

LEGACY OF COMMUNISM

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The unexpected collapse of communism in 1989 was a watershed event. It exposed two of modernity's great fallacies: the Jacobin fallacy, set loose in the French Revolution, according to which history is driven by the quest for power, understood as my capacity to impose my will on you; and the Marxist fallacy, according to which history is the result of impersonal economic forces struggling for dominance. Happily, the sudden collapse of communism transpired peacefully in most of Europe, but not in Croatia, where we were confronted by a bullying and aggressive Serbia, which was determined to achieve its imperialistic ambitions. Hard-line Communists exchanged their old ideology for a new nationalist one aimed at creating a "greater Serbia." Thus, Croatia had to achieve two liberations in the 1990s: the first being the physical liberation of occupied territory, and the second being the mental liberation from decades of Marxist indoctrination. It seems that the second liberation has proved to be the more difficult one.

You may be aware of the decision to rename one of Zagreb's main squares from Marshal Tito Square to the Square of the Republic of Croatia. This created a great deal of controversy here, as many people on the political Left loudly objected, arguing that the communist dictator deserved his rightful place in our capital city. The irony here is that many of Tito's leading defenders are self-described human rights advocates who claim to be fighting for the rights of various victim groups, but how about Tito's victims? Apparently, they deserved the treatment they got from the Yugoslav regime.

From the beginning, the Communists relied on terror to grab and consolidate power. One example: on the island of Daksu near Dubrovnik, the Communists in October 1944 executed 45 people, including eight priests, without trial. No one was ever prosecuted for this atrocity. The great British novelist Evelyn Waugh was serving in

1. This article is the transcript of the speech given by Stephen Nikola Bartulica at Ave Maria School of Law's *Victims of Communism* symposium in February 2025. Mr. Bartulica is a member of both the Croatian Parliament and the European Parliament.

Dubrovnik in the British army at the time and wrote the following in his report "Church and State in Liberated Croatia":

In Croatia a predominantly Catholic country is falling under a predominantly Communist rule. Great Britain has a responsibility for the solution of the problem raised. . . . A Communist minority is consolidating its control [in the Partisan movement]. . . . The Yugoslav Army of National Liberation, popularly called "Partisans," is an organised, revolutionary army, whose main characteristics are extreme youth, ignorance, hardiness, pride in the immediate past, confidence in the immediate future, intolerance of dissent, xenophobia, comradeship, sobriety, chastity. The regime which they impose in the rear of the retreating Germans has, to the superficial observer, most of the signs of Nazism. It is totalitarian in structure; great powers are exercised by the secret police; there is a cult of the Leader.

Waugh's observations caused quite a stir in the British Foreign Office which did not wish to be too critical of Tito's partisans. In response to Waugh's report, British ambassador Stevens remarked that "local conditions cannot be judged by Western standards"

One should not forget that the last State-ordered assassination took place in February 1990 in Brussels where the Yugoslav (UDBA) secret police murdered Enver Hadri, an ethnic Albanian political activist from Kosovo. This indicates that the most egregious human rights abuses were taking place from the beginning and until the very end of the Yugoslav regime. Since gaining independence, Croatia has not prosecuted a single crime from the communist period. Only thanks to pressure from Germany were two leading figures from the Yugoslav secret police finally tried for the murder of Stjepan Đurekovic, committed in Munich in 1983. The former socialist government of Zoran Milanovic spent great effort in resisting the extradition of these two former communist spies which eventually led to an open confrontation with the European Commission, but the two were eventually extradited and found guilty in a German court.

When one knows the nature of the communist regimes and the extent to which political power was abused, it becomes even more difficult to comprehend why the former Communists have received such gentle treatment from European Union elites. If one could imagine the political history of the last six decades without the United States and

Pope Saint John Paul II on the map, and look at communism only through the prism of Western Europe (excluding Britain under Margaret Thatcher) it seems almost certain that communism would still be thriving. I would argue that a certain accommodation between the two parts of Europe had been reached at a certain moment, much to the approval of the political elites and the convenience of Western societies. Communism never incited the indignation that fascism did, the latter term having become synonymous with the worst of political evil. The former Communists understand this very well and thus commonly use the label “anti-fascist” to describe their position. Anti-communist, on the other hand, does not generate the same emotional response and is, thus, not used so frequently. The problem with this is that the legacy of communism and the damage it caused in many countries does not receive the attention it deserves.

Before I elaborate on the legacy of communism, I would like to make the point that the democratic liberals in the West intuitively sensed that they had a deeper bond with former Communists than with anti-communists. As the Polish philosopher Ryszard Legutko explains in his latest book *The Demon in Democracy*, former communist leaders and functionaries received very good reviews in the West, as opposed to the avowed anti-communists, who were treated far less kindly. No post-communist government, even the worst, was condemned by the European Union, while strong anti-communist governments, like the former Law and Justice government in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary, have sparked fury of great intensity.² I believe that this is not just because of disagreements over the rule of law, but rather reveals a deeper problem: i.e., these countries have a very different view of what defines the European project. The topic of European identity is a very important one, but will not be covered in this lecture because of limited time.

The Soviet dissident Alexander Zinoviev made the following observation: “Communism is a much deeper phenomenon than Capitalism.”³ The author lived most of his life in the Soviet Union, but made this observation after having spent a considerable amount of time in Western Europe. He argues that communism affected all levels of social life, and that, in reality was more than an economic system. One could say that it, in fact, assumed many of the sociological functions of religion. Communism had its own comprehensive vision of man and society which was reflected in the education and formation

2. RYSZARD LEGUTKO, *THE DEMON IN DEMOCRACY* 141 (2016).

3. ALEXANDER ZINOVIEV, *THE REALITY OF COMMUNISM* 23 (Charles Janson trans., Schocken Books 1984) (1981).

of children beginning with pre-school and ending in the university. In this sense, one should not be surprised that the legacy of communism is much harder to overcome than first imagined.

In his analysis of why communism failed and finally collapsed in Europe, Pope Saint John Paul II mentions the inefficiency of the economic model as well as the flagrant violations of workers' rights, but says that:

[T]he true cause of the new developments was the spiritual void brought about by atheism. . . . Marxism had promised to uproot the need for God from the human heart, but the results have shown that it is not possible to succeed in this without throwing the heart into turmoil.⁴

Despite the philosophical flaws of Marxist ideology, the fact remains that the phenomenon of communism lasted for decades.

MAN AS "HOMO ECONOMICUS"

The great truth to grasp about Karl Marx is that he is primarily a materialist philosopher. He had many hatreds—for capitalism, for religion, for Slavic nations including Croatia—and some loves—for the proletariat, for example. But hatreds and loves alike depend upon his view of reality; and his view of reality is materialist. The second important principle in his philosophy is the claim that history is basically the history of the economic process. For Marx, relations in a society—social, political, legal—are derived from the material conditions of life. From this idea follows his emphasis on production as the key to all man's activities, which leads to the view that man, as an individual, has no great significance. Production must always be a collective act, and therefore, the individual must be totally subordinate to the collective unit. A man's life has meaning insofar as it contributes to the collective good of society.

Marx believed that he had discovered the laws of history and that he had found a remedy for the great original sin of humanity—exploitation.⁵ His view of morality was that there is no such thing as a good man or bad man, but only a good or bad member of his class. Members of the proletariat, one could say,

4. JOHN PAUL II, *CENTESIMUS ANNUS* ¶ 24 (Libreria Editrice Vaticana ed., trans., 1991).

5. Cf. F. J. SHEED, *COMMUNISM AND MAN* 64 (1938).

were innocent of that sin and were justified in overthrowing their oppressors. Marx describes the pernicious influence of the bourgeoisie in the following way: “The bourgeoisie . . . has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, callous cash payment . . . [i]t has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid labourers.”⁶ This is essentially how Marx perceived capitalism—as a system based on selfishness and desire for gain, which has no natural limits. His proposed solution is to deny man an outlet for his greed by abolishing private property, thus making it commonly or collectively owned. In his theory of history, capitalism inevitably becomes worse and worse and things become so intolerable for the proletariat that they will eventually be driven to overthrow it. In other words, capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction.

In practice, communism attempted to create a new kind of man—unselfish and detached from his base instincts for material gain. Engels describes this in the following way:

After society takes possession of the means of production, domination by the product over the producer will be excluded. Conscious organization will succeed the anarchy that now reigns in social production. The struggle for individual existence will cease. Only in this way will man be detached, in a certain sense, from the animal world in a definitive way, he will pass from the conditions of animal existence to conditions of human existence.⁷

Communism was in reality a massive attack on the human personality as such, since it could not control or contain on a large scale individuals who could be described as free persons. Absolute conformity was a necessity for the survival of the system, and the authorities simply could not tolerate persons who acted spontaneously or outside their given role in society. Dissidents were not allowed to read certain novels while serving time in prison for bad thoughts. Cardinal Mikel Koliqi in Albania was arrested for listening to Vatican radio and sentenced to thirty-eight years of hard labor.

Marx’s philosophy reduced man to “homo economicus” and thus greatly diminished his dignity. This was the logical consequence of his denial of God and the spiritual nature of man. Interestingly, he makes strikingly little effort

6. KARL MARX & FRIEDRICH ENGELS, *THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO* 35 (Modern ed., Verso 2012) (1848).

7. Friedrich Engels, Letter to Heinz Starkenburg (January 25, 1894), in HENRI DE LUBAC, *THE DRAMA OF ATHEIST HUMANISM* 431 (Ignatius Press 1995) (1944).

in proving this point, and, when one reads his writings, one finds that the tone is one of remarkable self-assurance. When discussing religious or philosophical objections to his theories, Marx responds as follows: "The charges against Communism from a religious, a philosophical and generally from an ideological standpoint, are not deserving of serious examination," and then boldly adds that "Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience."⁸ One can speculate about why Marx spent such little time in refuting the existence of God, but the fact remains that he simply proceeds from that assumption and then moves on to develop his theory. One should remember that Marx developed his thinking in a post-Enlightenment framework, which had removed God and metaphysics from consideration. Simply stated, if there is no God, then everything must be explained by material or non-spiritual causes.

In his book *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, Henri de Lubac argues that "Marx did not only seek a social liberation of man, he sought his spiritual liberation," and that one should observe Marxism primarily as a "spiritual phenomenon."⁹ The most essential alienation was not social or political, but religious, so the emancipation of man from this predicament becomes the final goal. As de Lubac explains:

The end of any exploitation of man by man and the return of the worker into full possession of the fruit of his work were still nothing if they did not lead to the end of this alienation par excellence, which emptied man not only of his resources but of his very being for the profit of some imaginary power which dominated and weakened him from on high in the heavens.¹⁰

In the end, Marxism promises nothing less than salvation here on earth, man reconciled with himself and nature until the consummation of history. Marx claimed that communism "resolves the mystery of history and knows that it resolves it."¹¹ In reality, as we know, communism did not resolve the mystery of history, but rather crumbled and left in its wake traumatized souls, the destruction of moral consciousness, and economic backwardness. As we have seen, it is no simple task to overcome such devastation.

8. MARX & ENGELS, *supra* note 5, at 37.

9. DE LUBAC, *supra* note 6, at 432.

10. *Id.* at 433.

11. *Id.* at 434.

HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

First, it is necessary to recognize that the disappearance of communism as a socio-political system does not imply that one can easily alleviate the effects the system had on people's lives and attitudes. Communism lasted for decades, with many people living out their childhood and adulthood under these oppressive regimes. When discussing the reality of communism in practice, one must keep in mind that its manifestation varied from country to country. As in other Central European nations, Croatia's natural cultural development was disrupted, first in 1918, and more significantly in 1945, with the imposition of official communist ideology. The Communists were ruthless in implementing their ideas on society and quickly began to squash any dissenting views, especially among the educated class. This is how Pope Saint John Paul II described their methods:

In the universities, every form of philosophical thought that did not correspond to the Marxist model was subjected to severe restrictions, and this was done in the simplest and most radical way: by taking action against the people who represented other approaches to philosophy. Foremost among those who were removed from teaching posts were the representatives of realist philosophy.

The Left employs many of the same methods today in American academia.

In Croatia's case, the show trial of Blessed Cardinal Aloysije Stepinac in 1946 was especially significant. Tito ordered the trial after Stepinac refused to yield to his demands regarding the status of the Catholic Church under the communist rule. Milovan Đilas, a prominent leader in the Party, stated that Stepinac would never have been brought to trial "had he not continued to oppose the new Communist regime." He was eventually convicted of "high treason and war crimes" and sentenced to sixteen years in prison. The Communists portrayed Stepinac as an enemy of the State and an enthusiastic collaborator with the Nazis, even though the Germans themselves never thought that. His condemnation of Nazi ideology was unequivocal and very public, as one can see from this passage of his homily on the Feast of Christ the King (October 25, 1942): "Every nation and every race that exists today on earth has the right to life worthy of man and to be treated in a fashion

worthy of man. All without differentiation, whether gypsies or members of any other race.” After his imprisonment, the communist authorities began to brutally suppress religious education, confiscate Church property, close Church publications, and, above all, arrest, terrorize, and execute priests and religious. In 1992, as Croatia began to establish its own democratic institutions, one of the first acts of Parliament was to issue a declaration condemning “the political trial and sentence passed on Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac in 1946.” The declaration asserts that Stepinac was punished “because he had acted against the violence and crimes of the communist authorities, just as he had acted during the whirlwind of atrocities committed in World War II, to protect the persecuted, regardless of national origin or religious denomination.” I must mention the very odd fact that the U.S. State Department in one of its past reports on human rights actually criticizes Croatia for reversing the Stepinac verdict!

The Stepinac trial symbolizes the way communism imposed itself on countries that naturally resisted it. The traumatic experience of communist totalitarianism also shows how fragile a culture can be, if it is subverted by a militant ideology. The rule of law was replaced by the arbitrary rule of communist leaders who recognized no limits to their power. In essence, one could say that communism was lawlessness, since the individual was completely at the mercy of the State, or more precisely, the Communist Party. This does not mean that there were no norms whatsoever regulating human behavior. There were likely more norms in communist Croatia than before, since communism had its own order and legality. But not everything that is normative or legal signifies the rule of law. In practice, very different criteria were applied to different categories of people. For instance, it was common that one and the same crime was judged differently according to who committed it. Another example is that the law on universal military service did not apply to the children of high officials. In reality, the privileged classes could always avoid the application of laws that were binding for the non-privileged classes. But the more important point is that communism systematically undermined basic moral virtues like diligence, honesty, and self-reliance, which are essential for a free society. In fact, communism actually encouraged the very opposite of virtuous behavior, i.e. the system rewarded people who were willing to accept and promote its lies.

Although Central Europeans were granted civil rights and new freedoms, this change was not immediately followed by a new

consciousness of personal responsibility and duties which are connected to rights. As liberal and democratic institutions were gradually developed, the political and moral culture lagged behind, and leading politicians (many of them former Communists) failed to set a good example. Undoubtedly, corruption is not a distinctively post-communist phenomenon, although nowhere else in Europe does it cause so much harm to democratic and liberal institutions. Regrettably, the average citizen conflates rampant corruption and cronyism with the free market, and there is great resentment caused by the way the economic transition has been managed. However, the more significant point to keep in mind is that a functioning market economy depends on a healthy moral culture to sustain it.

As virtue theory makes clear, for virtue to grow the individual person must repeat virtuous acts, and in time, his character will be formed by the virtues. If the person is not encouraged to practice virtue or is, perhaps, even punished when trying to do the right thing, this will inevitably lead to character deformation. Should this occur on a large scale and for an extended time, as under the communist regimes, then it should not be a surprise that the transition to a free society will have been enormously difficult.

One further complication, of course, is that in a pluralistic society with competing worldviews of the good, there is no consensus on how best to teach basic moral principles. This is the dilemma which inevitably arises in a culture where philosophical relativism is dominant. For example, if a society wanted to promote entrepreneurship as something good and desirable, it follows that it would make a deliberate effort to prepare children for this real possibility in life. However, if there is a more ambivalent attitude (as in Croatia) toward entrepreneurship and economic freedom in general, then the State will likely be less inclined to form a virtue-based curriculum.

Thirty years after the collapse of communism in Europe, we must recognize that failed ideologies do not disappear so easily but rather can transform into new, even more dangerous ones. Marx may have been a poor economist and a very bad philosopher of history, but he did not question the fact that human beings are born male or female and cannot alter their biological sex. Gender ideology claims that we have the power to create our own identities, without regard to nature. This is what we are facing today. The seductive power of ideology remains. The English historian Christopher Dawson understood this point very clearly. He observed that, when the religious impulse is disregarded or

else privatised and deprived of any public role, as in the contemporary West, the effects will be profound and disturbing. The yearning for transcendental meaning and purpose does not simply fade away. It finds new and menacing expression in substitute faiths, usually in philosophical and political forms. One must view the rise of “political religions” as the characteristic form of substitute faith in our time. With painstaking scholarship, Dawson demonstrated the cultural importance and power of religion, and this enabled him to interpret the appeal of secular ideologies, such as Nazism and Communism, which function culturally like religions. They convert earthly causes into transcendental faiths, which finally fail because they do not correspond to genuine transcendental realities.

Dawson was prophetic in seeing that a totalitarian solution would appeal to democracies, not just to authoritarian societies—an extension of power recently seen in the Covid response of Western countries, where the promise of social protection was used politically to crush long-cherished freedoms.

Pope Benedict XVI in his last encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, acknowledges the dangers in a global system without truth as the foundation on which people can flourish. As the title indicates, the key to resolving our current socio-economic problems is to be found in the relationship between truth and love. “Without truth,” the Pope writes, “without trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation, especially in a globalized society at difficult times like the present.” Unless we infuse our workplace with love of neighbor, we cannot expect to secure the common good, and the Pope adds that “every Christian is called to practice this charity.” Even though the encyclical was written nearly twenty years after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, Benedict nevertheless warns of the dire consequences for man, if he forgets God. He reminds us that “when the State promotes, teaches, or actually imposes forms of practical atheism, it deprives its citizens of the moral and spiritual strength that is indispensable for attaining integral human development and it impedes them from moving forward with renewed dynamism as they strive to offer a more generous human response to divine love.”

This is, perhaps, the key point to understanding the predicament of an emerging post-communist country like Croatia. After decades of state-imposed atheism, it is being overwhelmed by a new form of the

same materialistic philosophy, which has no place for God or higher spiritual values. The fact that the free market can provide ever more goods and services in society will not be enough to satisfy man in the long run. As past experience has shown, a materialistic philosophy of life inevitably leaves man unsatisfied and longing for higher things. China welcomes Western bankers and companies, but not the pope.

This is something the great Russian thinker Alexandr Solzhenitsyn foresaw well before the collapse of communism. In his Harvard commencement address, delivered in 1978, he said:

After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression, the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits, introduced as by a calling card by the revolting invasion of commercial advertising by TV stupor, and by intolerable music. All this is visible to numerous observers from all the worlds of our planet. The Western way of life is less and less likely to become the leading model.

He referred to the "logic of materialistic development" and the fact that man has been "made the measure of all things on earth—imperfect man, who is never free of pride, self-interest, envy, vanity, and dozens of other defects." This deeper moral problem is one that only religion can resolve, religion which must be allowed to shape culture and the public square. The inviolability of man ought to be a pillar for ethical discussions. We cannot trust one another and live together in peace unless man recognizes that he is an ultimate end, not a means to some other end. There is no evaluation of goods that could justify treating man as experimental material for higher purposes. The inviolability of human dignity also requires that this dignity belongs to every man, to each individual, without exception, regardless of health or stage of development. This is not just a lofty idea, but must be the starting point if we are to salvage our European civilization.

Thank you.