

Traveling to the past for the future

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1

Fourteen years ago, in the winter of 1994, I embarked on a long journey from St. Petersburg to Chuvashia with Andrei, who was my roommate at the time. The road to Chuvashia, a small republic on the Volga coast, was covered with snow and winter birches. I remember the two nights and three days I spent on the train, and the scenery I saw from the inside of the old *electric*hka. There were very few people outside the window. From time to time, the train passed by snowy villages, like those in a Chagall painting. The hills were covered with pure white snow, and mooing cows and carriages dotted them just like in the paintings. A horizon of birch trees stretched out beyond. In this vast world where nature overpowered human beings, it seemed logical that Russians would be relatively closer to divinity. In my rucksack, I had old poetry books by Russian modernist poets Alexander Blok and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

I thought of those passionate souls of the early 20th century Russia. It was an era when formalism, Marxism, the avant-garde, and materialist aesthetics coexisted in discord; a time when a politician like Leon Trotsky published a book on literary criticism titled *Literature and Revolution*.

However, I was not traveling through the Russia of the early 20th century, but of the mid-1990s. It had been only three or four years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and Leningrad had changed its name back to St. Petersburg. Andrei, who was used to Soviet bureaucracy, had barely been able to adapt to capitalism, which was then beginning to spread. There was nothing he could do but watch, perplexed, as the blind and reckless "freedom" of capitalism—a system newly transplanted into their world—spread. It was a strange time when he could neither grow wistfully nostalgic about the Soviet era, nor place his hopes on an unreliable future. Outside the window, the forest was deep and dark, the sky full of snow.

Andrei's family house was in the forest. His father, a lifelong farmer, grew talkative after several glasses of vodka and defined the Soviet era as "the good times," but his wife, a teacher, rejected her drunken husband's words. To the husband, the USSR was a country for laborers; to the wife it was a bureaucratic society tightly controlled by the government in the name of 'historical truth'

and ‘morals.’ Late that night, Andrei, who was a graduate student in theology, spoke to me as he stared into the fire, which he fed with birch wood to heat water for a bath. “You are a follower of democracy. Democracy belongs to the West. Russia does not need Western democracy,” he said. “What Russia needs is a religious and agricultural communal order founded on the idea of divinity.” His words were based on Slavism, one of the traditional ideologies that have dominated the Russian intellectual history since the 16th century. They do not believe in the West’s ‘reason’ or its institutions, and in many cases their distrust was justified.

I could not agree with Andrei, though. To me, the idea that their communalism based on a religious view could cross the boundary of culture and descend into the realm of politics was frightening. Divinity is something that every human being should ultimately confront, but I knew that if it became a part of politics, it was bound to function in an unexpected way—a way that followed the secular system. The value of politics could be maintained, albeit just barely, through ‘competition’ and ‘constitutive antagonism’ (C. Mouffe), because the field of politics is an arena for human beings who are such feeble creatures.

However, I think I was able to understand my friend Andrei at a deeper level. Understanding him meant understanding the birches and the snowy woods of Russia. I sat down next to Andrei and gazed into the fire.

2.

What matters now may not be the future but the past—even if we can only see a catastrophe just as *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee did according to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin wrote : "His(angel's) face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe....."¹

Instead of making predictions about the future, maybe we have to recall what mattered in the past. We could say that the most important 'social' change in the past several decades is the end of soviet regime in the beginning of the 1990s. This “social” change would be an important

¹ “There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees on single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.” (Walter. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History")

reference for the future, because the socialist system was the first example of a conscious attempt to organize the social system. Did the project fail? Maybe. It had many problems and resulted in many tragedies. Most of the problems originated from that system itself. Should we say that this is just an outcome of the "reckless mind" (Mark Lilla)? Many people would not agree. At least we have yet to see the so-called 'end of history' (F. Fukuyama).

Generally speaking, most failures are “successful failures,” and at the same time, most successes are “failed successes.” In my view, this is not so much dialectics as an oxymoron of history and truth. At least we can say that thanks to the "reckless mind," capitalist system could improve its “social soundness.” Here, we can bring to mind the fact that utopia is a u-topia, that is, a nonexistent territory and an inaccessible topos. But “no-where” is also “now-here.” Utopia or “regulative idea” (Kant) exists inside human life in an invisible mental form—even if it is filled with "catastrophes”. . . . We may see the catastrophes of many “histories” such as what Benjamin's angel of history saw behind him. But these “histories” are something for the weak and the lost and “the insulted and the humiliated.” (Dostoevsky)

3

And what matters now: social changes? There may be multiple answers to this big serious question. We can make a long list of social changes to come or problems which we have to take into account and address. Even if we just think about the approaching decade, this list will not be a short one. For example, the advent of the ubiquitous age, multipolarization of world politics, enlargement of local wars, weakening of nation-state boundaries, expansion of global economic gap, environmental problems and gender problems and so forth. And speaking about my country, the gradual reunification of South and North Korea will bring about important social changes.²

But generally speaking, the important thing is not to select just one out of the many changes in this list. The important thing, probably, is not defining just one change, but thinking about dynamic and chaotic relationships among these various changes. The important thing is not to think but to act for something better.

² There is a possibility that this reunification would come about in a uniquely Korean style (neither German nor Yemen style), namely, by undergoing an intermediary stage where a dual system of government exists in a single country—“one-country, two systems” according to Baek Nak-chung—before the ultimate reunification is achieved. If such a drastic change as reunification is brought about abruptly without the buffer of intervening phases, it will give rise to numerous problems in its wake and may even engender a highly volatile situation such as war. If North Korea's socialistic and despotic regime, which is based on Confucian morals (not on the traditional left wing democracy), is to change, then the U.S. and South Korea must recognize that a hostile attitude toward North Korea based on economic and political superiority cannot contribute at all towards enabling such a change.

What is to be done? For example, some may criticize any post-isms including even the Frankfurt school and recall another type of Lenin (S. Žižek). Or some may consider alternative life styles in places like Ladakh³ (for example, Helena Norberg-Hodge and Kim Jong-Chul). Or some may insist upon constructing a World-Republic in which nation-states surrender their power—which can bring about war—to “united nations”(case of Karatani Kojin).

It's clear that all of these intentions or efforts are important. But I think that the most important social change we're facing or about to face (or should be facing) is genetic or internal change of the system in which we live, and that system is of course capitalism. In other words, making various "cracks" inside the capitalism or making more human-friendly capitalisms (various types of capitalism) is important. Of course, we will begin to see healthier social system “beyond capitalist system.”

In my view it is unlikely that such a fundamental change could begin in an alternative commune outside of capitalism; nowadays, we can say that the most powerful enemy of capitalism is capitalism itself.⁴ It already has so many cracks in itself so that we can in fact say that this system has survived precisely by means of its cracks. Maybe we as individuals can trigger the birth of “cracks” in various ways in our own lives. (*)

³ “Ladakh is a region in the northernmost part of India, lying north of the Himalayas, in the ranges bordering the Tibetan plateau. Until a few years ago, Ladakh was one of the very few places that had not been affected by the Western monoculture that had spread across the entire world.”(H. Norberg-Hodge, ”Appropriate Technology and Co-operative Culture in Ladakh”)

⁴ It is a well known fact that capitalism owes its survival and continuation to various un-capitalistic ways including government interventions (Keynesian economics). Such uncapitalistic aspects of capitalism might eventually bring us to a point in the future when capitalism could no longer be called capitalism anymore.