Civilizational Incompetence: The Trap of Post-Communist Societies

Piotr Sztompka
Iagiellonian University. Institute of Sociology. 52 Grodzka Street, 31-044 Krakow, Poland

Abstract: Recent history has witnessed two huge surprises: first the collapse of communism, and then the unexpected slow-down of post-communist transition. The author claims that the secret of current tensions and drawbacks experienced by Eastern and Central European societies is to be sought in the area of "intangibles and imponderables", the deep cultural legacy inherited both from the distant pre-modern past of these societies and the more recent syndrome of "fake modernity" imposed by real socialism. The vicious effect of these complex historical influences is described by the concept of "civilizational incompetence" comprising deficiencies in: (a) entrepreneurial culture, (b) civic or political culture, (c) discourse culture and (d) everyday culture. The agents able to undermine and slowly eliminate civilizational incompetence must be sought among the elites most insulated from the impact of real socialism, and at the same time most exposed to the influence of modern, Western culture.

"It is more difficult to pass over from totalitarianism to democracy than from democracy to totalitarianism. (...) Democracy calls for deep-going, value-oriented changes in the public mentality – it calls for time."
(Karl R. Popper 1990: 16)

Two huge surprises

The revolutions of 1989 in Eastern and Central Europe rank among world-historical events of greatest significance. There is basic agreement that – in spite of their mostly non-violent nature – those events must be treated as revolutions, both because of their revolutionary scope and the scale of revolutionary mobilization. Thus, first, they have initiated radical and fundamental transformations of all dimensions of society. And, second, they have involved direct and immediate participation of large masses of citizens. That seems enough to put them in line with Great Revolutions of the past. The testimony of a British historian is unambiguous: "The revolutions of 1989 have been real revolutions: popular revolts before which armed governments, one after another, have collapsed; the recovery by nations of lost liberty" (Trevor-Roper 1989: 14). There is also vast consensus that the impact of 1989 is global, with ramifications spreading across the whole human society. As the editor of Daedalus puts it in an issue devoted to "The Exit from Communism": "The year 1989, with its unprecedented happenings in both Central and Eastern Europe, must figure among the few whose consequences have transformed the world". (Graubard 1992: v).

These revolutions were also among most baffling in history. Nobody has predicted them. Jean Kirkpatrick expresses the mood of common people, politicians and scholars alike: "what a fantastic surprise the collapse of communism was – she exclaims – I believe there has been no greater surprise in modern history – and we should admit it – than the speed and the totality with which communist regimes fell in Eastern Europe and in the socialist fatherland itself – the Soviet Union" (Kirkpatrick 1992: 7).

No wonder that such an amazing feat of world-historical change, and such a powerful affirmation of human agency – have released widespread enthusiasm, elation, euphoria and unbridled optimism. Everything seemed so easy and promising. But soon the post-communist societies were to wake up from the happy dream. Outside observers note: "Two years after the Revolutions of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe the mood has soured" (Chirot 1992: 1), "pessimism is the attitude of the hour" (Beckett 1992: 2), "neither capitalism, enlightenment, or democracy has proved as pristine or as accessible as everyone wished" (Alexander 1991: 4). Insiders are even more forthright. Vaclav Havel, one of the architects of the revolution, gives his account "two years after" a telling title: "Paradise Lost", and the picture he paints is dramatic and dismal: "hatred among nationalities, suspicion, racism, even signs of fascism; vicious demagogy, intrigue, and deliberate lying; politicking, and unrestrained, unheeding struggle for purely particular interests, a hunger for power, unadulterated ambition, fanaticism of every imagin-

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able kind; new and unprecedented varieties of robbery, the rise of different mafias; the general lack of tolerance, understanding, taste, moderation, reason” (Havel 1992: 6). Thus, the gloom of the nineties replaced the joy of the eighties.

This is the second huge surprise of recent history: why all this is so awfully difficult? What bad fortune keeps us – Eastern and Central Europeans – from attaining the goal of democratic polity, market economy and open culture, once the proverbial Wall has crumbled? As a sociologist I propose to seek the answer much closer to Earth than fate, destiny or providence. I propose to delve into human agency, to look at the people – ultimate makers of history, but also ultimate villains of historical failures. And then the secret of the current slowdown of post-communist project will become obvious: it is ourselves, Eastern Europeans.

The realm of intangibles

The dominant tendency of sociological explanation is to invoke “hard” institutional or organizational facts, economic or political arrangements, material resources, technologies etc. It is more rare to turn attention to the people inhabiting these institutions, running organizations, producing and consuming, ruling and obeying, utilizing resources and applying technologies. It is high time to bring people back into sociological theory, including the theory of post-communism, and to pay much more attention to “soft”, human, cultural factors standing in the way of smooth transition.

The central theme of anti-communist revolutions and post-communist changes is grasped by the metaphor of “returning to Europe”. An informed observer notes that “In all the lands, the phrase people use to sum up what is happening is the return to Europe” (Ash 1990a: 3). But rarely is it recognized that “Europe” may mean two different things. As Zbigniew Brzezinski insightfully observes the European house is not the same as the European home. “House has architectural implications. Home has relational implications. The first implies a structure; the second implies a family” (Brzezinski 1989: 2). Or in other words, the first refers to “hard” institutional and organizational frameworks (of economy, law, administration, technology), while the second implies “soft” intangibles and imponderables (of interpersonal bonds, loyalties, values, identifications, networks). To re-enter European house is not the same as being accepted into the European home. The former is easier and quicker: it only requires legal, constitutional changes and the coordination of the political and economic system with that prevailing in Western Europe. The latter is much more demanding; it requires fundamental transformations of mental, cultural, civilizational fabric of society. “We cannot return to Europe – says Polish historian – as long as our towns are dirty, our telephones do not work, our political parties are reactionary and parochial, and our mentality Sovietized” (Jedlicki 1990: 41). It is here, in the “soft” area of intangibles and imponderables that the most dangerous obstacles on the road away from communism, are to be discovered. But before identifying them, we have to take a brief excursus into the realm of general sociological theory.

There is one classical sociological author, dealing with earlier Great Revolutions – American and French – to whom we may turn for heuristic hunches. The lesson Alexis de Tocqueville teaches us is not to underestimate the “soft” factors of habits, mentalities, cultural routines. His focus in the study of successful American democracy is worth quoting at length, as a contrario it may suggest a lot with reference to yet unsuccessful democracies of post-communist Europe: “The manners of the people may be considered as one of the great general causes to which the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States is attributable. I here use the word customs with the meaning which the ancients attached to the word mores; for I apply it not only to manners properly so called – that is to what might be termed the habits of the heart – but to the various notions and opinions current among men and to the mass of those ideas which constitute their character of mind. I comprise under this term, therefore, the whole moral and intellectual condition of the people” (Tocqueville 1945, vol.I: 12). This is clearly a bit mixed bag of concepts: including what people do (their conduct), what they think (their mentality), and what they are expected to do and think (their culture). These three levels of human experience should be kept apart.

Those sociologists who were heeding Tocqueville’s lesson were most often taking either behavioral approach, observing activities of societal members; or psychological approach, investigating individual attitudes, motivations, reasons, and at most aggregating them statistically. When applied to communist or post-communist society such approach resulted in the accounts of “socialist mentality” (Koralewicz and Zielowski, 1990), “social subconsciousness”, (Marody 1987), “captive mind” (Miosz 1953), “Homo Sovieticus” (Tischner 1992).
I submit that for our present purposes — i.e. investigating the dilemmas of post-communist transition — the more fruitful approach is cultural: the search for underlying patterns for thinking and doing, commonly shared among the members of society, and therefore external and constraining with respect to each individual member. Tocqueville’s message must be delivered from psychologism, and here another sociological classic may be of help: Emile Durkheim. Following Durkheims notion of “social facts” we shall consider cultural precepts as telling societal members what ought to be done, either because it is good, or because it is done by most people, or because it has always been done. In other words, culture invokes the authority of righteousness, normalcy, or tradition, and derives its legitimacy and sanctioning power from these sources. When applied to post-communist experience, such approach leads to the ideas of necessary “moral infrastructure of democracy”, “civic spirit” (Offe 1991b), “frames of the mind” (Dahrendorf 1990), “discourse of civil society” (Alexander 1989), “habitus“ (Bourdieu 1990).

To use a metaphor, whereas the proponents of psychological orientation would answer the query about the failures of post-communism, by referring to the invisible “wall in our heads” (Nagorsky 1991), I would claim that there is a more basic “wall in our culture”, of which the conduct and mentality of post-communist people are just the symptoms or reflections. This cultural barrier has been raised by several decades of “real socialism”, it has acquired considerable autonomy, and therefore retains great potential of persistence long after institutional and organizational foundations of “real socialism” have been broken. This is the most vicious legacy that communism has left behind.

Let us be more precise. Culture is not something given. It is produced, constructed by the people in the course of collective life, historically accumulated and sedimented in tradition. Collective life has various scope: it is carried out in families, groups, local communities, nations, global society. All those contexts, or settings have culture-generating potential. There are quite idiosyncratic group cultures (e.g. professional soldiers), regional cultures (e.g. mountaineers), distinct national cultures (Esikno, Italian, German), cultures of the empires (e.g. Roman, Aztec), emerging global culture (most obvious in the area of consumer patterns). In the 20th century, in Europe we encounter another peculiar culture-generating setting of vast scope: the communist bloc (perhaps the closest historical analogy would be the culture of the em- pire). Imposing similar institutional and organizational forms, similar life-ways, similar ideologies on a number of nation-states of Eastern and Central Europe, and enforcing them for several generations, the communist system succeeded in creating a common cultural framework, over and above distinct national cultures, and relatively isolated from wider global culture: the unique syndrom of values, rules, norms, codes, standards typical for the bloc as a whole, the bloc culture. Even though there were obvious national varieties in the style in which those cultural precepts were implemented (DDR was not the same as Hungary, Poland was not the same as Czechoslovakia etc.), there were also fundamental, underlying commonalities. Life under communism has produced unique legacy, lasting cultural syndrom.

Unexpectedly and unintentionally this cultural legacy has turned out to play a double-edged historical role. First, it had a “boomerang effect” on the project of “real socialism” blocking its operation, undermining its efficiency from within and eventually leading to its collapse. And second, outlasting the conditions that have bred it, and even enhanced to some extent by the immediate effects of prolonged oppositional struggle and revolutionary experience (“conspiracy syndrome” and “post-revolutionary malaize“ to be discussed later) it persists after the demise of communism and stands in the way of democratic transition. Strangely enough it has proved to be a subversive force both against totalitarianism and democracy.

The paradox of real socialism and post-communism

To understand this baffling phenomenon, we must look closer at the nature of communist, as well as post-communist experience. There is an interesting commonality between the project of real socialism, and the current efforts at democratic transition. Ideological embellishments aside, both are the responses to the fundamental inequality in contemporary world; the division between the core and the peripheries. The global society has never been the society of equals. And this is not less true in the epoch of equal formal (legal) sovereignty, when Burkina Faso and the United States have the same, single vote in the UN. Whatever the claims of international law, in the Eastern and Central Europe we have always lived in the factual periphery (or at most “semi-periphery”, as some more generous observers prefer to put it). Anyway, ours
have never been the core societies. And the rationale of both communist and post-communist projects derived from this historical predicament. They were both the attempts at emancipation, at escaping the periphery; they were efforts to bridge the gap between the most developed and the backward, underdeveloped societies.

The first, socialist project embarked on forced, imposed modernization from above, hoping to escape from pre-modernity by means of command economy, authoritarian rule, and rigid "thought-control" (Koestler 1975). "Because the socialist states were late industrializers, they took a path of development that emphasized state mobilization of resources in order to catch up with early industrializers" (Chase-Dunn 1992: 30). They were "modernizing societies, which, in seeking to catch up with the more developed, selected and totalized the Jacobin ideological and institutional elements of modernity" (Eisenstadt 1992: 33).

The result was not authentic modernity, but what I would propose to call "fake modernity". By this I mean the incoherent, disharmonious, internally contradictory combination of three components: (a) imposed modernity in some domains of social life (industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratisation, technological advancement, educational progress etc.), (b) the vestiges of traditional, pre-modern society preserved in other domains (paternalism in politics, barter economy, nepotism, ascritiptive and particularistic principles of status etc.), (c) the cultural effects of real socialism, blocking the way to modernity, and incapacitating the system from within, up to its ultimate destruction (by a mechanism akin to a self-destroying causal loop). There is the paradox: forced creation of tangible modernity (at least in some domains, and to some degree), was accompanied by the destruction of intangible cultural tissue, indispensable for effective and authentic operation of modernity for the benefit of the people, for their own full enjoyment of modernity. As a result, instead of being narrowed down, the gap between the periphery and the core has grown. It is the irony of history, that at the end of the 20th century, in the aftermath of the socialist, modernizing experiment, the Eastern and Central European societies have landed deeper in the periphery than before.

The second, oppositional, anti-communist project culminating in the revolutions of 1989, attempts to escape from fake modernity, and perennial peripheral status by means of radical reconstruction of society by democratic means. It is mainly the flight from real socialism or, as somebody put it metaphorically "the escape from Asia" (Mokrzycki 1991). Shmuel Eisenstadt sees the events of 1989 as "rebellions of protest against a misrepresented modernity, a flawed interpretation of modernity" (Eisenstadt 1992: 33). And what follows after the revolution is mostly informed by the negative rejection of the recent past, rather than any clarity of what is to emerge in the future. "The postcommunist world is now being built by the negation of the Leninist experience" (Malia 1992: 58). But the vicious irony of history works again: instead of reaching authentic modernity, we plunge into economic crisis, social chaos, political anarchy, anomie and disorganization. It is indeed sad that three years after the victorious revolutions one has to agree with Vaclav Havel: "Society has freed itself, true, but in some ways it behaves worse than when it was in chains" (Havel 1992: 6). The road toward democratic polity, market economy and civil society, or to put it metaphorically entering the true European home, rather than merely building the empty skeleton of quasi-European house, is blocked again, this time by the cultural legacy of real socialism, aggravated by the experience of the anti-communist struggle and the revolutions themselves. After two long detours, theoretical and historical, we have to grapple with this cultural legacy more directly. What it consists of, and how it emerged?

The anatomy of civilizational incompetence

For a developed, democratic and market society to operate, several resources seem indispensable. Capital, technology, infrastructure, skilled labour force, robust middle class, efficient civil service, professional political elite – would be some obvious examples. But there is also a less obvious, underlying cultural resource which may be called "civilizational competence". By this – in clear analogy to what the linguists call the "language competence" – I mean a complex set of rules, norms and values, habits and reflexes, codes and matrices, blueprints and formats – the skillful and semi-automatic mastery of which is a prerequisite for participation in modern civilization. Four substantive sub-categories of civilizational competence coincide with four main areas of modern, developed society for which they are immediately relevant: economy, polity, social consciousness and everyday life. First, there is the enterprise culture, indispensable for participation in market economy.
Some of its components include: innovative push, achievement orientation, individualistic competitiveness, rational calculation and the like (cf. McClelland 1961, Inkeles 1976). Second, there is the civic culture, indispensable for participation in democratic polity. Some of its components include: political activism, readiness to participate, concern with public issues, rule of law, discipline, respect for opponents, compliance with the majority and the like (cf. Almond and Verba 1963).

Third, there is the discursive culture, indispensable for participation in free intellectual flow. Some of its components include: tolerance, open-mindedness, acceptance of diversity and pluralism, scepticism, criticism and the like (cf. Habermas 1984 and 1987 [1981]). And four, there is the everyday culture, indispensable for daily existence in advanced, urbanized, technologically saturated and consumer-oriented society. Some of its components include: neatness, cleanliness, orderliness, punctuality, body care, fitness, facility to handle mechanical devices and the like.

Civilizational competence understood in this way, is the historical achievement of modernity, which over several centuries has evolved slowly and gradually in Western societies (Elias 1982). Of course, even in modern Western democracies, none of its dimensions has been fully and unexceptionally realized. Larger or smaller enclaves of quite opposite values, habits, and patterns are obviously visible, in economic, political and everyday life. And the twentieth century has witnessed quite long periods of gross violation of civilizational rules (e.g. in fascist or autocratic regimes). But in peripheral societies of Eastern and Central Europe the civilizational competence has never had the chance to evolve. It was clearly undeveloped when these societies started on the road toward communist ("fake") modernization. The decades of real socialism not only blocked the appearance of civilizational competence, but in many ways helped to shape contrary cultural syndrome – civilizational incompetence.

This vicious process operated in all domains of social life. The entire social milieu of real socialism acted against the emergence of civilizational competence. And thus, planned, command economy effectively paralyzed entrepreneurship. Political autocracy alienated the masses and blocked the emergence of citizenship. Imperial domination constrained sovereignty and national identification. Shortages and poverty preempted any concern with everyday virtues of civility, esthetics and comforts of everyday life.

All this was effected by means of three causal mechanisms. The first was direct indoctrination through socialist propaganda, as well as habituation in the ways typical for socialist economic and political practice (this is responsible e.g. for primitive egalitarianism, demands of welfare and social security from the state, claims to "leading political role" by the working class etc.). The second involved successful attempts at totalitarian control, by means of coercive state apparatus (resulting e.g. in opportunism, blind compliance, reluctance to take decisions, avoidance of personal responsibility etc., which together make up the syndrome of "prolonged infantilism" matching the "paternalism" of the state). The third, and perhaps most crucial, were adaptive, defensive patterns developing spontaneously against indoctrination and totalitarian control. They took the form of unintended consequences, or "boomerang effects" (e.g. lack of respect for law, institutionalized evasions of rules, distrust of authorities, double standards of talk and conduct, glorification of tradition, idealization of the West).

Some of similar effects were produced by other causal mechanisms appearing together with the growing opposition against the regime. The conspirational struggle and contestation against autocratic rule, have drawn large segments of society into peculiar cultural settings, unfortunately not much helpful for producing civilizational competence. Rather, it strengthened some of the orientations listed above. The condition of combat, with the strict borderline between "us" and "them", allies and enemies, fosters intolerance. Ideological commitment, necessary for successful struggle encourages dogmatism; compromise is treated as treason. The situation of confrontation with the stronger opponent, in the condition of encirclement by the enemy requires strong, charismatic leadership which rarely bothers with the nuances of democracy.

In the immediate aftermath of victorious revolution, new factors appear, which – paradoxically – help to preserve the pre-revolutionary legacy, blocking the emergence of civilizational competence. First is the widespread anomie or axiological chaos, common disorientation as to the binding norms and values, valid rules, right ways of life. Old patterns have fallen down, new ones have not yet been legitimized. Thrown into uncertainty and devoid of moral guidance, people feel isolated, lonely, and turn their resentments against others. Interpersonal suspicion, hostility, hatred – destroy whatever social social bonds have been left intact.
by totalitarian rule (and purges under the label of “decommunization” or “lustration” paradoxically engrave this condition even more). Second, the emergence of new life-chances, opportunities to raise social status, by freshly opened access to wealth, power, prestige – generates brutal competition, in which stakes are high but rules of the game undeveloped. Civility, fair play, cooperative attitudes – do not find conducive ground to put roots. Entirely cynical fights for political power and complete demoralization of large segments of political elites – are most visible recent illustrations. Third, the rigid social controls, both external and internal are suddenly released. Police force and the judiciary get disorganized and lose any legitimacy they might still possess. The law is undermined by the claims that its totalitarian origins make it illegitimate and not binding. If law is considered unjust or anachronic – why should one comply? This is not the helpful condition for establishing the rule of law, as the fundamental principle of democracy. And fourth, there are unintended costs of opening toward the Western world. The flow of consumer mass culture of lowest quality arrives first, before any truly valuable products, and brings pornography and drugs, brutality and mysticism, organized crime and deviant ways of life. The enthusiastic adoption of most superficial symbols of capitalist affluence reminds one of “conspicuous consumption”, “nouveau riche” conduct, and “Great Gatsby syndrome”. A strange case of replaying the same scenarios a century later.

In this way, the civilizational incompetence, which had originated and evolved (on conducive soil of civilizationaly backward societies) in the period of real socialism, then got preserved by the logic of pre-revolutionary conspiracy, and finally has been enhanced by the unintended side-effects of revolution – still haunts Eastern and Central Europe.

To unravel its composition I will borrow a theoretical strategy used recently by Jeffrey Alexander. Applying the late-Durkheimian dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, coupled with Levi-Straussian idea of binary opposites organizing the symbolic-cultural domain, he analyzes the “discourse of democratic society”, underlying the political practices of modern democracies. “We call these sign sets discourses if they meet two conditions. First, they must not only communicate information, structuring reality in a cognitive or expressive way: they must also perform a forceful evaluative task. Binary sets do so when they are charged by the “religious” symbology of the sacred and profane“ (Alexander 1989: 8). The “discourse of real socialism“, as Alexander would probably label what I am describing as civilizational incompetence, may be reconstructed as a set of seven oppositions, in each case demonstrating clear evaluative bias toward one pole: (a) private vs. public, (b) past vs. present, (c) fate vs. human agency, (d) negative vs. positive freedom, (e) mythology vs. realism, (f) West vs. East, (g) usefulness vs. truth. Let us discuss them in more detail, together with their psychological and behavioral implications.

The most fundamental and lasting cultural code organizing thought and action in the conditions of real socialism is the opposition of two spheres of life: private (personal) and public (official). As an eminent Polish sociologist testifies: “The life of the average Pole is lived in the two, overlapping worlds: the domain of private contacts and the institutional-official sphere“ (Nowak 1987:30). And this observation can certainly be generalized to other “real socialist” societies. Such an opposition appears in a number of guises: “society versus authorities“, “nation versus state“, “the people versus rulers“, “we versus them“. The opposition has an unambiguous moral flavor. The private sphere is the domain of the good – of virtue, dignity, pride; whereas the public sphere is the domain of the bad; of vice, disdain, shame. Activities carried in the private sphere are elevating, while any contact with the public sphere is “polluting“ (Alexander 1989). Power centers are perceived as alien and hostile; the government is seen as the arena of conspiracy, deceit, cynicism, or at least stupidity and inefficiency. To “beat the system” to outwit the authorities, to evade public regulations, rules, laws – is one of the widely recognized virtues, and successful rogues evoke admiration tainted with envy. Excessive egoism, attempts at appropriation of common goods, “grab and run“ tactics to safeguard personal well-being, are condoned, or at least excused. The state is held responsible for providing welfare and security, and blamed for all personal failures. On the other hand private connections, networks, loyalties – in the job, among friends, at home – are overestimated and idealized.

The second dichotomy opposes the past and the present. It is typical for the people to glorify and idealize earlier times. The phrase “before the War“ (meaning the World War II, in the aftermath of which real socialism was imposed in the sphere of Soviet domination) has always signified the best in all domains of life. And when it came to the oppositional struggle and anti-communist revolution their main theme was the return to institutions and
traditions of the past, rather than shaping some new forms for the future (e.g. there was always a strong suspicion against “market socialism”, “social market economy” or in brief so-called “third way”, which was ridiculed as the sure way to get to the “Third World”). Jurgen Habermas insightfully grasps this nostalgic climate in his term “rectifying revolutions”, observing that in 1989 there is a “total lack of ideas that are either innovative or oriented towards the future” (Habermas 1990: 4f).

The third of our binary pairs is the opposition of fate and human agency. The world is perceived as operating according to pre-determined rules and the history as running in the pre-established direction. Providence, or destiny, or chance, or impersonal political forces, or inaccessible decision-making mechanisms are seen as responsible for human fate. People believe they have no say in the running of public affairs, no opportunity to influence their own well-being. Therefore they are reluctant to engage themselves in public life, because they do not see any realistic way in which it could change anything, and at the same time they clearly perceive the risks and the price of activism.

“A fatalistic orientation (…) is thus a learned (and rational) response to a distant, capricious and unresponsive power imposed from without” (Thompson/Ellis/Wildavsky: 1990: 3f). The Polish eminent sociologist Stanislaw Ossowski called it “the Liliput syndrome” (Ossowski 1967). Passivism, apathy, “wait-and-see” attitude, “free-rider” conduct are other pervasive symptoms of this cultural pattern.

The fourth and related opposition contrasts two brands of freedom: the negative freedom (freedom from, independence, autonomy), and positive freedom (freedom to, influence, control, mastery, potency). The cultural bias is clearly toward the earlier. People crave for and cherish liberty, self-determination. But this easily degenerates into anarchy, contempt for and evasions of all rules, disrespect for law and morality, widespread permissiveness. Mass activism focuses on defense against real or imagined infractions of freedom, on opposition and contestation, rather than on positive, constructive contributions to the operation of society.

The fifth among binary pairs is the opposition of mythology and realism. There is a tendency to elevate mythical, religious, ideological thinking over mundane, realistic and rational arguments. People mistake dreams, visions, idealized heroic traditions, utopian hopes and aspirations for hard circumstances. There is a constant expectation of miracles – economic, political – the recourse to magical strategies and the belief in some supernatural guidance or protection against adversities.

The sixth opposition contrasts the West and the East. There is an uncritical glorification of Western way of life, economic and political arrangements, consumer patterns, products, artistic achievements. The West is treated in an undifferentiated, stereotyped way, as a synonym of freedom, affluence, social security and all imaginable virtues. Any criticism, even invoking internal Western sources, is treated with suspicion as propaganda. Western political leaders are endowed with charisma they rarely enjoy at home, and even third rate Western consumer products are preferred to local fare.

Finally, the seventh opposition counters usefulness with truth. Beliefs, loyalties, attachments are treated opportunistically and instrumentally, valid as long as they bring benefits, till they prove effective. Truth, faithfulness, straightforwardness – are not considered as autotelic values. Hypocrisy, cynicism, but also dogmatism and intolerance for the other, reign widely in political and intellectual domain. Stereotypes and prejudices easily get acceptance. Double standards of talk and deeds – official and private – are quite common.

It might have been expected that once the institutional structures of “real socialism” are torn down, the civilizational incompetence will disappear as well. Unfortunately it is not the case. As one knowledgeable researcher testifies: “What is striking when we analyze the political attitudes in the 1990 is their surprising, truly structural similarity to the attitudes encountered and described in earlier periods” (Marody 1991: 166). By some vicious irony of history, the core cultural oppositions and biases typical of socialist societies, together with most of their psychological and behavioral expressions, have outlived the communist system, and stand in the way of post-communist reforms.

Is there a way out?

Getting rid of the cultural legacy of real socialism, and building of civilizational competence is, I submit, the central task facing Eastern and Central European societies in the nineties. It is a prerequisite, a necessary condition for attaining true modernity: authentic democracy, functioning market and open society. The task is onerous and protracted, but probably attainable. At the close of this article, let us consider the chances.
The primary question concerns the agents: who can do the task? Culture is omnipresent, permeating all layers of social life. People are fully immersed in culture. How, then, can they escape its pervasive grip? How can they raise above their taken-for-granted cultural milieu, liberate themselves from its constraints, and eventually deconstruct and reform it? The metaphor of raising oneself by the bootstraps immediately comes to mind.

The way out of this seemingly hopeless predicament will appear if we recognize two facts: first, that culture is not a monolith, but rather a complex, multidimensional and heterogenous entity, and second, that various groups within the same society are unevenly immersed in common culture.

Thus, to begin with, multiple cultures coexist, overlap at the same historical time, and individuals are reached by a variety of cultural pressures. Some – usually the strongest influences – derive from local cultures, of their group, community, nation. But some derive from wider cultures, regional, or global. As we remember the culture of real socialism, “bloc culture” is located in-between, it is of intermediate scope. And this means that together with its oppressive impact, the members of socialist, or presently former socialist societies, are faced with the impact of both their local cultures of smaller scope, e.g. national, regional, and the global culture of modernity, articulated in the core societies of the developed West. The more open is the access to these alternative cultural pressures – of indigenous national traditions, and of the strongly Westernized global culture, the more easily will societies free themselves from the grip of socialist legacy.

Even before the anti-communist revolution, when socialist societies were relatively insulated from the global culture (though never completely closed), the strength of national traditions weakening the socialist culture from within, explains why some of the Eastern and Central European societies were more liberal, and less Sovietized than others (Poland or Hungary would be good cases). With their gradual opening to the world, and Western culture – via mass media, travel, economic exchange – the global culture exerts ever stronger influence, undermining the socialist culture from without. Both from the inside, and from the outside, the monopoly of socialist cultural syndrome is eradicated.

Those individuals, or groups, or social categories which are most prone to fall under the impact of alternative cultural pressures – whereas national or global – will be most insulated from the grip of socialist culture and they will become the natural avant-garde of cultural deconstruction and reform. The hope of eliminating civilizational incompetence rests with those, who are able to acquire civilizational competence either from local, national culture (if it has such content), or from global culture, or both. They become leaders of civilizational advancement, spreading out to other groups and social categories.

The second fact is that people are unequally immersed in culture. Even if we consider only single cultural influence, say of real-socialist cultural syndrome, and ignore the availability of cultural alternatives, various individuals, groups or social categories are molded by its impact to uneven degree. Some, for example party apparatchiks and propagandists, nomenklatura, civil servants, secret policemen, are committed strongest in thoughts and deeds: by ideological creed, political activities, everyday practices. They have strongest stakes in the system, and therefore are most vulnerable to its demands. But others may be less so. Think of the clergy, or apolitical farmers, or students, or artists. They seem less dependent, and hence – less vulnerable to cultural molding. Such groups, relatively more free from the constraints of socialist environment, will provide ready clientele for alternative cultural options – national, or global – if and when they become available.

To sum up, the agents able to reform the pernicious socialist syndrome of civilizational incompetence, are to be sought among those who are either most exposed to the alternative cultural influences, carrying civilizational competence, or among those who are least immersed in, or least vulnerable to the impact of socialist cultural legacy, carrying civilizational incompetence.

There is probably vast range of variables co-determining such a peculiar personal condition. But at the first glance, four seem particularly significant. The exposure to alternative cultural currents is probably highly correlated with two variables: the level of education and cosmopolitan orientation. It is an old wisdom that knowledge is liberating. Education provides the awareness of cultural options, and instills critical and sceptical attitudes toward any cultural orthodoxy. It is among highly educated intellectual elites, that one should look for the forerunners of civilizational competence. Cosmopolitan orientation is often linked with education. It means either imagined, mediated, vicarious, or actual, direct experience of foreign cultures, pro-
viding detached, objective and relativistic perspective. It is among educated cosmopolitans, that one is most likely to encounter exemplars of civilizational competence.

The insulation from the impact of socialist cultural syndrom, carrying civilizational incompetence, is probably correlated with two other variables. One of them is age. Young people born and raised at the period when socialist system was already crumbling, and approaching its demise, have had the good luck to escape the most efficient and pervasive indoctrination and habituation. Youth gives a chance of independence. And the second variable, often linked with the first is oppositional, contesting orientation. People who opposed the socialist system, self-consciously raised a mental barrier against its ideological and cultural impact, and they were more sensitive to the evidence of its counter-civilizational implications. Those who coupled their oppositional beliefs with actions, entering conspiracy or participating in anti-communist movements ("Solidarity", Czechoslovakian "Charter", "Democratic Forum" etc.), not only strengthened their attitudes by deeds, but provoked rejection and stigmatization by the authorities (discrimination, harassment or outright oppression). In effect they were pushed to the status of outsiders, staying at the margins of official culture – which effectively saved them from its grip, and allowed to preserve personal autonomy and self-identity. Thus both categories seem free and ready to acquire civilizational competence, if and when it becomes available.

If this reasoning is correct, social categories manifesting some or all of these traits are most likely to beget the champions of radical cultural deconstruction and reform of socialist legacy, the leaders of cultural modernity, bringing much needed civilizational competence. They will constitute a hypothetical elite, or avant-garde of civilizational progress. But obviously, for the post-communist transition to succeed, the reshaping of culture cannot stop at the level of elites, but must reach much wider segments of society, and ultimately permeate it as a whole. What are the chances for this?

It seems that the same processes which engendered the elite potential agents able to reshape the culture from within, provide the mechanisms which may help their mission to succeed. The first and most important is the process of globalization. It may be an exaggeration to believe with some observers that the communist system was destroyed by the satellite TV dishes, allowing the "demonstration effect" of Western affluence to undermine all remaining legitimacy of "real socialism". But it is certainly true that the irreversible spread of technologies, products, knowledge, images, ideas from the core of contemporary civilization to its peripheries was equally significant in bringing the demise of communism, as it is now in shaping the course of post-communist transition. One crucial domain of globalization is culture, and within culture – that particular syndrom of values, norms, codes, and symbols that we call civilizational competence. It irresistibly spreads from the core to the peripheries. It is smuggled with the images of Western ways of life brought by the media, or by direct, participant observation of tourists, visitors, trade partners, Gastarbeiter. But it also comes in more tangible forms as an effect of economic and political integration. The requirement to adapt local laws, political and administrative institutions, terms of trade, business practices etc. to world standards – undermines the legacy of real socialism more effectively than any ideological appeals. In this sense, the association with EEC brings much more than mere economic benefits. It imposes the framework of civilization.

The second mechanism is technological progress. I wish to defend a limited version of convergence theory, to the effect that the advance of technologies, and particularly the appearance of high-tech industries and sophisticated consumer products, stimulates the civilizational competence. Modern technologies demand certain standards of organization, discipline, diligence, care, and they also pose certain "soft" requirements of neatness, cleanliness, orderliness, esthetics. Is it an accident that computer-chips factory looks so different from smoke-stack metallurgical plant? Or that a modern, functional household, equipped with sophisticated gadgets enforces so different life-styles than those typical of a traditional peasant cottage? With the accelerated technological progress embracing former socialist societies, we can expect significant pressure toward general civilizational advancement, more effective than moralizing and preaching.

The third promising mechanism is economic privatization. Placing industry, commerce and services in private hands is not only indispensable for mobilizing economy and raising overall economic efficiency, it also has equally important cultural side-effects. By experience, trial and error, it enforces self-reliance, responsibility, calculation, good organization of work, discipline, punctuality etc. It provides the best lesson that those virtues com-
prised by civilizational competence simply work, turn out to be beneficial and bring measurable profit. Is it an accident that a private grocery store opened in any Eastern European town is so strikingly more civilized than earlier, state-run outlets. Well-organized, efficient enterprises make up islands of modernity, the exemplars of civilizational competence from which it may spread by imitation to the whole economy, including the huge state-owned enterprises, destined to stay around for some more time due to practical constraints. In this, economic area, the role of multinational corporations or joint ventures, establishing the outposts, enclaves of modern business culture in former socialist countries is hard to overestimate. They bring with them, and impose ready-made patterns of modern, civilized business organization, management and labor. Thus, whereas indigenously developed or imported, the private enterprise is an efficient channel through which civilizational competence evolves and spreads.

And the final mechanism is perhaps the most exciting of all: political democratization. Either by importation of “well-tested” political solutions (as Lech Walesa used to plead), or by slow development of indigenous democratic institutions, the efficiency of government and administration will surely be raised. And, what is even more important from our present perspective, the political reform will enforce civilizational competence. The constitutional framework of democracy, will turn old political habits of autocracy, nepotism, favoritism, paternalism, particularism, dogmatism, intolerance etc. – into maladaptive and dysfunctional ways, guaranteeing political failures rather than successes. They will slowly be replaced by their opposites, fitting the new democratic polity. As Claus Offe observes: “By instilling the appreciation and a favorable attitude toward the routines of democratic participation and representation into their respective social domains, and also by developing a strong interest in their own respective role in the making of public policies – independent trade unions, employer’s associations, leagues of farmers, professional associations, political parties etc., can reinforce the popular consensus that supports the constitution and the practice of democratic government“ (Offe 1991a: 9).

The rooting of civilizational competence in political institutions and political practices, both at the central and local levels, will bring the ultimate victory of modernity, but one which will be particularly hard to win. First of all, because it requires a long time, and time seems scarce in post-communist world. As Bronislaw Geremek observes “Democracies are built only over time, through the forming and functioning of democratic institutions (...) The process is one of gradual maturation, both of democracy itself and of people in the ways of democracy“ (Geremek 1992: 15). And Ralf Dahrendorf is even more pessimistic, projecting the appearance of rooted democratic tissue in no less than sixty years (Dahrendorf 1990). The second reason for difficulty is that the new democratic constitution of society must be established through democratic procedure, by the people most of whom are not yet democrats at heart, still trapped in the legacy of civilizational incompetence. The hope to break this vicious circle must rest with those initially small elites of citizens – highly educated, cosmopolitan, young at least in spirit, ready to contest established ways – who have already escaped the grip of “real socialism“ or who have never succumbed to that in the first place. And the hope must also be placed in those universal mechanisms and processes, which embrace the global society and engulf the post-communist enclave in their salutary influence.

At the face of it, it all looks like an extremely hard job for several generations. But in quite recent past we have witnessed totally unpredictable turns of history, two “huge surprises“. Let us hope that the success of post-communist transition will provide us with another great surprise. After all, it is certainly more probable than the fall of communism seemed just a few years ago.

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