

Czechoslovakia's Return to Europe. A Moral Revolution

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Czechoslovakia's Revolution – A Moral Return to Europe [1991]

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- 01 Comments and criticisms of the title. Czechoslovakia started to exist only after the World War I. But even before that time, say since the 5-6th century, Czechs and Slovaks lived during all the following centuries on the same territory as now. Only those ones who emigrated outside Europe are able to come back home and so to return to Europe.
- 02 As could be seen, no return to Europe is really meant but a return to the West, to Western Europe. And there is another difficulty. We never understood ourselves as Western Europeans, but as Central Europeans. As Christians, we started to flirt with the orthodox tradition, centuries ago. (According to one of our traditions or „myths“, Constantine and Method „brought“ Christianity to our country in 863-4; really, Christianity existed there at least half a century before their arrival, already.) Finally, we decided for the Western tradition, but very soon, we became heterodox through the so called „first reformation“, before the Lutheran and Reformed (Calvinian) one.
- 03 After the 30 years war, we lost our nobility as well as our intelligentsia, and through massive repressions during the following period of counterreformation we lost even our cultural and spiritual identity. Towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, we can speak about a renewal of our national life, especially about a resurrection of the Czech language which was almost dead. But it was far more difficult to start with a renewal of our cultural and spiritual life, and of course also of our way of political thinking.
- 04 As you can see, we stood in this period in a similar situation as nowadays. Our actual problem is again the same: we have to find ourselves, we have to find our new identity. Our present state is probably worse, at least in some respects. One of the main points I should mention is the destruction of the moral condition of the population as well as vast damages of its social life. You may ask, why I should do it, if I was invited to speak about a moral revolution in Czechoslovakia. So it is my third critical remark to the title and theme of my contribution.
- 05 I don't think the political change in Czechoslovakia in November 1989 could be observed as a revolution. Nevertheless, it became a relatively frequent denomination, so that we can accept it and pose a question about the moral aspect of this change.
- 06 As you will probably know, the immediate cause which started the relatively quick and not very complicated deprivation of the existing communist regime of its power was the student demonstration in Prague and then protests of many people against the police violence exercised against the youth as well as against all who were present on a certain place of the National Street (near the National Theatre).
- 07 If the students started to cry „We want no violence“ already during the stupid action of the police, it was simply because they had fear. But they repeated this slogan also thereafter, in the following days. That was already a moral decision: they didn't want any violence at all, not only violence against the students, but also any violence against the police, against the leaders of the Party, against the Communists in general.
- 08 As any other event or situation, it can be differently interpreted, of course. But in one point, there is no doubt. The students and the young men and women in general were the only ones who could express that slogan with a certain moral legitimacy. They were the only ones who were not corresponsable for the past decades of the way the country has been going. And it was so because of their age only, not because of their moral superiority.
- 09 How did the people react? How did the mediocre citizen react? Better than could be hoped at all. Sporadic voices of will to revenge were neutralized, vast majority of the inhabitants accepted the slogan and perhaps the idea, too. It was not yet any moral revolution, but a first step to start again to respect

the relevance of one's own conscience. During these days, the people still knew about the considerable lack of their resistance against the past regime.

- 10 Two things were necessary, only, to fix these feelings and this atmosphere in the consciousness of the people: to express openly what the people felt in front of the students – and in front of the so called dissidents, too -, and to formulate reasonable arguments for it. It was one of the main duties of the intellectuals in the country. And we can say that they lost this important opportunity which never will come back in the same way.
- 11 No real „moral revolution“ started, therefore; there were only several signs it could. It seems to be – in my view at least – a specially Czech (better than Slovak, perhaps) sort of a „treason of intelligentsia“ or, according to Julien Benda, „trahison des clercs“. It was not the only one case in our modern history. We lost our best chances, I am afraid, after the World War I, during the twenty years of the first republic, then in the time of Munich, after the end of the World War II, during the crisis in February 1948 and during the following years, during the Prague Spring in 1968, and of course during the last two decades, i.e. during the period of the so called „normalization“.
- 12 Especially through Munich and the German occupation, then through the communist coup d'état and the massive repressions during the fifties, and finally through the Soviet intervention and the following period of normalization, the vast majority of the people was deeply frustrated, than most of them resigned and many collaborated actively in different ways and on different levels.
- 13 The worse aspect, according to my conviction, is to be seen in the situation of the churches and Christians at all. I don't see the main evil in their behaviour in the past, but in their incapability to see clearly what they have done in contradiction to what they should do instead. The only thing to be heard is an ideology justifying their activities or better their passivity.
- 14 As you see, my picture of the Czechoslovak situation is rather depressing. May I assure you that the real situation is even more depressive. But I shall not go on to further details. I shall stop here, because I already described the main two aspects of our moral debts. For both of them, intellectuals on one side, and Christians on the other, are responsible. All you can now hear about troubles in our small federation has to be understood not only as a consequence of the 50 years old period of a lack of freedom, but much more as a consequence of a new treason of intellectuals and especially of Christians.
- 15 I expressed already my conviction that the metaphor about returning to Europe is false. But there are further arguments against it. One of them is that the moral situation in the Western countries is not much better. Of course, it differs in many aspects, but not essentially. With all the terrible events, with all our incapability to treat the given situation as well as our moral and political duties – we lived in the same world as the Western people did, our political, cultural and spiritual life was based on the same European past, even if it differed in selecting other traditions and other ideas which were accepted or which had to be accepted under pressure. Bolshevism, stalinism, fascisme, nazism – all these phenomena were of European origin.
- 16 So there is no question if we could or should come back to Europe. The most important problem is: which one of the existing European traditions should we choose and which ones we have to reject. And after having posed this extraordinarily important question, we can go over to the second part of our thinking over and „reflecting“ our actual moral and cultural, as well as intellectual, chances and at the same time challenges and duties.
- 17 There is another problem for the countries and nations now emancipated and liberated from the communist domination and wanting to change their ways of living and thinking in accordance with the best European traditions. They don't want to be and to remain recipients only. They don't want to imitate the Western-European archetypes and so to become also Europeans of the West. They want to be, or better to say, to become themselves.
- 18 So they have to return not to Europe, i.e. to Western Europe only, but first of all to their own European roots, and – because of their poor present condition – it means for them: to their roots in the past. On

the technical or often even scientific level, the people of the Middle and Eastern Europe have nothing or nearly nothing to bring with for the common European future. But sometimes they could present, interpret and develop cultural, intellectual, moral, and spiritual resources and treasures which possibly might be of special interest even for the Western Europe and, perhaps, for the whole world.

19 I should like to present you one idea which proved to be of an enorm importance and value during the Hussite reformation and during the period of about 200 years till the 30years war, but which overlived somehow even the time of the counterreformation, was revived during the national renewal and began to have a new influence during the first half of our century. The whole interesting history started in one of the most important traditions of the ancient Izrael, and a relict of that tradition overlived on the flag of all Czechoslovak presidents till now, since the very first of them, Thomas G. Masaryk.

20 But I shall start with a small history about a nearly miraculous resurrection not of the words or of the slogan, but of the right idea during a discussion on a meeting of Prague students in February, 1989, i.e. 10 months before the political break in November. The third time already, the students invited some political bosses, but they never came. One of them published a speech only several days ago where he expressed himself as follows: the truth is on our side. The students quoted him and started to criticise his idea, too. They spoke about the unacceptable conception of a truth, which is on our side, and underlined their opposite idea that we are those who should stay on the side of truth.

21 I shall not interpret the original version of this idea of truth which is no object, no thing at our disposal, but a vital ruling order. I shall only very shortly quote the so called 3rd Esdras (1st apocryphic), out of chap.3 and 4. „Truth is victor over all things.“ (3,12) „Truth is great, and stronger than all things.“ (4,35) „Truth endures and is strong for ever, and lives and prevails for ever and ever.“(4,38)

22 Should we take earnestly these formulations, we have to conclude: anything stronger than all things and which is so for ever, mustn't be understood nor conceived as a thing, as a being. All things and all beings perish, and therefore truth prevails and is victor over all things. It is not victor because of being the strongest thing but because it is no thing at all.

23 In the Hebrew language, truth and faith are nearly the same. Both these words have another meaning than in our common use today. So we have to try to understand it better than we do it now. It should be an important aim for our philosophers and theologians. But there is a point of an extreme practical importance for everybody, and especially for those who expect relevant events coming to us out of the future.

24 The modern man, i.e. the modernity deprived the real human situation as a whole of one of its important quality, or perhaps better to say: of one of its dimensions, yes, of its most important dimension, of the structured, meaningful future. Friedrich Nietzsche described this remarkable phenomenon as the European nihilism. All values, and God as the highest value at all among them, lost their dignity as well as their convincing power, they became worthless, they lost even their quality of being something at all, they began to be observed as nothing. Nothing in latin is nihil. The modern nihilism consists in leaving all values to fall into the abyss of nothingness.

25 Among various old values, truth is one of the most important ones. If we try to understand the mentioned old tradition conceiving truth as no object, no real thing at all, but victorious over all things, we are able to find – I trust – a new way of understanding not only the modernity, not only the fallacy of postmodernity, but the necessary intellectual, moral and spiritual basis for building a new Europe, the Europe of the future – and possibly for the whole future world.

26 Many problems are connected with this new way of thinking over the truth as a non-being, as a non-objective reality, as no „res“, no thing, but at the same time no „nothing“. I don't want to discuss them, now. It is a matter of deep philosophical (as well as theological) reflections. But I wished to show some „signs of the times“ which can be discerned in the sky of the central Europe. There are philosophers and theologians (like Emanuel Rádl or Josef Lukl Hromádka) who started with the first steps in this direction. There are students who understand the importance of being aware of all the true calls and appeals

coming to us out of the future and challenging us personally to provoke our understanding as well as practical response.

- 27 I started with sceptical remarks concerning my theme, concerning the meaning of the slogan of coming back or of returning to Europe, and especially concerning the so called „moral revolution“ in Czechoslovakia. I can't present you my country like anything ideal which should be followed up or imitated by others. But I am convinced about the importance of the shortly described idea of truth understood as coming to us out of the future. This idea was already once in our past one of the leading ideas of our reformation. It could become, well reinterpreted, once again one of the leading ideas for the future spiritual and moral integration of Europe.
- 28 In the Czech language, all the very important „values“ are called by names derived from what is right or true: truth (pravda), right (pravý, právo), justice (spravedlnost), correct (správný, opravit) etc. One of these names is also „napraviti“ and „náprava“ (making better or repair). According to Comenius (according his PANORTHOSIA) all has to be made better or good. It has a good meaning if all given things, given beings are observed and evaluated in the true prospective light, i.e. in the light of truth, in relation to what is not yet, but what should be done, what is to become.
- 29 If the word „revolution“ should have any positive meaning at all, than in making relatively good things better, not worse. But for doing this, it is necessary to be open for the coming future, the future, which is not void but full of non-objective challenges attacking us personally and wanting from us to be performed and established in our understanding as well as in our lives.
- 30 So I hope and expect a moral revolution not only in our country, but in the whole Europe and in the whole world in the future. I am convinced that I could bring you a better and more joyful message: the great moral revolution did not take place in Czechoslovakia, but it is coming to us all out of the future. It is coming as the truth which prevails and is victorious for ever because it is no thing and no being. Do you think perhaps that such an idea has no social, no political consequences? We have quite different historical experiences. Of course, experiences four hundred years old.