The Left is in an enviable position in Eastern Europe, after all: conservative nationalists still say that it is a rootless cosmopolitan affair, a Jewish cabal, a conspiracy of uninhibited Westernisers, agents of Abroad with a capital A, while liberals (impressed as they are by the ongoing anti-globalization protests) think that it is anti-American, anti-Semitic, anti-Western, anti-modern, etc.

Luckily, those accusations cancel each other out. They reflect nothing else but the general East European state of mind since 1989, nervous of anything new, hankering after a state of the world which may be regarded as natural, thus impervious to change not by virtue of the excellence of democratic capitalism, but by its pre-established harmony with human nature, defined according to the prevailing individualistic prejudices. If capitalism (be it circumscribed by the bourgeois nation-state or be it global, de-territorialized, hostile to parochial sovereignties) equals nature, then opposition to it is not only hopeless, but senseless. It is not evil, but silly.

In Eastern Europe, blind faith in capitalism is caused by many factors. First, "really existing socialism" (in reality, of course, state capitalism with exploitation, oppression, wage labour, preponderance of dead capital) had annihilated the workers' movement (no strikes, no trade unions, no resistance), therefore socialist tradition had become utterly meaningless and incomprehensible and, moreover, it had annihilated feudal aristocracy, independent farmers and the church - thus it has crushed any real opposition, either on the Left or the Right, to capital. This opposition - from revolutionary socialism on the Left and the "alliance of the throne and the altar" on the Right - has always limited the dominion of capital, at least ideologically. Thanks to Lenin, Stalin, Mao and their heirs, no nuclei of resistance were left after the collapse of centralizing planning-bureaucratic-dictatorial state capitalism except isolated cases of confused jacqueries complaining, in true mediaeval fashion, of scarcity, high food prices and low wages.

East European capitalism is, culturally, the purest version of capitalism. Obvious alternatives are deeply compromised and are mentioned in the public arena only by irresponsible demagogues and nostalgic fools.

All this is further exacerbated by a rampant colonial mentality.

The reigning ideology is of adaptation and accommodation. Otherwise quite sane people are pinning wholly unreasonable hopes on joining NATO or the EU, the impressive riches and power of the West had awakened an awed respect and an imitation drive, a combination of envy, admiration and ignorance which is hard to believe. West European racist slurs directed against East Europeans (which serve the despicable anti-immigration policies of West European Governments) are internalized in furious explosions of self-hatred and self-contempt. Unlike everywhere else, in Eastern Europe the global economic, environmental, health and cultural crisis is not attributed to the misdeeds of capital, but to a lack of capitalism
or to, as yet, insufficient capitalism, nicely complemented with anti-Judeo-Anglo-American conspiracy theories on the far right of the Garaudy variety and worse.

The idolisation of "the West as such" leads to new kinds of ethnicism. "Rich" Hungarians despise poor Rumanians, "rich" Rumanians despise poor Russians, "rich" Russians despise poor Azerbaijanis and so on. The more Western, or richer, a nation is, the more its right to behave like swine is recognized. Money-induced genuine humility is painful to see.

But these difficulties pale in comparison with the greatest social, psychological and ideological obstacle in the way of the Left, to wit, that in the popular mind "the Left" is identified with the heritage of the fallen Stalinist, national Stalinist and post-Stalinist regimes. Certain factions of the "nomenklatura bourgeoisie" (the expression belongs to the talented Hungarian fascist leader, István Csurka) who are now big business tycoons and their political entourage of agents and flunkeys are calling themselves social democrats and centre-left social liberals and they do represent "the Left" for the media and the manipulated public opinion. "The Left" in Eastern Europe means, officially, good governance, efficient management, loyal pre-Western attitudes, uncritical servility towards the US and the EU, privatisation, monetarist fiscal austerity policies, and a largely ideological and time-serving anti-nationalism and anti-fascism. The latter do not stop so called centre-left parties and governments from evincing attitudes characteristic of an old-fashioned social conservativism, an ingrained antipathy for subversive minorities, sub-cultures and, to put it politely, "lifestyles". "Left-wing" fiefdoms reek of paternalism, pre-modern habits of patronage and quasi-feudal, clannish loyalties. "Left-wing" power on the ground is often based on "privatised" networks of the former Party and state security apparatuses, transmogrified in rather nifty centres of new-fangled mafia capitalism.

These phenomena are substantially helped by another feature of colonial mentality, the feeling that everything of importance is decided far away by the mysterious overlords at the Sublime Porte, the Imperial and Royal Court at Vienna or by the holy Czar-Batiushka; nothing that we can do will modify the destiny of our country or of our family. The so-called centre-left governments in Eastern Europe present themselves as a combination of capable colonial administrators and loyal tribal chieftains: reliable, practical and sensible.

This may be popular with voters who cannot envisage any glimmer of choice on the horizon, but it cannot lend any intellectual respectability to the "Left" in the minds of critical-thinking people. Also it does depend on the growing, albeit discreet rehabilitation of the former dictatorial regime. This intolerable rehabilitation of post-Stalinist systems is emotionally rejected by liberal-democratic intellectuals and rightly so, but also, in my opinion, in a blind, rigid and uncomprehending manner.

For the truth is that the transition from state capitalism to private, competitive capitalism meant a huge economic crisis in the former Soviet bloc and its clones. Even in the economically most successful Eastern bloc country, Hungary, the per capita real income of two thirds of the population is considerably lower than before 1989, let alone in other countries with even poorer starting conditions. Inequality is truly obscene, job security is non-existent, social security is worthless, public goods have all but disappeared. The self-legitimation of "centre-left" parties and governments is based on a half-heartedly admitted continuity with the former regime, the last two decades of which are now mendaciously presented as a period of peace and quiet, of modest well-being and reasonable simplicity.
The moralising criticism of liberal intellectuals, including former dissidents (such as myself - but I changed my tune years ago now!) is understandably ineffectual since it concentrates on those rights and liberties especially important for intellectuals, e.g., freedom of expression and suchlike, that fails to account for the misery and chaos that the new democratic system of government brought upon our unfortunate compatriots. Liberal-democratic intellectuals do rightly reject the two main popular ideologies which are trying to counter the present impasse (nostalgic apologia for the post-Stalinist Khrushchevite state capitalism and its supplement, envious and resentful anti-Western nationalism) but their uncritical acceptance of periphery capitalism that wrought such havoc on East European nations seems to refute their paramount claim: independence. People say they may have opposed the former regime and its apologists, but they are nothing better than apologists for the present one, hated by all and sundry. Liberal intellectuals may criticise this or that government, this or that party, this or that corrupt official or tin-pot provincial despot, but they are not opposing the system which sustains the petty tyrants.

Therefore the men and women who are trying to rebuild a credible and free East European Left must speak clearly amidst all this confusion. The following points spring to mind:

(1) However unpopular this might be, we must unconditionally reject the fallen pre-1989 state capitalist regimes masquerading as "socialism".

(2) We must make clear, beyond equivocation, that we reject the Leninist tradition which was already shown back in 1918 by Herman Gorter, the great Dutch revolutionary Marxist, to lead away from socialism, not towards it.

(3) We must clearly break with the mental habit of pas d'ennemi à la gauche; no alliances with real or pseudo-social democracy.

(4) While we must support human rights campaigners, Greens, feminists, minority groups, ill-treated prisoners and mental patients, anti-racist and solidarity groups and the nascent and troubled anti-globalization movements, in other words, movements for radical reform, we should not forget that the main enemy is capitalism, and the enemy of our enemy is the proletariat, a word seldom heard in Eastern Europe or in the mainstream media anywhere, so that one might think the proletariat ceased to exist.

(5) As shown already in the 1960s by André Gorz, Serge Mallet, Georges Friedmann and others, the socio-cultural character of the proletariat has changed, owing to new technologies, a modified habitat, social reforms, to the demise of old-style social democracy and "Euro-Communism", etc., etc. But proletarians are not only men in rust-stained overalls and cloth caps or bérets basques on their heads, but people delivering wage labour, people without property or ownership of the means of production. The fact of capitalism proves the existence of the proletariat. There are workers even in the absence of a workers' movement, and their proletarian existence is still the main scandal of humanity. A Left distant from the shop floor, from the trade unions is inconceivable, and if conceivable, superfluous.

(6) The old-fashioned revolutionary tactics of the Left are indeed obsolete. Marx and Engels said in The Communist Manifesto that all class struggles are political struggles. This is true, but in practice it has meant that revolutionaries had to attack national governments and form other national governments with the disastrous results we know. Today, power and sovereignty are not dispersed, the direct rule of capital without the mediation of national governments (this is what is
called globalisation) so widespread that pronouncements against seats of
government, even if possible, would be futile and meaningless. The imposing but
slightly tragicomic revolutionary street theatre of essentially reformist anti-
globalisers in search of the elusive Bastilles and Winter Palaces they would like to
storm, show that the available rhetoric and aesthetics of revolution can quickly turn
into parody. Leftist internationalism is more necessary than ever, since capitalism is
more international than ever - not that most of contemporary oppression is not
doled out by repressive national governments and their armies of increasingly
savage thugs.

(7) The decay of the New Left into anti-Americanism - a real danger - would be as
disastrous as any nationalist degeneration of the left, from the débacle of August 4,
1914, the death of social democracy, the doctrine of "socialism in one country" and
the concomitant betrayal by the Komintern of all revolutions in Western Europe,
Asia and Latin America (remember Catalonia!), the idiotic "third worldism" of post-
1968 New Left that ended up supporting the likes of Castro and Assad demonstrate
that defeat and resentment and frustration have always caused the abandonment
of the most elementary principles, and transformed the left into an enemy of
freedom and the more or less unwitting stooge of fanciful state capitalist regimes,
willimg to hoist a red flag or two. I do not think that we should get excited over
Chávez or Lula to repeat the usual feelings of vicarious revolutionary orgasm.

(8) Start by trying to find out about the demands and grievances of the working
people near you.

(9) Continue by reading and re-reading the huge body of radical literature which is
less sublime than Pascal and Kafka and less reader-friendly and less succinct than
newspapers, leaflets and e-mail circulars.

(10) Prepare for hostility, solitude, derision, career setbacks, betrayals, infighting,
the arid and disconsolate vistas offered by radical critique. Be unfaashionable. Be
uncool. Do not be a fanatic and a puritan. Nobody will be grateful to you, but cheap
wine and cheap books are still available.

To be continued.