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DEMOCRACY IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND ITS SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS

By Jakub S. Trojan

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From the very outset of our modern political thought democracy in Czechoslovakia has been conceived of as a system exceeding the usual techniques of a political rule. Going back to the 1918 as the date of the rebirth of our independent state we can say that Czechoslovakia had entered the European scene as a democratic state with a political philosophy that can hardly be understood, unless the exploration of both the historical, moral, and spiritual presuppositions and roots are taken into account. The same seems to be true, when both the so-called Czechoslovak Spring 1968 and the Velvet Revolution of November 1989 are reexamined. All these phenomena are, more or less, events and processes complying with the category--in the terms of our first president Thomas Garrigue Masaryk's vocabulary--"nonpolitical politics."

The idea of the nonpolitical politics denotes a set of attitudes and institutions that make us reminiscent of a deeper level and wider scope of citizen's activities than is usually accepted. Masaryk was aiming at conceptualizing a commitment to democracy that would be resistant even in times of tremors and crises. Democracy in his view has been more than a political doctrine and set of a few mechanisms to enable the citizen's option; he emphasized democracy as an integrated style of life, combining both the personal and the societal dimensions. He emphasized the necessity of having regulative means in the society such as elections, pluralism of political parties, executive and juridical power, etc., ingrained in a spiritual base. And it is this base that has, in his view, been indispensable for the inspiration and regeneration of those who have dedicated themselves to democratic principles. Our first president was, in accordance with the intrinsic motives of our past traditions, convinced that all these requirements apply particularly to situations where democratic institutions are tested. And as we know the middle European space, including Czechoslovakia, was subjected to testing more frequently than the other parts of Europe.

What does "nonpolitical politics" imply? First of all, the awareness that the political mechanisms and decision-making on governmental, parliamentary and municipal levels are just the visible part of processes, the roots of which generate from the "invisible" sources of human minds, from their aspirations, ideas, wishes and from the traditions the citizens have in common with the past generations. The reminiscence of the past is, of course, more or less selective, yet its influence on the living generation might from time to time become explosively relevant. Thus, people in society are guided not only by their own daily interests, as a superficial view might suppose; they are rather subjected to loyalties exceeding the momentary advantages and disadvantages of their own.

Masaryk formulated HUMANITY as one of the basic loyalties that is indispensable for a durable and efficient democratic society. The ideal of humanity involves a number of aspects that are of eminent importance for a thriving democratic system. Let us indicate some of them:

(1) DEVOTION TO TRUTH. On the Presidential flag on the Prague Castle the inscription TRUTH IS VICTORIOUS can be seen. This signals a basic loyalty to truth. What is truth? Pilate's question from the Gospel transcends, in my view, the level of personal uncertainty or even indifference. In Jesus' response the question of truth has arrived at a universal dimension. This has become an inherent part of our tradition since the Hussite reformation; understanding truth is far from being an adequation of a statement to reality. The ideal of truth as governing power over human lives was elevated by Jan Huss, a Czech religious reformer of fifteenth century and rector of the "Charles" University in Prague, who was burnt at the stake in July 1415 in Constance.

Since Huss' wrestling with the prominent worldly and ecclesiastical personalities of his time, Europe inherited the conception of truth as a spiritual power that governs human beings and their achievements in all spheres of social life. Huss' conflict with the fathers of the Council of Constance grew out of the following position: there is a sovereignty of truth over prerogatives of all kinds including all human institutions. It was Jan Huss who for the first time in history combined this emphasis on the primacy of truth backed by personal devotion with a sophisticated academic reasoning. There was no parallel in the Europe of his day or even later, to this unity of knowledge and doing, theory and practice, to the credibility of a witness, which was not even threatened when faced by the stake. What the Waldensians and other reform movements before Huss were practicing or what Wycliff was pondering in the calm of his parish-house, was integrated by Huss in an intrinsic monumental unity of cultivated thought and brave deed. It was for this reason that Europe was shocked immensely by this witness.

It was this witness to truth that has molded Europe's subsequent history. Since that time it has been essential to put into the light of truth calling everybody to openness for its

demands even those achievements that comply with the interests of a vast number of people. Already at this point one can see that politics and democracy attached to this conception of truth as a spiritual power transcends the current idea of political life as a mere articulation and fulfillment of human vested interests. Moreover, truth as supreme spiritual power is not a set of doctrinal statements, nor is it any kind of ideological weaponry postulated by political parties and movements. Consequently, all of these are judged and examined by truth and they never can claim being its perfect embodiment. In a democratic society everybody has the right to truth as the ultimate criterion of all proposals, legislative provisions, and political programs.

If everything must be reexamined and criticized in the light of truth, then, consequently, neither tradition, nor worldly and ecclesiastical institutions, nor human authority of any kind, are exempt from the overall reality ruling and this reality ever searching truth. Truth is the supreme criterion of both societal and personal life.

Provided this be correct, then even modern democracy as a rule of the majority is being tested, since truth resists option. Even the majority can be mistaken. Under the authority of truth, we all stand personally and together with our institutions. This is what Huss existentially experienced in Constance and the final consequence he had to face confirmed that clearly.

This ideal of the supreme truth, mediated to the following generations through the work of Masaryk and other thinkers of the nineteenth century, provided the basis of our renewed state independence in the year 1918. But its vitality has been revealed in the recent events of our Gentle Revolution, too. Havel's and other Charter 77 activists' essays analyzed profoundly the distinction between living in a lie or in truth as opposed options, each including the personal and public sphere of life. The belief is that truth governs and is prevailing with such a dominating style of life at present. All those who opened themselves to the truth as renewing power share in its beneficial impact on both personal life and that of their citizenship. Without faithfulness to that spiritual authority compelling one to be responsible within the political and social context, democracy cannot thrive. Equally, commitment to civil right activities and the constant control and criticism of the social life, the renewal of one's life and that of the public is hardly achievable, if this kind of loyalty to the invisible, yet victorious truth, would be neglected.

(2) Hand in hand with the belief of supreme value of truth for democracy, defenselessness of truth is to be emphasized. Truth is contradictory to power. This does not mean it is powerless. Truth becomes, to be sure, spiritual force and power, if obediently followed and witnessed. Yet truth resists any kind of violent means in order to be, say, successful; self-assertiveness of truth occurs only if nonviolent steps are undertaken to set it through. This aspect of truth seems to be hardly appreciated by the so called pragmatic

politicians who are prone to rely predominantly upon the means of coercion. Far from disregarding the manipulative and compelling means of the legal state power, I, nevertheless, am deeply convinced that the priorities of our social and political life, basic moral values indispensable for a thriving community, are not--if at all--achievable by coercion alone. Equally, the commitment to democracy of the citizens, their mutual cooperation and trust, their cohesion in pursuing their transindividual goals, cannot be established, creatively shared or unfolded and sustained, by oppressive methods.

Non-violence is in the last analysis the most effective way of molding the societal life. To resort to violent means, in return, inevitably puts an enormous burden on the subsequent period. The temptation of using oppressive proceedings whenever the problems in society seem to be mounting, cripples the creativity both of the rulers and the citizens. I believe that both attempts of our recent history, the Prague Spring 1968 and our November Revolution 1989 may serve as a proof; when democratic changes are being brought about peacefully, the future is less liable to dramatic conflicts and, consequently, people can more easily cope with issues they are facing. Superfluous tensions in society can be avoided, which unfortunately is not the cause in Romania.

We may be encouraged in our belief that non-violence is the best way in which society should be governed by the fact that even within the penal codes of the state law as a coercive tool, an enclave of non-violence or positively expressed a flash of mercy, can be identified, namely in the declaration of AMNESTY. This reveals a deeper truth of inevitableness to build up the societal life by means of values generating from a manipulative sphere. Here, we again have to deal with another aspect of the above mentioned nonpolitical politics as a foundation of democracy.

(3) TOLERANCE as a further prerequisite for democratic life is the third aspect and is a complementary aspect to the two preceding ones. Witnessing truth nonviolently is to be tolerant. Tolerance, however, by no means is tantamount to indifference, which seems to have resulted from the traditional liberalism. To acknowledge the supremacy of truth, to witness its power in freedom and that non-violently in the complexity of communitarian life, to use permanently democratic tools and to remain consequently tolerant, is hard work, self-restraint and an imaginative means of one's behavior. At the same time, both ways of seeming contradictory attitudes are to be pursued; to be firm in one's persuasion in insisting on one's views and standpoints and yet to be open for a dialogue in which one's own deepest ideas and concepts are reexamined is inevitable under the guidance of truth and belongs, to be sure, to the basic virtues democracy hardly can abandon.

(4) As a fourth spiritual source of genuine democracy, LOVE is to be identified. A question can be raised immediately; rather than interhuman relationships we are discussing, in our the issue of political theory, problems of democracy and the like; how then can love

be related to all these issues? It can--if, of course, love is not conceived of as a sentiment, a feeling narrowly attached to the most internal aspect of our personal life.

In my understanding LOVE, as a politically effective impulse, is indispensable for democracy. Love guides us first of all in a process of recognition that social maladies and evils recruit not only from wrongdoing of the others, but it is we who have to share the responsibility with other people for whatever happens in society. And to share guilt, to cancel innumerable sins is exclusively within the competence of love. The strategy of political thinking and practice, ingrained in love, is very simple; it is the awareness that citizens, politicians, both rulers and subjects, all are without excuse. We cannot escape the accountability for all controversial things that have occurred in our environment. Involved, participating, responsible, this is the call of love judging and the same time liberating.

In the November days 1989 the slogan "truth and love are victorious", could be heard often. During a freezing Sunday afternoon when a policeman addressed gathered crowds asking their forgiveness for him and other young policemen who had attacked students on 17th November, hundreds of thousands replied, "we are human beings! we are human beings!" Just imagine: at a political rally, the voice of love and forgiveness! There are worldly and heavenly things. But even politics of everyday life cannot be pursued authentically unless this transcendental perspective is being actualized within a very secularized context. This is how nonpolitical politics can and ought to be done. This is the politics sub specie aeternitatis Thomas Masaryk was carrying out all his life. And this, at present time, belongs to the unique legacy we, in my country are committed to pursue faithfully and consequently in a new European context.