
Shock in Florence

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The summer of 1968 was a turning point in my political and intellectual development. This statement will not sound particularly sensational, given the fact that a very great number of people that are my age and older will probably say the same. But each individual case is specific, and for me the crucial event happened in Florence on August 21 and the following days.

The marvellous Italian town of Florence was full of tourists that summer, as it always is. But for the first time since the communist take-over in Eastern Central and Eastern Europe, many of the tourists in Italy were Czechs and Slovaks. They took advantage of loosened travel restrictions in their home country and enjoyed the wonders of Italy. I was there as a student attending summer courses at the University of Florence, spanning the time between finishing school and starting my studies at the university.

Having grown up in Munich which is only about 200 miles from the Italian border, I had learned, in addition to the languages taught at the gymnasium, the Italian language. On several hitchhiking trips in Italy I had gotten the impression that a leftist Catholic like me could learn a lot there, both from Catholics and from communists. In the exams of the Italian Cultural Institute in Munich, I was awarded a scholarship for the summer courses of 1968 on topics ranging from the art of the Renaissance to Italian history in the 19th and 20th centuries.

When the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact took place, the Italian political parties, including and particularly the communists, vehemently protested against the violent Soviet repression of the experimental 'socialism with a human face' in Czechoslovakia. Since most of the tourists from that country understood German, but not Italian, I was among those who translated the texts of flyers and special editions of newspapers to groups of people surrounding me on Cathedral Square in Florence. I will never forget the disappointment and disillusionment, if not horror, in the eyes of those people. This is my most important politically relevant memory of 1968.

Shocking as it was for them and for me, this experience immunised me against all sympathy with Soviet-style communism, but even more so against the

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neo-Stalinist version that surprisingly became popular in radical student circles in the West—through the reception of Mao Zedong's writings and the so-called cultural revolution in China. I had turned to the Left quite independently at an early age (between 15 and 19) and at the beginning certainly was not free of delusions about the Soviet Union. But now it had become indubitably clear to me that a leftist position had to be a democratic one.

During my student days I ardently studied literary works connected to the Prague Spring from Milan Kundera to Ivan Klíma and Alexandr Kliment, but also philosophical writings (Karel Kosík) and political analyses from other socialist reformers (Jacek Kuroń/Karol Modzelewski in Poland, for example). Perhaps even more important were personal encounters—for example, with the émigré and top Czech economist Jiří Kosta in 1973, and above all with the Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller and her friends in 1972. Heller was a visiting professor at the Free University of Berlin in 1972, teaching a class on Marx's *Grundrisse*—a class that I found incredibly different from the sterile Marx seminars I had sat through before. Her broad horizon and experiential background in the circles around György Lukács, her passionate and inspiring speaking style—all this led to one of the most intense intellectual experiences of my student life.

When the class ended she mentioned that if I ever came to Budapest she would welcome me there. I did not need to be told this twice. A few weeks later I went—for the first, but certainly not the last time. Ágnes Heller then introduced me to other members of the Lukács group. The most impressive for me was the philosopher György Márkus whom I consider a great and underappreciated figure in modern intellectual history (see the introduction by Axel Honneth and myself to Márkus [2014]). Ágnes Heller even entrusted me with the task of editing and introducing the German edition of what is probably her most systematic contribution to the field of philosophy and social theory, namely her study *Everyday Life* [Heller 1978]. I also translated essays by Ágnes Heller on the family and the future of gender relations (in the volume Hegedüs and Márkus et al. [1974]). In the following years I visited Hungary numerous times, and in other capacities—for example, on a secret mission to make possible the translation of Miklós Haraszti's journalistic report about the working conditions in a Budapest factory [Haraszti 1975].

These contacts and connections convinced me that the differences between East and West concerning the post-1968 movements were much greater than the similarities. For people deeply influenced by what had happened or was happening in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland at the time, much of the sudden re-emergence of Marxism in the West remained mysterious and problematical. My personal way out of these dilemmas was through an ever stronger interest in American intellectual and political traditions, particularly those that I found inspiring in their radically democratic understanding of politics (John Dewey) and interpersonal relations (George Herbert Mead), but also in their profound re-evaluation of the conditions of religious faith in modern times (William James). I had the feeling of having found in American pragmatism a kind of Archime-

dean point for a rethinking of German (and European) intellectual traditions. This has become constitutive for my intellectual work in many respects,¹ but also for my political activities and publications.²

Tony Judt's famous summary of the experience of August 1968 is certainly well-taken: 'The illusion that Communism was reformable, that Stalinism had been a wrong turning, a mistake that could still be corrected, that the core ideals of democratic pluralism might somehow still be compatible with the structures of Marxist collectivism: that illusion was crushed under the tanks on August 21 1968 and it never recovered. Alexander Dubček and his Action Program were not a beginning but an end.' [Judt 2005: 447] But history is never over. Maybe some of the lessons drawn post 1968 and guiding the developments after 1989 will also retrospectively be seen as illusions. If the financial crisis of 2008 had gotten completely out of control or if a new financial crisis is ahead, if a new major war erupts because of the foreign policy of the world's strongest military power, we will be forced to question contemporary capitalism again and probably rethink the heritage of the Prague Spring of 1968 in the sense of a viable combination of democracy and socialism.

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¹ Particularly the series of books leading from *George Herbert Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought* [Joas 1985] through *Pragmatism and Social Theory* [1993] and *The Creativity of Action* [1996a] to *The Genesis of Values* [2000].

² One of my writings on the 'communitarians' led to my only publication in Czech so far: Joas [1996b].