

## THE TWILIGHT OF THE NEW POLITICS

*Zygmunt Bauman*

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Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost: The Post-Totalitarian Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. 248 p.

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This is a timely book: collecting and systematizing the words of East-Central European intellectual prophets and prompters of the imminent revolution just before they began to turn into deeds—or not to turn. What Goldfarb calls the ‘post-totalitarian mind’ is intellectual critique arising under conditions of spiritual unfreedom and given special significance—long forgotten by even the most radical intellectuals of the liberal and ideologically indifferent West—by the censorship and persecutions that befell its carriers. The more there is of suppression and prison sentences, the more explosive the obstreperous word becomes; it seems as if words truly mattered, as if the fate of society stood and fell at last by the presence or absence of the word. However, what Goldfarb calls ‘totalitarianism’ is curiously “a world of total mobility, of constant movement, without personal past or future, without a home.” This description bears an uncanny resemblance to the existential predicament of the Western modern intellectual—*freischwebende*, uprooted and incurably contingent. It does not remind one at all of life under totalitarian regimes, which was all about liberating people from the trauma of contingency and offering tempting escape from freedom into the safe havens of historical necessity and *nomenkulatura*. On second thought, however, Goldfarb’s definitional stratagem does not look odd at all. It is the solution of the problems lived through by the Western intellectuals that, after all,

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prompted Goldfarb to study Havel, Kundera, Michnik or Haraszti; the 'post-totalitarian mind' fascinates him not so much as the prospective saviour of the forcibly urbanized Rumanian peasant or Hungarian piece-rate worker, but as a lesson for the Western intellectual, despairing of the numbness of reality and his own impotence, how to be important, effective and listened to, with a mixture of awe and fear, by the high and mighty of this world.

There is little doubt that the spectacular explosion of intellectual political influence in East-Central Europe was one of the effects (the one felicitous effect alongside many others, incomparably less prepossessing) of the enforced and oppressive politicization of culture, of the totalitarian state construing the intellectuals as co-terminous with itself and hence always potential rivals (in Goldfarb's own words, the authorities even make dissenting literature and the arts serious because they deem them important enough to be censored; let us add that subjecting to censorship and construing literature as dissent is much the same thing). Kundera's somewhat pale rendition of Benjamin's description of the spirit of sacrifice being "nourished by the image of crushed ancestors rather than that of liberated children" (in Kundera's wordier version, "the future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone ... The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past") was a sort of time-bomb which Benjamin's proposition never became mostly because the key to the archive was in the safe-keeping of the police. As to the free spirits in the totalitarian world, they have no doubts about the time limits of their social role. As Kundera's compatriot Simecka wrote not that long ago ("Newspeak and *Glasnot*," *Time Literary Supplement*, 6-12 January 1989),

The journal *Nove Slovo* devoted an article to me that ran to several installments, saying that Orwell was a dangerous lunatic, and so was I. Now that terrible book of Orwell's is going to be let loose on the wide expanse of Russia in hundreds of copies. It will be read by people whose fate has far more in common with Winston Smith's than mine.

I am overjoyed, of course. At the same time, I feel that something has come to an end, that things are becoming ordinary and banal, and the thrill of it is evaporating. By now—in Russia at least—Orwell's book has become a book like any other. And all of a sudden I feel it's a pity. Won't it be less cataclysmic when people read it without fear? How long ago was it that I lent it to that young fellow? Three years? He brought it back the next morning, his eyes red from lack of sleep. He didn't say anything, but he looked burnt out. Will it still matter so much what message or carefully guarded secret a book conveys? Will it only matter how many copies are sold? But I had better hold my tongue, in order not to appear an ageing eccentric, recalling the thrill of the time when dangerous books were hidden under packets of noodles.

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To say that books are dangerous only as long as they hide under packets of noodles, is not to play down the role of anti-totalitarian intellectuals, mostly solitary figures surrounded by a multitude not yet formed into a society, or forming but a slumbering and torpid one, as—in thought and in deed—the pioneers of freedom, personal and social (as Agnes Heller beautifully explained in her homage to Andrei Sakharov (*New Statesman and Society* 22/29 December 1989)). But one needs to remind oneself that the astounding spiritual power of people like Sakharov, Michnik or Havel was aroused by political impotence and is unlikely to outlive its victory over the political oppression. The paradox of the heroic struggle of anti-totalitarian thinkers in East-Central Europe is that it paved the way toward a “normal” society like ours, in which yesterday prophets of freedom are bound to face (this time with less chance of spectacular showdown and even less chance of convincing victory) new limits and new troubles—like the ones Goldfarb put in his definition of totalitarianism. And then one would hear (as one does already today in Poland and Hungary) the all-too-familiar frustrated calls to “changing the mentality of the people” and the invocations to critical thought as the last troops to combat the overwhelming forces of soulless consumerism.

What the anti-totalitarian thinkers have accomplished was to speed up the catching up with the post-modern world by societies stuck in various stages of failed modernization. Goldfarb’s ‘post-totalitarianism’ may well prove to be another version of postmodernity, with all of its familiar fascination, anxieties and discontents.

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