FROM MY BOOKSHELF 24.10.2023 | Slavoj Žižek

Freedom without justice

At the end of Communism, there was hope that freedom and democracy would bring a better life — many lost that hope. This is where the real work begins

Lea Ypi's *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* has met with a hostile reception in her home country of Albania, and it is easy to see why. Her self-description as a 'Marxist Albanian professor of political theory at the London School of Economics' says it all.

Reading Ypi's book, I was struck by the parallel between her life and that of Viktor Kravchenko, the Soviet official who defected while visiting New York in 1944. His famous bestselling memoir, *I Chose Freedom,* became the first substantial eyewitness account of the horrors of Stalinism, beginning with its detailed description of the Holodomor (famine) in Ukraine in the early 1930s. Still a true believer at the time, Kravchenko had participated in enforcing collectivisation, and therefore knew of what he spoke.

As he spent more time in the West, Kravchenko grew increasingly aware of its own injustices and became obsessed with reforming Western democratic societies from within.

Kravchenko's publicly known story ends in 1949, when he triumphantly won a big libel suit against a French Communist newspaper. At the trial in Paris, the Soviets flew in his ex-wife to testify to his corruption, alcoholism and domestic abuse. The court was not swayed, but people tend to forget what happened next. Immediately following the trial, when he was being hailed around the world as a Cold War hero, Kravchenko grew deeply worried about the anti-Communist witch hunts unfolding in the United States. To fight Stalinism with McCarthyism, he warned, was to stoop to the Stalinists' level.

As he spent more time in the West, Kravchenko grew increasingly aware of its own injustices and became obsessed with reforming Western democratic societies from within. After writing a lesser-known sequel to *I Chose Freedom*, entitled *I Chose Justice*, he embarked on a crusade to

discover a new, less exploitative mode of economic production. That quest led him to Bolivia, where he invested in an unsuccessful effort to organise poor farmers into new collectives.

Crushed by that failure, he withdrew into private life and ultimately shot himself at his home in New York. And no, his suicide was not due to some nefarious KGB blackmail operation. It was an expression of despair, and further proof that his original denunciation of the Soviet Union had always been a genuine protest against injustice.

Falling short of ideal

Ypi's *Free* does in one volume what Kravchenko did in two. When Albania descended into civil war in 1997, her whole world fell apart. Reduced to hiding in her apartment and writing a diary while Kalashnikov shots clattered outside, she made an extraordinary decision: She would study philosophy.

But what is even more extraordinary is that her engagement with philosophy brought her back to Marxism. Her story attests to the fact that the most penetrating critics of Communism have often been ex-Communists, for whom the critique of 'actually existing socialism' was simply the only way to remain faithful to their political commitments.

Free grew out of an earlier treatise on how socialist and liberal notions of freedom are interrelated, and it is this perspective that structures the book. The first part, on how Albanians 'chose freedom,' provides an eminently readable memoir of Ypi's childhood in the last decade of communist rule in Albania. While it includes all the horrors of daily life – food shortages, political denunciations, control and suspicion, torture and harsh punishments – it is also punctuated by comical moments. Even under such harsh and desolate conditions, people found ways to preserve a modicum of dignity and honesty.

In the second part, which describes Albania's post-communist turmoil after 1990, Ypi recounts how the freedom chosen by – or, rather, imposed on – Albanians failed to deliver justice. It culminates in a chapter about the 1997 civil war, at which point the narrative breaks off and is replaced by snippets from Ypi's diary. The strength of Ypi's writing is that, even here, she is tackling the big questions, exploring how ambitious ideological projects usually end not in triumph but in confusion and disorientation.

In the 1990s, one such project was replaced by another. With communism toppled, ordinary Albanians were subjected to 'democratic

transition' and 'structural reforms' designed to make them more 'like Europe' with its 'free market.' Ypi's bitter conclusion in the last paragraph of the book is worth quoting in full:

'My world is as far from freedom as the one my parents tried to escape. Both fall short of that ideal. But their failures took distinctive forms, and without being able to understand them, we will remain forever divided. I wrote my story to explain, to reconcile, and to continue the struggle.'

Here we have an ironic rebuttal to Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, which famously observes that 'Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.' The counterpoint is that one cannot change the world for the better unless one first understands it. This is where the great initiators of both the Communist and liberal projects fell short.

If we believe that things will fall into place by just letting them take their course, we will end up with multiple catastrophes, from ecological breakdown and the rise of authoritarianism to social chaos and disintegration.

The conclusion Ypi draws from this insight, however, is not the cynical stance that meaningful change is either impossible or inevitable. Rather, it is that the struggle (for freedom) goes on, and always will. Ypi thus feels that she owes a debt to 'all the people of the past who sacrificed everything because they were not apathetic, they were not cynical, they did not believe that things fall into place if you just let them take their course.'

Therein resides our global predicament. If we believe that things will fall into place by just letting them take their course, we will end up with multiple catastrophes, from ecological breakdown and the rise of authoritarianism to social chaos and disintegration. Ypi channels what philosopher Giorgio Agamben called 'the courage of hopelessness,' his recognition that passive optimism is a recipe for complacency, and thus a hurdle to meaningful thought and action.

At the end of Communism, there was a widespread, euphoric hope that freedom and democracy would bring a better life; eventually, though, many lost that hope. That is the point where the real work begins. In the end, Ypi does not offer any easy way out, and therein lies the strength of her book. Such abstinence is what makes it philosophical. The point is not to change the world blindly; it is, first and foremost, to see and understand it.

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