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Making History: the Limitations of Pure Reason*

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It has been said at this conference that our deliberations may not have much relevance to the world beyond the walls of the community of professional philosophers. It is also quite clear that our discussions are straining against the limitations of purely cerebral constructions. We have been trying to find that personal and intimate element without which knowledge and experience are at best sterile and at worst dangerous. None of this is accidental. On the contrary, we are approaching something very important: the limitations, under certain conditions, of Pure Reason. When the moment comes to make history, it not the philosophers who make it. It is made by other people, acting less rationally than professional spinners of theory. When one universe collapses and another is being born, Reason hovers, impotent, in the shadows.

In keeping with the tone of most of our work – and because truth, to be grasped, must be anchored in experience informed by passion – I will argue my case from personal experience.

In Bulgaria, the 1980s opened with the regime looking stronger and more popular than ever. Yet in the spring of 1983 it suddenly dawned on me that a society held together by a tissue of lies and fuelled by cynicism cannot survive for long – the end of communism would fall well within my lifetime. This being the case, some preparation on my part was needed.

I started racing through different schools of thought in various sciences – history, political theory, cultural theory – in order to work out, with the help of these tools, what needed to be done, when, how, to whom and by whom. In spite of the increasingly distracting presence, at my lectures at Sofia University, of stocky individuals wearing moustaches and raincoats, I spent several years trying to prepare my students for the coming upheaval, in which they would also have their part to play.

When the upheaval started, I tried to act in accordance with the rational strategies that could be distilled from the accumulated wealth of social science. Every time I trusted intellectual discipline and philosophy, as opposed to the anarchical hooliganism, if you like, of my instincts, I failed to be useful. Every time I trusted my instincts – for the wrong reasons, or for no reason – I did the right thing.

Ultimately, by early 1990, it had become abundantly clear that philosophy could not make history – the owl of Minerva does, indeed, spread its wings only with the falling of dusk. I left my very senior position at a research institute, terminated my involvement with Sofia University, where I had lectured for four years, switched off that part of my brain which contained philosophy, and dived into street politics –

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joining my friends who were there already and, not being philosophers, were acting entirely out of passion. I found myself but an atom in the crack force of the street which set the political agenda for more than a year – the punks, the heavy metals, a sprinkling of old hippies, the drunks, the cafe regulars, the Construction Brigade – Sofia's most violent group of street fighters. All of them were associated in some way with the rock-and-roll subcultures that had been kept virtually underground for several generations.

These 'outsiders' knew – as the philosophers did not – that what you needed to do was simply come out on the street, look communism in the eye, and say, 'Be off with you, I'll take no more'. It is the irrationality of this absurd situation – long-haired layabouts challenging, unarmed, the world's most successful repressive regimes – that the communist machinery failed to cope with. Until then, it had always coped perfectly well with rational, philosophical criticism which left the mass of people entirely unmoved and the regime secure.

Here are four major instances which made history – pushed Bulgaria, almost willy-nilly, out of communism – and which illustrate the limits of Pure Reason faced with the uncompromising, awesome presence of History.

1 SUMMER OF 1989. The communist regime unleashed a widely popular wave of repression against Bulgaria's ethnic Turkish population. The idea was to isolate the intelligentsia, which was making too much noise about human rights, and squash it on precisely a human rights issue – but with popular backing. The intellectuals, by then used to dealing in petitions, prepared another petition – the sharpest-worded to date – against the regime, specifically on the Turkish issue. For three hours I argued with the maker of that petition. I pleaded that this was exactly what the regime wanted us to do, so that it could arrest a relatively small number of people and behead the dissident movement for another generation by 'exposing' human rights activists as agents of Ankara and antipatriots. 'You are entirely correct', said the man, 'but I can't do otherwise. This is pure emotion and I've no arguments to back it with – but, for God's sake, there are limits beyond which I'll not be pushed! Let them do their worst – at least I'll know I've done the right thing.' His passion was right and my reason was wrong. The petition became one of the factors which cracked the regime a few months later.

2 NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1989. With an ever-increasing number of people refusing to be afraid, the communists found themselves in the throes of a crisis and conducted a palace coup which ejected Eastern Europe's longest-serving dictator, Todor Zhivkov. On 10 November reformist Gorbachevites came to the fore. They granted *glasnost*, talked of socialism with a human face, even tolerated the formation of the oppositional Union of Democratic Forces, set up mostly by ultra-reformist communists. The country – and the philosophic community in particular – breathed a sigh of relief as the intelligentsia on both sides decided to work together for an undefined 'democratisation' against an abstract 'totalitarianism' which, all agreed, was something bad and which already belonged to the past.

The Construction Brigade and their friends had other ideas. The long-haired and partly criminal subcultures hit the streets of Sofia, with slogans which sounded coarse, vulgar, dangerous: 'Communism or freedom – the choice is yours', 'Communists – off to Siberia!' They were roundly condemned, particularly by the philosophers then in charge of the UDF: 'Rabble! Hooligans! Nothing to do with us! We don't hate communists, just a system which has now gone.'

The long-haired marginals were right. Their instinctive rebellion shifted the debate onto the only level where it could be resolved: either communism – or, more simply,

communists – or democracy without communists. The alternative would have been to get ourselves locked into a Romanian-type political impasse.

3 JUNE 1990. The first multiparty elections for more than a generation were won fairly and comfortably by the renamed Communist Party. The communist majority in parliament formed a communist government and elected a communist president. Western observers agreed that such proceedings were legitimate, reasonable, democratic and desirable. The UDF, traumatised by its defeat, went into hibernation and put out a call for acceptance of the results and for working within the limitations imposed by them.

On the morning following election night, the street ‘rabble’ of Sofia rebelled. They refused to bow to arguments about legitimacy, reason and precedence or to western pressure to keep quiet. The crowd set up barricades and declared civil disobedience. The Sofia crowd took over the streets and demanded that the communists disappear to Moscow. Crowds in six other big cities followed their example. The West was appalled. ‘The election results are entirely legitimate,’ they told us. ‘Why make trouble?’ Our answer was beyond the pale of legitimacy and certainly beyond the pale of decent manners: ‘We don’t want to see any more ugly communist mugs on our streets.’ Ultimately, this rebellion spread, blocked a counteroffensive the communists had been planning in case of electoral victory, and by the beginning of July pushed out the communist president. Later, in the autumn, the rebellion toppled the first legitimate communist cabinet in Europe’s history.

4 AUGUST 1990. Under overwhelming provocation the crowd of Sofia sacked and set fire to the Communist Party Central Committee building. The fire was started by children aged 12–14 whose actions were in no way informed by reason. Whichever way you look at this act, it is an act against reason and against any possible formal legitimacy. Yet the results were astounding: the population, which had voted the communists in two months earlier, now saw that they were no longer the stronger side – how could they be, when they could not even protect their own bastion? – and began realigning themselves away from the Communist Party, unblocking the political situation.

In Sofia, passion and instinct did the work of history. Whereas in August 1991 the defenders of the Russian parliament had the easy job of saving legitimacy against an illegitimate communist act, we in Sofia had a much tougher task. We had to save morality against formal legitimacy, and there were no reasonable grounds on which this could be defended.

Is all this the fault of Reason, you may ask? Isn’t it rather the failing of Evgeni Dainov’s reason? I think not. Every single one of the philosophers who refused to suspend their reason and partake in the rebellion of the street – who tried, as they saw it, to preserve their reason amid a sea of madness – ended up in some kind of collaboration with the communists. After all, that was the side which behaved impeccably, played the game by the rules, had a civilised demeanour and in this way disarmed any critique based on reason and the rules of legitimacy. Only the street, refusing to play the game, got it right and defended values situated at a level much deeper than the levels which contain rules derived from Reason.

There may be a way grounded in Reason in which communism can be confronted – not simply criticising, which is something any first-year student of politics can do, but fighting a battle in which only one of the combatants can be victorious. There may be such a way, but I’ve certainly never seen it work successfully. Only an act of absurdity can shift the game to a terrain where communism can’t possibly win. That terrain is morality, the knowledge of good and evil and the capacity to choose between them, not

always – not often – on rational grounds.

When a whole way of life explodes, all mediating levels between impulse and action dissolve. When a whole way of life explodes, all mediating levels between two opposing wills disappear. Passion takes over. If that passion is based on aggressive, outward-directed nationalism, it leads to war. If that passion is based on the desire to clean your community of ugliness and evil, it leads to a breakthrough and to liberation.

For a whole year the only law and order on the streets of Sofia was mob law and order. Yet the mob, although it ruled unquestionably, never struck a single blow. Not one communist was hit over the head, not even during the big fire, when the crowd picked up the thin blue line of police and carefully deposited them some distance away – out of harm's way – and escorted communist dignitaries on night shift out of the building before sacking it.

The motivations of the crowd were always egoistic. They had little to do with a conscious perception of the greater good – they were, if you prefer jargon, expressive rather than goal-oriented. 'We don't want communists, because they stop us doing what we like doing.' But the very self-discipline of the crowd, its refusal to house looters or to welcome extremists points to a deeper motive force: the desire to end ugliness and evil, a desire which came straight from within, not from theory. In the hothouse atmosphere of 1989–90, that desire proved enough, by itself, to lead to doing the right thing.

And this is where our deliberations link up with the world outside the philosophic community. Morality underpins both our discussions here and the actions of the people who liberated themselves from the evil that is communism – palpable, tangible, real, existing evil, evil which is not just the absence of good, but a real presence. What is extremely doubtful is whether philosophy can decide questions of morality for society. No morality worth the name can ever be grounded in Reason alone. And society at large has already demonstrated that it operates within the forcefield of Christian moral values, which are ultimately ungroundable in philosophy. All that is needed now is to make sure there are no obstacles between this inherent morality and its expression in behaviour. And our job is to write from the heart, to write truthfully and honestly even if this makes us look naive, or unphilosophical, or unprofessional.

Four conclusions arise.

- 1 We must not forget how things really happened because that which happened puts its imprint on that which will be. Philosophers did not bring about the end of the old order – at least they did not do so while behaving like philosophers – and it is highly unlikely that they will usher in the new one.
- 2 We must be able to look at things directly, unclouded by the stories – once known as theories – we habitually tell ourselves, and recognise good and evil even under the most peculiar guises. That is more important than coming up with grandiose theories which impress our colleagues.
- 3 Every one of us must curb the pride of Reason, and look honestly at that which is happening; otherwise we will not be able to take part in that which is happening. If we use our philosophical skills in this humble way, we may be useful still.
- 4 One must not intellectualise in situations where intellectualism is not called for.