

Totalitarianism in Europe Is Not Finished



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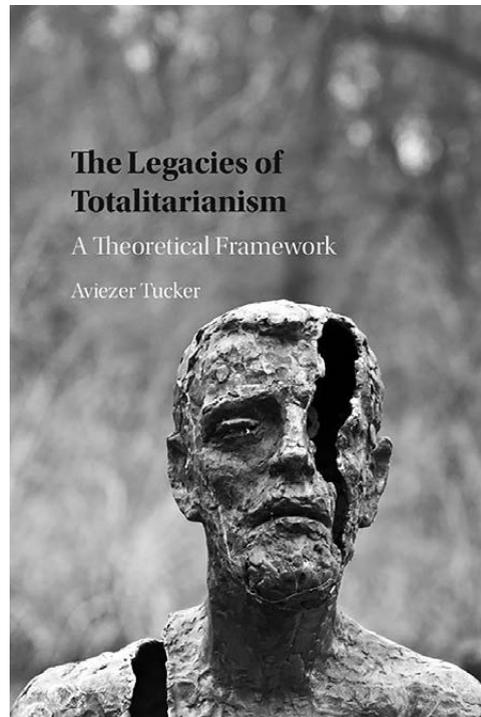
Josef Šíma, President of the CEVRO Institute, talks with Professor Aviezer Tucker of Harvard University about contemporary dimensions of totalitarianism, transition and populism in the Central Europe.

Professor Tucker, your recent book *The Legacies of Totalitarianism* published by Cambridge University Press is considered to be a milestone in scholarship devoted to our understanding of societies of Central and Eastern Europe. In what way can your analysis of legacies of totalitarianism enrich political theory or even political philosophy?

It tests conventional ideas and theories about liberty, rights, justice, restorative justice and property rights in a new historical context, far from the English, French and American contexts where most of these theories were born. Some of them cannot survive this harsh environments, others need to be revised. I proposed how.

How did you approach such a broad topic and what major challenges you had to overcome?

Political philosophy and theory hardly reacted to post-totalitarianism. Jeffrey Isaac called it “the strange silence of Political theory”. Some immediate theoretical responses merely reaffirmed truisms that had been known long before 1989. The collapse of command economies confirmed Ludwig von Mises’ criticisms of socialist economies from 1922, the insurmountable difficulties in making economic calculations and planning without a pricing mechanism. On the left, the distinction between Marxism and Social-Democracy or liberal socialism that has been the staple of the “New Left” since



the 1960s was emphasized again, in an attempt to resuscitate a left alternative either as a variety of liberalism or at least as consistent with it. But the crisis of Social Democracy preceded the end of totalitarianism by fifteen years and had endogenous reasons.

A political theory and philosophy of post-totalitarianism and the legacies of totalitarianism is also a revisionary critique of



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received political theories and philosophies that were developed against other historical circumstances but fall short of heuristic, descriptive or normative applicability to post-totalitarian conditions. This book will likely disappoint readers who expect ideological affirmations of faith. I delve into political, philosophical and theoretical issues that do not clearly favor one ideology or another, though I hope to have undermined some received ideological dogmas in the process.

Post-totalitarianism was fashionable in the nineties. This led to many publications in the immediate aftermath of totalitarianism, especially in comparative politics and political economy. But this flowering was cut short abruptly by the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001, followed by two wars, and then the econom-

ic recession. Attention, academic fashions, and media interest shifted away from post-totalitarianism. Even Putin has not managed to restore funding and public interest so far. The first decade after totalitarianism was too short to see where trends were heading and allow meaningful hindsight.

My purpose in this book was to fill in this theoretical and philosophical vacuum and present a theory of post-totalitarianism. I explored how the post-totalitarian political experience should inform traditional topics and theories in political philosophy such as rights, justice, justice in rectification and restitution, property rights, the idea of the university and philosophical education, and theories of ideology and language and the critique of democracy of illiberal thinkers like Habermas, Derrida and Žižek, which I interpret as preserving aspects of totalitarian thinking.

What are your main conclusions?

I argue that democracy in post-totalitarian Central and Eastern Europe was the unintended consequence of the adjustment of the rights of the late-totalitarian elite to its interests. The late-totalitarian elite was usually indifferent to democracy, it wanted private property but was hostile to economic free competition and the impersonal rule of law. It preferred a system of economic inequality and a clientelistic social model, the rule of well-connected individuals intertwined with the state from which they appropriated assets and to which they passed on liabilities. Consequently, the elite's interests were not affected usually by the form of government. They needed little from the government, and they could buy it through bribing politicians and civil servants, forming "joint ventures" with them or their family members, financing political parties, and influencing elections through ownership of mass media. Democracy may be then



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an unintended effect of the elite's relinquishment of direct political domination in favor of economic appropriation.

The transition from late-totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism was the spontaneous adjustment of the rights of the late-totalitarian elite to its interests, its liberation, the transmutation of its naked liberties into rights, most significantly, property rights. This social mechanism, the adjustment of rights to interests, explains the end of totalitarianism and has interesting theoretical implications for supporting choice theories of rights against interest theories of rights, and for finding the republican concept of liberty as non-domination more heuristically useful than the liberal negative liberty as non-interference, at least in the post-totalitarian context.

Justice is a scarce good. Its scope and depth are balanced against its accuracy. The legacies of totalitarianism included a severe scarcity in the supply of justice and an elevated level of demand for justice. Righting the wrongs of totalitarianism was deep and broadly scoped. Post-totalitarian governments attempted to supply this demand under conditions of extreme scarcity of resources for justice by compromising on the accuracy

of justice, producing what I term "rough justice". I apply this non-ideal theory of justice and elaborate on how rough justice operated in post-totalitarian societies, respectively, in attempting to punish the perpetrators and compensating their victims. Justice was rough in restitution and had very limited scope in retribution. I explain how and why and debunk some of urban myths about lustration. Rough justice in restitution and privatization participated in causing a realignment of political positions with theories of property rights, historical theories of property rights have come to support redistribution as compensation for victimhood and consequentialist theories of property rights came to support inequality because it generates economic growth and efficiency irrespective of the origins of property rights.

The legacies of totalitarianism appeared not just in "grand" aspects of social and political life like social stratification, the composition of the elites, divisions of rights and liberties, forms of justice, and property rights, but also in the realm of the everyday, how post-totalitarian citizens interacted with each other and with institutions and how public institutions attempted to survive and preserve their privileges and elites in new post-totalitarian contexts. Continuity overwhelmed change in post-totalitarian institutions that were protected by subsidies and protectionism from external pressures. I examine how post-totalitarian institutions of higher education weathered the storm of political change, survived and protected themselves, and at what cost. The discussion of higher education demonstrates not just the institutional legacies of the old totalitarian state but also that totalitarianism in Europe is not finished. New totalitarianism in higher education, including the abolition of academic free-



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dom, is exported to post-totalitarian Europe from the West through models of New Public Management which is nothing more than Communist central planning under a new label.

Probably the most long-lasting and deceptively hidden legacies of totalitarianism have been its deleterious effects on the way people think and argue and on their use of language. Totalitarian modes of thought, ideology, and language were not exclusive to countries ruled by totalitarian regimes. Parts of the Western European intelligentsia partook in the totalitarian intellectual project without living in a totalitarian system. Their totalitarian frame of mind has had similar post-totalitarian legacies. I examine some of these legacies, the promotion of the use of logical fallacies to argue for ideological conclusions, and the “divorce” of language from reality achieved through the use of dialectical language that identifies between opposites. I illustrate these legacies with the writings of a Czech former secret police officer and Habermas on democracy and the writings of Derrida and Žižek about personal responsibility, dissidents, and totalitarianism. I conclude with tying together some of the themes that span the whole book about liberalism, republicanism, dissent and post-totalitarianism in the light of the recent rise of populist authoritarianism in Europe. I call for building an alternative opposition on the legacies of dissent.

Is there any specific feature in which the Czech society differs from the *general Central Europe*?

Czechs like to think they are more Western than other countries. Apart from the geographic fact and the benefit the country derives from proximity to the German economy, and the historical traditions of the First Republic, the Czech

Republic still shares more with Slovakia and Hungary than it does with France and Denmark.

Communism was the most homogenizing political system in world history. Forty years of this system generated many similarities between countries that had nothing in common historically like Bulgaria, Latvia, and the Czech Republic. In some respects Czechs and Slovaks started from a lower point than Hungarians and Poles. For example, although Poland has maintained private farms and Hungary allowed private businesses, in Czechoslovakia there was no commercial private property. Czech dissent was more liberal and intellectual than in Poland or Hungary, but that tradition is disappearing from the Czech political scene, at least for now.

Since the Communist Party destroyed its "reformed" wing after 1968, it could not reform itself as in Poland and Hungary, which made the transition smoother and easier. Unlike the Baltic countries, Visegrad countries failed to use their diaspora in the West to "refresh" their political and other elites.

Is there a lesson you believe we should learn from the process of privatization and reforms of systems of justice which Central European countries went through in the 1990s?

It is a common mistake to label post-totalitarian economic systems as "free market capitalism". This mistake may be based on a bivalent view of economic systems as either socialist or free market capitalist, or on misidentifying "capitalism" with overt economic inequality. There was a third way, privatization without marketization, private property, inequality, but no free competition, and strong correlation between political power and economic wealth.

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THE LATE-TOTALITARIAN ELITE THAT PROSPERED AFTER TOTALITARIANISM PREPARED THE FALL OF COMMUNISM BY "NEST-FEATHERING" AND TRANSFORMED ITSELF INTO A CLASS OF "BUSINESSMEN"

The debate in the early nineties between advocates of "market socialism," gradualists, shock therapists and those who wished to maintain command economy was theoretical, in the irrelevant sense of the word, since governments had little control over the evolution of the economy without control over the late-totalitarian elite and government bureaucracies. The choice of policy hardly affected the results: If the state kept the monopolies, the managers continued to control them and transmuted their naked liberties into rights by stripping the assets they controlled. If the state decided on quick privatization, the managers became owners through manager buy-outs and could then sell the firms or their assets if the assets were worth more than the company, as was often the case. If



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the state did nothing, the managers privatized spontaneously and again gained control of the properties. The late-totalitarian elite that prospered after totalitarianism prepared the fall of Communism by “nest-feathering” and transformed it-

self into a class of “businessmen”, cashing in on patronage networks to position themselves favorably in the privatization process.

If the state decided on voucher/coupon privatization, the manager maintained actual control and again stripped the assets in the absence of legal or market mechanisms through which dispersed owners could control corporate government and management. The introduction of investment funds that collected the vouchers from individuals to concentrate ownership did little to help small investors gain control over the management of their vouchers/coupons; first, because they could not control the corporate government of the investment funds, whose owners could and did liquidate and steal them by stripping their assets, and second, because some investment funds were owned by banks which were owned by the government and so privatization became a method for the government to transfer ownership back to itself... Initially, voucher privatization appeared politically attractive, giving “gifts” to the whole population. It was ideologically appealing to visiting libertarians enthralled to apparently see Milton Friedman’s idea in action (though Friedman conditioned it on the rule of law that was absent after Communism), as a whole population became owners with an apparent stake in the new privatized economy. But many vouchers became worthless because their owners could control neither the companies they owned, nor the investment funds they invested in.

Gradual reforms gave the managers more time to strip assets. Naked liberties to control cash flows and to access assets can become property rights by transferring liquid and other unspecific and portable assets, like precious metals, abroad. Even West Germans who gained properties in East Germany quickly learned to

adapt to the post-totalitarian conditions and engaged in the same activities, stripping assets and lobbying the government for subsidies.

“Privatization” in the post-totalitarian context did not mean severing contacts between “privatized” firms and the state, between managers-owners and politicians and bureaucrats. Firms and the state remained entangled with each other in complex webs of transfers of subsidies, credit, and protectionism from the state to firms, and kickbacks, bribes, political contributions and so on from the firms back to politicians and governing political parties. After “privatization”, the new owners divided their firms into private assets and public liabilities. The state paid for industrial subsidies either from taxing healthier parts of the economy such as small businesses, commodities and weapons, or from loans, the issuing of international bonds, or by taxing foreign direct investment (FDI).

So, what have we learned and what will we be able to teach countries that may move to privatize in the future like Cuba? First, it is absolutely essential to create first the infrastructure for the rule of law, even if it means importing your judges and policemen from abroad, as they try to do now in Ukraine and parts of Latin America. Without the rule of law, there is no point in distributing coupons. Second, the process of privatization should be managed by an independent agency and not by politicians and should be open to foreigners. International accounting firms can handle the auction for a percentage and foreigners may pay more and offer more to locals than local mafias of former secret policemen and party bosses. Third, after privatization, the state should remain neutral and not offer subsidies or protection to the privatized firms, or this would not amount to privatization.

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Today in most countries in Central Europe we can often witness people being nostalgic over the old “good days” of totalitarian regimes which allegedly provided for safety and security. Newly formed political parties often respond to these feelings by downplaying the problems of the old regimes and criticizing harshly social changes of the last 25 years. How should we keep a sound view on these problems? How

and what to teach our children so they could have a true understanding of what has really transpired?

I do not think there is a genuine "movement" for restoration in the space between Russia and Germany. I think there are protest movements that say what they think would frighten the "establishment" and Brussels. There are two reasons for it.

One is global. The economic mess that has started almost ten years ago is still with us. This leads to the rise of populist movements and politicians everywhere, including the United States and Western Europe. Populist movements usually advocate contradictory goals - less taxes and more public services, less immigration by tax-paying foreigners and higher pensions, more taxes on foreign companies and higher investment in the economy and so on. They may also advocate more freedom and return to a strong state. In post-Communist Europe populism is particularly acute because the people were not ready for 2008. When they went through painful economic changes in the nineties, there was a clear narrative: The Communists ruined the economy, there will be painful reforms, but then we will live like Austrians and Germans. This allowed the governments to institute reforms and convince the people to be patient. But the crisis of 2008 does not have a clear culprit. Some anonymous bankers made bad decisions half a world away, so why should Poles and Czechs suffer?!

Second, the current situation is the result of a couple of decades of pretty high levels of corruption on all levels of government and by politicians of all stripes. This creates a temptation for voting for non-politicians, dictators and businessmen, under the particularly Eastern European illusion that a strong state can solve problems that a liberal state cannot and that very rich people are above stealing to become richer. Then,

the lack of experience as far as politics is concerned leads people (not only in post-Communist Europe) to believe contradictory promises, to support policies that are internally incoherent. I believe this will be a passing trend and that soon the global economy will recover, Russia will not have the money to subsidize European populism anymore, and liberal democracy will return in triumph.

We really do not need to rerun the 1930s in European history. Part of the problem may be that after 1989 everybody wanted to either forget history or did not know how to study and teach it. If we do not learn from history, especially totalitarianism, we may repeat it. Karl Marx wrote that when history repeats itself twice, it is first as a tragedy and then as a comedy (he meant Napoleon the First and the Third, respectively). He may still be right about totalitarianism, but then the joke will be on us. ●



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