

EDITORIAL ESSAY
KUSÝ, STRAUSS & BERLIOZ
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Professor Miroslav Kusý – philosopher, intellectual, dissident and political scientist. A philosopher by his original métier and temperament; a dissident by his own choice; an intellectual commenting on important topics of Slovak society during four decades; an active opponent of the Communist regime from 1969 to 1989; a founder of political science studies in Slovakia. His distinct voice could be easily detected in the clatter of such different periods as the 1960s, the period of Normalization (1969-1989) and after 1989. Yet, anyone who will try to draw his intellectual and personal biography would certainly have to talk not only about a philosopher but also of a Marxist philosopher, not only about a reformer but also Communist reformer, not only about a dissident but also a Marxist-dissident, not only about an objective political scientist but also a very opinionated commentator. And for those who want to undermine his intellectual integrity and erudition, Miroslav Kusý will remain “just” a former or “recovered” Communist.

After all the Communist regimes did during the 20th century, there is no point today discussing the differences between young and late Marx, or between Lenin and Stalin. The outstanding thinkers like Lukács, Sartre or Adorno have remained respected today not for their Marxism, but because some of their thoughts and analyses are still relevant and thought provoking. What seems to prevail after the fall of monstrous regimes and ideologies are the brilliant thoughts of some of their followers and victims, who, paradoxically, might not have generated what they did without their own zeal or the regime’s pressure. One should not judge individuals according to the regime and ideology that hold or possess them, but according to their work and deeds, and those who were trapped by the Communist regime according to their degree of personal commitment in battling the “God that failed” while it was still in place. Certainly, there is a difference – surely in moral terms – whether I am critical towards a Communist regime when it is gone or when it is still in full force. Miroslav Kusý, facing the Communist regime that he had first admired, afterwards became one of the very few in Slovakia who dared to challenge it and was able to justify his deeds theoretically.

Kusý’s biography – no doubt exceptional – is still a variation of the story of individuals who entered the Communist party out of idealism, but sobered up after they found out that the Communist regime was not interested in equality and justice, but was a regime run by scoundrels, ideologues and careerists. And so people like Leszek Kolakowski and Zygmunt Bauman in Poland, Ivan Sviták and Karel Kosík in the Czech Lands, Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér in Hungary, Milovan Djilas and Vladimir Dedijer in Yugoslavia or Miroslav Kusý and Milan Šimečka in Slovakia belong to those who realized – as did many thousands of others – that the Communist regime betrayed its own ideals or that the regime was rotten from the start, however, they belonged to those few individuals who did not hesitate to counter the regime even if the cost was bullying and coercion. Most of them did not become openly Anti-Marxist. They eschew a public repudiation of their former creed lest they are perceived as shedding responsibility for something that they revered and supported in the past. They realized gradually, however, that the social and political justice they sought has a chance and hope in a liberal-democratic system and not in a regime that tried to enforce certain ideals through social engineering.

I wrote that “the Communist regime betrayed its own ideals” and this expression might be perceived as a nostalgia for some kind of false justice. However, the belief and hope in building a just political regime as well as an effort to achieve peace, prosperity and adhere to certain values is not only a dream of Marx and his followers. On the contrary, it has been an effort by individuals ever since we could be called a civilization. During history, what is ideal was by and large determined by religions. In the West, Christianity rejected the possibility to attain the ideal here on Earth, rather salvation awaits us in “the City of God”. As St. Augustine writes, “the earthly city”, hence the political structure created by human beings, is simply to provide the protection for prayers and “neighbourly love” within the community of believers, the Church, which hopes for salvation in the “City of God”.

However, since Greek antiquity there has been a tradition which believes that the span reserved for the fulfillment of human ideals is solely here on Earth and the highest virtues that we revere – or should revere – are not set by God but created by human reason. These virtues are derived from the experience of human interaction and, of course, backed by principles created by religion. This secular tradition returned with Humanism and during that period the sacral and secular ideals coexisted invariably in tension and symbiosis. Afterwards, since the Enlightenment, these two ideals have remained in fierce conflict and became diametrical opposites. Fanaticism and dogmatism on both sides led to wars and great human suffering. The “enemies” of our ideals could be killed, in the name of our ideals, with a clear conscience – the source of legitimism and pride of any form of fanaticism or totalitarian regime.

Liberalism is the only ideology and liberal democracy is the only political system, which does not try to achieve any ideal, rather its aim is to restrain fanaticism and promote tolerance among varied religious convictions and Weltanschauungen. The state should secure individual freedom, the rule of law and guarantee equality of opportunity, while individuals should follow certain ethical norms and abide by the law. Your views and moral convictions will be tolerated as long as you will not impinge on the freedom and rights of other individuals – a norm emanating from the Bible and derived from Kant. This key liberal premise curbs intolerant ideologies or religions and, at the same time, guards itself against slipping into becoming a police state.

Undoubtedly, one of the consequences of secularization is estrangement and the relativization of values. Life can be carried on without ideals or without even contemplating whether any justice is feasible or necessary – the case also of a majority of people in stable and prosperous countries. Paradoxically, in societies where the state and the rule of law guarantee the basic human rights and human dignity and a certain degree of economic prosperity exists, some abstract ideals become less significant and urgent. There is nothing odd about this state, yet it is exactly this disinterest in seeking an ideal that many consider to be a source of crisis of the West whose only idols are mammon, consumerism and lewdness.

Why am I writing all this? Professor Kusý considers himself a liberal for, among other things, the tolerance of liberalism towards others unless it is under direct threat. As Ortega y Gasset writes, “liberalism announces the determination to share existence with the enemy; more than that, with an enemy who is weak.” To someone who experienced the intolerance of the Communist regime first hand as Kusý did, this liberal credo represents an incomparably superior political system than the one that deprived him of his freedom before 1989. He perceives the liberal political system as the one that protects and tolerates the natural human diversity and also sees it as a hope and guarantee to our society that we will experience no more purges and malevolence and killing of the innocent, by clerofascist and Communist regimes.

Leo Strauss

The political philosopher and a critic of liberal democracy, Leo Strauss, had to flee Germany as a Jew and found safe heaven and protection in the United States. To be sure, he respected liberal democracy for its tolerance and openness and was thankful that it provided those like himself with an opportunity to freely write and criticize, if necessary, even liberal democracy itself. As he writes: “We are not permitted to be flatterers of democracy precisely because we are friends and allies of democracy”. He criticized liberal democracy for its shortcomings – an inability to defend itself against external enemies and, above all, because its main aspiration is individual freedom rather than the attainment of virtues – the highest human aspiration in ancient Greece.

With respect to the external enemies, Strauss’ fears seem unfounded. Liberal democracy has been extraordinarily successful. It defeated its enemies, as Ernest Gellner argues, with the weapons chosen by the enemy – Nazism militarily, Communism economically. This Strauss could not have known for he wrote his works during the war and when he died in 1973 it was not at all clear that the Communist regimes would simply implode without a fight. However, his argument that a modern liberal democracy should be anchored in an Aristotelian politeia (good society), where the stress is on

cultivation of virtues and providing what we call today, liberal education, still remains open. Equally relevant is his critique that potentially the West is permanently in crisis because modern rationalism is not able to provide irrefutable legitimacy for liberal democracy. On the contrary, rationalism, taken to the extreme or to its logical end, undermines and relativizes the foundations on which the trust in liberal principles of justice and freedom stand. In fact, if the highest values are not given by God, but rather are the creation of the human mind, then to follow them is not an imperative, but a matter of choice and agreement. If someone questions them, the person can be physically silenced or simply the liberal rules are simply enforced. Morally, however, that person has a right to disagree and, according to the liberal principles, those dissenting views should be upheld. This represents the problem with respect to multiculturalism and political correctness, which insist on upholding liberal values for everyone and everywhere. However, if liberal democracy tried to *fully* accommodate these demands, it would undermine its basic foundation. Hence what Richard Rorty views as the essence and advantage of rationalism, that none of our values are given and solid, but are contingent, and John Rawls' attempt to prove the legitimacy of liberal democracy indirectly, is regarded by Leo Strauss as the enduring weakness of modern rationalism and its progeny, liberalism. Again, he sees the solution in the return to and "rediscovery" of the ancient philosophy. According to him, the ancient philosophers, found the truth not valid only for their own era, but universal for all times and so also valid for us. Hence, we should attempt to recover it as a source of our own revival.

Strauss had and still has plenty of critics, who view him as an elitist and blame him for his esoteric way of writing as a way to conceal his thoughts from those who are not able to face the horrors of existential terror. Some also reproach him for his instrumental view of religion, which he considered as one way to survive the hopelessness of human existence. He writes:

"The belief in active gods then grows out of fear for our world and attachment to our world – the world of sun and moon and stars, and the earth covering itself with fresh green every spring, the world of life as distinguished from the lifeless but eternal elements (the atoms and the void) out of which our world has come into being and into which it will perish again... we live in every respect in an infinite universe...in which nothing that man can love can be eternal. [And elsewhere adds:] what is eternal is not lovable." (Natural Rights and History, p.113)

Nevertheless, Strauss does not belong to the nihilists for whom human life has no meaning and for whom the truth is sheer fiction and, in fact, a matter of choice for whatever occasion we want to use it. Strauss turns our attention to Antiquity where philosophers like Socrates, Plato or Xenophon discovered truth, but we forgot how to read it properly. However, each person must read the ancients with Strauss on his or her own. The thing is that to admire or disagree with Strauss requires deep concentration and patience that the majority of contemporary political scientists lack and, instead explore various tributaries of modern social sciences for which Strauss has such an enthusiastic disdain.

Yet, Leo Strauss is today well known not for his controversial arguments and books. When we were announcing his profile on the back page of K&K three-four years ago, Strauss' name was relatively unknown even in the USA. All of a sudden, the unexpected events of the last few years that followed the tragedy of September 11, 2001, caused Strauss's name to be registered even in daily newspapers around the globe. He was designated as a guru of the neoconservatives in the USA. And considering that Strauss's work was rather unknown, the journalists draw mainly on secondary sources that have been, by and large, negative. Strauss is depicted as an obscure elitist, who bestowed on his disciples a task to "improve" the world and spread American democracy (sic) – hence to conquer the world. Wherever the US has its interests and whether someone like it, or not. It needs to be added that some journalists often did not fail to add that many of Strauss's disciples were Jews and could anything other than conspiracy and the rule of the world be their aim. Thanks to George W. Bush the Straussians got access to the most powerful place on Earth and the poor George Jr. is just executing their wishes.

My friend and a former professor, Randy W. Newell, gives us a first hand account of what is it to be a Straussian today and provides an excellent analysis of the relationship between the neoconservatives and Leo Strauss. The author of a famous book in the USA, The Closing of the American Mind,

and a prominent Straussian, Allan Bloom, systematically presents various stages of the work of Leo Strauss. He finishes with words that, perhaps, in a few years might not be as utopian as when Bloom wrote them: "I believe our generation may well be judged by the next generation according to how we judged Leo Strauss".

Hector Berlioz

Up to now, we did not present a musician in K&K and even now we are doing it as an exception. I confess, the reason for this is my own declaration of admiration and celebration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of a brilliant composer, conductor, librettist, music critic and an exceptional stylist, Hector Berlioz. Although for more than twenty years I have studied and listened to classical music, drawn energy from it and experienced the joy and profundity only true art can provide, I have not been for so long fascinated by a single composer as has been the case with the music and writings of Berlioz. In fact, to be absorbed by one author is against my taste and habit. I have always admired – of course, I still do – concurrently the whole spectrum of works and composers from Giovanni Gabrieli to Philippe Glass – the former the founder of polyphony, the latter of minimalism. Still, Berlioz represents something special, a combination of composer genius as well as intellectual who continually struggles with the baseness and bureaucracy of his native country.

I chose three texts, an excerpt from Berlioz's remarkable and touchy Memoirs about his travels in our region as well as two pieces by his most important interpreters. An article about the anti-Berliozian tradition in France is by an English conductor and music theoretician, John Eliot Gardiner, who is also a foremost interpreter of Baroque music on original instruments. He explains the background to the rejection of Berlioz at the end of 19th century in France and how it affected his subsequent reception. His successes were followed by near disregard and he fell into oblivion during the past 100 years. During his life, Berlioz was more appreciated abroad than at home, especially in Germanic regions and England. In Russia, he influenced a whole generation of composers and his orchestration of the Rákóczi March has enthralled generations of Hungarian patriots for more than 150 years.

Berlioz had problem with recognition especially in Paris where, for example, his operas were never performed during his lifetime. This, of course, did not prevent the state commissioning works, such as his Requiem or Te Deum for some important occasions. He was resented by a whole spectrum of the musical establishment because his main source of living was music criticism and his piercing and acerbic pen did not earn him many friends. Later on, the French composers were divided between admirers and anti-Berliozians and often, without any foundation, Berlioz was contrasted with Wagner. The fact that Debussy a 100 years ago expressed disdain for Berlioz might now be viewed as a historical curiosity, what is more astonishing is that, for example, Pierre Boulez, the foremost contemporary French composer and conductor, never conducted Berlioz's music during the past few years while conducting in Vienna. In addition, if an orchestra decides to play something by Berlioz it is very often his Symphonie fantastique – a work of genius, no doubt, but badly overplayed and remaining his only famous work.

Another piece is an interview with the conductor, Colin Davis. He and Gardiner as well as theoreticians Cairns and MacDonald, all from the UK, represent the most important interpreters and specialists in Berlioz's works today. Since the 1950s, Davis has promoted and recorded Berlioz and the most important festival of Berlioz's music of 2003 was not in Paris but in New York, with Colin Davis conducting. Another Englishman, David Cairns is the authority on Berlioz and a few years ago he published a definitive two-volume biography of the composer. Finally, the editor of the seven-volume Correspondance générale, Hugh MacDonald, is also from Great Britain.

In the meantime, another in the series of bizarre Berlioz stories has been taking place in Paris. His physical remains were to be transferred (against his categorical wish not to be moved from his grave) to the Panthéon, but the intervention of President Chirac prevented it. Not at all due to Berlioz's wish, but because the Elders in Paris could not agree whether a musician belongs in the Panthéon at all! And as had rarely happened to Berlioz, folly mixed with bureaucracy was finally merciful towards him. It prevented a gruesome event similar to that he had experienced personally when the grave of his