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The hole he left behind

“THE poor you have with you always,” said a knowledgeable observer of the human condition born about 1,992 years ago. The scientific optimists of the 19th century thought they were proving him wrong, and it is true that in some countries the poor have grown markedly fewer; but most people in this late 20th century, watching the world as a whole produce babies as fast as it produces new wealth, would say that Christ was still right. Which is why the death of communism leaves a void that needs to be filled quickly.

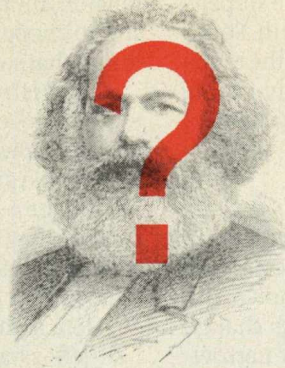
The communists were scientifically certain that they knew how to do away with poverty. They were famously wrong. A comparison of the Eastern Europe they created and the Western Europe that escaped them is enough to reveal the size of that 19th-century lie, in whose name so many horrors were committed. And yet, for most of the past century, the body of ideas called Marxism-Leninism has succeeded in poisoning half of the world's political life. It not only misruled, at its peak, most of the Eurasian pair of continents. It misled many of the young governments of the newly independent post-1945 third world. Even in the mature West far too many politicians of the democratic left who rejected communism's one-party politics succumbed to its claim that Marx and Lenin could tell you how to run an economy.

Now Marx and Lenin have gone where the false prophets go. The doctrine that said it knew how to rescue the poor has collapsed, but the poor are still with us: in growing numbers in much of the southern world, in pockets of desperation in North America and Western Europe. Doing something for the unfortunate is the chief business of the political left. The old distorter of the left has gone. Come in, a new and better left.

The ugly alternatives queue up

And it had better hurry. Other claimants to the empty space on the post-communist political stage are elbowing their way forward. One is nationalism, in all its awkward varieties. There is new-nation nationalism, the Afro-Asian sort, which tries to strengthen a wobbly sense of national identity by being beastly to the neighbours. There is revived-nation nationalism, the East European kind, in which the assorted peoples just released from their communist prison jostle each other angrily on the pavement outside the jail door. There is old-nation nationalism, the West European speciality, in which elderly grumps mutter to themselves that it is about time the world started paying them proper respect again.

All these varieties of nationalism are now about to grow more vehement, if the recession of 1991 drags its way through 1992 and beyond. Recession makes nationalists want to keep out the imports from alien factories that, they say, throw even



more of one's own people out of work. It also lengthens the queues of those who want to change countries in search of a better life, and worsens the already bad temper of those who do not want to let them in. Because of what recession does to nationalists, the free movement of goods and the relatively free movement of people will cause more friction in 1992 than for many years past.

The 1990s may also be witnessing, in two or three parts of the globe, a new phenomenon: the mutation of old-fashioned nationalism

into an even hairier beast, regional hyper-nationalism. Some Japanese are starting to defend their country's single-minded pursuit of economic self-interest by explaining that East Asia is culturally different from Euro-America, and therefore does not wish to become part of an economically homogeneous world. Some Europeans now openly defend their enthusiasm for a single European state by explaining that Europe is culturally different from America, and therefore needs to organise itself separately from America. Some Americans retort that, if Europe and Japan are different from America, it is because they do not possess the American Idea.

This new hyper-nationalism is dangerous. It could destroy the Euro-American-Japanese coalition that won the cold war and that is the best hope for a new world order. It could also, as Europeans bridle at intruding Muslims, and Japanese curl their lips at technologically backward westerners, turn into something unpleasantly close to racism.

Some say that greenery will come to the rescue, a virtuous new global ideology untainted by nationalism or hyper-nationalism. It probably won't. The environmental movement does have some of the right qualifications. Its concern is usually for the whole world, not just one country or group of countries. Its first instinct is usually to preserve what is good, not to destroy what it considers bad; that marks it off from ideologies like communism and fascism. But the environmentalists are getting themselves into an intellectual tangle that could put them on the wrong side of tomorrow's arguments.

They are suspicious of economic growth, because they think it will use up too much of the world's natural resources. This is turning many of them against free trade, because free trade means more growth. They are appalled by the thought that the world's population will double in the coming century, because that will eat up resources even faster. The physical earth is becoming more important to them than the people who live on it. The result is that environmentalists in rich North America and Western Europe—which means the most influential of them—are becoming pro-protection and anti-immigration: unwitting allies, in fact, of the nationalists they despise.

If a serious new political movement is to fill the post-com-

munist vacuum, it will have to start by recognising the facts created by the collapse of communism. There is now no alternative to the free market as the way to organise economic life. The spread of free-market economics should gradually lead to a spread of multi-party democracy, because people who have got free economic choice tend to insist on having free political choice too. In short, the organisation of human life can now be based on many individual decisions, not orders from the top issued in the name of scientific certainty.

To say this is not just arrogantly to deny what communists once arrogantly asserted. It is the plain lesson of these stupendous past three years. The lesson will take time to sink in. Some politicians will still go on wanting to keep chunks of the economy under state control rather than risk a temporary rise in unemployment. The world will never be wholly dictator-free. But most people have seen the point of 1989-91.

The natural home of the left

Starting from there, the new politics of the left will remember what its pre-communist ancestors understood. There are two sides to the human mind as it deals with the organisation of life on earth. One is the driving-force side, which brings change and innovation into the world. It is inevitably rather narrow-minded; it can be greedy; but it is necessary, because without it men would still be wondering how to light a fire and sharpen

an axe. The other side is concerned about different consequences. It recognises that change and innovation do not benefit everybody equally, and it wants to reduce the disparities. This is the side that stresses collective responsibility, and the duty of compassion. It is the natural field of the left.

The weakness in this argument is that compassion, left to itself, cannot be sure of collecting a majority of the votes. It needs reinforcement. For some, the reinforcement is religion: God asks people to treat each other as they would wish to be treated themselves. For others, it is the hope that, even without religion, more and more people will become rich enough, and secure enough, to spend time and money doing the altruistic things that socialists wanted the state to do.

There is a third type of reinforcement, more in keeping with today's mood. Tomorrow's intelligent left-wingers should be looking for ways to deploy self-interest in support of their politics. It makes sense to rescue the poor, because the world is then likely to be a safer place. It makes sense to educate all children, because they will then all be able to make their contribution to a richer human race. Your great-grandchildren will be better off in 2092 if you act in the name of compassion in 1992.

Here is the starting-point of something new on the left. A new left is badly needed. The end of communism has left the world standing, as it were, on one leg. The forward march cannot be resumed until the other leg is back in healthy operation.

Hail, Croatia

With those words, Germany drags the European Community its way and risks a bigger Balkan bust-up

IN PUSHING towards recognition of Slovenia and Croatia as independent states, the European Community is coming to terms with two new realities. The first is that Yugoslavia has in effect ceased to exist. The second is that united Germany is becoming a foreign-policy power to be reckoned with. For it was German arm-twisting that forced the Community—against the better judgment of some EC members and the advice of the United Nations and the United States—to agree to recognise any well-behaved ex-Yugoslav republic within a month. Europe should now brace itself for a third reality: the danger that the war, instead of stopping, will spread.

The Germans are convinced that they are doing the right thing. Closer to Yugoslavia than most of their EC partners, they feel they are more sensitive to what is happening there. In most German eyes it is a simple case of good (democratic Croat desire for self-determination) against evil (communist Serb aggression). They have been exasperated by what they see as the EC's impotence. Public opinion—influenced by several hundred thousand Yugoslav *Gastarbeiter* and by millions of German holidays in Dubrovnik and other places now going up in smoke—has demanded action. Far from being assertive, the Germans reckon they have been restrained, holding back from recognition until after the EC's summit in Maastricht.

The strongest pro-recognition argument is that the careful even-handedness practised by the West so far has failed. On this view, not only is the even-handedness morally wrong (because Serbia is the warmonger), it amounts to supporting the

12 Serbs, who have taken advantage of the world's stand-offish-

ness and their own military superiority to grab more chunks of Croatia. Perhaps withholding recognition made some sense so long as there were worries about setting precedents for the Soviet Union. But now that that country is disintegrating into 15 fully fledged states, is it not absurd to deny ex-Yugoslav republics the rights given to ex-Soviet ones? With luck, recognition of the breakaway Yugoslav republics might even shock the Serbs into serious peace talks.

Maybe. But it is part of Yugoslavia's tragedy that there is no good policy towards it, only a choice of bad ones. So far, the EC's performance has undoubtedly looked hesitant and flawed. The trouble is that its new policy may be even worse.

A European Germany, or a German Europe?

From the start of the Yugoslav war, the West's overriding interest has been to keep it contained. True, a repeat of 1914, when trouble in the Balkans escalated to world war, is unlikely; but the risk that instability could spread through an already fragile Eastern Europe is much less unlikely, as is the danger that divisions in Western Europe could undermine its ability to help settle disputes in the East. So far, the war in Croatia, though awful, has remained local, and the West has remained united. That could now change.

Within Yugoslavia, the likelihood has increased that war will spread to Bosnia, an ethnic powder-keg, and to Macedonia, which has already declared independence. Serb extremists may now reckon that they have a month to impose their control on both. Serbia's propaganda machine will whip up yet more

