

## **Objective and Existential Truth in Politics**

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Tomàs Masaryk concluded his essay, “John Hus and the Czech Reformation,” by saying that he could think of no better conclusion to his remarks than a well-known prayer of Hus which he then quoted with the injunction, “Let us heed it, let us heed it well”: “Seek truth, listen to the truth, learn the truth, love the truth, speak the truth, keep the truth, defend the truth with your very life!”<sup>1</sup> These words may also serve to point us toward important truths as we consider the implications of an upheaval we are living through now that is comparable in magnitude to the Reformation itself. The collapse of communism and the Soviet empire was undoubtedly one of the most dramatic historical events of an already eventful century. Heightening its dramatic quality was its suddenness. The speed with which this collapse took place seems to have taken every observer by surprise, and it will probably take decades to explore fully the reasons it happened the way it did. It would probably not be too much, however, to say that the reason that system failed will turn out to be closely related to the topic of truth in politics. And if this history has lessons to teach us, one of the most important is that truth is vital to the well-being of any polity — and in several ways.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn once said, long before any of us would probably have thought the Soviet regime might end in our lifetimes, that if only its people would refuse to lie anymore, it would fall in short order. By this he seems to have meant that the totalitarian system depended on complicity in the form of silence or conformist affirmations to maintain its system of control through intimidation. This is probably so, but by itself it touches on only one aspect of a complex issue. My purpose here is to sketch out briefly what I think are the main facets of the broader issue in the hope that they will help us understand what is needed for the development of more successful and humane systems of government in the world we all hope will replace the one that has recently collapsed.

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<sup>1</sup>Tomàs G. Masaryk, *The Meaning of Czech History*, ed. René Wellek, trans. Peter Kussi (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), p. 14.

Another telling anecdote I remember about the problem truth and its lack posed for the Soviet regime is that when Mikhail Gorbachev took office as Chairman of the Communist Party in the mid-1980s he called in one of their top people in computer science and asked him to tell him honestly how the Soviet Union stood in computer capability in comparison with the U.S. As I remember the story, the expert answered that they were about ten years behind the U.S. Gorbachev then asked for his estimate of where they would stand in ten years time, and the answer was something like forty years behind. This illuminates a quite different aspect of the problem, but both grow out of the same root: the attempt of a totalitarian regime to maintain power by controlling the thought of its populace. This inevitably must involve stifling not only the expression of alternative political views but also the free pursuit of inquiry generally and the free flow of information in every domain. The implication is that under modern conditions a totalitarian regime will necessarily turn out in the long run to be a weak one, not only because its attempt to coerce assent will lead to resistance, or at least to very weak assent, but also because it will cut off the sources of objective knowledge on which a technologically developed economy depends for its growth and basic functioning.

This is true not only of modern societies, of course. It seems likely that one of the main reasons for the rise of Western Europe centuries ago to a preeminence of technologically grounded power in relation to other regions, such as China, for example, is that Europe's feudal fragmentation made it impractical for any one feudal state to try to exercise too much control over the processes of inquiry that generated objective knowledge. Any state that tried to do so would only drive its ablest thinkers and their potential discoveries to the state next door where they would pose an even greater threat than at home, since any value that came out of their efforts would accrue to the rival state. The imperial China of the early modern era sought stability through the control of inquiry and information and had the misfortune to be fairly successful in that effort — with eventually disastrous results. The story of the Soviet regime, *mutatis mutandis*, constitutes a fairly close parallel, but with the time-frame shortened due to the rapid acceleration of scientific development since those earlier centuries.

All of this is pertinent, of course, to the question of the relative advantages of a market economy in comparison with a command economy. To speak of a free market is to speak of one in which there is not only freedom to make economic decisions but also a free flow of information about matters relevant to those decisions. Any economic system that tries to suppress that flow of information will weaken itself in direct proportion to the success with which it does so, because its economic decisions will inevitably have to be made in ignorance of the factors that are likely to influence their outcomes. Even a small

increment of truth over blind guesswork can result in significant differences in outcome if the results are allowed to compound over time. It is frequently said that free markets can exist without general political freedom, and this may be true in the short run, but an authoritarian regime that tries to control for its advantage the flow of information within its territory is likely to end up hampering its economy's development in the long run whether it intends to or not.

All of this probably now seems fairly obvious. It is worth spelling out mainly because its neglect for some three generations on the part of misguided political leaders in Russia and Eastern Europe has left their heirs with a situation that can be corrected only by taking these simple truths into account. But there are also deeper philosophical issues implicit in all of this, and to render them explicit may help contribute to something even more important than the development of viable economies in the states that will have to develop to succeed the communist ones.

What is most important to understand is that although truth has the different dimensions, objective and existential, that I refer to in my title, it is nevertheless of a piece. The two dimensions, though distinguishable, are mutually involved in one another, and an attack on one will inevitably injure the other.

Let me explain what I mean. By existential truth I mean something closely related to what Thomas Aquinas meant when he said that not only is the truth in God, but God Himself is the highest and first truth, *summa et prima veritas*.<sup>2</sup> The truth that is *in* God, that is, the truth He knows, would, from this point of view, be objective truth, truth about objective reality or matters of fact. The truth that God *is*, on the other hand, would be His consciousness itself, that is, the inherent luminosity of His being, which He may be assumed in principle to enjoy in perfect fullness. To say that this is the “first” truth means that it is ultimate and fundamental, that the truth of objective knowledge depends on it absolutely.

Whether or not one may follow Aquinas in all the points of his theology, the principles involved in his analysis of the question of God's relation to truth can help, I believe, to illuminate the questions of truth as such and of the nature of consciousness in the human case as well. Objective truth, considered in this light, is *adequatio intellectus ad rem*, the fit between understanding and reality that the performance of human cognitive operations in fidelity to their inherent norms may produce. Existential truth is that fidelity itself. Or to put it another way, it is the “openness” of consciousness in act. Transposing Aquinas's theological terms to the human case, the openness of existential truth is the “first

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<sup>2</sup>*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 16, a. 5.

truth” of human consciousness, on which all objective knowledge that can be humanly developed necessarily depends.

By the inherent norms of human cognitive operations I mean the requirements that knowledge must involve interpretations that are developed as a genuine effort to understand reality and that these interpretations must compete with others and be tested against the evidence of experience. Such interpretations may be imperfect and subject to revision in the light of new hypotheses, evidence, and critical procedures for testing their adequacy, but they constitute the only genuine knowledge of reality possible for human knowers. To realize and accept this, and then to live in continuous openness to the intrinsically endless process of critical inquiry makes major spiritual as well as intellectual demands, because it requires us always to acknowledge the finitude and fallibility of our cognitive claims and to be willing simultaneously to respect and to hold lightly to our cognitive achievements. This means not only to be willing to allow them to be surpassed but to hope that they *will* be, through the conflict of interpretations that critical inquiry will continually give rise to.

This is the structure of human truth in its objective and existential dimensions, and as such it has the most fundamental implications for politics. Most important of all is that it makes clear the advantages of pluralism. If a society wishes to realize the full possibilities of both existential and objective truth, it will have to organize itself on the basis of an acceptance of possible diversity of views and a fundamental openness to questioning, wherever that may lead. To live in such a spirit of openness, of course, is a great challenge, and it requires not only a political foundation of laws guaranteeing such rights as freedom of speech and freedom of the press but also a cultural foundation of habits of respect for these principles and of tolerance for difference. It might be a relatively simple thing to enact laws protecting plurality of views, but legislation alone cannot produce a pluralist culture — that is, one that not only permits difference but actually values it for the positive contributions it may make. For a whole society to become ready for this requires preparation through the cultivation of civilizational habits over the course of centuries.

This is a rare development, and in fact it has been mainly a European phenomenon, at least in its origins, and has been rooted primarily in those parts of Europe one usually refers to as “the West,” that is, Latin Europe — as compared, that is, with those parts of Europe that have had their cultural roots in the traditions of the Byzantine Empire or the Ottoman. There seem to be three principal causes that have produced this favorable pattern of culture in Latin Europe, each, ironically, a case of clouds with silver linings — a point that seems especially worth remembering today when there seem so many clouds over this continent. One of the great voices of the European tradition, Dante, considered it a disaster that the Roman empire had disintegrated in the west and thought its restoration in the form

of a universal European empire and a universal church would be the greatest of worldly blessings and the precondition of all others. Although he seems to have given no thought to it, in the Christian East the Roman empire had remained intact and enjoyed a high degree of religious unity — just what Dante thought he wanted — and that world produced a cultural tradition in which intellectual, religious, and political pluralism have always tended to look like symptoms of decay rather than sources of strength. The feudal fragmentation in Latin Europe that Dante lamented on the other hand became a condition fostering the rise of the sciences and of all sorts of intellectual and imaginative exploration. This, therefore, is the first of the three principal causes that seem to me to have contributed to producing the European culture of pluralism.

Feudalism also provided the conditions that made possible the second principal cause I have in mind: the experience of the Reformation. From the point of view of the members of any one religious group, religious pluralism is likely to be considered an inherent evil, since it means there is public tolerance of views they think not only false but likely to lead people religiously astray. But even religion seems to flourish more vigorously under pluralist conditions — as can be seen when one compares religious life in the United States with that in countries with state churches. The habit of tolerance of diverse religious views in turn offers valuable training for tolerance of diverse political views, which can sometimes be almost as absolute in their claims. It is also worth remembering that unified religious regimes tend to fall into the same counterproductive patterns of governance as do politically totalitarian regimes. Dante may have lamented the political fragmentation of his time, but it was also what made it possible for him to live and write in reasonably comfortable exile, rather than in the prisons of an emperor or pope. He probably would equally have lamented the religious fragmentation of Europe after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, but he might not have fared well himself at the hands of the Counter-Reformation if he had fallen into them.

A third factor that I think has probably been significant in forming the pluralist traditions of Europe has been still another cloud with a silver lining: Latin Europe's somewhat embarrassed awareness, from its very beginning in the days of the Roman Empire, that it has never been radically original — that is, self-generating — but has always depended on sources anterior to itself. A French classical scholar, Rémi Brague, has recently suggested that this sense of being “secondary” in relation to another source is the essence of *romanité*.<sup>3</sup> The Romans were conscious of their cultural dependence on Greece, and the European heirs of Roman culture added another layer of dependency by seeing

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<sup>3</sup>*Europe, la voie romaine*(Paris: Criterion, 1992).

themselves as deriving from Rome which derived in turn from Greece. The Byzantine civilization felt itself to be rooted in a continuous Greek culture descending from classical Greece and including the Greek New Testament and the Greek Fathers of the Church — which meant that it never experienced the feeling of a need to reach to comprehend something other than itself that was eminently worth the stretch.

Similarly, the Islamic civilization has felt itself secure in its foundation on the word of God given to it as the Arabic Qur'an, which was itself the perfect replica of an original, co-eternal with God, inscribed in the very same Arabic in heaven. Currently the Islamic world seems to feel rather less secure in itself due to its confrontation with the pluralist rationality of modernity, but this only illustrates the point at issue, since the movements of radical “Islamism” that have sprung up in Iran, Egypt, Algeria, and other Islamic countries are precisely an effort to restore that lost sense of self-sufficiency by the suppression of pluralist tendencies and the western-influenced systems of law that protect them.

Lack of self-sufficiency was built into the European tradition of secondariness from the start, which meant that European thinkers were always being reminded that the foundational knowledge of their civilization had to be approached through an infinite approximation process of interpretation. Of course, Europeans have often been as eager to forget this as anyone else, but their unavoidable experience of cultural plurality has served as a constant reminder. A good illustration is the hermeneutic naïveté of the early reformers — as exemplified by Ulrich Zwingli in his treatise, *On the Clarity and Certainty of Scripture* — and the way they were later led by the embarrassments of hermeneutic experience to correct that naïveté. All of the Protestant reform movements hoped to recover a lost primitive simplicity of faith through an unproblematic return to their scriptural sources, only to be driven ironically, by the inescapably problematic character of that very effort, eventually to form exemplary traditions of critical scriptural scholarship.

The fact that a deeply rooted culture of pluralism and critical rationality requires centuries of historical experience of a sort that so far has developed only in Latin Europe and in those countries of the New World founded and nurtured by European immigration means, unfortunately, that the establishment of stable polities that can flourish on the basis of acceptance of the demands of existential and objective truth is likely to be especially challenging for many of the new countries precipitated by the dissolution of the Soviet empire and the former Yugoslavia — and with the challenges will come dangers.

There is a constant temptation to try to generate solidarity by the creation of myths of national unity and the identification of scapegoats and hereditary enemies. Some of these new societies may succumb to this, with disastrous results, especially if their peoples have shared little of the formative experience sketched above. We can only wait and see, while

trying to keep our own heads clear and offering what help we can. There are, nevertheless, cases that seem promising, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. These *have* shared the experience of Latin Europe, and respect for the demands of both objective and existential truth seems to have retained its roots among them, despite the decades of forced submission to regimes that lived on the eclipse of truth.

Thinking of this, perhaps one may take heart from a story told by the historian Eric Hobsbawm in a lecture given at the beginning of the 1993-94 academic year at the Central European University in Budapest. Hobsbawm spoke of how Tomàš Masaryk “was not popular when he entered politics as the man who proved with regret but without hesitation, that the medieval manuscripts on which much of the Czech national myth was based were fakes.”<sup>4</sup> It is heartening both because Masaryk had the integrity and courage to do so and because it did not prevent him from eventually becoming the founder of the Czechoslovak Republic. Masaryk clearly appreciated and was committed to the value of objective truth. That he equally appreciated and was committed to existential truth can be seen, I think, in his political belief, as summarized by René Wellek in his introduction to Masaryk's *The Meaning of Czech History*, that humanism and democracy mean “the perfection of man conceived as a religious, moral, and responsible being” and that “every man should be able to strive for perfection, that no outward constraint, no social barrier, no economic or national oppression should bar his way to the realization of his humanity.”<sup>5</sup>

This, then, is the deep issue in the question of truth in politics. The lack of objective truth may weaken a society, but the lack of existential truth — the truth of existence that must be realized, and can only be realized, on the level of the responsible individual — in addition to undermining the pursuit of objective truth, would attack its very soul.

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<sup>4</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, “The New Threat to History,” *New York Review of Books* 40, no. 21 (Dec. 16, 1993), p. 64.

<sup>5</sup>*The Meaning of Czech History*, p. xvii.