

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

History's House of Mirrors

by Chandler Rosenberger

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Dear Peter:

History is a house of mirrors. Any citizen looks at his or her nation through the events that have shaped it. Every event is seen in terms of the one before it; some events acquire significance only for how they were later reversed or relived. It is from this reflection of reflections that every national identity emerges. Outsiders might find that identity to be grotesque or inaccurate, unduly shaped by fears of another or pride in perversity. But there is no point in saying history is too much with others, since every nation turns to such an array for a sense of its present self. We should not be throwing stones at nations obsessed with their pasts. We live in looking-glass houses too.

But just because all homes are made of history does not mean all are as well designed. For the emerging nations of Central Europe, the past is too often warped by pseudoscientific Marxism, chauvanistic nationalism or a combination of the two. To understand is not to forgive, but it is to understand. We owe our newly-liberated neighbors that much.

Sadly, the West has fallen far short. Neither of the two most prominent post-Communist paradigms -- those of Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington -- help us come to grips with the virulence or virtue of nationalisms now again in full bloom. Fukuyama would have us believe that, no matter what the indigenous cultures, liberal democracy will "eventually" triumph in every new capital. Huntington would ask us to give up on capitals that fall on the wrong side of cultural faultlines, to condemn those now studying their pasts

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to repeating them.

Can we, with Fukuyama, praise the nations that have "escaped" their histories and assume that the others will "eventually" follow? Or can we, with Huntington, draw sharp cultural faultlines between history's saved and damned? The diversity of the region bedevils both writers. Why should so many states have broken up, but in such different ways? Why should ethnically-mixed Bosnia be bloody while other mixed regions -- southern Slovakia, Transylvania -- remain peaceful? Why should a strong ruling party in the Czech Lands allow pluralism, while an equally powerful machine in Slovakia shuts down newspapers?



To recognize the differences among the newly free is to begin to understand them. We can agree with Fukuyama when he describes the 1989 revolutions as satisfying a common demand for "recognition" of dignity. But we need not say that all nations recognize themselves in the same image. We can agree with Huntington that cultural divisions lay underneath the multinational

states that collapsed. But we need not assume that some "ancient ethnic hatreds" have been unleashed.

We ought instead to look with the new nations as they begin again to look back into their pasts. After all, these countries are shaping their national identities today from the stuff of many different yesterdays. If a national identity seems warped -- paranoid or resentful -- we ought to try to discern where in the array of reflections a mirror has cracked. We might then find that history really is a concern, but maybe not in a way we would expect. For although the demagogues would have us peer deeply into past, is it often that first mirror, the events since the fall of Communism, that is distorting everything it reflects.

Nationalisms, not "nationalism"

The New York Times is, sadly, the best example of the lazy man's view of Central Europe. Review the paper's pages for the the past five years and you will find countless descriptions of "ancient ethnic hatreds," "disputed borders" and a beast called "nationalism" that has been released since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Rereading their false predictions is the best possible cure for the assumption that all the new governments will pull out old maps and agendas to chart their futures. Despite hype approaching hysteria, the revanchists running in Budapest's 1993 elections got 2 percent of the vote. For every border now contested (most in the former Yugoslavia), there are a dozen that remain firm. Germany has not reclaimed Silesia. Poland does not want Vilnius back, and is as happy as Slovakia and Hungary to leave Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia in western Ukraine.

Assume instead that there are "nationalisms," good and bad, and the picture gets clearer. The Slovene nationalists who rescued Ljubljana from Zagreb's fate suddenly appear as saviors of a pluralistic culture rather than fools that began Yugoslavia's collapse. Czechs and Slovaks elected in 1992 can both be blamed -- if "blamed" is the right word -- for the breakdown of a federation in which they could no longer both live. But maybe there was no better way for the Slovaks to take responsibility for their own government than to deny them the excuse that their problems were caused by "Czech imperialists" in Prague.

Not inevitable

Ironically, the rebirth of nationalism, with all the history it has brought in tow, is far better explained by a man who saw history ending than by those who feared its wrath. For all the chaos, Fukuyama might yet have got it right. For all their nationalist rhetoric, nearly every new state in the former Soviet bloc takes a visit from the International Monetary Fund more seriously than an arcane historical debate. Nearly every government from the Baltic to the Aegean, even those run by former Communists, give at least lip service to free market gospel. And all but the most backward Central Asian regimes hold semblences of free elections. The new nationalisms seem not so much to have abolished Fukuyama's faith in Western law as to have fulfilled it.

Fukuyama writes that free markets and liberal democracy satisfy human desires found in all nationalities. Capitalism triumphs because human beings are innately acquisitive and will settle on the most efficient means to produce wealth. And men of all nations, Fukuyama writes, also share an innate desire for recognition of their dignity, and it is this desire that drives most rebellions against authoritarianism. Man's desire for recognition, his "thymos," can be discerned behind the invention and then expansion of liberal democracy.

To understand the historical force of that desire for "recognition," Fukuyama writes, we must reread our Hegel. It was Hegel who argued that man distinguishes himself from animals by being the only living beings willing to fight to the death for dignity. Men are driven to fight for their freedom; once they have it, they will pursue ends -- mountain climbing, social climbing -- far beyond mere survival, just so they can be "recognized." In the Hegelian vision, feudalism collapsed because serfs are willing to risk their lives for freeholdings. Liberal democracy and the rule of law take root as individuals demand more and more respect of one another, eventually shaping a coherent body of laws and freedoms that no one individual can undermine. The "thymotic" nature of man, Fukuyama argues, means that all societies will evolve toward liberal democracies. It is this common evolution toward liberal democracy that is bringing history to an end.

Recognized as what ?

Something in Fukuyama's thesis rings true. The Czechs who took to the streets on November 17, 1989 may well have occasionally

dreamt of owning Mercedes. But the protests were ignited by rumors (false, it turned out) that a student attending a smaller rally had been killed. Forty-one years of Communist rule could not wipe out an innate desire for respect and recognition of free thought and action.

It is when Fukuyama slips into the language of evolution in order to make this desire for recognition a universal drive that the fundamental flaw in his thesis appears. The scientific analogy of evolution cannot be used to describe movement toward a higher form, since "natural selection" is not teleological except in the loosest possible sense. We live on a planet with both higher and lower life forms because natural selection only condemns species hobbled by a fatal flaw. If a distinguishing characteristic, a random product of mixed genes, is not fatal, it may nonetheless get passed on to descendants. Species evolve away from deadly diseases. But they do not evolve toward anything but relatively better health.

Perhaps aware of this difference, Fukuyama leans heavily on his concept of "thymos." In order to argue that liberal democracy will inevitably triumph everywhere, thymos needs to be supranational and very picky. Thymos is not only innate in all men, Fukuyama insists; it is so easily frustrated by anything short of liberal democracy that it drive revolutions against shallow substitutes. If we do not see liberal democracy flourishing everywhere, he writes, that is either because we are not taking a long term view or we refuse to recognize how similar apparently different cultures are to ours.

And yet. . . in a world of more than 200 states, how many could we truly say are "liberal democratic?" How many of the newly liberated ex-Communist states are? Although all seem responsive to the stern whip of the IMF, how many are really safe, stable investment opportunities? In how many do governments change hands without fraud or bloodshed? No doubt Fukuyama was right to stress that the fall of Communism was driven by a desire for "recognition" rather than goods. But it is one thing to want to be recognized, another to want to be recognized as a perfectly formed "last man." Might people not want to be recognized as something else -- for example, as subjects of a virulently nationalist state?

Cultural fault lines

Western writers -- I among them -- have tried to demonstrate how corrupt every electoral victory of Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic has been. In 1992, he rerouted the ballot papers from counting stations manned by the opposition to communal collectives dominated by his own party. In 1993, the vote count from the province of Kosovo was inexplicably delayed by three days. For almost a decade Serbian television has been his handmaiden. But Milosevic's manipulations have been minor changes in a hand of cards the voters have regularly dealt him. For all the privations and corruption his regime has inflicted, Milosevic is the favored son of Serbia.

Fukuyama cannot explain Milosevic's success. Nor can he explain how Slovak prime minister Vladimir Meciar has twice run his nation to ruin and yet has twice been rewarded with the lion's share of the vote. Were Milosevic and his milder Slovak imitator exceptions, we could perhaps wax eloquent about the "long term." But from Franjo Tudjman's authoritarian regime in Zagreb to Georghe Funar's corrupt city council in the Transylvanian city of Cluj, Central Europe is littered with well-liked despots. Many electorates in Central Europe want to be recognized, all right. But they want to be recognized as kith and kin, blood brothers under threat. Strong men driving their nations onto the rocks are not the exception. Such rulers are the rule.

How, short of becoming racists, can we explain Central Europe's failure to become like us? At first glance, Samuel Huntington seems to offer an explanation. Cultural faultlines far deeper than the Iron Curtain are re-emerging, he writes, now that the Soviet Empire has dissolved. Huntington distinguishes, for example, between "Western" and "Slavic Orthodox" civilizations. And although his article "The Clash of Civilizations," is primarily concerned with coming conflicts between the world's six major civilizations, he also argues that there are smaller faultlines within each. If one draws in the cultural faultlines of Central Europe -- the internal and external borders of the former Habsburg Empire -- one finds striking resemblances today among the nations on the same sides of the lines.

The Empire Strikes Back

First, look at the outline the old Empire cut in Europe from 1740 until its collapse in 1918. The boundaries of several post World War II states fall entirely within this world; Czechoslovakia, Austria and

Hungary. As future nation-states, these countries would depend entirely on Habsburg culture and tradition for a sense of themselves before the First World War. Even today, young Czechs and Slovaks have grandparents who remember life under Vienna. It is from such people that one can still occasionally hear the old anti-Stalinist, pro-Habsburg line, "Better Franz Josef than Josef."

But the territory of the old Empire extended beyond these states into administrative districts that, with small adjustments, were attached to other capitals after 1918. In the Western regions, the Duchy of Milan, Trent and the southern Tirol went to Italy. In the south, the Slovene provinces of Carniola and Gorizia, the four Croatian territories (of various status), Bosnia, the Serbian Military Frontier and largely Hungarian Banat went to Yugoslavia. In the southeast, the region of Transylvania, with its mixed Hungarian and Romanian heritage, went to Romania. In the northeast, the province of Galicia was split among Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.

A glance at a map of political tensions and new states today will show the importance of these lines, for they are the faultlines of political frustration. It is, for example, no coincidence that the separatist Northern League of Italy should be based in Milan or that it should aspire to what it overtly calls Central European political traits, such as an honest and efficient state apparatus. Slovenes, Croats and Transylvanian Hungarians are quick to suggest that the Catholicism they cultivated under the Habsburgs and, more importantly, their exposure to the Enlightenment via universities in Vienna and Budapest, have given them a cultural heritage that made life under various "Ottoman"-style governments in Belgrade and Bucharest unbearable. Nor is it a coincidence that the Ukrainian nationalist movement Rukh, which insists that Ukraine is a "European" nation and Russia an Asiatic power, should be strongest in the Western cities, such as Lviv, that were once governed from Vienna.

There is even a faultline within the Habsburg Empire that explains the very different political cultures of nations that enjoyed its tutelage. In 1867, when Hungarian nationalists took advantage of Habsburg weakness and pushed emperor Franz Josef to divide his realm with them, new and bitter resentments were sown. It was Budapest's subsequent campaign of Magyarization of foreigners in the territories largely inhabited by Slovaks, Croats and Romanians

that infected future national states with a fear of foreign domination and a taste for strong national leaders. It is from the annals of history that authoritarians such as Slovak leader Vladimir Meciar, the Croatian president Franjo Tudjman and Cluj mayor and Romanian nationalist Georghe Funar get their backing. One need only see the mutual lack of comprehension between Czechs and Slovaks, or Slovenes and Croats, to see how deep even the empire's internal lines run.

Should the West ever take the ongoing revolutions in Central Europe seriously, these will be the cultural faultlines that matter. What do northern Italy, Slovenia and the Czech Republic all have in common? All are Catholic and prosperous regions once ruled from Vienna. All launched earthquakes against a larger state (Northern Italy beginning in 1981, Slovenia in 1988 and the Czech Republic in 1992) in the name of ending political obfuscation and corrupt subsidies to their poorer southern cousins. (It was, incidentally, Czech premier Vaclav Klaus, not Slovak premier Meciar, who first said the Czechoslovak state was dead. Until official independence, Meciar pleaded that he had not wanted an independent Slovakia.)

What do Slovakia, Croatia and Transylvania all have in common? All were once governed by Hungarians; all are now governed by national authoritarians who make much (with varying justification) of an external threat. The politics of all three are dominated by a paranoia so great that the extraordinary corruption of the "national heroes" goes unchecked. And when one dismisses Serbia and Romania as hopelessly "Ottoman" -- well, there may be more to that than mere prejudice. Both Serbian president Milosevic and Romanian president Ion Iliescu preside over regimes that are astonishingly brutal toward their own citizens and yet are rewarded with reelection time and again. One suspects that a national histories of survival in religiously-based and thieving parastates have not helped the Serbs or Romanians join the modern world.

Back to the House of Mirrors

But can we really understand Central Europe today by looking so deeply into its history? Has a lid been lifted off of "ancient ethnic hatreds?" A Huntington approach to Central Europe, one that explains the present in terms of faultlines from the past, will only get us so far. The longer we stare into distant past of ex-Communist

states, the more we lose sight of their recent Communist and even more recent post-Communist pasts.

First, one might ask, is it fair to assume that Communism was a "lid" on "ethnic hatreds?" Or did the Communists of Central Europe exploit tensions as often as any post-communist leader has? In Czechoslovakia, the Communists used nationalism to help defeat the reform movement of 1968, promising (and giving) Slovaks more state aid and a larger role in a newly federalized totalitarian regime. In Yugoslavia, Marshal Tito played national Leagues of Communists off one another for his political gain -- first earning the trust of Croats in 1966 by removing a Serb head of the secret police, then crushing the Croatian Communists five years later when they pressed for decentralization. Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was vilified Hungarians just as much as any of his heirs have.

If anything, Communism exacerbated nationalist problems. Rather than allow open debate and local, individual solutions to minority questions, the regimes sucked questions of nationality up into their creaking political structures, to be used when convenient and settled in secret. And since Communism was built on a envy and hatred of the 'capitalist' West, newly-free nations can quickly turn one form of self-pity, the cries of the 'underdeveloped,' into another -- the groans of an 'oppressed' nation. Saying the collapse of Communism has released nationalist demons is like saying that the fall of Communism has hobbled Central European economies. It was the existence of Communism in the first place that has exacerbated both ethnic and economic problems.

Given that their inheritances had been poisoned by the regimes they replaced, how have post-Communist countries acquitted themselves since? Are they plagued by their distant pasts? Or has it been the failure to address questions of the immediate past that has made the distant past seem an appealing refuge? Take a look again at our three groups.

Among the new political forces on lands once governed from Vienna, the distant past is barely an issue at all. In Northern Italy, the Northern League has been a three-party coalition's watchdog, threatening to remove its support when Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has ducked difficult (and possibly personal) issues. No new state would have better grounds to worry about its sovereignty

than the Czech Republic, lodged as it is in the headlock of a nation -- Germany -- that invaded it within living memory of many of its voters. And yet fear of a German "economic invasion" has given no party political pull. A larger proportion of Slovenes worry about Italian or Austrian capital, perhaps because their nation is so small. But even the victory of neofascists in neighboring Italy roused little nationalist sentiment. No doubt Czech, Slovene and northern Italian leaders have been able to build on a tradition of liberalism extending back hundreds of years. But more importantly, the governments of each have embraced liberalism, arguing that it is the key to solving contemporary problems.

Further southeast, the situation is bleaker. Take the regions populated by non-Magyars but once dominated by Hungary. In Slovakia, Croatia and Transylvania, demagogues have clung to power despite rampant malfeasance in part because they have been able to exploit cultures of paranoia. In ruins of their own making, all now deliver thundering speeches of ethnic hate. But none came to power on the ancient grievances alone. Rather, they played on fears in the culture and coupled them to the familiar rhetoric of solidarity and hatred so endemic in both Communism and authoritarianism. Here, liberalism has not failed only because of "ancient ethnic hatreds," but because ex-Communists actively sought to defeat it by using the language of the recent past to whip up visions of demons from the distant past.

In the far southeast, both Milosevic and Iliescu have successfully drawn on national histories of parastate rule; the worse a crisis becomes, the higher their popularity as national leaders. No one could argue that Belgrade and Bucharest have ever been hotbeds of liberal thought. But in both countries, the search for deeper and deeper ethnic roots has grown from failure to deal with contemporary problems. Western journalists have tended to turn up once the contemporary issues have overwhelmed the nations and the populaces, seeking some consolation or esteem, have turned back into history in search of a golden age denied them. But neither Milosevic nor Iliescu designed his disastrous politics around ancient ethnic hatreds. Both had contemporary, if devious, political agendas and have found the rhetoric useful in pursuit of their ultimate aim. Both are communist apparatchiks on the make first, nationalists second. And both represent communist machines first, their nations second.

Correcting the right mirror

Since the collapse of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and the revival of nationalism in Central Europe, the history of the region has received renewed attention both in the West and at home. For all the tragedies that have befallen the Bosnians, this revived interest has not been without fruits elsewhere. Freed from bogus Marxist myths about the proletariat of the medieval Slavs, the nations of Central Europe are building, however hesitantly, the kinds of intellectual homes in history we in the West enjoy.

How then can the nations that have faltered along the way restore some truth to their warped historical senses of themselves? Accurate scholarship and journalism will certainly help. But if we are looking for flaws in the mirrors that reflect a nation's sense of itself, we need not assume that the cracks are to be found in the distant past.

Nations or regions that have begun to grapple with the damage done to them in their recent pasts are blissfully free of concern about the distant past. Admittedly, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and northern Italy have much in their historical vaults to treasure. But they have not been subject to soul-searching tours of medieval history because they have addressed the harm done recently. Open debate about their pre-revolutionary histories has made reassessment of the distant past unnecessary.

Slovakia, Croatia and Transylvania started in 1989 with much less to treasure. But they only began dwelling on their self-image as oppressed nations once they had failed (sometimes through no fault of their own) to solve their contemporary crises. Partially down the road to historical madness, they all still show glimmers of sense. Their ancient history will only seem settled once they have addressed the crises on their own times head on.

In Serbia and Romania the prospects are far bleaker. Their historical legacies are tales of surviving crises, tales that only bolster those leaders whose inept management leads to more crises and more calls for salvation. One fears that Romania is simply damned for a generation. In the case of Serbia, it seems that a wholesale

reassessment of recent crimes and folly could not happen without civil war, reconstruction and the trial of Milosevic and his cronies. But should that appraisal take place, medieval history will slip back into the textbooks.

With so much tragic history in the making, it is clear that history has not ended. All of the states of Central Europe have freed themselves, more or less, from orthodox communism. But only a few have chosen liberal democracy. We cannot assume, as Fukuyama does, that citizens will demand "recognition" as free, autonomous individuals. Too many Serbs have freely chosen collective drudgery. But neither can we look exclusively to the distant past for explanations of contemporary issues. Every nation in Central Europe can find horrors in its past to mull over, but not all bother. States that have laid the ghosts of the immediate past to rest find that they are not haunted by the distant past either. It is the countries that have not confronted the legacy of their immediate pasts honestly or effectively that are plagued by identity crises and that seek justification in myth. But their salvation will lie in an honest assessment of the past five years, not of the past five hundred.

Yours,

Chandler

The belief that Slovaks will not re-elect Vladimir Meciar is the triumph of hope over experience.

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