

Little Platoons of Monomaniacs



by Theodore Dalrymple

What you deem to have been recent depends very much on your age.

What is recent to an old man is prehistory to the young. To me, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe seems but yesterday, though I have to admit that there are people now, even professors, for whom that downfall, and what preceded it, is no more vivid than, say, the War of Jenkins' Ear or the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji.

Political figures who once strode my imagination like colossi, for example François Duvalier, Papa Doc, are barely known even as a name to otherwise well-informed youngsters. Some years ago, I gave a talk to very clever students at a university in Switzerland, and I had with me a book, *Lenin in Zurich*, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, which I carried as a guide to Zurich. "Who is Solzhenitsyn?" asked one of the students, and I soon discovered that the name meant nothing to any of them, not even the ringing of a faint bell. I felt personally humiliated

by this, for it brought home to me what should, perhaps, have been obvious already, namely that one's own cultural references are of fleeting salience, and that one's epitaph will be that of Keats: Here lies one whose name was writ in water.

Be that as it may, I was rootling among my books the other day when I came across one by Ernest Gellner, a brilliant intellectual whose name, I suppose, now means very little to 99.9 percent of university students, let alone to the general population.

Gellner first came to prominence—fleeting, as it now seems, like the great majority of prominence—in 1959, with his book *Words and Things*, a witty attack on the then-prevalent linguistic philosophy and the academic dominance of philosophers who accorded more reverence to the figure of Ludwig Wittgenstein than should, perhaps, be accorded to any philosopher. Wittgenstein was then the object of a cult, such as should not exist about anyone—though whether it is reasonable to object to cults *as such* when they seem to be a permanent and ineradicable feature of human life may be questioned.

Anyway, one year before Gellner's death in 1995, he published a book, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, which I started idly to reread.

In 1994, when it was published, the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe was very recent, in whatever way "recent" might be defined (even an 11-year-old could remember it in 1994). Communism seemed like a broken egg; nothing could put it back together again—and surely this, in a sense, was right. No one in his right mind would expect the likes of Antonin Novotny, Walter Ulbricht, or Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej to rise from the dead, as in some cheap horror movie, and take power again.

And yet there are some passages in Gellner's book that make

uncomfortable reading, only thirty years after it was published. Gellner was not only a philosopher but a social anthropologist with a special interest in Muslim polities. He saw in Islam a much more effective and durable system of mind control than Marxist states ever managed, and he claims (I am not qualified to say whether correctly or not) that Islam is much more concerned with the lower levels of social control than with the higher, being relatively indifferent to the state and who is at the head of it, so long as he is not in open or flagrant opposition to Islam. Gellner says that this attitude is prevalent in the population too: It does not see in the corrupt and often brutal clientelism of the state what Westerners would see, but merely what is to be expected and therefore not worth reprehending. It follows that there is no prospect of a truly liberal democracy in Islamic lands.

At the beginning of the book, Gellner contrasts communist societies with our own—to the general advantage of the latter, of course. He writes:

In extensive [communist] parts of the world, [civil society] was absent. This absence came in due course to be strongly felt and bitterly resented: eventually it turned into an aching void. The absence was felt acutely in societies which had strongly centralized all aspects of life, and where a single political-economic-ideological hierarchy tolerated no rivals and one single vision defined not only truth but also personal rectitude. This caused the rest of society to approximate an atomized condition, and dissent then became a mark of heresy or, in the terminology of modern ideocracy, it defined "an enemy of the people."

After the downfall of communism, during which people were obliged to assent to what they knew to be untrue, something different was required:

[It] was found in Civil Society, in the idea of institutional

and ideological pluralism, which prevents the establishment of monopoly of power and truth, and counterbalances those central institutions which, though necessary, might otherwise acquire such monopoly.

I don't want to exaggerate by claiming that we already live in a totalitarian dictatorship such as that ruled over by, say, Enver Hoxha; nevertheless, one cannot help but think that we are somewhat nearer to it than we were in 1994. In that year, I do not think anyone in the West would have equated personal rectitude with adherence to a single ideological vision, but I think it quite common now. If you want to know whether a person is good or bad, ask what his opinions are. If they are correct, he is a good man; if they are wrong, he is a bad man.

There is a difference, however, with the uniformity of outlook in communist societies and that which is developing in our own, which is that in communist societies the ideological uniformity was imposed by force from above, and in our own has been, so far at least, imposed principally from below, by little platoons of monomaniacs, in short by the Civil Society that Gellner lauded, though governments increasingly give in to the demands of monomaniacs and make their monomanias their own. In a way this is even more depressing than communism was, for it suggests a thirst for unfreedom in our societies whose counterpart in communist societies was the thirst for freedom. Where people want to be slaves, it is impossible to free them. The worst of it is that they want to enslave others, to validate their own choice of slavery.

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