”. And we know that **the free market system does not typically reward those who are – in their own eyes – the most meritorious. Because the intellectuals value themselves very highly, they disdain the marketplace. Markets value them differently than their own eyes and, in addition to it, markets function nicely without their supervision. As a result, the**

**intellectuals are suspicious of free markets and prefer being publicly funded. That is another reason, why they are in favour of socialism.**

These arguments are not new but our experience in the first days after our – so called – Velvet Revolution was in this respect more than instructive. What actually happened was more textbook-like than anyone of us would had expected.

3. In the first decade of the 21th century we should not concentrate exclusively on socialism. There is a well-known saying that we should not fight the old, already non-existent battles. I find this point worth stressing **even if I do not want to say that socialism is definitely over**. There are, I believe, at least two arguments, which justify looking at other ideologies as well. The first is ***the difference between the hard and soft version of socialism and the second is the emergence of new “isms” based on similar illiberal or antiliberal views.***

As regards the first problem **we can probably confidently say that its “hard version” – communism – is over**. It is a great victory for us, but this victory should not demotivate us because the fall of communism does not automatically lead to a system we would like to have and live in. It is not a victory of ideas of classical (or European) liberalism.

**Fifteen years after the collapse of communism I am afraid, more than at the beginning of its softer (or weaker) version, of social-democratism, which has become – under different names, e.g. the welfare state or the soziale Marktwirtschaft – the dominant model of the economic and social system of current Western civilization. It is based on big and patronizing government, on extensive regulating of human behavior, and on large-scale income redistribution.**

As we see both in Europe and in America, the intellectuals love such a system. **It gives them money and an easy life. It gives them an opportunity to be influential and to be heard. The Western world is still affluent enough to be able to support and finance many of their unpractical and directly unpurposeful activities.** It can afford

the luxury of employing herds of intellectuals to use “poetry” for praising the existing system, for selling the concept of positive rights, for advocating constructivist human designs (instead of spontaneous human action), for promoting other values than freedom and liberty.

We need to understand **this contemporary version of world-wide socialism**, because our old concepts may omit some of the crucial features of what is around us just now. We may even find out that the continuous use of the term socialism can be misleading.

4. This brings me to another problem. After the complete discrediting of communism and in the moment of the undeniable crisis of the European social-democratism **the explicit socialism has become insufficiently attractive for most intellectuals**. Nowadays, it is difficult to find – in the West – an intellectual, who wants to be “in” and to have an influence, who would call himself a socialist. The explicit socialism has lost its appeal and we should not have it as the main rival to our ideas today.

**Illiberal ideas are becoming to be formulated, spread and preached under the name of ideologies or “isms”, which have – at least formally and nominally – nothing in common with the old-styled, explicit socialism.** These ideas are, however, in many respects similar to it. There is always a limiting (or constraining) of human freedom, there is always ambitious social engineering, there is always an immodest “enforcement of a good” by those who are anointed (T. Sowell) on others against their will, there is always the crowding out of standard democratic methods by alternative political procedures, and there is always the feeling of superiority of intellectuals and of their ambitions.

I have in mind **environmentalism** (with its Earth First, not Freedom First principle), **radical humanrightism** (based – as de Jasay precisely argues – on not distinguishing rights and rightism), **ideology of “civic society”** (or communitarism), which is nothing less than one version of post-Marxist collectivism which wants privileges for organized groups, and in consequence, a refeudalization of society. I also have in mind **multiculturalism, feminism, apolitical technocratism** (based on the resentment against politics and politicians), **internationalism** (and especially its European variant called Europeanism) and a rapidly growing phenomenon I call **NGOism**.

**All of them represent substitute ideologies for socialism. All of them give intellectuals new possibilities, new space for their activities, new niches in the market of ideas.** To face these new isms, to reveal

their true nature, and to be able to get rid of them, may be more difficult than in the past. It may be more complicated than fighting the old, explicit socialism. Everyone wants to have healthy environment; everyone wants to overcome loneliness of the fragmented post-modern society and to participate in positive activities of various clubs, **associations**, foundations and charity organizations; almost everyone is against discrimination based on race, religion or gender; many of us are against the extensive power of the state, etc. To demonstrate the dangers of these approaches, therefore, very often means blowing against the wind.

5. These alternative ideologies, in their unclear, unstable and yet undescribed potential synergy, are successful especially where there is no sufficient resistance to them, where they find a fertile soil for their flourishing, where they find a country (or the whole continent) where freedom (and free markets) have been heavily undermined by long lasting collectivistic dreams and experiences and where intellectuals have succeeded in getting and maintaining a very strong voice and social status. I have in mind, of course, rather Europe, than America. **It is Europe, where we witness the crowding out of democracy by post democracy**, where the EU dominance replaces democratic arrangements in the EU member countries, where the Hayek's "paragovernment", connected with organized (because organizable) interests is successful in guiding policy, and where even some of the liberals – in their justified criticism of the state – do not see the dangers of empty Europeanism and of a deep (and ever deeper) but only bureaucratic unification of the whole European continent. They applaud the growing formal opening of the continent, but do not see that **the elimination of some of the borders without actual liberalization of human activities "only" shifts governments upwards, which means to the level where there is no democratic accountability and where the decisions are made by politicians appointed by politicians, not elected by citizens in free elections.**

**The European constitution was an attempt to set up and consolidate such a system in a legal form. It was an attempt to constitute it. It is, hence, more than important that the French and Dutch referenda made an end to it, that they interrupted the seemingly irreversible process toward "ever-closer Europe" and that they set into motion a hopefully serious discussion – in Eurospeak it is called "a reflection period"**. I do not assume that this permitted reflection organized from above will go far enough to reveal deeply rooted causes of the current European problems. It, nevertheless, opened the door. **We should use this opportunity for reminding our fellow citizens what makes our society**

**free, democratic and prosperous.**

It is a political system, which must not be destroyed by a postmodern interpretation of

**human rights (with its stress on positive rights, with its dominance of group rights and entitlements over individual rights and responsibilities and with its denationalization of citizenship),**

by weakening of democratic institutions, which have irreplaceable roots exclusively on the territory of the states, by the “multiculturally” caused loss of a needed coherence of various social entities, and by continental-wide rent-seeking (made possible when decision-making is done at a level which is very far from the individual citizens and where the dispersed voters are even more dispersed than in sovereign countries).

**It is an economic system,** which must not be damaged by excessive government regulation, by fiscal deficits, by heavy bureaucratic control, by attempts to perfect markets by means of constructing the “optimal” market structures, by huge subsidies to privileged or protected industries and firms, by labor market rigidities, etc.

**It is a social system,** which must not be wrecked by all imaginable kinds of disincentives, by more than generous welfare payments, by large scale redistribution, by many forms of government paternalism.

**It is a system of ideas,** which will be based on freedom, personal responsibility, individualism, natural caring for others and genuine moral conduct of life.

**It is a system of relations and relationships of individual countries,** which must not be based on false internationalism, on supranational organizations and on misunderstanding of globalization and of externalities but which will be based on good neighborliness of free, sovereign countries and on international pacts and agreements.

The founding fathers of the Mont Pelerin Society, Hayek and Friedman, together with others, always insisted on fighting for what seemed politically impossible. We should keep doing the same.

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