The New Eurocentrism

John Feffer

I against my brother
I and my brother against our cousin
I, my brother and our cousin against the neighbors
All of us against the foreigner

Bedouin proverb[1]

SANDWICHED BETWEEN THE EUROTOP 20 and the Euromusic report on EuroMTV came a commercial for Robert Maxwell's latest addition to his media empire, *The European*. The first paper to focus specifically on the various countries of the new Europe, Maxwell's venture promised the substance and panache of *USA Today*, albeit with a different continental drift. The advertising hype was predictable, its overstatement irritating (and surprisingly misleading: the newspaper isn't half as vapid as the commercial suggested). The subliminal message, however, was revealing: the new Europe will possess not simply a unified economic system, but a unified consciousness stretching across many nations and many more ethnic groups. Whether his paper will succeed or not, Maxwell is certainly on to something. After decades, actually centuries of competition and division, Europe is indeed establishing a new identity.

Maxwell's enterpreneurial neurons are being fired by two major events sweeping the continent, one the culmination of years of planning (European integration in the West), the other of years of gradual deterioration in planning (the collapse of Soviet-style Communism in the East). Despite the yards of newspaper copy describing events East and West with often unctuous optimism, both these components of the new Euroidentity have their unpleasant aspects.

Take the magical year 1992, for instance. Billed as an almost alchemical process, 1992 will transmute the various base metal nationalities into golden pan-Europeanism. The philosopher's stone necessary for such a transformation, the invisible hand of the market, will remove trade barriers, harmonize the value-added tax rates and bring prosperity to all. But beneath the pleasantries of the various Euromaterials produced in Brussels and Strasbourg lies a good deal of dread. In one introductory pamphlet to Europe 92, for instance, the Vice-President of the EEC, Martin Borgemann, says: "We are . . . convinced

[1] Quoted in Bruce Chatwin, The Songlines (London: Picador, 1988), p. 224.

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housewarming? Or is 1969 a reminder of counterrevolution, the re-imposition of a red corridor after a premature Eastern European spring?

This routine carrot-and-stick depiction of the Soviet Union's relations with Eastern Europe obscures the contemporary reality.[3] Gorbachev and his like-minded Kremlin compatriots played a leading role in changing the geography of Europe, reviving Khrushchev's notion of "separate paths to socialism," undercutting the authority of unpopular regimes and providing the political space within which the various independent movements in the region could operate. Like a careful post-modernist, Gorbachev quite deliberately deconstructed the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe.[4] No doubt, he thought that events would not spin out of control, that "friendly" coalition governments would be established along the Polish model developed in the spring of 1989.[5] But he underestimated the degree of control that Eastern European Communist parties had, not only over the population, but over putative political allies in government.[6] Sensing the fragility of their ruling elites, Eastern Europeans massed in the streets, first in East Germany, then Czechoslovakia, spreading to

[3] It has recently become fashionable to describe parts of Eastern Europe as Central Europe, alluding to the fact that parts of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia once belonged to the Austrian-Hungarian empire and are, for reasons of orthography and religion, closer to the West than the East. Furthermore, "Eastern Europe" has various Cold War connotations since it applies to those countries that fell into the Soviet sphere of influence following World War II. Now that the Soviet sphere no longer includes these countries, the term "Eastern Europe," it is argued, should no longer be used. Yet, I find the phrase "Eastern and Central Europe" needlessly cumbersome. And since the Cold War is over, at least as it relates to Europe, the designation "Eastern" should no longer carry with it any of its previous Cold War baggage. Bearing these considerations in mind, I will therefore use the term "Eastern Europe" throughout this essay to refer to East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.

[4] Hans Magnus Enzensberger calls those politicians who have the talent for undermining their own positions for the sake of higher causes the "demolition experts." See his piece in "The State of Europe," *Granta* 30, Winter, 1990.

[5] After "round table" negotiations in Spring 1989, the Solidarity trade union and the Communist party agreed to partially free elections. Solidarity could contest all the seats in the Senate, and 35 percent of the seats in the Sejm, thus ensuring that the party would maintain majority control in the more important house of parliament.

[6] The Democratic and Peasant parties in Poland, the Socialist party in Czechoslovakia, the Christian Democrats in East Germany: parties like these throughout the region quickly sided with the opposition movements, isolating the various Communist parties and rendering them, with several exceptions, politically marginalized. In Bulgaria, the Communist Party, redubbed Socialist Party, won a majority in national elections in June; the National Salvation Front, composed of elements of the previous Communist party, swept the national elections in Romania in May; the reform Communists in the GDR, collected in the Party of Democratic Socialism and led by the charismatic Gregor Gysi, had a respectable 15 percent showing in national elections; the Czechoslovak Communists, unrenamed, came in a surprise second in national elections behind Civic Forum.

toward overvaluing Europe that Soviet influence caused. Addressing Milan Kundera's thesis that Eastern Europe was the "kidnapped West," Rupnik writes:

> As soon as you start drawing cultural boundaries you run the risk of being accused either of cultural determinism or of "excluding" whole nations from Europe. Everyone is always someone else's "Eastern barbarian." After all, the Russians too feel that they have been the rampart of the Christian world against the Asian hordes, while in the Balkans, Orthodox Serbs see themselves (even now, in the conflict with the Albanians in the Kosovo) as defenders of Christian Europe against the onslaught of Islam.[7]

In their eagerness to embrace the once forbidden fruits of European identity, Eastern Europeans have indeed spent a good deal of time drawing cultural boundaries. In order to anchor themselves in the West, they have had to distance themselves as much as possible from the East. For the Polish novelist Tadeusz Konwicki, for example, the Soviet Union is an Asian power, the successor to the barbaric hordes of Tatars. One character in his novel, *A Minor Apocalypse*, exclaims: "Oh, why are there always quarrels between Russians and Poles! Aren't we all Slavs?" To which the main character responds, "But, you know, there are no Russians left . . . Lenin murdered the last of the Slavs, the upper classes. Now it's strictly Asia from the Bug to Khabarovsk."[8] In *Moonrise, Moonset*, Konwicki again addresses his Soviet neighbors: "Nicest of brothers, it's time, it's high time, it's last call. You must become European, meaning human."[9] This identification of Russia and the Soviet Union as an Asian—and therefore "alien" and non-European culture—is not peculiar to Russophobe Poles. The program of the liberal Hungarian Young Democrats (FIDESZ) talks of the post-war "subjection of Eastern Europe, including Hungary, to Asian despotism."[10]

THE CULTURAL BOUNDARY IS NOT SIMPLY DRAWN along the Eastern border; it gerrymanders within the countries as well. "Eastern" populations such as Gypsies, Turks, and Albanians are singled out: for not being civilized, for producing too many children, for polluting the Motherland. For those with long memories, epithets applied to these populations will call to mind characterizations of Jews in this part of the world in the inter-war period. One example will suffice, from a 1922 guide to Warsaw, describing the future Jewish ghetto: ". . . this quarter of the city has the appearance of something completely other.

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[7] Jacques Rupnik, The Other Europe (New York: Pantheon, 1989), p. 22.

[8] Tadeusz Konwicki, *A Minor Apocalypse* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 57.

[9] Tadeusz Konwicki, *Moonrise, Moonset* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), p. 101.

[10] FIDESZ program, prepared in Hungary in 1990 and obtained from the FIDESZ offices in Budapest.

to the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) playing the nationalist card, the opposition (the Union of Democratic Forces or UDF) realized early on that ugly nationalism was not confined simply to the former Communists. Sensing that its electoral position was fragile and lacking a Bulgarian Havel or Walesa to galvanize the population, the opposition began to temper its support for the rights of ethnic Turks. The UDF could ill afford to lose the support of anti-Communist nationalists. Since neither the BSP nor the UDF attached much importance to their concerns, ethnic Turks and some ethnic Bulgarian sympathizers formed the Movement for Rights and Freedom and fielded a separate list of candidates for the June elections. Needless to say, the two main political blocs were not pleased with the third force. Both the BSP and the UDF have hinted that the ethnic Turks are acting in concert with Turkish authorities or, at the very least, pose the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. As Bojko Nikonov of the UDF's newspaper *Demokracja* told me, "Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism [may] try to find a way into Europe through Bulgaria. And this possibility really exists."[13]

The Asian, the Oriental, the Turkish, the Islamic — these are the threats that come from East, from South and from within. Imagined and distorted and magnified, they are too often characterized as obstacles placed on the path to Europe. Yet ironically, these non-European threats also serve their purpose: to unify an ideologically heterogenous population, to turn attention away from serious economic and political problems, and finally to give greater legitimacy through contrast to the populations which consider themselves unalterably European.

Eurocentrism and the Third World

NICO, A TAXI DRIVER IN BUCHAREST, spends half his days working and the other half dreaming of the time when he will be able to buy his own truck. But a truck costs money, hard currency which he doesn't have. Nico's plan: work abroad, live cheaply, buy a used model, drive back to Romania and start a little business - mineral water to Istanbul, maybe coffee back to Bucharest. One day during my stay in Bucharest, Nico announces to me that he has picked his country: South Africa. A friend has given him the address of a place in Vienna. Telex your name, profession and marital status and the South Africans will, if they find the information acceptable, arrange airfare to Johannesburg and a job in the new land. I compare apartheid's injustices to Ceausescu's injustices. He is not convinced. The blacks in South Africa, he imagines, are like the Gypsies in Romania: lazy and thieving, interested only in dancing and having a good time.

In an ironic way, Nico was right: Romanian Gypsies and South African blacks do share some qualities. Both have been oppressed for centuries, both are locked into poverty by systemic injustice and both, to the eye of the average Romanian, are quite obviously non-European. The misconceptions surrounding

[13] I must point out that other journalists in the opposition press thought this sentiment ludicrous.

generally negative (Poles often describe Arabs as dirty, dishonest moneychangers, the exact words once used to describe Jews in the region). Croatians and Slovenians routinely complain of Tito's infatuation with the Non-Aligned Movement and his eagerness to include Yugoslavia in an alliance with African and Asian countries "with whom we do not belong."

In foreign relations, the countries of the former "socialist" bloc are adopting the Soviet pragmatism, searching for reliable trade partners in the Third World, shying away from ideological ties and trying to get debts incurred under previous regimes paid back. A sign of the times: the Hungarian Solidarity Committee, once a sinecure for aging nomenklatura members, has gone the way of many official "peace" councils and "friendship" societies. Its name to be changed to the Hungarian Goodwill Committee, the new organization will only give money away for emergencies such as earthquakes. East European governments put the issue in cash terms: they no longer have the money to support "charity" and "solidarity" with the Third World.

The money issue is critical, especially as it relates to Western aid. Third World countries are worried that funds will be significantly redirected toward the new East European democracies. They point to discussions under way in the U.S. government to cut funds to top recipients of aid in favor of Eastern Europe. Of course, they can also point to the EEC record. EEC assistance to the greater part of the Third World comes under the Lome Agreement. The Fourth Lome Conference was recently concluded and provides only 12 billion ECUs (European Currency Units) for five years— about 14 billion dollars or a little under 3 billion a year to countries of Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Whereas the allocation of 12 billion ECUs for the Lome was a long bitter negotiating process, the EEC quickly allocated 6 billion ECUs for Eastern Europe this year. The EEC practice is clear. Integrate Europe, first by providing cash assistance to the southern tier to bring Portugal, Spain and Greece up to northern standards of living and second by offering assistance to Eastern Europe. The Third World comes in a distant third.

East European governments, heedless of Third World concerns, have been calling for a new Marshall Plan for the region. Individual countries have also been cultivating their own sources of bilateral aid. (Sometimes the requests for aid have been far-fetched: Lech Walesa's 1989 call for $10 billion U.S. aid for Poland.) One interesting question: how can Eastern Europeans explain to Western leaders that the situation in Eastern Europe deserves a reduction of aid to the impoverished, diseased and war-stricken Third World? One peculiar answer: Eastern Europeans are in a position as bad if not worse than Third World countries. In a cartoon from a Polish newspaper, an African schoolteacher addresses her students: "Tomorrow, you must each bring a banana for the poor children of far-off Poland." The subtext is disturbing: bad

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several occasions. In June, the Vietnamese struck back in the Moravian city of Zlin, sending several Czechs to the hospital. In the GDR, I was told several times that 20 per cent of the young population supported the expulsion of all foreigners from the country.

European left too has its bouts of Eurocentrism. For years, Western European peace movements focused on possible nuclear and conventional confrontation in Europe and comparatively ignored the actual conflicts taking place in the Third World. As E.P. Thompson pointed out during the 1980s, the European peace movement was simply trying to insert itself into a debate dominated by the superpowers, affect as well the dubious policies of European governments (Britain in the Falklands, French military sales), and raise the issue of East European rights. His conclusion therefore: "It may be overdue that we Europeans should become more Eurocentric in our political concerns: that is, should consult one another and try to resolve some of our own problems. If we could set matters right in our own backyards, we might be less of a danger to the world."[17]

Now, however, both superpowers are retreating and the era of an Atlantic alliance and a cordon sanitaire is coming to an end. Europeans no longer have to insert themselves into the superpower debate. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe framework involving 35 nations is gaining importance as bi-lateral arms control processes become progressively more anachronistic. Eastern Europeans no longer need Western patrons to champion their rights.

Yet, Eurocentrism on the left still lingers, but in a new version for 1992: the overvaluation of social democracy. This tendency appears in an otherwise thoughtful book by Bogdan Denitch, *The End of the Cold War* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990). In sketching the future of socialism in the post-Cold War era, Denitch places Europe at the center of world history and, almost as a justification for such Eurocentrism, overestimates the role of socialism in European events. That requires a substantial misreading of European integration.

The European left has gradually decided, however begrudgingly, to support Europe '92 (in some sense due to the inevitability of the transformation). Instead of focussing on the financial unification of the continent, the left has looked to the European parliament as an appropriate forum for social democratic politics and has championed a social charter as a pan-European guarantee of labor and human rights. There is much to this argument: the left broadly speaking has a majority in the parliament and social and environmental provisions figure prominently in Eurointegration. But politics is only one part of the picture. Europe '92 is primarily an economic transformation and it would take a tremendous leap of logic to term this transformation "socialist." In fact, under the influence of Anglo-American neo-conservatism, Europe has in the 1980s moved away from socialism, a process that has presaged in many ways the market revolutions now convulsing the East.

Denitch's premise is that Europe's "flirtation" with Reaganism was "brief," and the deeper history and more compelling logic of social democracy is now returning to center stage in Europe. But how brief was Europe's

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[17] E.P. Thompson, "The Wisdom of Solomon," *The Heavy Dancers* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 22.

need foreign investment and are willing to accept social strain in the short term to get the products on the shelves that will alleviate social strain in the long term. Various deals have already been made: Italian firms getting huge profit margins in Poland; West German media magnates buying up newspapers in Czechoslovakia; Austrian firms establishing over-the-border operations in Hungary to escape stringent environmental laws. A strong alliance favors austerity and supply-side economic solutions: Western businesses, banks and the IMF along with the new democratic governments in the region. Demonstrating in the streets in the fall of 1989, the various populations faced rickety Communist governments. Demonstrating against "Thatcherite" austerity programs, they will encounter economic forces with substantial internal and external support.

Social democracy has triumphed neither in the West nor the East. To argue otherwise is to ignore the facts. By glossing over the negative aspects of Eurointegration and reform in the East, Denitch and other left Europhiles can more easily make the case that Europeans (not workers or Third World revolutionaries) are the agents of social change. By virtue of its embrace of the more civilized norms of social democracy, Europe deserves then to be at the center of world history and absorb the attention of all progressive peoples. After years of "Third Worldism," Denitch therefore argues, the U.S. left in particular should finally acknowledge the importance of Europe. This brand of Eurocentrism, while certainly more benign than the racisms permeating Europe itself, is no less influential, precisely because of its sophistication and its intended audience.

Save for last chapter

TURMOIL IN THE PERSIAN GULF, fratricide in the Soviet republics, IMF riots in the Third World, financial instability in the U.S. In this post-Cold War world, Europe seems a veritable island of tranquility and progress, with stable economic unification in the West and comparatively bloodless tyrant-toppling in the East. Indeed, as the era of bi-polarism comes to a welcome end plunging both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. into a sort of superpower provincialism, the European Community appears well positioned to fill the new geopolitical void. Not by the sword: expensive arms races and military interventions do not figure as largely in the new European identity as they have in the identities of the two declining titans. The new Europe will instead draw strength from its comparative economic advantage (Western Europe together exports three times as much as the U.S. or Japan;[22] Brussels expects that integration will only improve this position, adding five percent to the Community's gross domestic product and creating two to five million new jobs.[23]). With greater emphasis on the social and less on the military, Europe seems well on the way toward becoming — to borrow a Bushism — a kinder, gentler superpower.

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[22] Edith Cresson, "France and the European Community," *Harvard International Review* (Summer 1989), p. 28.

[23] These figures come from EEC pamphlets.