

Plenary Session

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Towards Responsible Citizenship: On Leaving the "Victim-Mentality" Behind in the Context of Central Europe

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Reflections on victim-mentality

1. Victim-mentality is a reality and a powerful factor in political life not only among the post-communist nations. I think that it can explain much of the appeal of the populist policies that expand and sometimes prevail across the world, from the USA to Russia, not to mention other regions, such as the Arab world. Perhaps it explains better than other attempts the victories not only of Orban or Kaczynski, but also of Trump. His slogan, "Make America great again" is a perfect expression of this mentality. Variants of it can be detected in the other countries. In Poland it would be "Make Poland proud again."

2. Being a victim is a familiar experience. Nations, ethnic groups, minorities are sometimes victims of wars, attacks, discrimination. In addition, we all are victims of various events and processes, from sporadic accidents to occasional hyperinflation, to the widespread extremely fast changes in social life caused by internet, to the universally experienced, slow but sure process of getting older and older. And we mostly feel that our being victims of those events and processes is undeserved.

In the post-communist countries the process of transformation from 'real' socialism to capitalism has enabled many to flourish and, at the same time, has made many others victims. The hope that overnight "normality" could come back proved unrealistic. Even those who fare better than before feel bad looking at those who prosper even better. For younger generations it is natural to compare the situation and prospects with Western Europe, and this also brings frustration. Poland was for many years an example of the success of transformation yet the frustration and, yes, the feelings of victimhood have recently prevailed.

3. We all happen to be victims yet victim-mentality is more than actually being a victim and more than perception of undeserved victimization. First, we mean a group sentiment rather than individual feelings. Secondly, it is a method of maintaining group identity, often by relating it to some traditional ways. Third, it is a way to explain our failures. Fourth, it is a force used to build a defensive attitude against a prevailing enemy, whether identified or not. So it is the feeling that external forces act against us, crush us, thwart our efforts to retain our group identity and achieve success.

If present, such mentality is indeed destructive to proper citizens' virtues. It functions as a trap, limiting one's ability to understand the social processes around us. They are complex, so personalizing them is often wrong and deeply misleading.

4. I think that a major and highly problematic aspect of the victim-mentality can be seen in the need to find and identify those guilty for our failures. To say that civilizational changes or historical processes cause our problems is rarely good enough for those who represent the victim-mentality. They feel that the enemy must be identified, pointed to, and named. Sometimes it is a group, occasionally an individual who usually is not seen as just himself but as a representative of a group. Thus, in Central and Eastern Europe Jews have often played the role of the collective enemy, responsible for all the misfortunes; and nowadays the role of the vicious archenemy is played by George Soros, not only in Hungary. (Cf. the burning of the effigy of a Hassidic Jew holding an EU flag, in Poland in November 2015; it was explained by the perpetrator during the trial to be the effigy of, well, Soros. Note also the attacks on Soros in Israel. In Poland, Adam Michnik has achieved a comparable status even though he has no wealth, only a wealth of ideas and activities.)

I believe that this need to find the person/s responsible for our misfortunes constitutes one of the main dangers resulting from the victim-mentality. According to this approach, those persons are not only responsible, they are also guilty of intentional plots against us, they are at (undeclared) war against "us."

5. One consequence of victim-mentality, namely a relative ease of rejecting and, indeed, victimizing others, can be witnessed in post-communist countries. The anti-refugee feelings are extremely high in Poland even though very few refugees have arrived, and almost none from Syria and Africa.

History plays an important role in fomenting victim-mentality. Past wars and occupations leave a legacy: the enemy is remembered for many generations. Sometimes this leads to destructive long-term attitudes having little to do with present day realities. Look, for example, at the Polish-Ukrainian relations. The unchanging image of the other is can function as a trap, limiting one's freedom of thought.

6. Jews can be closely associated with a certain variety of the victim-mentality. Many Jews would say, or at least feel, that victimization has been such a major element of Jewish history that for them such a mentality is only natural: if we are chosen, they say, it means chosen to suffer; the nations (that is, the goyim) are against us and that is why we suffer. Faced with such generalization I certainly disagree as do all those who reject the 'lachrymose' account (to use the term introduced by Salo Baron) of the history of Jews.

The fact is that the experience of victimization has been present also among Israelis, even though they enjoy a relatively strong state, and the state agencies can more easily discriminate against non-Jews than Jews.

At the same time, despite the presence of the victim-mentality among Jews I feel the result has not been overly destructive. Not only Jews in the diaspora but also Jews in Israel seem to me to be not deeply affected in their citizens' attitudes. The question is, Why? The answer, I guess, has something to do with the fact that victimization has not been important in defining what it is to be a Jew or an Israeli. Whereas it is there, especially the historical consciousness of discrimination, added to the awareness of the present-day dangers and the automatic UN condemnation of Israel, the definition of Jewishness, or of being a citizen of Israel, does not involve those facts.

7. If I am right about Israel then we should consider the hypothesis that the destructive character of the victim-mentality is present when this mentality constitutes an important aspect of the group self-definition.

At this point one can notice the special role of the post-communist countries. The high hopes of post-1989 transformation have led to results which are satisfactory to some but disappointing to many others. The disappointed ones form the electorate of the populists who get stronger and stronger. The feeling of helplessness causes the need to have a strong leader who would lead the nation and oppose the enemies. The enemies are now seen in the EU, the Western liberalism, and all those who support the changes that question the domination of the traditional values and family models. The dismantling of the democratic infrastructure of the state is approved by the followers of the populist leaders. Apparently, for them there are more important issues than the rule of law or the balance of powers. It seems that they feel to be so strongly victimized that this has become part of their self-definition. This is impossible to accept and hard to understand for those of their compatriots who feel that the transformation brought freedom and wide opportunities. As a result, 'two nations' have emerged, unable to cooperate, to understand each other, to accept the legitimacy of the other side. Interestingly, in Poland, both sides feel that the opponents are somehow 'communist' or 'post-communist'. This label means different things: for the liberal, pro-EU camp it means one party rule disregarding basic laws and rights, with the leader above democratic mechanisms; for the conservative, anti-EU camp it means that a new superpower, Brussels, has replaced Moscow, and dictates laws and social norms contradicting the traditional and Christian values. The division is deep and extremely destructive. This is true about other nations as well. Not only politics is affected but also other areas of public life.

8. To consider the example of Poland, it is instructive to see one of the main expressions of the victim-mentality, namely the fear of showing Poles as being, at times, victimizers and not only victims. A phrase, introduced at the turn of this century has since become very widely used: 'pedagogy of shame'. Bringing to public attention shameful events is seen as wrong and 'anti-Polish'. A sophisticated way of arguing for this position exists: it is claimed that on shame no community can be built. This is true, but the ability to face the difficult past is a sign of strength. For several years it seemed that the debate initiated by Jan Gross book "Neighbors" on the murder of Jews by their Polish neighbors under German supervision, in July 1941, showed the strength and maturity of the Polish public discourse. Poland was considerably more advanced in discussing this sort of topics than all other post-communist nations. This achievement has been largely reversed by recent developments, especially after the new government has assumed power.

The Polish "obsession with innocence" (the phrase introduced by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir) has been important and is growing. The law of January 26, 2018, about the Institute of National Memory, provides a good example. It includes the point that ascribing responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes to the Polish people is punishable. Its statement is so imprecise that it has provoked many criticisms, in Poland and abroad, especially in Israel and the US, based on the perception that the new law is supposed to delegalize mentions of war-time crimes perpetrated by Poles. In the statement issued by the Polish CCJ we reminded that Holocaust survivors routinely say that during the war they were afraid of Poles; would that be punishable? Recently, due to the international outcry, the law has been softened. The problem it has evoked remains.

9. Considering the issue in the framework of ICCJ approach we need to ask the fundamental question whether religion, religious attitudes and institutions, contribute to the victim-mentality, and how they can help to overcome it.

The religious aspect of the nation's identity is very clear in present-day Poland where the overwhelming majority is Catholic, at least formally. At the same time, the secularizing tendencies are also present and

are seen as connected to Western Europe. The dominant trend in the Church seems to combine two contradictory perceptions: we are the overwhelming majority and, simultaneously, we are a beleaguered minority. This leads to a very acute variety of victimhood, felt as undeserved and contrary to nature. The victim-mentality grows easily on this soil. Pope Francis is then seen as a traitor.

In many other post-communist countries more than one Christian denomination is seen as basic. In Hungary, there are two, in Ukraine three. This makes the situation more complex, but the feeling that Christianity is a victim of modernity is probably felt everywhere.

To be sure, there are other people in the Church(es), those who see modernity as providing more of a chance than of mortal danger.

10. Religious involvement – Christianity and Judaism, as well as other religious traditions – can help to overcome the victim-mentality provided that religion is understood as a deep and positive resource, that is, a source of strength in dealing with the problems we face.

This brings me back to Jewish part in the issue. I believe that the proper way of understanding the challenge set to Jews by Judaism provides an attitude that is opposite to the victim-mentality. It requires care for others, pursuit of justice, humility; and all of these citizens' virtues are to be based on the awareness of the being chosen. How this functions in reality is another matter. Still, being Jewish is ultimately related to the special relation to the Creator. In result, a mission of self-definition and self-determination follows, whether religious, especially in diaspora, or secular, in particular Zionist.