

## 1990

**Gellner sent this report to *The Spectator* but, as far as it known, they did not publish it. A dot matrix copy, corrected in hand, has been converted by OCR to the present text.**

### Conference on Ethics and Politics, Bratislava, 5-6 April 1990

On 5 and 6 April, a symposium took place in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, on the subject of Ethics and Politics, under the highest possible auspices - those of Václav Havel, the President of the Czech and Slovak Federated Republic (this appears to be the new terminology, replacing the unlamented Czechoslovak Socialist Republic). There are good reasons for welcoming the demise of the rule of the KSC (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia - but the letters should really read Kolaborantská Strana Československá, the Party of Collaboration), and of the elevation of Havel to the Presidency. Havel is not merely a brilliant playwright (as far as I can judge, the most brilliant living practitioner of the art) but one whose wit and perceptiveness laid bare the moral dilemmas, the constraints and temptations of a situation in which most other people concluded that resistance was pointless, and that they might as well submit. *Noone* foresaw that by the end of 1989, resistance would prove not pointless, but on the contrary, easy and victorious. Those few who, like Havel, resisted nevertheless, did so from some heroic compulsion, not from calculation.

The regime toppled in 1989 was indeed originally based on a fascinating, sharply delineated, historically important view of the connection between *ethics* and *politics*. The argument, stripped to essentials, ran as follows. That which had passed for ethics and morality in recorded history was but the cover, the handmaiden, of exploitative and oppressive social orders, endowing them with a spurious legitimacy, and blinding their

victims (and, for that matter, their less numerous beneficiaries) with false consciousness. In human history, there had been a number of such social orders, based successively on a class monopoly of water resources (the famous and much disputed Asiatic Mode of Production), of the human person itself (slavery), of land (feudalism), and in the end, of capital. The last of these systems was in a sense the most, noxious, because it was no longer necessary. It combined the acquisition of great resources, such as at long last made it feasible to do *without* exploitation at all, with an extreme economic polarisation. It bestowed affluence on some, and impoverishment on the rest. To add insult to injury, this system gave itself great moral airs. It insisted on its own formal egalitarianism and democracy, whilst obscuring the mechanisms by which these only covered up the deprivation of the majority. It made their political participation ineffective, by reducing them to economic helplessness. It was endowed with putatively rule-bound and plural political institutions, claiming to serve society as a whole - but these in reality only served to perpetuate and protect the central iniquities of the system.

The Communist regime which prevailed in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1989 (and which after 1968 deserved fully the appellation of Collaborationist), legitimated itself as the repudiation, and the overcoming, of this allegedly spurious, bourgeois, formal-democratic morality. It claimed to be its replacement by a social system in which the abolition of private ownership would lead to a genuine moral order, to human fulfillment. Reality turned out to be somewhat different. In consequence, throughout ex-Communist Eastern Europe, there is a desperate craving for a return to the old Civil Society with its previously denounced, supposedly fraudulent morality. The passionate new cry is - let us have our Fraud back! All is forgiven, but return!

It is not always easy. Frauds once lost, may not always be readily recovered. Their

roots had been brutally assaulted, and the revival of the plant itself may be problematic. The moral slash-and-burn had been more effective and thorough in some places; the revival of the rejected old institutions and morality more promising in others. In Soviet Russia, for instance, one of the contemporary slogans is that henceforth) "all-human" values will no longer be trumped by *class* values. This is a coded way of saying that it is no longer legitimate to suspend moral considerations by appealing to the overriding imperative of victory in the class struggle... But what, exactly is the delimitation, and the social base, of these *all-human* values? And how are they to acquire social effectiveness ? These are the questions. They are not always easy to answer.

Given these problems, one approached the Bratislava symposium on *Ethics and Politics* with the greatest possible expectations. Here the central issue was to be investigated under the highest auspices of the new order, and with the participation of a really outstanding collection of people, qualified by their previous work, or by their fine record during the days of darkness, or by their present position, to make a contribution to its elucidation.

Given these eminently plausible expectations, it is sad to have to say that they were not altogether fulfilled. Let me begin with a general typology of scholarly congresses and conferences. I am by way of being an expert on this topic, having attended any number of them, notably in Eastern Europe ( it used to be one of the few ways of gaining access to and insight, into East European intellectual life). There are two extreme types:

1) The Ritual of Confirmation. This illustrates almost everything that social anthropologists say about rituals. The point of the occasion is not the communication of information, still less the critique of argument; the aim is to highlight a given hierarchy - of both persons and of ideas - and make it vivid and authoritative. Top People speak

at great length. Lesser people speak less or not at all. For them, it is a privilege to be there at all. People from abroad are there to convey to the locals that the local hierarchy is also accepted abroad, and that there is not much point in appealing to those Outside against those who are bosses at home.

2) A genuine conference. A reasonably clear and important, even if not necessarily soluble, issue is selected for discussion. People known for having important ideas, standpoints, experiences or documentation relevant to that issue are invited. Arrangements are made to ensure, or at least make possible, a confrontation of ideas. The technical problems involved in this are not insurmountable. The advance circulation of papers, the restriction of speeches to lengths compatible with attention, and reasonably rapid succession of critical exchanges, can all help ensure that positions, their strengths and weaknesses, are made to emerge.

I do not wish to suggest that many conferences exemplify either one of the ideal types (1) or (2) in their purity. Generally speaking, there tends to be a compromise between elements drawn from either type, in any country. If, for instance, a conference is held in Clochemerle, and the *maire* of Clochemerle has kindly put the local chateau at the disposal of the meeting, it is only natural that he also be asked to say a few words at the opening, or the final dinner. If, in the course of his speech, he goes on a little too long", and betrays complete misapprehension concerning the nature of the subject of the conference, this is all part of the game.

The period of Communism now officially designated as Stagnation (roughly, from fall of Krushchev to rise of Gorbachev) had its own distinctive style of compromise in this matter. The praiseworthy Marxist respect for theory and science (*nauka* is actually a broader and morally

more potent word than mere "science"), the hallowed principle of the Unity of Theory and Practice, and the desire to win recognition, support and legitimation from some at least of the external scholarly world, prevented anything like a complete ritualisation of the proceedings. Participation by some at least of the politically dubious locals, and discussion of septic issues was allowed. Eager for international recognition to the point of other-directedness, the Soviet Marxists were conceptually bi-lingual: they lived both in a world in which their own views were definitively established, and the very norms of truth, and all dissenters but dupes or work of evil forces - *and* in a neutral world in which they could discuss open issues with outside scholars.

I treasure certain recollections of these compromises. For instance, there was an occasion in Moscow, not many moons before the fall of Krushchev, when a severe American lady critic of the distortions of Marxism, a direct pupil of Karl Wittfogel, had to fight, literally, for control of the microphone, but was allowed to do so. At the same conference, the Soviets, assuming that British participants were organised in a manner similar to their own, tried hard to identify the *leader* of a supposedly corporate body, the 'British delegation'. (There was no such body, only an undisciplined assembly of unconnected individuals). They finally picked on a very distinguished scholar who happened to have an expansive personality, which they took to be a mark of status, but he also had a rather weak head for alcohol. By the Soviet standards of the time (due to change markedly under Gorbachev) important members of the hierarchy had to be plied with drink, and the unfortunate supposed leader of the non-existent corporate and hierarchical 'British delegation' was made dead drunk, which did not correspond either to his style or taste.

But I mustn't over-indulge my nostalgia for the funnier aspects of the days of *Zastoi*. Here in Bratislava, a week or so ago, we were to celebrate the *end* of *zastoi* and the coming of liberty and intellectual honesty. The preconditions for serious, sharp, enlightening discussion

were all there. The problem of the recovery of a new basis for morality, of finding the logical and social bases for a new political order, was only too real and topical. The participants included a heroine of Russian dissidence, who had paid dearly for a few minutes protest in the Red Square against the invasion of 1968 (Larisa Bogorazova), a hero of Polish dissidence (Michnik), Czechs who had bravely kept alive thought and analysis in the dark days (Pithart, Milan Simecka, Hejdánek), excellent Parisian students of Central and Eastern Europe (Rupnik, Smolar), a famous Czech poet (Holub), an admired Magyar writer<sup>1</sup> (Esterhazy), two outstanding Anglophone social philosophers (Peter Winch, Charles Taylor) , a noted Polish phenomenologist (Tischner), and others of similar calibre. A Czech dissident who was also a critic of Havel's present political style was also present and heard, proving that no new orthodoxy was being imposed. With such a cast and such an occasion, what could go wrong? Why were there such persistent resonances of the old Ritualistic Style?

It was a great pity that Havel could not be present (for health reasons, it was said), for it would all have provided marvellous material for one of his witty plays. Bratislava castle provided a perfect setting: a brutalistic piece of architecture, four bleak towers made to daunt and dominate, connected by minimal and starkly functional buildings evidently intended to house an uncompromising bureaucracy: why, the very setting virtually defined our problem! But only a play by Havel could do justice to the total failure of acoustics. Eight, languages were used (the three main Western ones, four Slav ones, and Magyar). The interpreters were not acoustically segregated either from each other or the participants: if you switched your earphones to, say, Russian, you also had the benefit of one or two other languages in the background at the same time. If you did not use the headphones at all, the cumulative brouhaha of the massed interpreters gave the theatrical impression of a loudly murmuring proto-revolutionary *frondeur* mob at the

bottom end of the hall, getting ready to invade and pillage. I sat next to a noted English thinker who has no Slav language and so had to rely on the translation, and who looked at me helplessly, observing that the English translation simply was not intelligible.

In the brutalistic courtyard, the opening of an exhibition “Art against Totality” was synchronised with the conference, accompanied for some reason by harmonica music played by two men on one instrument, one playing the keys and the other, kneeling and nearly prostrate before him, providing so to speak the bellow-power. The art displayed was uncompromisingly abstract, hermeneutically impenetrable (or impenetrably hermeneutic), and it menaced Totality (and thereby was, presumably, aimed against totalitarianism) by saying, in effect, You Know Where You Can Stuff Socialist Realism (which would have been a much more apt title for the exhibition). I have nothing against such a sentiment .

The failure to think out the acoustics and provide adequate translations as it were symbolised the failure to work out other preconditions of genuine intellectual communication. You can limit the length of speeches without regard to status (instead of allowing speeches of absent stars to be read out in total length), and you can ensure that main points emerge through juxtaposition, on the programme, of rival viewpoints. A sharp but disciplined exchange can ensure intelligibility, even in a half-understood language, where long, *read* speeches, accompanied by an overlay of dubious translation, elude the mind's grasp and numb it by boredom. But noone seems to have given much, or any, thought to such problems.

I do not wish to malign the conference. Very interesting things were said, especially - but not only - in informal conversations. There was the opportunity to observe really outstanding past - and presumably future - participants in the drama of European intellectual life. It was a fine opportunity to sense the atmosphere of the new Czechoslovakia. (Very near the hotel, I

could observe an admittedly not very large, but vocal political meeting demanding total independence from [for?] Slovakia, with much waving of the Slovak flag. A member of the meeting held up Father Tiso, ruler of Slovakia under Hitler, and who was hanged after the war, as a model to follow and [this] provoked no protest by so doing. Whereas Lithuanian secession from the USSR arouses real fears because of its possible effects on liberalisation elsewhere, Slovak secession from Czechoslovakia would in no way imperil either the political or economic future of the new free regime in Prague.) It would be ungrateful and unfair to condemn the conference without qualification.

But it is apparently meant to be the first of a whole series of conferences. So it would be no kind of service to those who stand behind it, and who care for the values and aspirations which the conference rightly espoused, to refrain from telling them that they were, in some measure at any rate, celebrating the new values with a touch of the old style, thereby making it somewhat ridiculous. Too much thought was given to the ritual, PRO aspect, too little to intellectual content. One important sign of a liberal society is that intellectual content trumps re-affirmation of hierarchy and shared values – at least on occasion. Not enough care was taken to ensure that this would happen.

A bit of a hangover from the days of Communism? - or an example of a more widespread central European tendency to undue status deference (responsible, a participant assured me, for the feebleness of intellectual life in free Vienna)? - or mere technical lack of experience? Perhaps each of these factors contributed to the failure of the conference to do full justice to the splendid aim which it had set itself - namely, to help clarify, and, perhaps even go some of the way to establishing the moral foundations for the new social order, now at long last emerging in Central and Eastern Europe.



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Ernest Gellner