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America in the Eyes of Eastern Europe

by Tomislav Sunić

While a massive amount of both critical and laudatory literature on America is circulating in western Europe, only a few critical books on America and the American way of life can be found in today's postcommunist eastern Europe. This essay is my attempt to add to that literature.

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Before attempting to tackle this complex subject (an eastern European account of America), one needs to define terms. People living in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, or Slovenia do not like being called eastern Europeans; the term eastern Europe has a ring of an insult to their ears. They consider themselves, despite their region's undemocratic past, full-blooded Europeans--as much if not more so than west Europeans. There may be some truth in this semicomplacent attitude. From the ethnic point of view, all postcommunist countries in eastern Europe are highly homogeneous, with only a few non-Europeans living on their soil. By contrast, western Europe, or what is today part of the fifteen states of the European Union, has a non-European population of approximately 7 percent. Moreover, the population of the United States--which can be thought of as an extension of western Europe--is well over 25 percent non-European in origin. Ironically, due to the closed nature of its communist past, eastern Europe has never known a large influx of non-Europeans. The paradox is therefore twofold: the label eastern Europe is viewed by many as ideologically colored, its derogatory meaning referring to the formerly Soviet-occupied and communist-ruled part of Europe. Second, although claiming to be 100 percent Europeans, all east European nations, and particularly the newborn nation-states in the region, are well aware of their ethnic roots--certainly more so than are west Europeans. For decades, if not centuries, and even during the darkest hours of communism, east Europeans had a strange love for America, while displaying strange resentments toward their next-door European neighbors.

Any American who travels to Budapest, Zagreb, or Warsaw, be it in a public or private capacity, is welcomed. An American backpacker may enjoy passing

through Copenhagen or Amsterdam, but he will never be so warmly embraced by west Europeans as he will be by his east European hosts. The communist rule, which lasted well over forty years in eastern Europe and seventy in Russia, created a mental atmosphere whereby the very term West became synonymous with America, and only to a lesser degree with nearby western Europe. The West, in the eyes and ears of east Europeans, was not so much the rich and opulent Germany or France, but rather the distant, Hollywood-hazed America.

While one could find scores of Marxist true believers in American academia during the Cold War, most east Europeans privately nurtured strong anticommunist and pro-American feelings. Former Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan had more true, albeit hidden, constituents in communized Poland, Hungary, and Albania than on the West or East Coast. It was difficult for many east Europeans, particularly those who physically suffered under communism, to grasp the motives of young American students during the anti-Vietnam protests in the late sixties. Of course, pro-American and anticommunist sentiments among the wide layers of eastern European society had to be skillfully hidden. But a great majority of people in eastern Europe privately applauded the U.S. bombing of Vietnam and the harsh anticommunist rhetoric of Nixon and Reagan. They were all persuaded that, sooner or later, American GIs would liberate their homelands from the red plague. But today east Europeans are beginning to realize that America had other fish to fry than liberating Hungary in 1956 or Poland in 1980.

The Passing of the American Age

After the fall of communism, the United States is still perceived by many east Europeans as the incarnation of good, a symbol of enormous wealth, and a place of boundless economic opportunity. To some extent, east European attitudes toward America resemble those of west Europeans following World War II. In their eyes, America was a myth that surpassed the often-gloomy American reality. Many east Europeans are now going through similar psychological convulsions and self-induced misperceptions. The first cracks in their imaginary image of America are beginning to appear. On a political level, with the end of the bipolar system and the breakup of the Soviet Union, America has become the only role model in the neighborhood. Whether they like it or not, east European politicians know that entrance into the international community means, first and foremost, obtaining a certificate of good democratic behavior from Uncle Sam, and only much later a passing grade from the fledgling European Union (EU). Challenging and opposing U.S. foreign policy in this region is a luxury that no east European ruler can afford, short of paying a hefty price (as Serbia did a half-decade ago).

But contradictions, if not outright hypocrisy, abound on both sides of the Atlantic. Even a self-proclaimed anti-American in eastern Europe will accept with great mistrust EU arbitration of a regional or ethnic dispute or armed conflict. He will always turn his eyes first toward America. Even among America-haters, the unwritten rule is that only America, due to its historical detachment, can be an honest broker. Despite almost grotesque cravings to join the EU exhibited by the entire east European political class, in the back of

everybody's mind the quest is to join NATO first. The recent entry of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into NATO had far more psychological significance for people in the region than the protractedly scheduled entry into the European Union. Even the most cultivated east European opponent of the American way of life or the harshest critic of U.S. foreign policy does not dispute the fact that America elicits more confidence and sympathy among east Europeans than does the next-door European neighbor, who is traditionally and historically suspected of double deals and treachery.

While western Europe is often decried and derided by European conservative intellectuals as a protectorate of America or a subject of U.S. cultural imperialism, the fact of the matter is that everybody finds something inexplicably attractive about America. One can rave and rant about its decadence, its highest per-capita prison population, poor educational system, or military overextension, but every citizen in Europe, both west and east, is subconsciously enamored with either the real or surreal image of America.

Even gloomy projections of an apocalyptic end of America must be taken with caution. Many erudite conservative authors depict America as the belated aftershock of the late Roman Empire, with a willful, albeit often dangerous, desire to export global democracy by means of paleo-puritan and neoliberal messianism. But features of globalism and political messianism were common to all great powers in Europe throughout centuries. The Jacobin and post-Jacobin France at the end of the eighteenth century, for example, was no less a globalist power than America is today. The case was similar with the now-defunct Soviet Union.

Many Europeans, let alone east Europeans, do not realize that America is not just a continent but a planet with enormous differences in lifestyles and worldviews--despite its often-derided "McDonaldization" or its "Have a nice day" daily discourse. One learns to appreciate the allegedly decadent American system only after great distance in time and space. The supreme paradox is that many ancient and traditional European values were better defended intellectually by the Confederates in 1863, than by conservative Europeans, then and now. But is America still the same country today as it was just a decade ago? Certainly it has changed dramatically over the past ten years, not just due to a massive influx of non-European immigrants but also to an infusion of new role models and mindsets that they have brought with them. Only fifty years ago the overwhelming majority of American immigrants were Europeans, who saw in their newly adopted homeland an "extension," albeit a distant one, of their unfulfilled European dream. The very geographic distance from Europe made them accept wholeheartedly their new American destiny, yet they continued to honor their old European customs, often better and more colorfully than they had done on the other side of the ocean. This hardly seems to be the case with the new immigrants today. Many of these immigrants, especially those coming from Latin America, do not experience a geographic gap from their abandoned homeland because they live in its close vicinity. What is more, due to the rising tide of globalism, their loyalty is often split between their old homeland and their new American one. They may often experience the American dream as just another passing journey, looking instead to whatever will bring them greater financial and economic success. Early America was grounded in the roots of the Western heritage and had no qualms about displaying the badge of traditional Christian and European values, such as chivalry, honor, and the sense of sacrifice. This seems

increasingly difficult to preach to new would-be Americans whose religious customs, cultural roots, and historical memory often stretch to the different antipodes of the world. Contradictions, paradoxes, and hypocrisies abound. Probably one of the best early observers of postmodernity, the conservative author and novelist Aldous Huxley, wrote in a little-known essay that America would be the future of the world--even if and when America, as a separate country and jurisdiction, fades into oblivion. The American system of soft ideology--that is, the dictatorship of well-being and the terror of consumerism--makes it globally appealing and yet so self-destructive. As an English sophisticate and aristocratic conservative, Huxley deeply resented the massification of America, in which he foresaw both a blueprint and a carbon copy of softened communist totalitarianism. But was he not a contradictory person himself, despite his visionary predictions? Did he not choose sunny, ahistorical, decadent, and uprooted California as his deathbed, not his own rainy England or somewhere else in rooted Europe? And did he not spend much of his later life on LSD-induced trips?

American vs. Soviet Man

Eastern Europe's distorted image of America, coupled with an often ludicrous love of the imaginary America, was a logical response to the endless anti-American rhetoric propagated by its former communist masters. Even when communist apparatchiks aired slogans that carried some truth about racial discrimination, poverty, and high crime rates in the United States, the east European masses refused to believe them. This was understandable. How could they believe communist officials, given the fact that the communist system was founded on the big lie and could only function by lying on all wavelengths twenty-four hours a day. Instead, east Europeans opted for their own self-styled vision of America, which real Americans would have found hard to believe in. The gloomier the picture of America presented by the communists, the more east Europeans believed in its opposite pastoral and pristine side.

Ten years after the fall of communism, eastern Europeans are gradually toning down their illusions about quick Americanization--that is, a sudden outbreak of affluence--in their countries. Hence another paradox: Ten years ago, communist mendacity, police repression, and economic scarcity prompted them to kick out the red plague, but today it is American-style capitalism that makes them cry out for more communist-style security and economic predictability, saying to themselves, "Who says, after all, that totalitarianism cannot be democratic, and that an individual always knows what is in his own best interests? Sometimes a leader, a strongman, fuehrer, caudillo, or vodj, best knows the answer." The legacy of communism in eastern Europe is hard to grasp even for scholars of substantial culture and intellectual probity. Communism created distinct patterns of behavior that will take longer to discard than the ideological or juridical legacy of communist repression. The shrewd traveler to eastern Europe, whether businessman, politician, or student, will notice that citizens of today's Prague, Bucharest, Budapest, or Zagreb still display behavioral traits of the communist system. The communist culture of social leveling created a peculiar mind-set

of base survivalism, visible today even among individuals who brag that they are ardent anticommunists. American businessmen are often amazed with the way the new postcommunist political elites conceptualize a free market, forgetting that beneath the style and rhetorical veneer of the new class, the substance of communism was never uprooted. Indeed, from the Balkans to the Baltics, the majority of politicians in eastern Europe are basically recycled communists, who for obvious geopolitical reasons converted to Americanophile opportunism. It is questionable to what extent they are true democrats now, and to what extent they were true communist democrats twenty years ago. Thus, there are many misunderstandings and misperceptions on both sides of the Atlantic.

The culture of postcommunist mediocrity and mendacity cannot be wished away by State Department officials or would-be UN Samaritans. Generally speaking, the American attitude toward eastern Europe is based on pragmatic (albeit too idealistic) models and schemes that foresee a solution, or at least a contingency plan, for every crisis. But formulas or models do not work in postcommunist eastern Europe. An average east European is still prone to irrational emotional outbursts and continues to harbor paranoid conspiracy theories. Given that he sees others, including Americans, as crooks, he will himself continue cheating and pilfering, and do his best to double-cross others. In essence, past communist terror badly weakened what we might call the genetic pool of eastern Europeans. Therefore, many east Europeans accept the vaunted transition toward democracy--i.e., American-style capitalism--only on a purely rhetorical level. Initiative, commitment, and self-reliance, which are taken for granted by Americans, are nonexistent in eastern Europe. The imbedded communist practice of double deals presents a formidable barrier in east European--American business or political relationships. Numerous U.S. scholars and politicians think that these barriers will fade away with the brutal implementation of free markets, but they are wrong.

The primitive appeal of communism abided in the psychological security and economic predictability it provided. Most east Europeans would now like to have it both ways: They would like to retain the economic and political security of communism, while having all the imagined glitz and glory of projected Americanism. For eastern Europeans, the American dream basically boils down to transplanting themselves physically into the imaginary yet real soaps of Santa Barbara or Melrose Place. One may argue, as does Jean Baudrillard, a theorist of postmodernity, that America is utopia achieved. This is true in a sense, if we disregard the ever-increasing economic inequalities and growing social anonymity that could spell the end of the American dream. Conversely, eastern Europe today is a laboratory where different and sometimes obnoxious ideas are officially heralded one day, only to be discarded the next. Americans frequently observe that little can be achieved in this tragic part of Europe by role-modeling or preaching democracy.

Eastern Europe skipped the most important part of its modern history; it never carried out wholesale decommunization, and it never began educating its masses in civility. Consequently, a strong irrational element in human behavior will continue to exist in eastern Europe. Eastern Europe has already had too much of verbal democracy. What it needs is civility. During the initial postcommunist phase, east Europeans became ardent anticommunists who thought that by hollering anticommunist slogans, they would immediately open up the road to rich America. It is no accident that the first governments

in postcommunist eastern Europe were made up of radical anticommunist and nationalist spokesmen. Then, during the second phase, which is still in progress, east Europeans, particularly the political class, engaged in a grotesque mimicry of America. Everybody regurgitates the words economic growth, privatization, globalization, and Euro-Atlantic integration without knowing what they stand for. This phase is coming to an end, leaving a dangerous vacuum behind and a minefield of mass anxiety ahead.

The unpredictable nature of the European character is obvious. Who could have foretold the fall of the Berlin Wall, the brutal war between two similar peoples (Croats and Serbs), and the never-ending reshuffling of the EU? One may not rule out that after the experiment with "made in the U.S.A." style ultraliberalism, east Europeans may suddenly, out of defiance, revert to ageless domestic hard-liners. Security comes first; democracy may be a distant second. The rapid process of Americanization of eastern Europe, with its self-induced, self-gratifying dreams, may have its nasty drawbacks. If Americans themselves start raising questions about the veracity of their elections and the honesty of their leaders, their poor imitators in eastern Europe will flock to the large trove of their own strongmen. A parallel could be drawn with former European colonies, which after the end of French and English colonial rule, reverted to their own often unsavory customs. Moreover, the surplus population they keep sending to open-armed Europe and America bears witness to the decline of the West.

Additional Reading

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