

THE VULGAR, THE REFINED AND THE RESTRAINED

A Rejoinder to Professor Zagorski

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Dear Professor Zagorski,

Have a look at the following quotation from President Reagan (International Herald Tribune, 16-17 November 1985):

"Imagine if people in our nation could see the Bolshoi Ballet again, while Soviet citizens could see American plays and hear groups like the Beach Boys," Mr. Reagan said. "And how about Soviet children watching Sesame Street?"

Or, a footnote from George Kennan's Memoirs: 1950-1963 (Volume II, page 100):

"An entire issue of Collier's magazine was devoted to imagined accounts of our future war with Russia. I can recall glancing with horror, at the time, at the cover of that issue; and I heard from others, with even greater horror, that it contained a suggestion of our celebrating our victory over the Soviet Union by staging Guys and Dolls in the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. I had visions, of course, of a Collier's editor conceiving this to be the acme of America's triumph: showing the benighted Russians what such a great operatic and ballet stage ought really to be used for."

I am in no way saying, Professor Zagorski, that the differences in the way the economy is constructed not to mention the polity are in any way unimportant. They are absolutely crucial. I am only saying that in the daily life of most people there is a third dimension that my essay is about, referred to as the Vulgar versus the Refined and the Restrained. Two indications of what I am thinking about are given in the above quotes. Fair enough, you also say that I do not totally disregard the significance of the economy and the polity, only that "his arguments contribute to such a per-

spective." Does this mean that it is impermissible to discuss the differences between east and western Europe in other than these two terms and their interrelations? That any effort to bring in a third, a fourth, a fifth dimension is some kind of treason? For sure Professor Zagorski would never stand for a view of that kind.

In no way do I think that philharmonic concerts are only found in the east; my description of a philharmonic concert applies equally well to the west and to the east; refined, restrained. What I am saying is only that the west has very much else, and I then go on to try to develop some kind of thinking about the structure of vulgarity. And this is where Professor Zagorski actually confirms the entire point of my article:

"True, the features colourfully described by Galtung differentiate the West from the East, and they are attractive to inhabitants of the latter."

Exactly. In other words, there is already considerable agreement, let us now go on to the disagreements. I think the basic point is that Professor Zagorski everything that is not vulgar in the east is not so because of a policy to cultivate the refined and the restrained, but because of "drabness of scarcity." Could it be both, Professor Zagorski? Could it be that there is a basically puritan streak in eastern european communism, including Soviet communism? Could it be that the discipline is also the discipline of the petty bourgeois, some element of frugality, combined with the

delight at conquering the society including the culture of the bourgeoisie? That this is compatible with the "drabness of scarcity" does not make the latter the only dimension to conceive of what happens. That this, in turn, is completely compatible with orgies of vulgarity enjoyed at the top of the communist parties, because of their access to western goods, and that this in itself constitutes a major class difference is a point made repeatedly in my article. But it does not detract from the major point. Consider a newsstand in the east and one in the west: political propaganda in the east, economic propaganda in the west--both of them stupid; excesses of vulgarity in the west of violence and pornography, of all the things I described in my article; and--I dare say--the restrained and the refined in the east. The contrast is obvious and communicated very clearly to people who arrive from the east to the west. The attractiveness to vulgarity, in other words.

Where Zagorski and I would agree, however, is in his statement "what is refined (in the Soviet Union) is more often a relic of the old socio-political system rather than a product of the new." I see it as a management of culture, most of it old, some of it new. But I totally disagree with Professor Zagorski that the difference in consumption of culture between, say, British coal workers and Polish shipyard workers when it comes to what kind of culture they feel inspired by in their struggle for equity, that the difference "has nothing or little to do with the existing social order." Rather, I see this as a basic factor in understanding the crisis of the west:

a cultural vulgarity impoverishing the mind, creating a distance between people and more truthful expressions of their identity. Not by that saying that what is vulgar does not have its attractiveness-- a major point in my article--nor that the tremendous difference in cultural level between, say, East German and West German television may make one tired of the former and wanting to relax in the interminable soap operas, quizzes and just plain empty nonsense of the latter. Maybe in a longer time perspective we shall see that there is some relationship between this factor and what I believe will happen: the Polish workers will win their struggle, the British workers have lost theirs; meaning not only a struggle for pay, but for freedom and identity in a broad sense.

And this has something to do with what Professor Zagorski seems to be a puzzle. I say that there is overutilization of human potential in the west, and that the west is vulgar. Why: because vulgarity serves as a drug. I say that there is underutilization of human potential in the east and that the refined and the restrained may lead to an expansion to the human potential. Contradiction? No, because I think eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union are in for very basic changes in the coming years, and among other reasons because the masses of people have not been effectively drugged (yet) with vulgarity. Of course this carries no news to the leaders of the east: in order to stifle discontent they will increasingly bring in exactly the vulgar aspects of the west that I deplore, and exactly for the reason that I have just indicated. I have great difficulty believing that Professor Zagorski would be

in essential disagreement on this point.

Professor Zagorski then goes on to say that no party apparatzhiks believe that the party will lead people to ever higher forms of human existence. But Professor Zagorski, how many priests, bishops, cardinals and so on in the publicly supported and protected propaganda machines of the west, the official churches, do you think really believe what they say about salvation and grace and resurrection? The point is not their relation to the faith; the point is that this is the public faith--and in that sense I of course agree with you that marxism has taken some of the place of religion (but certainly not in your country!), and the party some of the position of the church. Official religion /ideology may still set the course for public action even if nobody believes in it; a paradox to many people, but hardly to the social scientist.

The rest of Professor Zagorski's article, precisely the part that he refers to as "perhaps my arguments are sometimes too emotional" I agree with completely. Only that Professor Zagorski's effort is reductionist, letting all other differences between east and west be overshadowed by the one that he and millions of others rightly deplore: the curtailment of freedom.

So, where do we stand on the issue I tried to highlight in my article: will a higher level of freedom in eastern Europe necessarily bring in its wake a tremendous increase in vulgarity? When

censorship is lifted, multi-party rule flourishes, will we also see all the other aspects of western society, violent pornography, stupid commercialism and consumerism; abundance for sure, but also of vulgarity? This is for the peoples of eastern Europe to decide, no doubt. And in doing so I might be interested in considering the impact of vulgarity on the western mind, for instance why it is that in a country so devoted to democracy like the United States only about half the population participates in elections? (Not by that saying that it is better when one hundred percent are forced to do so.)

In short, the issue is not that black-white and simple.

To give the last word to Professor Zagorski:

"True, vulgar indoctrination may be found in the West, and also refined political discussions sometimes take place openly in the East (though not often and in not all countries), but that does not mean that there is no great difference in this respect."