

KOVÁČ Ladislav

THE INTERNATIONAL WISDOM. Personal reflections.

*In Proceedings of The Third International Scientific Conference “**Happiness and Contemporary Society**”, March, 20, 2022. Lviv: SPOLOM, 2022. P. 119-120. <https://doi.org/10.31108/7.2022.22>*

ISBN 978-966-919-826-6

Ladislav KOVÁČ

*Professor, Doctor of Sciences., Department of Biochemistry,
Faculty of Natural Sciences, Comenius University (Bratislava, Slovakia)*

THE INTERNATIONAL WISDOM.

Personal reflections.

Also published in EMBO Reports (2022) e55285

<https://doi.org/10.15252/embr.202255285>

In purges that followed the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, our groups of internationally renowned young researchers and teachers at the Department of Biochemistry of Comenius University in Bratislava was dismantled. Most of us were dismissed from the school. Compassionated people offered me a position of a clinical chemist at a country psychiatric hospital with a job to analyse blood and urine of abnormal lunatics. Paradoxically, I devoted my free time there to examine what is human normality. Upon getting the opportunity to visit Russian asylums but also Russian research institutions, I conceived a samizdat book with a subtitle that paraphrased the title of a book “In a land where tomorrow means already yesterday”, written in 1932 by the Czech author Julius Fučík. As a devoted communist he returned zealous from the Soviet Union to present to his compatriots an example for the bright future of their country. (It was the time of the Great Famine in Ukraine, a genocide in which, according to the U.N. estimate, 7-10 million Ukrainian people perished. The Ukrainian diaspora in Czechoslovakia published reports about this “Holodomor“ as a warning.) In my subtitle I omitted the adverb “already” – I borrowed the title from Fučík to used it as an irony. The testimony of my book implied that “already” should be replaced by “woefully”. This would be the fitting description of the present Russia.

Russia has not changed for at least two centuries. In 1836 the Russian writer Piotr Chaadaev put it in his First Philosophical Letter: “We do not belong to any of the great families of the human race: We are neither of the West nor of the East, and we have not the traditions of either. [...] We belong to that number of nations which do not seem to make up an integral part of the human race, but which exist only to teach the world some great lesson.” I got a chance to visit Russia in 1999, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I described my experience of the “communist capitalism” of the Wild East in another text, which ended with the citation of this perspicacious Chaadaev’s characteristics.

In my samizdat book I had a chapter dealing with human happiness. I expressed my conjecture that the Russian conception of happiness may be different from those else in Europe. I wrote: “Take Russian classics, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Gorky, Solzhenicyn. You would not find a happiness that would spring from a light, unproblematic sensual experience or would be born from an intellectual enjoyment; happiness for all of them is part of some sweet and sick affliction, some by-product of passion, suffering, or ecstasy.”

On August 21, 1968, the very day when the Soviet army (assisted by the satellites) assaulted Czechoslovakia under the pretext to “suppress the contra-revolution”, we held an international scientific conference in Brno. We decided not to stop the proceeding. During a break, we left the room to watch the enraged protests of the crowd facing the Soviet tanks on the main square of the city. A Swiss colleague approached me to tell: “I envy you. At our place, everything is so uneventful, boring.”

In 2002, I summed up my reflections on the “grand lesson” I’ve got in my life in a long paper “Natural history of communism”. In my view, communism can be conceived of as a large experiment, in which a number of fundamental hypotheses on human nature and on social dynamics have been subjected to test and eventually falsified. Yet – and here I had referred to my samizdat book on Russia – the Russian form of Communism was marked by centuries long traditions of Russian political despotism and by the character of the Russian Orthodox religion. I concluded that by reducing cultural polymorphism and destroying evolutionary arisen institutions communism peeled off cultural layers and denuded humans to their biological core. Our human nature consists of immense potentials for both good and evil. And I have posed a question which persists with us and the urgency of which is being stressed by the irrational absurdity and horrible atrocity of the Russian attack on Ukraine: “Will humankind progress quickly enough in its knowledge of human nature and of society to be able to master its own institutions? This may be the fatal question of the 21st century.” Not just happiness, but wisdom is at the stake.

I think that the brave decision of the colleagues of the Ukrainian Institute for happiness research to hold the conference on happiness in the scheduled time despite the uncertainty of events qualifies them to enlarge their scope of scholarly interest. I fancy that they may aspire to become the European centre of research on human wisdom.