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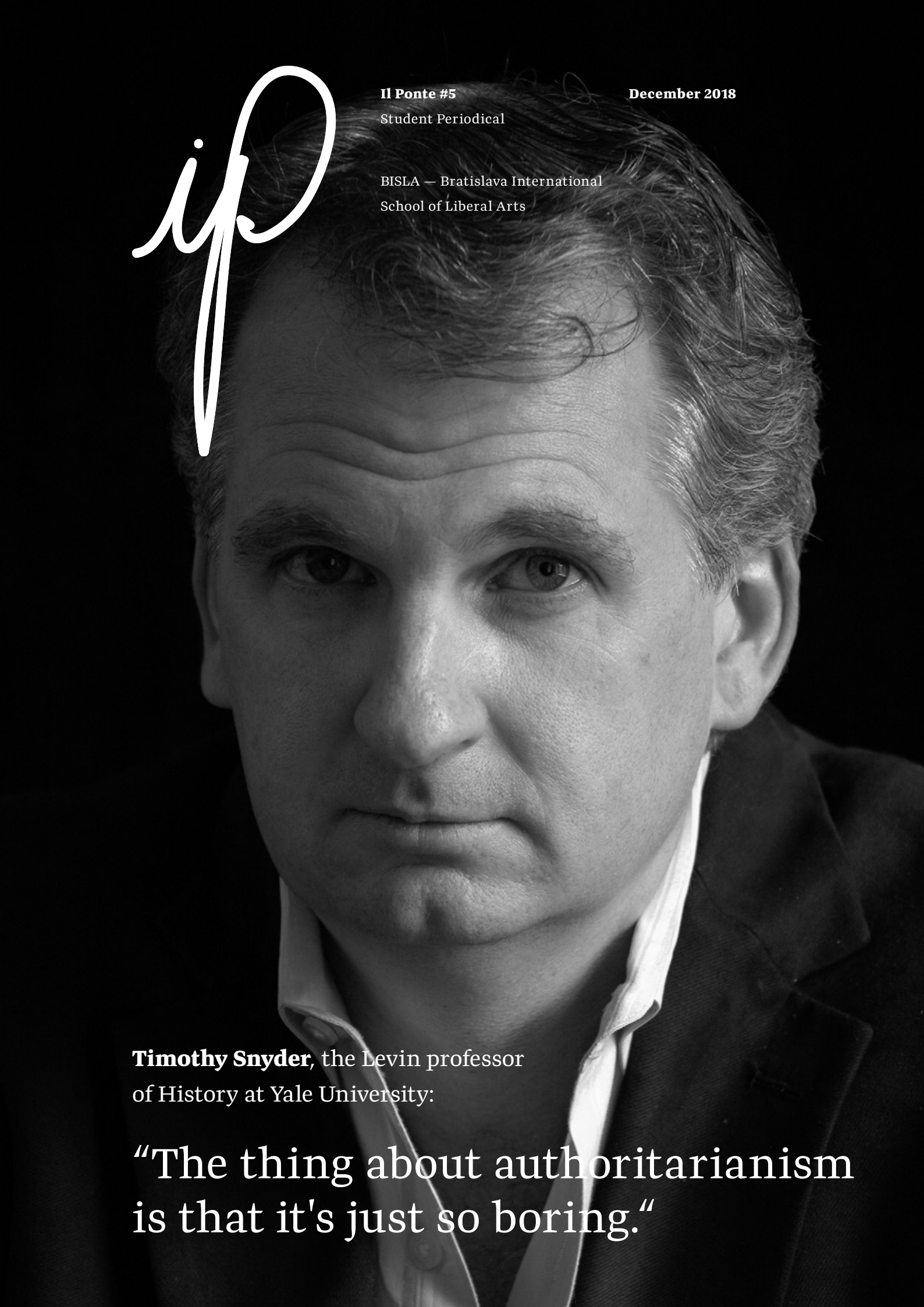

Timothy Snyder, the Levin professor of History at Yale University:

“The thing about authoritarianism is that it's just so boring.“

Il Ponte, 5th Volume, Printed Issue
XENOPHOBIA

Content

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Editorial

Author: Jonáš Jánsky
Editor: Arnold Remenár, Pavlina Jones
Illustration: Adam Bázlik

Dear readers,

I will try to introduce to you the theme of this issue of Il Ponte: Xenophobia. For starters, I want to assure you that no one from Il Ponte was paid by any NGO supporting millionaire — or at least the person that has been paid has not shared with their colleagues, which makes them a bad friend. This decision has been made for two main reasons.

First of all, we are all quite interested in the topic of xenophobia. And, as all of us have probably realized sometime during the last few years xenophobic attitudes are becoming more and more inescapable. And since all of us are students at a liberal arts school, we are psychologically conditioned not to miss any opportunity to discuss, analyze and share our opinions.

Secondly, this topic was inspired by a quite heated discussion that took place during September 2018 in Slovakia. This discussion, as many other heated and quite random discussions, has its origin in alcohol. More explicitly, a commercial for one of the major vodka brands in Slovakia features a young dark-skinned woman who declares herself to be Slovak. For some reason a vocal part of the Slovak society finds this act offensive. I am not really sure why but I would say that they heard of some sort of god given natural law that requires Slovaks to be white. And, it does not matter if you have lived in Slovakia since you were born. To wrap up, the whole xenophobia issue was quite trendy when we decided to write about it.

But on a more serious note, as this discussion in Slovakia has shown us, xenophobia is no longer simply about fear from the unknown. Fear might sometimes be helpful as it may generate caution — this whole situation was just hate camouflaged by xenophobic rhetorics. And this hate was not 'just' towards refugees, immigrants, or others from 'outside' of our culture. This was hate towards people that are not 'xenos' or strangers, but those that have the same culture, identity, and customs as we do. Hence, this kind of xenophobia is not a defence of one's traditional values and customs as some people try to convince us. It is not something necessary in today's dangerous and changing world. And we, as citizens of our societies, can never forget this fact.
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Timothy Snyder: “The thing about authoritarianism is that it’s just so boring.”

Authors: Peter Sterančák, Michal Micovčin
Editor: James Thomson
Photo: Ine Gundersveen

Interviewing the Levin professor of History at Yale University Timothy D.Snyder, is not an easy task for a student magazine so we were naturally excited to do it for Il Ponte. A historian by profession, specializing in the history of Central and Eastern Europe, professor Snyder is also a permanent fellow at The Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. His latest book, The Road to Unfreedom (Cesta do neslobody), explores parallels between the rise of authoritarianism in Europe, USA and Russia. We traveled to Vienna to meet him and although we only agreed on 15 minutes, prof. Snyder was kind enough to stay with us another 15 minutes to answer all our questions.

We discussed, among other things: current political development in Slovakia; ideas from his latest books, such as: historic perception of time, importance of ideas in politics, xenophobia, the rise of authoritarianism, or power of oligarchy; a role of Europe and EU in fighting extremism; and a role of journalism in protecting truth.

We come from Slovakia and we’ve had a busy year so far in our country, in particular the political turmoil and protests that followed the murder of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée. Have you been following these developments and do you think Slovak society has reacted adequately?

It’s not for me to tell Slovaks what to do. I’d answer it in a slightly different way. The question of a free press and in particular the ability of journalists to investigate inequality and corruption seems to me to be the most important question of our time. I think the real axis of politics in Europe and in America is not right versus left; it’s reality versus unreality. And unreality is winning. Unreality helps oligarchs and oligarchs help unreality. The only way for people to have any idea where inequality comes from or what oligarchs are doing – the only way to find these things out is by the work of independent journalists. So, this is an absolutely central question and I’m sure that there’s more that could be done in Slovakia. But, from the external perspective it’s very important that Slovaks reacted and it’s very important that the prime minister had to resign.

This wouldn’t have happened in every country. I had the sense that civil society in Bratislava was pretty strong but it was exemplary, because it’s very important to see that murder of a journalist isn’t going actually to change things in the way that the murderers wanted them to change. And it’s also important in resisting the general [political] climate.

So, you were positively surprised by the reaction?

I wasn’t so much surprised. I was gratified by it. I think it’s incredibly important and not only in Slovakia.

Connected to that, one more local question regarding Slovakia. There’s a lot of public debate about reviving interest in controversial figures from our recent history such as Jozef Tiso, or Gustav Husák. RTVS, Slovakia’s public broadcaster, for example, is trying to provoke questions about them that were already answered by facts and history. How do you think the media in general should handle these topics?

I haven’t been following these debates in particular. So I would just make a couple of general points. The first is that Slovakia, thus far, has happily avoided the kinds of memory wars that one sees in Poland, or in Ukraine, for example. And I think that’s a good thing. I mean, I’m in favour of history, of course. I am a historian. But it’s important not to have the whole political discussion dominated by questions like “Are we good? Are we evil? Are we victims, or are we perpetrators?” Because those aren’t the only important questions. There are more important questions, like “How you build a state?”, “What’s the relationship between the state and Europe?”, “Where does Slovakia come from? In the 19th century and in the 20th century.”

For me those are more important questions. So, if you’re asking what the media should do, I think the media should write about history that isn’t the same history that politicians necessarily are talking about. And when it comes to controversial figures of the 20th century, it’s very important to just be as factual as possible and not be passionate. Because there’s a form of politics that just wins when the subject becomes “Are we good or are we evil?” “No one else understands us, because we’re so good and so innocent.” That is unfortunately a step towards authoritarianism: “We have these figures; nobody understands them; therefore, we’re innocent; therefore, we’re good; therefore no one should criticize our leaders,” and so on. You want to try to avoid a discussion which takes that form.

Let me start by saying it’s good to have a historical sense of time, a sense of time that says there were events in the past and we should learn about them.

But how should we students react when there’s a show called “The Greatest Slovak” and the trailer for the show features Gustav Husák and Josef Tiso? And it asked if they were martyrs or tyrants?

If I was a young person, in particular I think I would say “We want better Slovaks”. You can’t yourself fall into those choices: as if it’s got to be Husák or Tiso! (laughs) I think especially young people should say: “We actually want better Slovaks”. We don’t want the same Slovaks that our grandparents and parents were arguing about. We will look back into our history and we’ll find more interesting Slovaks. Maybe some women. The only way to win those discussions is to find surprising things – say, you find some poet that everyone else forgot about, or you find someone who was interesting in 1920s and 1930s Czechoslovakia. Find better examples, because this whole thing you’re talking about is a trap, basically. It’s a trap to say either Tiso or Husák. Or either martyr or hero. And the only way of out is for someone else to say “Hey and by the way, we think the greatest Slovak is somebody completely different.”

Let’s now explore your latest book, The Road to Unfreedom. I think the most interesting concept in it is the idea of the perception of time. You divide the politics of time into two categories: the politics of eternity and the politics of inevitability. Can you briefly describe for our readers what these are and how they work?

Let me start by saying it’s good to have a historical sense of time, a sense of time that says there were events in the past and we should learn about them. Because events in the past help us see what possibilities and limitations there are in the present and, once we see that, we have a certain amount of agency about the future. I think that’s a sensible way to live and I also think that it works well with democracy, because democracy functions that way, or at least it should, namely that we look at the past and make decisions about the present, if only by voting. Through these decisions we can anticipate some kind of future.

Underneath this authoritarian turn that we’re all experiencing is, I think, a challenge to historical time. Because after 1989, what a lot of people in the West and especially in America did, was rather than thinking historically, we said: history is over. We adopted this thing that I call the politics of inevitability. Namely, history is over: there are no other alternatives, the market will create democracy, your wallet determines politics. No one has any individual responsibility for all this, it’s just the way it’s going to happen. That version of progress, that belief in

inevitability I think creates all kinds of costs. Including inequality, loss of historical knowledge, and loss of sense of individual responsibility.

The politics of eternity is what comes next when people give up on this idea of automatic progress. Rather than going back to historical time they tend to go in a loop and they say: we no longer believe in an automatic future, and then we're going to stop thinking about the future entirely. All around Europe, and in America too, people find it hard to talk about the future. The future has just disappeared. It's not just Slovakia. Take Britain: you ask people in favour of Brexit, tell me about the good future that will follow Brexit and they just don't know what to say. Because instead of a plausible real future it's all about looking back into the past, right? Whether it's Brexit, "Oh, let's think about the Empire", or Trump saying 'Let's make America great… again." But with no policy. It's everywhere. Kaczyński, Putin, Orbán. This is the politics of eternity. There's no policy for the future. We continue our loop into the past. We use the technology of the present not to make things better but to pound our minds with emotions and divide us and wear us down with emotional questions so that we stop thinking about the future. That's inevitability becoming eternity.

Technology has lost the ability to promise a better future for everyone.

Do you feel like the future has been stolen by the political agenda of these authoritarians, or do you think the source is existential anxiety about the future itself?

I don't know the answer. I want to say all of the above. It's definitely the case that the oligarchs are stealing the future. That's a very basic thing because if you have an obscene amount of money, unfortunately the tendency often is to support the status quo.

You mean they do it consciously?

Yes, I think there's something conscious going on with, let's say, Putin. Who is just an example, but he's an extremely powerful oligarch who just happen to also control a state. I think when you're in that position you just don't want people to think about alternative futures. The other way to relate to oligarchy is social mobility. In America, we have a huge problem with social mobility. What we called the American Dream has really slowed down, if not stopped. So, if people cannot move forward or they can't get better jobs, or leave their parent's houses, and you're an oligarch – what are you going to say about that? You know, you're not going to open things up for them, you're not going to make the economy more transparent. So you have to give them something else and that's the story of the past. That's part of it.

But then – and I'm still puzzling this out and I don't have the answer; I'm just going to name it as a phenomenon – technology is not really about the future anymore. Or it's not about a good future. I mean, you're going to be replaced by robots is not a great future. We going to enter a future in which rich people will have better genes and poor people will not. That's not a good future. Technology has lost the ability to promise a better future for everyone. [Take] climate change: it's the catastrophe of the 21st century brought about by our 20th-century technology, by which I mean carbon emissions. And there's the strange way these two things come together in the reactions of rich people, some of them technologists, to the upcoming crisis, which is to say "Oh, we're going to escape: I am going to go to Mars, or I am going to build a platform in Pacific, or I have bunker in New Zealand. This is, for me, the big challenge. This is what I am working on right now: how do we get our future back. Because we need democracy for the future, but we also need a future for democracy. When people don't believe in the future, it's really hard to vote and believe it will get slightly better in two years.

But if you forget about other ideas then liberal democracy stops being an idea.

Connected to this is, I think, the second most important idea in your book. That is the importance of ideas and where they come from. You mention philosopher Ivan Ilyin and how he influenced Mr Putin in shaping his worldview. How important is the creation of a mythology about a nation or a leader in today's politics?

Yes, thanks for mentioning that. Writing about Ilyin at the beginning of the book is definitely the biggest risk in the book because you know, who cares about ideas? Who cares about an unknown Russian philosopher? But I did it because I wanted to say what you said, which is that ideas really do matter. And part of the politics of eternity is going back to the 1930s and bringing back thinkers from the 1930s and using them for ulterior purposes. I think one sees that not just in Russia but everywhere – but the Russians, as in many things, are ahead. I do think that these new 21st-century representatives of the right actually do have ideas. They're not exactly like fascism, even if they use fascists to justify who they are. But there's a larger point, and it connects to your previous question, which is that ideas also matter if you want to make things different. Because part of what we've done in the last 25 years in this politics of inevitability is say that ideas don't matter. Because the only idea that matters is liberal democracy. But if you forget about other ideas then liberal

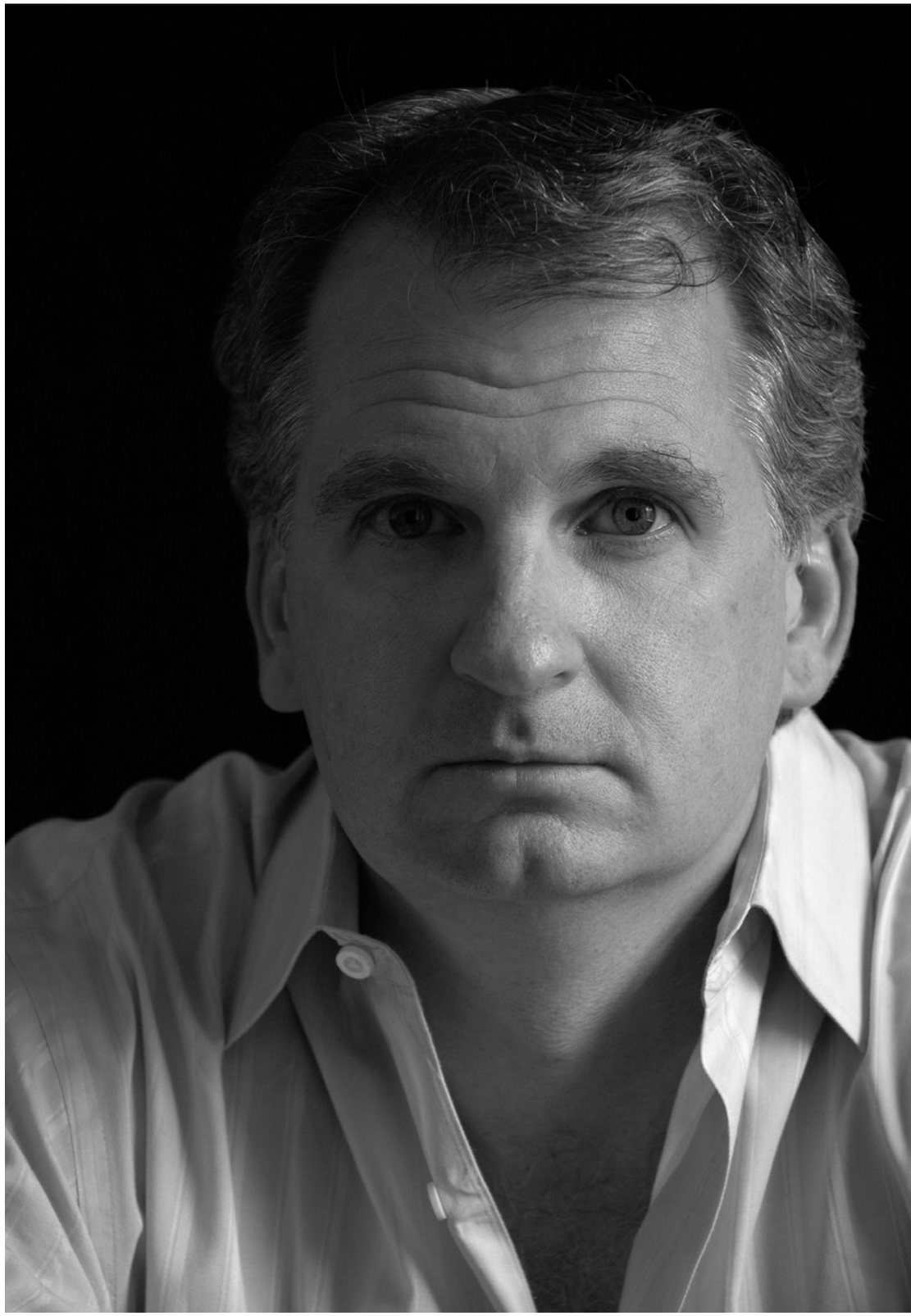

Photo: Zsolt Marton

democracy stops being an idea. It starts being something that people just take for granted. When I look at a lot of younger Europeans and especially Americans, they take what liberal democracy gives for granted. Without seeing it as only one possibility among the others, and because they don't see any other possibilities, they don't appreciate what liberal democracy is all about. But more positively, if we are going to make this liberal democracy better, we have to have ideas. If we shut ourselves off from ideas then we don't have anything else to say how it could be better.

This is what your fellow historian Yuval Noah Harari identifies as a reason for people to retreat into nostalgic ideologies: that we have no vision of the future, no global vision. With all the worries about technology-related unemployment, climate change, etc… You mention it at the end of your book when you talk about the politics of responsibility as a solution to that problem.

I think there's some kind of relationship there, sure. The thing that I call the politics of responsibility for me is about history. For me, you can't have the future without the past. If you try to think about ideas for the future without the past you are going to fail. You have to have them, because for them to make sense you have to somehow flow in time. The definition of utopian is that it doesn't have a connection with history. So, it's not going to be utopianism that is going to save us but I honestly think we have to think of the present, because what the politics of eternity tries to say is that the present is just a cycle that comes around over and over again. No, the present is a moment in time and things are flowing in the present and they can flow out of the present and we can sometimes control the way they flow help them move towards certain kinds of ideas. But we have to have ideas. So, the politics of responsibility is about having ideas for two years, five years, ten years from now, which aren't based on historical determinism or some impossible utopia. Ideas based on ethics, people have to be able to say this is good and this is bad, because if you can't do that you can't say that this is preferable to this. So, yeah, I think nostalgia has something to do with fear of the future, but I think we have no choice but to get over the fear of the future.

Like with climate change. We can still do a lot about it. We don't have to give up on climate change. We can still take carbon out of the air. There are all these things that are actually possible if you're willing to address it.

If Europe is going to win it has to be about the future.

We'll soon have elections for the European Parliament. What do you think is the role of European Union in beating the politics of eternity and in creating an integral European identity as opposed to national one?

I have a general answer and I have a specific answer. The general one is that Europe has to have a future. That's the thing. Europe has to have a future and in some sense be the future. Because, here is how Europe has worked. The Europeans have a story about the past, the West Europeans. It's basically wrong, but here's the story: World War II was bad and we've learned a lesson and therefore we have the EU. OK, that's not true, but it has a bigger problem. It's that it doesn't offer a future. Because for how many generations can you keep learning about the World War II? I say this as a historian of World War II. It's very important, but you can't keep telling every generation that the whole EU is about World War II. The EU has to be about the future. And here's the thing: that nobody noticed that the Europeans of 1992, with the Maastricht Treaty, were also saying "history is over", [along with] the Americans, [Francis] Fukuyama: "We won the Cold War, history is over!" Europeans were also saying history is over. "We have our EU, we have nothing to do with Eastern Europe, we don't want to hear about Eastern Europe at all." I remember this very clearly, they did not care about you, at all. You were a problem for them. This whole "coming back to Europe" was a problem for them. They didn't want to hear about it. All those Havels and Šimečkas, when they returned to Europe it meant nothing to EU. They were saying "nope, we're done…Treaty of Maastricht, common currency, we're finished", that was their own version of the end of history.

And what happened was that Eastern Europeans gave the EU the future. From 1992 to 2004, or even a little bit longer… basically Eastern European gave the EU the future. Because, enlargement became the next thing they could do. The EU didn't want it. And now we've passed that. Now, that's done with. And the EU really, desperately needs a future now. If it's always going to be only about memory then Europe is going to lose. Because the nostalgia of the British Empire or even nostalgia for Husák, is going to beat nostalgia for the Treaty of Rome.

If Europe is going to win it has to be about the future. And it could be! It's the biggest economy in the world, it's the only entity that can take on Google. There are a lot of things you can say about Europe, but no one is really saying them. I don't know how to do it, but I think it's like this: the future or bust.

The theme of the next issue of our magazine is xenophobia, which is closely tied to nationalism. How do you see the relationship between xenophobia and nationalism? Is it a source or a by-product?

Tell me what you mean by nationalism.

I mean ultra-nationalism. The extreme form of nationalism. Because there's also a healthy form of nationalism, right? It's seems to us you mention xenophobia in your work only indirectly. Is there a reason for that?

That's a good question. So, in my work I try really hard to identify general structures of why people behave the way they do. I also try to describe the way individual ideologies work. So, I think it would be inadequate to describe Hitler's anti-Semitism as xenophobia. There would be something wrong about it. When I discuss Stalin and the 1930s I try to show how the optimistic policy of creation became xenophobic and fearful of the outside world. But I don't use the term, because I don't think the term is particularly helpful. You're right by saying that xenophobia is somewhere on the edge about what I am writing about, but I've never really treated it as a subject. I think that the key thing about xenophobia … I would describe it in a different way. I'd describe it as my colleague Jason Stanley does in his new book about fascism: as the politics of 'us' and 'them'. Because you don't know who you are. You define who you're not by virtue of the category of the others, which is largely fictional. Like the migrant crisis in Slovakia or Poland and, for that matter, a lot of other places.

So, it's a problem of identity?

Yeah, it's fictional. It's not like you run into a migrant and you say "Oh, I understand this migrant is a Syrian Muslim, and therefore I am not a Syrian Muslim." You run into an idea of the migrant. And that vague idea helps you to think of yourself as 'us'. That's more of what I think is going on. It's that you're not sure who you are, and so you become 'us' by saying they're 'them'. And migrants are a good 'them' because you don't know anything about them; they come from some other place. The politics of 'us' and 'them' leads straight away from democracy and rule of law, because 'us' and 'them' isn't the same thing as citizenship, isn't the same thing as the rule of law.

Do you consider it a global trend or does it have a special flavour for each country?

As I see it, it's a global trend. It's a response to globalisation. It's the easy response to globalisation. The harder response is: "Let's build up institutions, let's define who we are by what we do" or "Yes, globalisation is hard but the state can do something about it". That's the hard answer but it's the good answer. It's the European answer. Because Europe is the single best response to globalisation. We're the best shelter, we have the best answers to globalisation, which is true as a matter of fact. The easy answer to globalisation is to say "We're right and they're wrong, they're them and we're us". I see it as strikingly similar everywhere. Like the migration thing is strikingly similar in the US. We don't actually have any Mexican migrants. I mean we do have some, but they're actually leaving faster than they're coming.

The whole midterm elections were dominated by this caravan, which president Trump treats like the Wehrmacht or something. It's like a couple of thousand people. Mostly women and children. They probably aren't even going to


Photo: Michal Micovčin

make it to America at all. And he literally sends out the army. So the migrants from the south are not very numerous and maybe won't even show up.

Is that the result of a failed project of globalisation?

Well, no it's a result of being cowardly about globalisation. Because the globalisation just is. It's not anybody's project per se. It just is. So, then your project is how you respond to globalisation. The way Mr Trump responds to globalisation is (depending on his mood) to say "The Chinese are bad", "Mexicans are bad", "The Jews are bad" – as he done lately, with Soros.

… which is always fashionable.

Yes! I mean, this is one thing that came from Eastern Europe. Finally, we're talking about Soros! You know, after Fico and after Putin and after Orbán, we're finally talking about Soros.
But the Jewish conspiracy theory is the cowardly response to globalisation. We can't deal with globalisation as it is, so we blame a Jewish financier, or whatever.

In your book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, one of the lessons is 'Believe in Truth'. How does this fit into our internet era of our "own truths"? What's the difference between believing in your own truth and believing in truth?

It fits nicely with globalisation. It's because globalisation is hard, so it's easy for society to fall into fictions. Because global communications are complicated it actually becomes easy for us to think the things we want to think. Like, for example, "I am great" – which is kind of what it comes down to. Or, "I am right." That's like a global fiction. Because, we're not right. I mean, sometimes, we're right, but not very often. What the internet does it allows you to think "I am right".

The trick is to say "I'm going to go out in the world and find out some things that challenge me."

It's the denial of reality.

Yes, it's a subjectivity which is based upon your immediate impulses being affirmed. The distinction to draw at some point is the distinction between what feels right and what is right. Trump is a good example. A politician of the internet age will learn what feels right for you. Then slowly, slowly, slowly you lose the ability to say there's the difference between what feels right and what is actually true out in the world. With this form of politics, it's easy to point to individual fictions. Whether it's the Smolensk crash in Poland, or whether it's Trump saying Obama was born in Africa, or whether it's Putin saying he didn't invade Ukraine – you know, "they were just locals who bought their camouflage uniforms at a store". It's easy to look at the individual fictions, but there's a larger style. The larger style is "we're going to tell people stuff they want to hear." The Russian intervention in the American elections was like this: we're going to find the people who are afraid of Muslims and then we're going to tell them to be more afraid of Muslims. So, I think the trick in the 21st century has everything to do with individuals and the rules of democracy.

The trick is to say "I'm going to go out in the world and find out some things that challenge me." That's what makes me a good man, or a good woman, or a good citizen. I can actually lean into the window a little bit as oppose to just sit back here and let the internet blaze the back of my eyeballs with the stuff that my brain finds comfortable. I am going to get off


Photo: Michal Micovčin

the chair and figure some things out. I am going to read some stuff that people have reported, this is why reporters are so important. Because we have to produce facts, because they don't just come to us. People have to go and produce them and we have to read things that change our minds.

We should conclude that we have to open our doors and challenge ourselves?

Yes, that's what life is. The thing about authoritarianism is that it's just so boring. It's sad because it's nice to feel like you're right. It's a good feeling but it's a terrible way to live. It's not an interesting way to live. If the guy who's 50 thinks the same things he thought when he was 22, that's a failure. That's a tragedy. That's a disaster, I think. About some things sure, but if you're 22 and you think you know everything and then you're 50 and you think you know everything, that's sad. And it's a problem for democracy too. Because in democracy you have to be able to say: "Oh, okay I realise there's this whole problem I didn't understand and I am going to vote according to that problem." But if you've already decided when you're 22 that you know everything, you're not going to be a good voter.

I see this in my country. I see people falling behind these information walls. I'll give you an example. In London I was debating the midterm elections, and I was speaking to a Republican and she said she had never heard that voter suppression was an issue. Now, maybe she was just lying, but the more depressing possibility is that this was actually true: that in her information world, there was no mention of the fact that the state of North Dakota has disenfranchised native Americans; that in the state of Texas, if they take you off the voter rolls and then you apply for the right to vote and you make a mistake, they put you in prison, etc. That in two American states the same person that is counting the votes was the person who was running for governor. Which is the kind of thing that if another country did, we would say: that's a violation of democracy. My point is that this is a basic factual thing and she said she didn't really know about it. She wasn't aware of it. There were a bunch of other Republicans and they were like "Yeah, this is not true, this is a conspiracy theory." I said: "Okay, well, it's very hard for us to have democracy when we don't even know basic things about the democracy itself."

The point is not to make fun of them, the point is to say that the stuff you're not supposed to know, you have got to find that out.

It's good to challenge our own information?

Well, it's good to challenge things that make you feel comfortable. That's the moment when you have got to watch out. The point with the information is to care about the people who actually generate the facts. Again, going back to the beginning: the actual reporter who's actually trying to research. For example, there were those connections between Slovak politicians and Italian mafia. That's the person you have to support, by reading it, by paying for it, all of that. There's an infinity of junk out there, there's very small percentage of actual reporting. And those are the people we have to support.
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Winter is coming: Why extremism is not the answer

Author: Peter Sterančák
Editor: George Merkouris
Photo: Adam Bázlik

Extremism is similar to a snowman, standing solidly in cold and dark times, yet once exposed to sunlight, it loses its foundations and melts into a shapeless puddle. Melting away extremism isn't easy in such times as ours. Ultra-nationalism, fascism, and different shades of populism pop up everywhere as if planted by some vicious invisible force. Slovakia, Hungary, Greece, Brazil or France it seems like no country is spared from this new trend. If you are a Game of Thrones fan you might be familiar with the phrase, "Winter is coming". Lord Stark's dark warning of hard times coming fits not only the fantasy world of the TV series but our current reality, as well. Perhaps that's why Game of Thrones is so popular – it reflects the current political problems in a fantasy setting. So, where did the cold wind of extremism come from?

My fascination with this question began a couple of years ago when an openly fascist party was elected into the Slovak parliament for the first time in my lifetime. Capitalizing on its success by opposing minorities and migrants wasn't surprising. What surprised me was the amount of support for those extreme views in my wider social circle. Even friends and family members whom I considered open-minded and liberal began to flirt with those extreme ideas, as if out of a sheer exhaustion of viable alternatives. A general disappointment and disillusion of the political establishment powered the anti-establishment mood that the populists and extremists hijacked for their own gains. And while one could analyse this phenomenon locally from nation to nation, I believe we have to adopt a global perspective to understand it fully.

A wave of populism and extremism is flooding the whole world right now. No country is an island and while extremism has many different forms and branches, they are all rooted in one global society. All extremists are subject to one global market, they all use money and modern technology – even Islamic fundamentalists are happy to share their medieval backwardness through modern social media. After all, it's paradoxical how much Islamic extremism in the Middle East has in common with its right-wing Christian fundamentalist counterparts of Europe. They both want "their country back" from foreign intruders; they both derive their values from religious traditions; they both revolt against modernity and liberal values and yearn for a nostalgic glorious past. And they both have very rigid views regarding the position of women in their societies. The problem seems to be rather global and not local. And a global problem requires a global approach.

Climate change, technological disruption, the danger of a nuclear war, the rise of artificial intelligence, migration – these are all global problems. Ultra-nationalism, populism or any other forms of extremism don't offer solutions to these problems. No country can solve them on their own. Even if Slovakia reduces carbon emissions to zero, if there is no global consensus and policy on those issues, Slovakia or any other country will nonetheless feel the tragic impact of climate change. As Israeli historian, Yuval Noah Harrari puts it when it comes to climate change: No country is sovereign.

Another dimension of the problem is individual. It is a cliché to say that the personal is political. However, this truism is still valid. Although we all live in different cultures, countries and environments, one thing that is universal for all people is our biological and emotional makeup. Emotions run faster than rational thoughts. They are processed through quicker routes in our brain. They are easier to arouse and harder to extinguish. Whether it's the fear of a terrorist attack or a migrant invasion; anxiety over an uncertain future with certain jobs becoming obsolete; anger at the so-called experts whose predictions do not come true – or perhaps they do; disgust of all things political after exposing propaganda and lies; and worry about an economy that failed so spectacularly in the Financial Crisis in 2008. All play into the hands of extremists who have spun those emotions into a fictional narrative of "Us vs. Them".

The most successful extremists and populists are good storytellers. They tell us who counts as "Us", and who are the dirty "Them". If we can only get rid of those "Them"-s and create a society full of "Us", we would reach the ideal, their argument goes. In his massive book, "*Behave, The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*" Robert Sapolsky explains how this dichotomy of seeing the world in Us/Them categories has a very strong biological basis, and how we can't help but seeing the world through this tribal perspective. As social creatures that we are, the yearning to identify with certain groups while vilifying groups of those "others" comes naturally to us. In the absence of convincing unifying global story, extremists win because they understand this on some level. I think the problem of extremism is partially a by-product of the global crisis of identity. As the world has gotten globalized, local identities got less and less relevant and many people started to feel less and less secure. Uncertainty and fear of the future fuels the nostalgia of the past – even if that nostalgia is fictional.

In his latest book, "*The Road to Unfreedom*", historian Timothy Snyder explains how the time perception of reality has changed over the last decade. When we stop believing in the future we are stuck in the present moment, and look for certainty in our past. When globalization challenges the sense of our identity, the easiest answer is to identify with what is closest to us – be it a nation, a subculture, a political party or religion. We tend to reinforce the Us/Them lenses of perception. No wonder that we start looking for someone to blame – Jews, Roma people, migrants, Muslims, gay people – you name it. Uncertainty is not a comfortable feeling and it's not easy to get over it. But life is marked by complexity, and easy answers get us nowhere. We need to overcome our biological impulses and step out of our comfort zone of local tribalism to solve global issues ahead of us.

The only answer, I believe, is more integration and reinforcing the international sense of identity, supporting international democratic bodies such as the European Union, as well as reforming and making it more inclusive. We can't afford ourselves the luxury of protectionism, isolationism, and ultra-nationalism anymore. Perhaps the famous Solzhenitsyn's quote from "The Gulag Archipelago could give us a good starting point: "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts… Alas, all the evil of the twentieth century is possible everywhere on earth. Yet, I have not given up all hope that human beings and nations may be able, in spite of all, to learn from the experience of other people without having to go through it personally." «

A Warm Welcome to Slovakia

Author: Mara Steiber
Editor: Arnold Remenár
Photo: Miroslav Kuruc

The author of this story is an exchange student from Luxembourg, studying at University College Maastricht. Mara has spent one semester at BISLA, and comments on her experience in Bratislava.

Before I came to Bratislava, Slovakia meant for me a blank spot on the map of Europe, the continent in which a fair deal of my twenty-two years life has been spent. I chose to spend my semester abroad in Slovakia since it was one of the only destinations of which I had no stereotypes at all. However, while the lack of stereotypes might sound positive, it went hand in hand with an almost total ignorance of the culture and the history of the country. Thus, my suitcase filled with warm winter clothes and my mind with anxiousness, excitement and curiosity, I arrived in Bratislava. Fortunately enough, some BISLA students volunteered to show me around the city and teach me the basic rules of survival.

It was on this very first city visit that I was first introduced to Bratislava as a slightly hostile city. “Don’t go there, that is where people get mugged and a person was murdered last year” was one piece of advice, given to me just around the corner from the street in which I now lived. In the weeks that followed, I heard from some classmates and acquaintances that Slovak people generally do not like foreigners very much, and that xenophobia is a rampant epidemic in the country. At the same time, I also heared often that Bratislava in itself is a bubble, and that it is very different in the rest of the country, that it is much more open-minded than other places.

Three weeks into my stay however, I had not yet experienced a moment when I did not feel welcome. There was only one instance, in which I felt some sort of hostility towards me. I had asked somebody for directions, and instead of just pointing me into the right way, the person started shouting “No English, no English!” unmistakably gesticulating for me to go away. At the supermarket, I was also wondering whether the reason the cashier did not say a word to me, or even look at me once, was for the reason that I did not speak Slovak. However, when I noticed that the said cashier was the same with all other customers, whether Slovak or not, I realised that her distanced manners did not have anything to do with me not being from here. Thus, I started trying to understand people’s distance more as a cultural and social custom, or an individual characteristic, rather than as their dislike towards me as a foreigner. I slowly developed a much more positive attitude towards the people I encountered here in my daily life, and was grateful for every smile and every kind word spoken to me. Especially when it comes to service in cafés and restaurants, most waiters were outstandingly friendly and accommodating.

I am aware of the fact that I am a white, and except for my lack of command of the Slovak language, I hardly differ from a Slovak girl on the outside. I do believe that if I had a different skin colour, or if I was wearing a hijab, things might be different. I do not want to downplay the experiences of violence and hatred that other people, externally more “foreign” have to endure in Slovakia. From my own experience, I must say however, that Bratislava sometimes maybe welcomed me in an indifferent, but never in a hostile manner. I believe that this is something that the people of Bratislava should be proud of, and see it as a token of their hospitality. Bratislava is the capital of Slovakia, and therefore the figurehead of the country. Stories like mine show that although there are certainly problems with xenophobia in Slovakia, there is hope, and that it is possible as a foreigner to experience a warm welcome to Bratislava.
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Mara Stieber, 21

Feminism: Is there a middle way?

Author: Vivien Slíž
Editor: Arnold Remenár, Linda M. Steyne, PhD
Photo: Adam Bázlik

Every once in a while you cross paths with someone you do not agree with. It might be just one person with different perspective, someone who encourages you to rethink your own ideas and sometimes even beliefs. In this case, I have had the chance to meet various types of people who made me think through the whole idea of feminism and its benefits and disadvantages. For several years I was convinced that feminism could not have a negative side or a negative impact on society. I would define feminism as an incredible strong way how to empower women in every way, not only socially but also politically. Not long ago, I realized how naive I was and understood that almost everything we do or see affects us.

One day I had the chance to have a deeper conversation on this topic with a woman who I consider to be very intelligent and independent. When she claimed to be an anti-feminist I was genuinely shocked. I had never heard that word before and could not believe that such thing existed. Some people hearing this word for the first time might assume that the goal of anti-feminism is to promote the idea that men have a superior and dominant role in society. However, that is a misunderstanding, which is not entirely true. From personal experience, and this woman's explanation one can become an anti-feminist when they believe in gender equality but still are against the idea of modern feminism, which they claim is exaggerated. Anti-feminism understands modern feminism as something supporting misandry and no better than patriarchy, which does the same with the opposite gender. In a sense, they are right. The superiority of women brings the same problems as the superiority of men. It is gender inequality in a reverse.

Anti-feminists, however, took their fight to the next level when they decided to create organizations, which often consist of conservative, primarily religious, women. One organization in the US, 'Stop ERA (Equal Rights Amendment)', is not only against any feminist movements, pornography, and abortion but, surprisingly, gun control as well. It is generally believed that anti-feminists are against feminism because those movements might threaten male-dominated positions, not only in labor but also in religion. According to the anti-feminist societies, clubs and organizations, the dominant role of a man should not be questioned. It would seem this is the root of the problem and at the bottom of the disagreement between the two ideologies.

The main reason modern feminism is looked down upon is the negative attention drawn by the so-called radical feminists. All around the world, women who support the idea of extreme feminism seem to forget the real meaning of this movement. The original belief in equality has, in their minds, been completely transformed into hating men and abolishing patriarchy. Radical feminists promote the idea that misogyny is absolutely unacceptable and yet misandry is tolerable. They focus on discriminating against men's basic human rights. How is that progressive for feminism or even society? Feminist men, after hearing about this goal of radical feminism to degrade them, decide not to back up feminism at all. In general, it is putting a bad image on something that should have been positive. It takes away voices that should be heard.

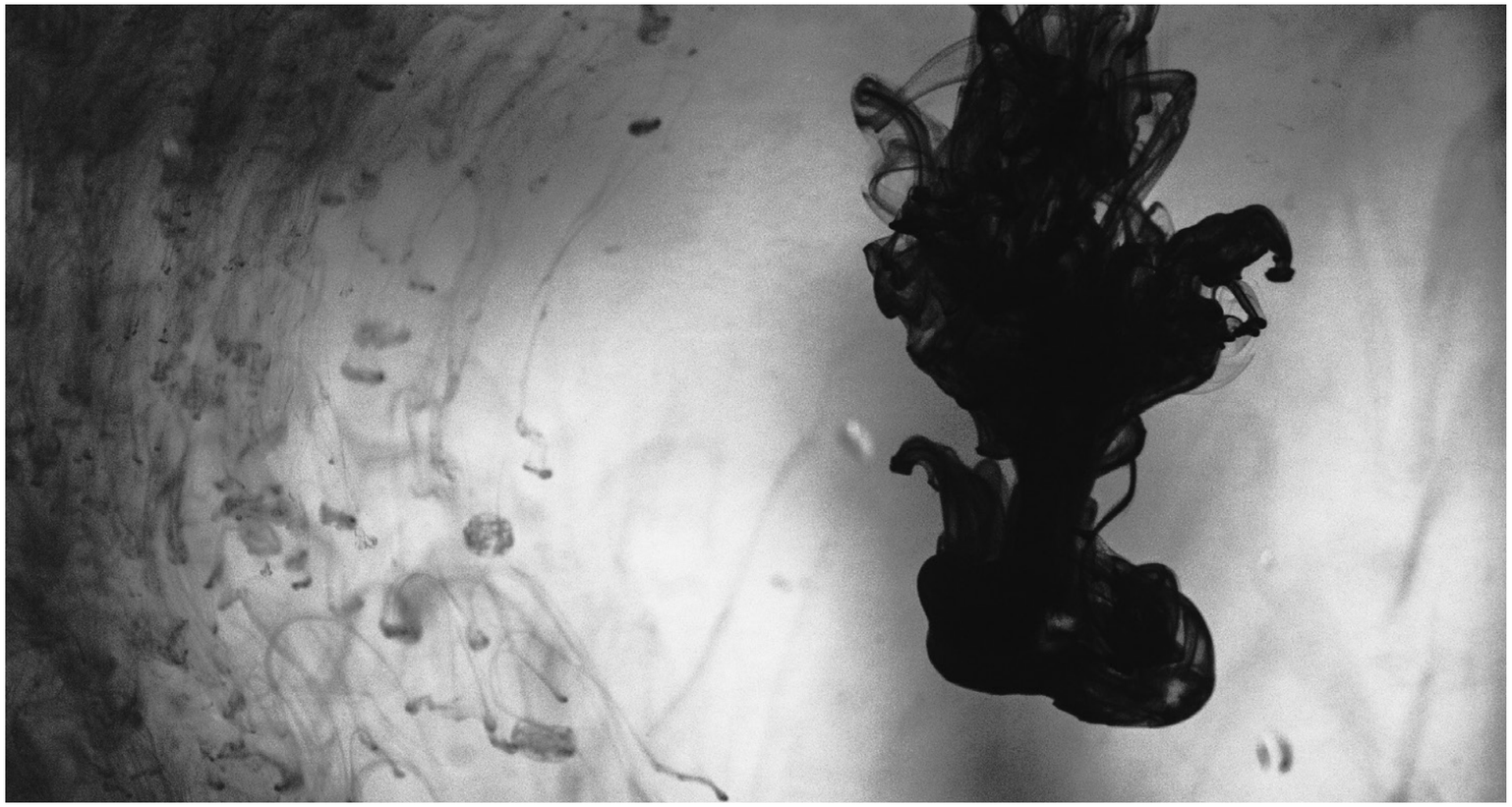
How can we find the middle ground? Is there a way to be a proper feminist without stepping on anybody's rights? People will always be offended or judgmental no matter the ideology.

The feminism of the 1840's was not created to degrade men. It was not about women being above men. Feminism was the belief that wanted to define and establish equal political, economical, personal, and social rights. The idea was not to immediately indicate that women should be superior but that women had to break out of the bubble where they were practically invisible. Feminism is not about making women strong, because they are already strong. It has the goal to open the eyes of the unaware world in order to respect each other.

I personally think that one does not have to be an anti, radical or modern feminist. You do not even have to label yourself. Simply, I let other people be who they want to be, respect what they've achieved, and try to be a decent human being. Everyone should have the right to be appreciated regardless of their gender. Now, I proudly call myself a feminist because I stand behind the theory that every human being should be respected and given the same opportunities to fulfill their needs and desires. It does not matter what nationality, religion, skin color or age someone is, to me feminism is a belief that supports not only women but diversity in general and proves that everybody should have the same life chances. «

Anti-Semitism alive and well in the US

Author: Pavlina Jones
Editor: Arnold Remenár
Photo: Adam Bázlik



Xenophobia is alive and well in many countries all across the world and it does not avoid the United States. On Saturday, October 27th, a hate crime broke out at the Tree of Life Congregation Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Leaving eleven people dead this is recorded as the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the United States' history. The suspected shooter, 46-year-old Robert Bowers, walked into the Synagogue on Saturday morning. heavily armed and began to shoot.

As the FBI made further investigations on what led Bowers to commit such a crime, they have uncovered his Gab profile. Gab is a small social network that allows users to say or post anything they want, unlike Facebook or Twitter where posts and comments may be reported. Bowers' Gab profile had a blue check mark next to his name showing his account was verified – he showed Gab a verified form of identification when he signed up for its services – and in his bio it read "jews are the children of satan". Many of his posts were rants about Jews but the most disturbing post of all came only hours before the shooting actually occurred. It stated, "HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in". Robert Bower's account is no longer in existence and the Gab network is temporarily offline due to the fact that hosting providers are pulling their services (Ohlheiser & Shapira, 2018).

Bowers was indicted with a total of thirty six criminal counts, which include criminal homicide, criminal attempt, aggravated assault and ethnic intimidation. His case will be prosecuted first in the federal court rather than the state court because "the U.S. Justice Department says it believes it's in the national interest to protect the constitutional right of freedom of religion." (Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting Suspect Robert Bowers Pleads Not Guilty At Federal Arraignment). The question of implementing the death penalty is at hand as well.

Though anti-semitism has been a centuries old problem, the United States was always held as a haven for the Jewish community to thrive – at least comparatively speaking. That is why events like these leave the people of the country shaken. When asked about this, a former schoolmate of mine back in Georgia, Rachel Cooper – herself a member of the Jewish community – had this to say about the event:

"I think it was absolutely devastating and really showed how much anti-semitism still exists in America. All of the recent shootings are heartbreaking but this one really hit close to home because it was a hate crime on my faith and my aunt actually used to teach at that synagogue and was less than a mile away when it happened. The fact that it could have easily been her in there just made it that much more real. I think this showed that we still have a ways to go in America to really be an accepting and equal community."

I personally maintain that incidents such as this one are utter travesties. However, they sometimes showcase the hidden nefarious beliefs that reside within the public consciousness. Therefore, it is imperative that we counter those beliefs in order to avoid such heinous hate crimes from being repeated.

Our condolences go out to the families and friends of the victims and the Pittsburgh community. May the eleven lives that were lost rest in peace.
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The toughest opponent a footballer can face: Racism

Author: Miloslav Valko
Editor: Arnold Remenár
Photo: David Clarke

Football pitch. Twenty-two players. 7140 square meters of the greatest ethnic diversity you can possibly find, where the only thing that corrupts and bonds men at the same time is the passion for what they love. During the 1970/71 season in the Premier League, England, no other players outside of the isles where included in Liverpool FC squad consisting of 26 players. In 2018/19, out of the thirty-player squad, only twelve are from countries of the United Kingdom. Three players are from South America, ten are from rest of the Europe, and six are from Africa.

A great jump towards racial equality in football took place in recent years all over the world. Racism though, still prevails, although Western Europe's leagues are more tolerant than the Eastern European. In the Polish League, fans boo, hiss and torment players of different skin colour or religion whenever the ball is passed to them – even at their home ground until now. In England though, for example the Liverpool fans are obsessed with a song of Mo Salah, the Egyptian king, with which they honour their best player – Mohamed Salah, a very much religious based Muslim, who prays on the ground every time he scores a goal. These are gestures of a very tolerant, peaceful but still strongly passionate fan base. But if you think, that you will not find racism in English football at all, you would be very mistaken. In 2015 campaign, Luis Suarez from Uruguay, received eight match ban and forty thousand pound fine when found guilty for racist abuse toward Patrice Evra. Paradoxically Suarez had the habit of celebrating every goal he scored with his striker partner Daniel Sturridge, who is the same skin colour as Patrice Evra. Has the progress really been made from 1970/71 campaigns then?

For some clearly not, as at EURO 2012, racist abuse from football stars who are role models for young children and scouts being told to avoid hiring Asian players. Although racism is still taking place in football, FIFA is trying to fight it. In recent years, FIFA launched a powerful anti-racism campaign, with a goal to eliminate racism from the greatest game in the world. Say no to racism campaign, featuring the best active players, all saying no to racism, in their native languages. Also, a badge with a simple sign: Respect, were installed on the sleeves of the football kits. FIFA claims they are doing everything possible to challenge racism in this great game.

As professional player Kevin Prince-Boateng stated recently, "The only thing that has changed is that racism is more hidden. It's not up front anymore it's not about people chanting or whatever because they know there's going to be sanctions, people are going to watch them. So, it's just a little bit more hidden. But it's still there because if you see the last five years, a lot of things happen still, and it's very alarming because after five years nothing has happened, nothing has changed. That's sad." Just days after sitting down with Boateng, The New York Times ran a story about Kerfalla Sissoko, an amateur soccer player from Guinea playing in France who was racially abused in May and given a 10-match ban. He received the same suspension as the perpetrators, after a brawl broke out in which, according to spectators, he and the team's other black players were assaulted by their opponents, leaving him beaten and with severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

One may ask, what can players and fans do to stop racism, when the elites in football institutions are failing to deal with the issue. Speaking up and raising awareness on social issues, using the platform and the profile the sport provides, it should be enough drive them. A great respect should be shown for the sacrifices of the former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick who took a stand against social injustice. Those are the moments we need, to demonstrate what people are fighting against, they let their voices be heard. Kaepernick, left millions of dollars on the table, in order to b able to say what he believes. He's going to be known forever. We need these big people to make big actions because otherwise nothing will change.
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Mainstream philosophy's open secret...

Author: Georgios Merkouris
Editor: Arnold Remenár
Photo: Adam Bázlik

G.W.F. Hegel once asserted that encounters between humans are best described as a 'life-and-death' struggle. Thankfully, not every encounter we have leads to that conclusion. The world is composed of a variety of people, each possessing a wide array of different opinions and beliefs. Relationships between them can often cross language and cultural barriers. Long-standing bonds between individuals can develop instead of life threatening situations. That being said, the mere existence of bigotry denotes that we are far away from achieving just that. With its focus on dialogue and rigorous debate, philosophy strikes me as the perfect platform to tackle on these issues.

The first question one needs to ask is why forms of bigotry like racism, sexism, and xenophobia arise and take hold in society in the first place. By analysing this issue from a philosophical, as well as a sociological perspective, one can surmise that among the main contributors to this are desires to elevate one's status by disparaging members of different groups, the social inequalities found in society, tendencies towards tribalism, and categorizing people into members of a "core group" vs. outsiders. Certainly, one of the most ubiquitous and easily recognizable forms of bigotry is xenophobia. People tend to fear what they do not know and often exaggerate with regards to their fear about the other. Recently, in Europe in particular, our societies have witnessed some of the worst manifestations of this phenomenon. With the advent of the refugee crisis, hysteria swept throughout the continent about the supposed danger that these newcomers would pose to our societies and how they would fundamentally change their nature for the worst.

The consequences of xenophobia, in addition to other forms of prejudice, can be devastating. One can think of a plethora of reasons to be worried when it becomes a wide-spread phenomenon. If this way of flawed thinking were to gain ground in a society, it would result in the breakdown of the liberal world order that Western societies are trying to attain. Every philosopher should have a natural aversion to prejudice. Their duties consist of providing everyone with moral guidelines in order to better their societies, to help the individual achieve a state of higher being.

The nature of prejudice in itself, however, is becoming increasingly difficult to expose. To combat it is even harder. These views are spread throughout disparate corners of society and a collective majority often shares them, thereby eventually becoming socially acceptable and regarded as objective truth. Often times, liberal-minded individuals merely scoff at the people holding these views, provide derogatory labels for them, and ignore them. However, when not confronted head-on, these views will not cease to exist in the public consciousness on their own. They will continue to fester, spread, and consume the minds of more uninformed individuals exposed to them. It is demanded of everyone, therefore, to contribute more in the effort to eradicate them. Our duty is to maintain a calm composure when confronted with these views and actively strive to dismantle them at any chance.

Philosophers were denoted as wild explosives in the presence of which nothing is safe by Friedrich Nietzsche. He was right in that regard. Philosophy can provide us with the means to better understand aspects of human nature that lead them to hold such pernicious beliefs. In the process, we might even learn how to combat them properly and efficiently. This is what we deem necessary to endeavour until the end of our lives. The necessity of exploring the issues concerning xenophobia and its roots, as well prejudice in general, is imperative. Hopefully, we can one day overcome them by honest and constructive dialogue. «

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