
AT ISSUE

Rough Beast Time

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

—W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Around the world, rough beasts are busily slouching. They are the nations recently emerged from decades of communist misrule, or those on the verge of similar emergence, while some additional few are escapees from other forms of authoritarian governance, both of the right and left persuasions. What all have in common, from Russia and Poland to Zambia and Nicaragua, is their embryonic political form. What shapes they may eventually assume remains the great mystery of our time.

Not surprisingly, these various nivities-in-the-making have occasioned a wide range of scholarly prognosis. From one corner, what might be caricatured as the Francis Fukuyama "end-of-history" corner, come hosannahs about the vindication and triumph of the liberal ideal. To these optimists, it is only a matter of time—and not much time, at that—before the rest of the world jumps on the free-market-and-democracy bandwagon.

From the opposite corner weigh in the doom-sayers. How, they ask, can countries with no tradition of rights or democracy turn into Swedens or Britains overnight, or next week, or even within the next 100 years? They point to the absence of legal and constitutional traditions, civil society, and other elements of a democratic infrastructure. Given such realities, they conclude, no one should be surprised that democracy in Nicaragua and Brazil appears to be unraveling; that the forces of reaction are gaining ground in Russia; that ethnic resentments, pent up for more than 45 years in such countries as Yugoslavia, Romania, and Germany, are once again breaking out all over.

Poised somewhere between the two parties, though tending more toward the latter, is historian John Lukacs, a scholar of rare, if often cranky, independence. He insists that we are seeing not the end of history but the end of the 20th century—a century that began in 1914 and ended in 1989—and

with it the end of the modern state. If anything is in the ascendant, Lukacs argues in *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age*, it is nationalism—a primitive creature that antedates the state that it is now outliving. The brave new world to come may be ugly, but just as Lukacs anticipates no Hegelian liberal apotheosis, so he expects no inevitable apocalypse.

Lukacs is not alone in championing modest expectations. Historian Martin Malia, writing in the *New Republic*, argues that the current crisis in the former Soviet Union is the very "stuff that exits from communism are made of." Because exits from communism are still something quite new under the sun, Malia's confidence may be premature, but at least he asks the right question: Why should anybody in the West have expected the formerly communist nations to have an easy time crawling out from under the rubble of a failed social and political experiment? Certainly, the ruling *nomenklatura* of the former Soviet Union, roughly five percent of the empire's population, had every reason to make such an exit as difficult as possible. And many of them are doing just that.

It is easy to understand the behavior of the old *nomenklatura* in Russia or Poland or Romania, or that of the communist elites who are still holding on in China, Cuba, and North Korea. Self-interest is no mystery. Less easy to comprehend has been the gloomy chorus of Western scholars who see nothing but failure and ineptitude in the earliest efforts to bring about political and economic reform.

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Malia cites three such scholars in his field—Stephen Cohen, Jerry Hough, and Peter Reddaway—though, in fairness, he could have cited many others, and others far more pessimistic. Cohen is a vociferous opponent of economic shock therapy, calling it an inappropriate American import that has undercut the achievements of Soviet

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industrialization and the Soviet welfare system. Hough would like to see Yeltsin replaced by so-called centrist Arkadi Volski, a leader of the Civic Union, the club of choice among old-style industrial managers. Reddaway points to errors on Yeltsin's part, fraudulent economic strategies, and beneath it all a fatally autocratic political culture from which Russia will never escape.

It would be easy to describe such criticism as giving aid and comfort to the enemy. It is not. Nor is it a case of ideological knee-jerkery. The three commentators occupy quite distinct positions on the political spectrum, from Cohen on the left to Reddaway in the center to Hough somewhere off on his own. All three are serious, intelligent, well-meaning scholars, widely respected within their field. The problem, however, may be precisely the field within which they are so widely respected, not just the field of Russian studies but the social sciences generally.

What is it about the social sciences that makes them so inadequate to this "interesting" time? German political scientist Heinrich Vogel, in a talk delivered at the Woodrow Wilson Center last fall, decried what he calls "mantras in Western transformation rhetoric," the Procrustean application of such concepts as "chaos," "stability," "democracy," and "the Western market economy" to situations where they fit uncomfortably at best. "Post-Soviet societies," Vogel remarked, "are so far away from internal balance, in such disarray that outside calls for 'stability' are tantamount to the support of forces who may be dreaming of a new equilibrium in repression."

At the same time, Vogel cautioned, efforts by legions of Western consultants to promote Western models of law, economy, and administration as though they belonged "to one denomination" rather than representing "different variants of the Western world" have only added to the confusion and raised expectations. Vogel sensibly appealed for a new and more nuanced language, one which he quite reasonably believes "can make a difference in the political reality."

But the problem may run deeper still, to the very character of those categories for whose renovation Vogel calls. For even in Vogel's measured approach, we may detect the curse of scientism: a blind faith in the methods and aims of science, particularly as applied to subjects that are essen-

tially unamenable to scientific analysis.

Is it merely humanistic arrogance to level such a charge against the social sciences? Not at all, for the humanities themselves are equally implicated, having adopted many of the same scientific pretensions that hobble the various social sciences. Historians, or at least many of them, are as likely as political scientists or sociologists to resort to behavioral or structural models as well as to their own encrusted theories of national character. And they do so, it seems, without having profited from mistakes they made during the Cold War.

Classicist W. R. Connor, in a trenchant essay published two years ago in the *American Scholar*, asked his fellow scholars, "Why Were We Wrong?" Why, that is, had Western observers of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe been so surprised by what happened in 1989? The answer, according to Connor, was that scholars had fallen into the habit of studying their subject through the keyhole of social science, focusing on a limited range of factors such as military force, agricultural productivity, and the behavior of party and state elites. Ignored, Connor said, were "the passions—the appeal of ethnic loyalty and nationalism, the demands for freedom of religious practice and cultural expression, and the feeling that the regime had simply lost its moral legitimacy. These considerations were 'soft' or 'unscientific,' and those who emphasized them could be scorned."

Connor offered more than a postmortem over the body of failed scholarship. Looking to the future, he argued that what was needed for the education of leaders and citizens was not "more elaborate calculations, more sophisticated modeling, or greater expenditures on the familiar forms of 'security studies,'" but instead a "greater attunement to emotional and moral factors, to the persistent claims of primary attachments, and of religious, ethnic, and national identities." True security would be found not in the misguided scientific quest for systems of predictability but, Connor concluded, in "an awareness of complexity, a respect for limits, and what the Greeks would call 'practical intelligence.'"

If Connor's advice is today being largely ignored within the academy, should those who live and toil beyond the cloistered halls be concerned? After all, what is the danger of intellectual irrelevance? Unfortunately, it may be considerable. In precarious times, ideas are decisive, as are val-

ues and individuals. Yet most social scientific theories—whether structural, behavioral, or evolutionary—tend to scant all three.

It would be particularly tragic if the citizens and leaders of the democratic world forgot how important ideas and ideals were in bringing about a favorable end to the Cold War. The testimony of Václav Havel and other witnesses to the importance of standing firmly by principles should have made this clear. Nevertheless, the voices of relativism are once again making themselves heard, and are doing so in the most influential places. The day after Russia's reform-minded acting prime minister Yegor Gaidar was forced to resign, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed piece by an American economist saying that a partial return to the centralized industrial-planning system of the former Soviet Union might not be so bad. After all, the economist suggested, such a centralized system would not be so different from the industrial policies being proposed by some of America's Democratic leadership. This was not merely a case of bad timing on the part of the *New York Times*; it signaled a return to the same kind of fuzzy relativism that marked much Western analysis during the Cold War, a relativism that blurs the all-important distinctions between democratic and nondemocratic institutions and practices.

Those on whom we count most to make such distinctions are, of course, our heads of state. Yet in addition to forgetting the importance of moral distinctions, we also seem to be forgetting the importance of leaders. Whether it was Lech Walesa opening the way to democracy in Poland or Deng Xiaoping controlling change to preserve the communist regime in China, recent history should have taught us that individuals matter tremendously, for better and for worse. Although much has been said against Ronald Reagan by his critics, it is hard to find fault with the former president on one crucial point: He realized that principles firmly stood by can change the world.

He knew, in a way that we can only hope our current leader knows, that to say decisively one thing is good and another evil is the real foundation of a vision. To act on anything less, however enlightened one's motives, is to give room to the worst opportunists.

There is no question that democratic nations will have to provide material aid to the newly liberated nations of the world, but realistically there are limits to how much can—and even should—be given. When it comes to the struggle of ideas, however, democracies can provide almost limitless support. Whether or not they possess the will and energy to do so is uncertain. Also uncertain is how helpful that support will be. The performance of Western intellectuals during the Cold War gives one little cause for hope, but some notable exceptions fend off despair, among them theologian and author Reinhold Niebuhr.

Writing at the end of World War II, Niebuhr described the struggle between good and evil in this world as a struggle between the "children of light" and the "children of darkness." He believed that the former, though full of the best intentions, were dangerously prey to notions of innate goodness and human perfectibility. Such credulity made them vulnerable to the wiles of the children of darkness, who play only according to the rules of self-interest. Niebuhr called on the children of light to arm themselves "with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice" so that they might "beguile, deflect, harness, and restrain self-interest, individuality, and collectivity for the sake of community."

Whether he single-handedly accomplished what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., described as a "revolution in American liberal thought," Niebuhr made a difference in the course of world events. Without denying ambiguities, he knew where it was important to take a stand, and his message was heard by those who went on to wage and win the Cold War. This time of rough beasts calls for thinkers who are just as principled, just as wise, and just as strong.