

The Vulgar, the Refined and the Restrained  
An East-West Dimension

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Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin - October 1982

There is no scarcity of efforts to describe the difference between the state/socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the private/capitalist countries in the west. Most efforts take as their point of departure the economic system and/or the political system. It is pointed out of course correctly, that there is "centralized planning" in the east and predominantly "market economies" at work in the west. Essentially this is the difference between the free flow, within and between countries, of production factors and goods/services in the west and the directed flow of the same in the east. However this is not a very fruitful way of seeing the difference> the "free flow" of market societies is also directed, but as opposed to the centrally planned economies the direction is carried out by very many, some small, some big, different decision makers, some of them working at cross purposes with each other. As a result there is much more flow than centralized planning is able to direct, and the flow is more diverse and has more diversified consequences. The net result tends to be over-production in the west and under-production in the east.

Then there is the political system: Eastern Europe is "authoritarian/repressive," Western Europe is "democratic/permissive." Again the formulas may be too simplistic. If by "authoritarian" one refers to decision-making that cannot be challenged, decisions for which the decision makers are not accountable, then there is certainly much of that also in the west; at the micro-level of the family and the peer group, at the meso-level of the local community and organizations/associations, and at the macro-level of the corporation and the nation itself - not to mention the region and the world for that matter. If by "democracy" one means participation in decision-making concerning oneself, and the very basic idea that decision-makers should be accountable for their decisions, then this is certainly not found in all human relations in the west either. But at the top level the west is probably more challengeable and Eastern Europe more authoritarian. And then there is the equally important totalitarian aspect: decision-making in Eastern Europe tends to be "gleichgeschaltet," to run in the same direction at macro and meso levels, whereas this is not necessarily the case in the west. If the opposite of "totalitarian" is "pluralistic" then that is perhaps closer to the essence of the west than the notion of "democracy/freedom" - key decisions in the west are probably made by unaccountable bureaucrats and corporate managers anyhow supported by an incomprehensible intelligentsia. It is not obvious that they are more accessible than the apparatschiks found at the top of the police/military/party complex in the east (which incidentally, also exists in the west, more discreetly, in the background).

But, however this may be, the question is whether such distinctions give an adequate insight into the daily lives of people in the two systems. Thus, if one does what is easily done from the west, and as many people as possible should do (and very often): cross the border between the two systems, what is the most striking difference? Economic and political decision-making are

not visible anyhow; they have to be inferred, they do not belong to immediate data. And, as a question at the more existential level but very related to this one: what do those people say who cross for good, from the east to the west as the opposite flow at present is minimal or absent? How do they perceive the differences, what is on top of their mind?

How many times does one have to hear it to take the message seriously: what is attractive in the west is not necessarily the freedom in political and economic decision-making since most people know that this freedom can be exercised by very few people anyhow and that the rest will be carried by the flows and ebbs and turbulences of the currents caused by these decisions. How many times do we have to hear that what is attractive is something else: the colors, the sounds, the music, the quick pace, the sensuality, the rhythms of the west - to take it seriously? Neon lights and nylon stockings, the strongly colored paper of chewing gum, these are differences of key significance. And there are a couple of other differences that are at the more analytical level. In the astounding diversity of goods available in the shops etc. even a small western village encountered a kilometer or so beyond almost any east-west border a message is communicated of utilized, even over-utilized human potential; of the possible. The village on the other side has not only that proverbial grayshness, drabness. There is also a hidden message here: the underutilized human potential, the monochromatic human existence as opposed to the polychromatic image projected on the western side.

This brings me to think in terms of two basic dimensions to try to catch some of the essence of every-day life: the vulgar vs. the restrained, and the plural vs. the singular (I prefer those terms as shorter versions for "pluralistic" and "singularistic"). The analytical problem, of course, is what one should mean by "vulgar."

I would like to try to define it relative to our senses: seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling. The vulgar is crude and loud. The colors are shouting, the sounds are glaring. All over the body the nerves are being teased and tickled, stimulated and exercised - e.g. through unrestrained sexuality. The tastes are strong and monochromatic, simplistic tastes like the sweets for children. And the smells are always there, as a prelude to other sensual perceptions. It is like exiting from a good European plane with subdued restrained colors and noises, almost no vibrations, relatively plural, complex tastes in the food, including the smells to the glaring vulgarity of a US airport, e.g. JFK, with kindergarten colors, the beginning of Disneyland. It is not a symphony but a cacophony; it can be broken down into elemental stimuli, each of them loud and monochromatic, put together in a highly pluralistic but also disharmonious totality. Variations over one theme: vulgarity.

On the other hand, then, is the subdued, possibly also more complex. The refined as category seems to be based on subdued colors, sounds, feelings, tastes and smells; less evident, and far more complex in their composition. There is also much emphasis on harmony among the components, on a hidden key and code available

only to the initiated, requiring some search and struggle to be revealed. Again this differs from the vulgar that demands no explanation, no search for the latent and hidden - only indulgence in the immediate. In fact, there would be even a cult of immediacy, of the unmediated sensation as in a rock'n roll performance - to a large extent a key symbol of the west as seen by the east. For here it's present, all of it, at the same time: The sounds, even the vibrations so strong that they hammer on the human body, tastes from food and drinks enjoyed during the performance, smells from the multitude of jumping human beings. Again, compare this to the public present at a Philharmonic concert: subdued, restrained, complex, sophisticated in search of a hidden meaning (or at least pretending).

The thesis is of course that vulgarity is a key aspect of the west. And how could it be otherwise? A system based on market forces is a system based on giving people what people most immediately want, and there can be no doubt that vulgarity is a demand, as seen by the sales of the popular, vulgar press and its typography. Of course, the refined has its public, its market, more limited but always there, as a counterpoint to vulgarity. It may be argued that one cannot have one without the other, they exist by virtue of contrast. The search for vulgarity can perhaps be seen as something basic to human beings, as also the search for the refined, the sublime. Problems arise when societies are organized in such a way that only one of the two is available to the members of society, or to groups within society.

Thus, it may be argued, that capitalism by its very nature produces such an overwhelming quantity of vulgarity that it is difficult for the refined and sublime to take roots and grow up in a sufficiently protected manner. This can be seen by the circumstance that the groups that go in for the refined and restrained, the upper-middle and upper classes, intellectual/artistic circles and monastic/religious circles tend to segregate themselves, to live apart only occasionally to emerge from a totally segregated, marginalized surrounding. It is also interesting to note that the restrained if certainly not refined is also used as punishment in prison and concentration camps. Nothing is supposed to be loud (except, perhaps, foul smells - but then the vulgar is supposed to be positive as a sensation, not negative). There is also a gradient in age and sex and class where these things are concerned. Children are supposed to be surrounded by louder colors and sounds, women by louder colors than men unless they see themselves as belonging to higher classes, and/or to more advanced age-groups. And the lower classes are supposed to be - precisely - vulgar.

In short, the language of sensual stimuli has a very clear social grammar, like most languages.

How would this be in Eastern Europe? I would tend to say that there is an effort to cultivate the restrained and the refined as a general social norm. What to people of the capitalist west is gray and drab is not only that: it is also the expression of an effort not to yield to "market forces," not to make vulgarity king. And: it is an effort to abolish the lower classes by

abolishing one of the landmarks, vulgarity. Not only are the products less vulgar in the sense defined above; the efforts to make people buy those products, the epitomy of vulgarity in the west, commercial propaganda, (shrill voices, loud colors, etc.) is largely absent, or - when it appears - only in a highly restrained form. When meaning is attempted conveyed through vulgarity it comes out as stupidity: commercial messages in the west are and continue to be insults to the human mind. Their absence in the east, however, is compensated for by a corresponding stupidity in political messages. And these slogans are conveyed in vulgar ways. One cannot say loud colors in plural since there is only one color used, red, but vulgar in its simplicity, literally speaking, its monochromaticity. Of course the west has something corresponding to this: the stupidity of posters during election campaigns can well compete with the corresponding stupidity in the east as insults to the human mind. Unreflected, simplistic messages of one, two, maximum ten words never intended to bring thinking any forward, to invite to a dialogue, or things of that kind. A face, the name of parties, the word YES! - that is the level of faith in the electorate communicated by the free world.

So, by and large, the east appears as more restrained. Is it also more refined? In a sense, yes. There is a parallel between socialism in the east and Christianity in both east and west. There is a hidden meaning, a Message (in Christianity "Message" spells "Messiah"). There is a meaning in history, there is movement, there is progress. The social potential will unfold itself with the release of the production forces, from the shackles of capitalism. The party will lead not only the proletariat but also the scientific-technical revolution (STR) to ever higher forms of human existence. There is a code, a key - available to those who search with an open mind. But for history to unfold itself a certain restraint today is needed. One cannot just dive into strong sensations, indulge both in them and the propaganda for them, with no search, no interpretation. And in this search for the realization of the refined and the sublime the refined in art and culture in general is a better guide than the vulgar. The vulgar leads to curtailment of the human potential, the refined to its expansion. The vulgar leads to contentment with status quo; the oversatisfaction of the senses paralyzes higher pursuits, politically, culturally, personally. Vulgarity functions as a tranquilizer, an anaesthetic.

What is seen in Eastern Europe, the high-quality programs on radio and television, people reading everywhere, in the queues for kvas in the villages, in the subway in Moscow - in general, the much higher level of consumption of refined culture than in the west - is compatible with what has been said above. From a (vulgar) western point of view it is the inevitable outcome of a severe cut in the supply of vulgar goods and services: people have nothing else to do so they can just as well read Pushkin and enjoy Mozart competitions. No doubt there is some truth to that explanation. But there is some truth to the opposite explanation, that of compatibility between the search for the refined and hidden social code and the search for a code in a refined piece of

culture. There is something the leadership wants to obtain. However, whatever it is, their success will always be limited to the extent that they fully release or cut out completely the vulgar option, precisely because they do not see it as an option but as an alternative and are convinced that it will wipe out everything refined that they ever do, by stifling any social initiative.

And here comes a key difference between the west and the east of Europe. In the west there is, as mentioned, a class gradient: vulgarity for the masses, the refined for the upper classes. By and large the correlation works perfectly, and supplies the upper classes with a language of intercourse, vehicles of communication not available to the common people in general. What it means can clearly be seen comparing lower class restaurants and establishments in general with those for the higher classes: just compare the colors and the sounds along the dimensions of loudness, monochromaticity and disharmony/harmony.

But that does not mean that there is no such correlation in Eastern Europe. To the contrary, in my experience the correlation is there but it works exactly the opposite way: the restrained and subdued for the people in general, vulgarity as an upper class monopoly, segregated, hidden away from the masses. Go to the restaurants, even the shops for the few and the difference is clear from the very beginning: bright lights, flood lights, flood sounds if that could be the expression, simple tastes and smells, abundance. Even higher levels of pleasure have always been at the disposal of elites so that is hardly anything new. It is the way this is at variance with official doctrine that is interesting. By definition mainly elites have the opportunity to travel to Western Europe and North America and sample vulgarity, unobserved, at their own discretion. This may be habit-forming. Upon return they may create well isolated cells of vulgar enjoyment at home. Examples of this exist, perhaps particularly in the Soviet Union.

But that has a very important consequence: vulgarity becomes a reward, something one might hope for. An upper class restaurant in the Soviet Union shows considerable similarity to a lower class restaurant in the west. The line taken here is not that this is because the Soviet Union is more poor - the comparison also holds relative to countries in the west poorer, on the average, than the Soviet Union. What this implies in terms of political and cultural schizophrenia is easily seen: one cannot use some of the key symbols of the antagonist economically and politically speaking as a reward without instilling some doubts as to who is the real antagonist. And, more profoundly: if vulgarity is a tranquilizer, then the upper classes in the east have something in common with the lower classes in the west; satisfaction with status quo.

And that is exactly what must have been a major force working psychologically inside the thousands or millions, when one includes Eastern Germany, who "voted with their feet" and went to the west. If all these goodies, here described as vulgar, are good enough for the elites of the socialist countries, then they must also be good enough for the citizens. If they are not available, then go where they are available! And that also explains some of

the psycho-dynamism involved. Eastern countries cannot stop the longing for the west simply by producing the goods also available in the west, even in sufficient quantity and technical quality. The colors matter, the sounds, the smells ---. It is not merely a question of being rich, or economic growth. Along such lines Eastern Europe is not necessarily doing that badly, of course depending on which countries in the east one is comparing with which countries in the west. (Right now Hungary and Bulgaria are showcases; Poland and Romania certainly not). But the difference still remains that Eastern European goods are instrumental, a bread is just that, a supply of calories - it is not a message carried in the wrapping paper of loud voices, in the texture of the paper made to please the hand caressing it, in short, the immediate expressive aspect in a capitalist, competitive economy of whatever commodity one buys. One may decry that this should be of any significance at all, but that will hardly change the matters - the fact remains that capitalism is so much better in addressing the senses in an unmediated manner through its vulgar under- and over-tones than socialism.

But could socialism not build it into the product simply through planning? They probably could, and they even may, sooner or later. But for this to happen the planners have to become different. Whoever has met a planner in the east, at a high level, will probably agree that it is not through this channel the floods of vulgarity would be opened. It is not necessarily because the planner is against but simply because he is not capable of serving as a vehicle for that flood, usually not having sufficient well developed sensual delights inside him/herself. Like their Western counterparts they are somewhat on the dry side. A younger generation of apparatschiks who have bought the fruits of western vulgarity when participating in conferences with their fellow technocrats from the west may also at some point decide that what is good for them is also good for the people, what suits the planner should also suit the planned. But on the way up through the planning hierarchies that type of sentiment may get lost and the few who finally arrive in positions reserved for gerontocrats may stay with the subdued and monochromatic. Backstage, of course, they may have their vulgarity rewards and end up deciding they are too good for common people.

Mention was made above of the diversity of western capitalism and the way its display of goods and services serves as a message of human potential, of potential unlimited. It is interesting in this connection to look at the leading newspapers in the east, the party newspapers. They are subdued in lay-out, highly monochromatic in message. In fact, they are very similar to Christian newspapers and magazines, particularly the small ones published by local congregations: very subdued in form, highly monochromatic in message. The message is always the same. One sermon over the radio or the press does not differ much from the next; at least not more than one edition of Neues Deutschland differs from the one the day before. The reason for this is clear: it is not so much a question of conveying news from a shifting and complex world as to convey the single hidden message, the key to

the order in the chaos - again and again and again. The net result, of course, is boredom, fatigue.

The escape from that fatigue will take the form of indulgence and vulgarity, for the elites, in a hidden form for people in general, as a refuge. And that vulgarity will then be over-valued, it will be seen as profundity, as "freedom". Deep will be the disappointment when confronted with capitalist reality, with the emptiness behind and below that layer of profanity. And that may reactivate the search for refined profundity, in pendular moves between the two extremes, unable to enjoy eclectic combinations of them both.

Is there some kind of prediction one could make in this connection? The west can hardly afford to give up vulgarity, essential as it is to the whole competitive capitalist enterprise. As that enterprise goes into ever deeper crisis the supply of vulgarity will probably become even more pronounced, helping make people want products to the point of really demanding them on the market in spite of prices going up, buying power going down, and quality possibly also going down. A counter-point to this will only be found among those who more or less consciously opt out of the capitalist structure to the extent they are permitted to do so. In recent years it already looks as if the "green" in fact are less colorful than the blue and the red surrounding them, clinging to more conservative, refined and restrained values of the existing social formation, e.g. in music. An exception is made for folklore, though.

In the east one might speculate that the leadership may have to relinquish some of its firm control over vulgarity and release more of it to the people. One is reminded of the complaints of the Cuban refugees who in 1980 fled to the United States: not only the lack of opportunity to prove oneself as economical and political entrepreneur, but also the longing for the unproblematic and unmediated. A restaurant on the pavement in one of La Habana's broad avenues, with an orchestra playing shrill, uncomplicated tunes and not necessarily folklore, simple, colorful food will sooner or later be a necessity - maybe it should already have happened many years ago. But for the elites, with their skepticism of the people, this would already be too much of an invitation to the petty-bourgeoisie, to the people who will shy no means to promote their counter-revolutionary activities.

In other words, there may be some material here for the famous convergence theory: the point of convergence is vulgarity, of course associated with the center of capitalism in its now classical form, America (with Spanish pronunciation; like in West Side Story), meaning the United States. The only interesting thing is that "Americanization" seems to be compatible with quite a lot of difference in economic and political organization appealing as it does to a common, vulgarity-oriented basis rather than to political or economic philosophy, or such high-sounding matters.

The socialist countries have on their program, and as a major goal, the New Man, el hombre nuevo. He and she will have solidarity and achievement built into them as a matter of course, fostered through years of socialist competition. The forces of



nature will be harnessed as the production forces are released and tied to the insights and techniques of the scientific and technological revolution - leading humankind forwards, towards not only satisfaction of basic needs but ever higher levels of refinement, not only as consumers but also as producers. That some of this is not impossible is seen in the testimony given by many of the religious orders, particularly the monastic ones, in human history. To them the same applies as to official socialism in the east: it is not that they cannot be vulgar or do the vulgar things, it is merely that they do not want to do so.

But experience seems also to show that the condition is to stay closer to nature, closer to primordial human groups, in other words a greener type of social formation. The more processing takes place through industrialism and division of labor with professionalists, the more the social formation attains blue and pink and red colors, the more the vulgar seems to be an unavoidable byproduct. Could it be, just as for the Middle Ages, that the vulgar and the refined are so dialectically intertwined that one cannot have one without the other? Was the loudness and vulgarity of popular manifestations in the Middle Ages a result of the heavy sorting that took place when monastic orders were established and large segments of the population withdrew to the restrained and the refined? And could the same be the case in the socialist countries, that as the population is forced into the puritanical and restrained, if not necessarily the refined, the elites by dialectic necessity have to tend towards the vulgar? And could that explain some of their jokes, a certain roughness, an uncouth behavior, their search for western commodities with rock records and jeans as the typical examples? However that may be, it cannot be easy to produce New Man within industrial societies, to build on puritanism when that social formation is so capable of satisfying exactly the opposite.

In conclusion, let me try to summarize and pursue the type of reasoning a little further. What has been explored here is another type of East-West dimension, the vulgar vs. the refined and the restrained. It has been pointed out that capitalism, being market-oriented and based on a minimum of restraints in the conquest of customers, will tend to appeal to vulgar tastes, to the highly simplistic. Much of the appeal in capitalism, and by implication in capitalist countries, lies precisely in the vulgarity.

Socialism, on the other hand, based as it is on planning and state monopoly behavior, does not have to give in to the vulgar. At the same time there is a puritan tendency and a close linkage to general Christian morality, often a certain boy/girl scoutism in the communist youth organizations which would steer activity away from vulgarity. The result would be restraint, sometimes a certain greyness which will look shabby and dreary to eyes and ears (and noses) used to capitalist colors, sound and smells. This opens for the refined, the step from the restrained to the refined being considerably shorter than from the vulgar to the refined. The result is a high level of art publicly displayed or available at very low costs - a fantastic achievement very insufficiently appreciated in the west except by all those who with pleasure

spend money in the east on very refined art books, records, musical instruments - relishing the good buys rather than the artistic value, raised as they are in capitalist societies. Both systems use this dimension in their class structures: the refined and unrestrained (e.g. in sexuality, in gourmand cooking) in the west, the vulgar and unrestrained as a reward in the east - making available to the higher classes what is available to the lower classes in the west. For public display comes highly refined versions of the unrestrained, like the excellent rock festivals and jazz restaurants in Berlin (DDR). The refined is also available, amply, in the east in the form of very high quality restorations or upkeep of old European monuments, including whole quarters of cities - as opposed to the vulgar americanization that has done so much to destroy Western Europe, with the high load of McDonald's and other kinds of hamburgers, with a layer of tomato ketchup, colorful, greasy and smelly all over, with hotel and restaurant chains displaying their colors much like in a kindergarten.

Either side may seek refuge in the other. The present author, when wanting a rendez-vous with his own father's generation, or in general with the Europe of culture, taste and style, travels to Eastern Europe. My colleagues in the east, when they want a rendez-vous with the future, travel west - if they can, or may. Both may express what they do in political/economic idiom; what I suggest is that other dimensions are also operating.

Of course all of this applies more to the bigger, and less to the smaller, countries. The smaller countries in the west have generally more cultural stamina to put up against vulgarity - look at Iceland, or the Faeroy Islands, for instance! The smaller countries in the east may be less afraid of some vulgarity. In other words, there are meeting grounds. And there is a tremendous ground for cooperation, with east learning from the smaller countries in the west - when possible - to enjoy a minimum measure of the vulgar, and the west learning from the smaller countries in the east how to preserve better the past, how not to give in to everything vulgar, how to make people appreciate the refined even when the vulgar is available - e.g. through the simple means of differential prices. Have your vulgarity, but pay for it! (and use the money to subsidize the refined).

The trouble is, of course, that the vulgarity in the west is an almost automatic consequence of capitalism and the restraint in the east a consequence of a lower level of affluence - hence these may be vices or deeds of necessity rather than choice. Maybe, they can nevertheless be reflected upon. And in that reflection, east and west could discover something else to do than to lament each other's political and economic systems, extolling one's own. There is more to Europe, east and west, than politics and economics alone - there are more, and possibly equally important, east-west dimensions.