



European Culture and the New Ideological Challenges

1. Introduction

Those of us who have not lived under the rule of an ideological regime, which attempts to build an ideologically-given (but always ‘historic’) future, are perhaps unaccustomed to thinking of the real depths and purposes of culture, as manifested through its artefacts: painting and sculpture, music, theatre and literature. We tend to see them chiefly as diversions or escapes from reality, or as a means of individual self-exploration and refinement, or perhaps as an indulgence. So when we first encounter Solzhenitsyn’s view that literature ‘constitutes the last and strongest line of defence of the truth against forces attempting to destroy it’,¹ we may discount or dismiss it.

The truth, however, is that it was not just over economics and politics that the ideological wars of the twentieth century were fought. Culture was also transformed into an ideological battleground. Millions of lives were lost in the changes of regimes in many European countries, and in the war between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, but lives were also at stake in the cultural arena for those who would not conform. Robert Conquest relates that ‘Stalin was responsible for the slaughter of a great number of Soviet writers ... [O]f the 700 writers who attended the first Writers’ Congress in 1934 ... only fifty survived to see the second in 1954’.² For the ideologist, culture is just another front in the campaign for the supremacy of his or her worldview. For the ideological regime, culture must be turned into a servant of its interests, and cultural enemies are regarded as potentially or actually subversive. On grounds of ideological loyalty or submissiveness, the producers of poor art and literature were

promoted to prominence in such regimes, and better artists were often prevented from working and even imprisoned and killed. The collapse of communism in Europe in 1989–91 seemed to promise an end to culture subordinated to narrow political ends. The end of ideology—indeed, history itself—was proclaimed. But ideology has not disappeared, and the baleful influence of ideological conformity has not ended, even if the ideological focus has blurred. We must now be aware of the challenges of ‘political correctness’ as well as Islamist ideology, both in general and in relation to artistic integrity.

It is not only tyrannical regimes that present a challenge to cultural expression and development; we should not relax because communism and fascism are now disempowered and discredited. Artists played an important role by preserving non-totalitarian values in those ideological regimes, and—by seeking the truth—helped to undermine them. But artists need to be ever on guard against fashion, both artistic and political, as well as sceptical about the lure of state subsidies, all of which threaten to impair their independence. This paper will outline some of the lessons for culture of the experience of communism, and reflect on the less obvious (but no less real) dangers of so-called ‘political correctness’ in Europe today, particularly as it relates to the relations between cultures and Islamist ideas.

2. Communism and cultural production

Communism may not have succeeded in becoming an utterly ‘totalitarian’ regime, where every aspect of life was controlled by the Communist Party—a topic hotly debated amongst some political scientists—but it certainly aspired to it. Consequently, and despite an initial flourish of artistic independence after the Bolshevik Revolution

in 1917, the dark shadow of political purpose eventually fell across all aspects of cultural production, from literature and the plastic arts through poetry to music.

The debate about the relationship of art and communism had been lively in the USSR through the 1920s and 30s, and while many avant-garde influences were tolerated, this changed once Stalin had consolidated his rule. Artistic freedom ended with the imprisonment and death of Osip Mandelstam, the ostracism and official denunciation of Anna Akhmatova, and the humiliation of Dmitry Shostakovich (after Stalin attended a performance of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in 1936, and again in 1948 at the hands of Andrei Zhdanov). The innovative cinema of Sergei Eisenstein was successively allowed and disallowed depending on the political whims, and needs, of Stalin's regime. In the process of Andre Gide's disillusionment with the Soviet Union, which culminated in his 1936 *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, Gide reflected that the role of the artist—as a witness, and as a reminder of civilized values—had been subverted by the Soviet state.

Yet for every artist who had made a Faustian bargain with the communist regime, and every Socialist Realist hack who prospered by following the approved artistic formula, there was an artist of integrity who may have gone through the motions of obedience but whose life was marked by smaller or larger acts of *samizdat* and insubordination (otherwise known as honesty). By the mid-1950s, when Soviet imperialism had settled across Eastern Europe, there was no longer room to debate the role of art. European communism entered its grey period. Boris Pasternak may have been expelled from the Soviet Writers' Union and forced to reject the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958 for having the banned *Doctor Zhivago* published in the West in the previous year, and

Alexander Solzhenitsyn may have had a brief window of Soviet recognition with the publication in 1962 of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, but *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and *Novy Mir* continued to churn out the approved stories and poems with which the political and literary establishment in Russia felt comfortable. That great works continued to be written, even if they could not be published or performed, is a testament to the courage and integrity of artists, and was done not because of, but despite, communism.

Gide argued that ‘A great artist is of necessity a “nonconformist” and he must swim against the current of his day.’³ The Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko conceded—in his autobiography published outside Russia—during the period of Khrushchevian artistic ‘thaw’ that ‘In Russia all tyrants believe poets to be their worst enemies’,⁴ but was soon afterwards brought to heel by the Soviet regime. The communists deliberately sought to harness literature to their cause. In a speech to writers in July 1961, Khrushchev declared that ‘The development of literature ... proceeds plan-wise as directed by the party’. As Robert Conquest so ably demonstrated, ‘One of the most depressing things about the official [Soviet] attitude is that literature, like every other field, becomes a “front”, on which a political “struggle” is always taking place’. When one is creating a ‘new man’, there is no room in art for complexity, uncertainty, dilemmas and the appreciation of difference; in other words, life itself is drained from art.

Communism was not unique in attempting to subordinate cultural production to its vision, nor was it peculiar to Russians—mindful of the nineteenth century *intelligentsia*—to be sensitive to the power of artists. Nazism, too, had its tame artists

and pressed (approved) national artists from an earlier period into serving its political purposes. In important respects, and not just in the arts, the similarities between them were striking. Vasily Grossman, in *Forever Flowing*, makes it clear that the Soviet regime dehumanised kulaks in just the way that the Nazi regime dehumanised Jews, as ‘pariahs, untouchables, vermin’, and for the same purpose: to make their deaths or murder more palatable to those who were agents in it. Anti-Semitism also has a long history in Russia, intensified under Stalin’s rule. It is useful to remember that the twentieth century’s ideological tyrants did not ignore or detest art. Hitler’s admiration for Wagner’s music is clear, his early pretensions as a painter led to his plans for the creation of art galleries, and he wanted to capture the power of his Reich in monumental architecture.

Hitler’s ideas finally succumbed to the criticism of explosives in 1945; communism lingered for a further 45 years. The 1989 collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe can be said to have been ‘over-determined’. Economic irrationality and decline; political hypocrisy and repression; the breakdown of social trust; anti-Russian feeling: all these played their part. At its core, however, was a reassertion of the individual against a system that attempted to destroy individuality. The Czech playwright—soon to become President—Vaclav Havel captured this spirit on New Year’s Day in 1990, when he declared: ‘I dream of a republic independent, free and democratic, of a republic economically prosperous and yet socially just, in short, of a human republic which serves the individual’.⁵ Havel believed that individual acts of dissent were the Achilles Heel of communism. Communism produced a ‘profound crisis of human identity ... by living within a lie’; freedom, by contrast, signified ‘an attempt to live within the truth’.⁶ The attempt, in other words, to reassert one’s

personal authenticity—to live one’s life, to have one’s own memory, to have real choices and make individual plans—was inimical to communism. Ordinary people were forced into the role of dissidents by doing the most human things. That there was a flourishing of independent civic activity in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, especially in the realm of independent communications, cannot be doubted,⁷ but much more of it was individual and informal, and marked the declining legitimacy of the regimes. As communism in Europe neared its end, art and literature had a role to play in ‘speaking truth to power’. The reassertion of individuality may not have been caused by artists and writers, but it found a powerful expression in their work.

3. The challenge of ‘political correctness’ and multiculturalism

Though Nazism is long dead and communism recently deceased, it does not mean there are not other challenges to the European artist that seek to inhibit cultural expression or make it conform to a vision. Externally, recent challenges have come from Islamism; internally, they come from political correctness, or an exaggerated sensitivity to causing offence to particular categories of people. These challenges tend to coalesce in the notion of ‘multiculturalism’.

‘Political correctness’ manifests itself in everyday life in the choices we make to describe things. The way we use language shapes our perception of reality, and thus shapes the way we treat political issues (and other people). From this truth, people have drawn some far-reaching conclusions: if we outlaw certain types of language, or certain words, we can change for the better people’s attitudes towards particular groups. Such groups are often described as being ‘disadvantaged’, and some of that disadvantage is argued to derive from negative perceptions of (and language about)

them. Many groups claim consideration on this score, including women, gays and lesbians, intellectually and physically disabled people, and ethnic groups. Their claim is that the language used to describe them contributes to—that is, helps cause—their social disadvantage. To put it in its best light, being ‘politically correct’ means avoiding both offending and stereotyping members of particular groups.

It may be appropriate to avoid giving offence, especially where that is gratuitous. But the effects of political correctness are not all benign. It has become a censorship that distorts and stifles political debate, and suppresses free cultural expression. In the first place, who decides which terms are politically ‘incorrect’? The groups that describe themselves as disadvantaged have numerous organisations, but no representative structure; so who speaks with authority on their behalf? In the second place, will the replacement of certain terms have the desired effect of changing attitudes and, above all, outcomes? And, in the third place, there is a clear danger that by placing—legislatively or otherwise—certain terms and discussions on the ‘taboo’ list, freedom of discussion will be destroyed. In trying not to offend, we must take care that we do not suspend judgement, especially when judgements are made across ethnic lines. (It is instructive to recall that political correctness arose in American universities in the 1960s and 70s, when the notion of ‘great works of Western civilisation’ that informed the curriculum was criticised as ignoring and diminishing contributions to knowledge made by other civilisations.)

Political correctness has some legislative force, especially where laws against ‘hate speech’ have been enacted, but it is primarily a social pressure leading to censorship, both self-censorship and an external censorship by one’s peers that certain issues are

not to be discussed, except in ‘appropriate’ ways. So political correctness supports a type of orthodoxy, and the issues it has affected most are those around ethnicity (or ‘race’). In Europe, political correctness has focused on multiculturalism and, since culture encompasses religion, on the experience of Muslims within Europe.

‘Multiculturalism’ itself is a term used in many countries of the world—initially in immigrant societies such as Canada and Australia—with a wide range of meanings. Designed to encourage respect for the different cultural backgrounds that come together in immigrant societies, ‘multiculturalism’ soon became a term that disallowed judgements of particular cultural practices of some immigrant groups, and created confusion about the core values that such societies should be built upon. These debates have largely come to an end, with an acknowledgement of the importance of toleration, the rule of law, and democracy. In Europe, the debate around multiculturalism seems to have taken a different turn, with long-established and vibrant cultures challenged by immigrants who feel alienated and who close ranks around their sense of disadvantage, and some European intellectuals believing that European culture should yield to these critiques. The conservative commentator Theodore Dalrymple has argued that despite the ‘cultural’ emphasis of such debates, we should recognise the political dimension: ‘Political correctness is communist propaganda writ small’.

Partly because their political roots are less obvious, it is difficult to trace precisely how multiculturalism and political correctness have influenced art, music, theatre and film in Europe. Greater recognition of other cultural traditions does not, of itself, constitute evidence; after all, European artists and intellectuals have long benefited from cultural cross-pollination, whether it be Vincent van Gogh’s debt to Japanese art, or the

influence of African art on the work of Picasso and other early twentieth century artists. Rather, the evidence should be sought in instances where other cultures are presented without critical appreciation, or in the idealisation of other cultures (particularly those that are less complex, and materially poorer) as being in harmony either with themselves or with nature. But if it is difficult to locate such examples, we can see disturbing results from the pervasive influence of political correctness in European responses to threats to basic values, including free speech. Salman Rushdie, after publishing *The Satanic Verses* in 1988—which was interpreted as disrespecting the prophet Muhammad—was subjected to death threats and a *fatwa* issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini that called for his assassination. Theo van Gogh, the Dutch film director, was murdered in November 2004 after screening *Submission*, a film about violence against women in Islamic societies. And some time after Dutch newspapers published cartoons that treated Islam and the prophet Muhammad in an irreverent way, Muslims throughout the world threatened violence against any who would dare to reproduce them. This sort of intimidation has been opposed by many; unfortunately, it has also been justified by many Europeans who are perhaps burdened by a sense of guilt or shame at their culture.

4. Conclusion

It is possible that a lack of confidence in the European cultural heritage, which seems to be expressed in contemporary examples of political correctness, is confined only to some intellectuals. But even if that is the case, it sends a confusing message to all Europeans about the worth of their way of life, and its underpinning values. Should we, for example, suspend judgement of patriarchal cultures that sanction honour killings and female genital mutilation? The notion that criticism has no place in

relations between cultures is not the same as the challenge presented by old-fashioned political ideologies, which are unashamedly and vigorously judgemental. Ideologies take individual, identifiable human beings out of the artistic picture, and replace them with abstract categories, who masquerade as individuals. The stereotypes are much easier to categorise, hate and even kill. Ideology therefore encourages abstract classifications. Political correctness, by contrast, challenges the foundations on which our individuality is based, and pressures us to cease judging other cultures and conditions. Art, literature and theatre are ways in which we encounter ourselves and others, and sharpen our understanding, our sympathies, our imagination and our judgements. These cultural forms should not be censored in the name of respecting diversity. Whether by ideology or by political correctness, culture is forced into approved channels and its potential consequently restricted.

Shelley's 1820 play, 'Prometheus Unbound', was inspired by the French Revolution and presented Prometheus' liberation from the rock to which he was chained as a triumph of mankind over tyranny. This was a 'liberation' conceived in revolutionary terms of the fall of kings and the end of social and national divisions. Near the end of the twentieth century, Europe was liberated from the tyranny of communism, just as it had earlier destroyed the tyrannies of Nazism and fascism. We must be vigilant that it does not fall victim to the tyranny of political correctness.

David W. Lovell

University of New South Wales

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, UNSW@ADFA

Canberra ACT 2600 Australia

d.lovell@adfa.edu.au

¹ Cited Robert Conquest, *Tyrants and Typewriters: Communiqués in the Struggle for Truth* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 6.

² Conquest, *Tyrants and Typewriters*, 61.

³ Andre Gide, 'The God that Failed', in *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard H. Crossman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [1949]), 165–195 at 189.

⁴ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *A Precocious Autobiography* (New York: Dutton, 1963).

⁵ Cited I.T. Berend, *Central and Eastern Europe, 1944–1993. Detour from the periphery to the periphery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 303.

⁶ Vaclav Havel, et al., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the state in central-eastern Europe* (ed. J. Keane. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1985), 45, 39.

⁷ H.G. Skilling, *Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 92–97.