Wittgenstein, Fischer, and the Passions of a Bulgarian Publisher

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For generations, many scholars portrayed history as a function of the "Great Men" who supposedly shaped it – kings, generals, presidents, magnates, etc. – the rest of us being but spectators on the sidelines. Others sought the key to history in primal forces and inexorable laws. Marx, for one, looked to class conflict and the dialectic; both predetermined to lead us to a conflict-free utopia, no matter the upheavals and holocausts encountered along the way.

In the United States, the "Great Men" of history were brushed aside during the 1990s as a moldering clique of "dead white males," all in the good name of feminism and multiculturalism; while Marx and the dialect were yanked from the stage before utopia came into sight. In the aftermath of fall of the Berlin Wall, an American conservative, Francis Fukuyama, author of a book titled "The End of History," went so far as to declare history itself dead and defunct, a useless concept in what he naively expected to be a conflict-free post-Cold War world. [1]

Today, conflicts are still with us and the understanding of history remains as central to human affairs as ever before. But, as grand explanations fail one by one, some writers turn to details, to seemingly small events that may tell us more about our world and our prospects than broad-brush studies of great men and great cataclysms ever can.

In the late-1990s, two BBC journalists, David Edmonds and John Eidinow joined forces to write a serious piece of intellectual history that emerged against odds to become an international bestseller. The book, "Wittgenstein's Poker," takes a seemingly minor and obscure event – a 10-minute argumentative encounter between two European thinkers at a British university soon after World War II – and turns it into a metaphor for understanding twentieth-century thought, the spirit of the post-war world, class differences, and the vanished empires of Central Europe. The book is also a dramatic study in the psychology of two brilliant, ambitious, and difficult men as well as a whodunit-like investigation into the details of a near-forgotten, half-century-old incident.

"Wittgenstein's Poker" takes its name from the iron fireplace poker with which legendary philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein allegedly threatened to strike up-and-coming thinker Karl Popper during a debate hosted by Cambridge University's Moral Science Club in March, 1946. The subject of the debate: Are there philosophical problems?

By the time of the debate, Wittgenstein – who wrote his first opus, the positivist classic "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," under fire in the trenches while serving in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I – was finalizing the manuscript for "Philosophic Investigations," a book that was to propose that

[1] (French thinkers, by the way, elegantly sidestepped grandiose historical theories during the 1980s when Pierre Nora's epic "The Place of Memory" showed is that history is not necessarily about history at all, but rather about those who write history, i.e. about how and why people at different times and in different places remember and portray things that came before them as they do.)

traditional philosophic quests for moral and intellectual certainties are meaningless and that the purpose of philosophy should be clarification of language. Indeed, Wittgenstein held, philosophic questions were nothing more than puzzles. Only investigation of language can lead us out of our intellectual confusions like trapped flies led out of a bottle. Karl Popper, on the other hand, was a thinker of more tradition bent who, despite questioning concepts of absolute truth, held that moral and social issues were the very substance of philosophy.

In 1946, Wittgenstein was a figure of world renown, on the way to eclipsing past mentors such as Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. Popper was a newcomer to British academia after having sat out the wartime as a refugee in New Zeeland. Both men were convinced of their own rectitude and brooked no dissent. Also, both were born and shaped in Vienna, offspring of assimilated Jewish families that had converted to Christianity. Wittgenstein was a scion of a family of steel magnates, one of the richest in Europe. His siblings were artistic and high strung; indeed, several committed suicide. One brother, Paul, went on to win fame as a brilliant pianist despite having lost an arm in combat in the First World War. Prior to World War I, Ludwig voluntarily gave up his share of the family fortune and set out to live the life of an ascetic while pursing his vocation of philosophy. Popper's roots were humbler, possibly making him all the more determined to eclipse Wittgenstein professionally. In a sense, the thinking of each man represents opposite responses to the wars and horrors of the 20th century: Seeming acceptance of moral relativism on the part of Wittgenstein and a commitment to moral and social certainty on the part of Popper.

As recounted in Popper's memoirs, the 1946 debate quickly turned heated. Wittgenstein, violently gesticulating with a poker he had seized from the room's fireplace, taunted Popper to name an irrefutable moral truth. "Thou shalt not threaten a visiting lecturer with a poker," Popper claims to have countered. Wittgenstein, again according to Popper, then flung the poker aside and stormed out of the room, leaving Popper – and the concept of moral truth – the victor. The problem is that not all those who were present remember the event as Popper did. Edmonds and Eidinow assiduously tracked down surviving witnesses, many of them philosophers and specialists in Epistemology, the theory of knowledge. Ironically, none of these experts on perception and knowing could agree on exactly what had happened!

The aftermath of the tale is more certain. Wittgenstein died in 1951 and to this day remains a cult figure in world popular culture. Contemporary scholars acclaim him to be one of the most influential philosophers of all times. Despite this, Wittgenstein's theories and method have slipped from favor. Instead, the concerns of philosophy have returned to moral and social issues of the sort addressed by Popper, even though Popper himself is increasing forgotten and his works read less and less. In the end, Popper may well be best remembered for his concept of an "Open Society," a phrase that inspired his one-time student George Soros to fund a cornucopia of intellectual and social projects in Eastern Europe for more than a decade and a half following the collapse of Communism in 1989.

In their second book, "Bobby Fischer Goes to War," Edmonds and Eidinow turned their talents to another seemingly peripheral intellectual encounter between two brilliant and eccentric men – the Fischer-Spassky world chess championship of 1972 – and use it a key for examining the US, the Soviet Union, and their relations at

the time. The book is also a near-Shakespearean study of the passions of both protagonists and the ultimate tragic decline of Fischer, the official winner of this epic confrontation.

In 1972 US-Soviet relations were at a turning point. The Vietnam War was drawing to a close, Cold War tensions were thawing, and two decades of bilateral cultural exchange were revealing to Americans and Soviets the human face of each other's societies. Nevertheless, the planned Fischer-Spassky world championship at Reykjavik, Iceland was heralded as an East-West showdown, a test of the intellect, mettle, and legitimacy of the two superpowers in which a dynamic post-war America was out to break the Soviet hegemony on world chess. In large part, this was due to the clichés and stale imagination of the world's press but also to the showmanship and near-hysterical ambition and political fanaticism of one of the two participants.

Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky, the most brilliant chess masters of their time, were unlikely Cold Warriors and equally unlikely representatives of their respective countries. Spassky, whose politics leaned more to Russian nationalism and conspiratorial anti-Semitism than to Socialism, once publicly posed the question of whether Lenin had died from syphilis. Large apartments and good living were more to his liking than world revolution. Bobby Fischer, Chicago-born and Brooklyn-bred, was the son of a married Eastern European Jewish emigrant and a Hungarian immigrant physicist with whom she had a wartime affair. Brilliant and with a near-autistic focus on chess, Fischer later became a fundamentalist Christian and doctrinaire anti-Semite and anti-Communist. It was Fischer who turned the Reykjavik championship into a spectacle of political confrontation and personal ambition. Fischer would do anything to crush the Communists and to win the world title, histrionics and theatricality included. For Spassky, the championship was about chess; for Fischer, it was, to use an infamous term, "Total War."

Before and during the match, Fischer turned to psychological warfare, alternately canceling and postponing games, arriving late, calling for changes in venue, and complaining about cameras, lights, the color of chessboards and the Nordic placid nature of the people of Iceland. All this wore down the more retiring Spassky, contributing to his defeat as well as to the media circus that surrounded the championship. It is said that at one point Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had to step into the fray and plead with Fischer to go ahead with the match. According to his memoirs, Kissinger only managed to get Fischer's attention by announcing that "the world's worst chess player was calling to speak with the world's best."

Following the championship, Spassky returned to the Soviet Union. His debriefing led authorities to conclude that the Soviet chess structure was rusty and outdated, an early official acknowledgement of a larger ossification that hastened the economic and administrative decline of the Soviet Union. Today, Spassky lives in Paris and is still active in the world of chess. After fulfilling his dream and winning the world championship, Bobby Fischer simply disappeared. In the three decades since, he has surfaced every now and then, most famously during the 1990s to play in Serbia during the Bosnian War in defiance of a US boycott and again only a few years ago when he was arrested at Tokyo airport while traveling with an expired US passport. At both sightings, Fischer entertained the press with hysterical anti-

American outbursts. Fischer is said currently to be living in seclusion in Iceland, the guest of an eccentric millionaire.

Sidebar

This past week, David Edmonds and John Eidinow visited Sofia to celebrate the publication of the Bulgarian translation of “Bobby Fischer Goes to War.” Their earlier book, “Wittgenstein’s Poker” appeared in Bulgarian translation in 2004. The publication of Bulgarian editions of both books is the result of a passion of publisher Mario Krastev (41T Eood) to bring to Bulgarian readers high-quality, authorized translations of influential new titles in intellectual history that are durable, well designed, and well-printed on decent quality paper. This is more of a challenge than it might at first seem. The Bulgarian book market is small, average print-runs are minuscule, and costs per volume high. In the case of Bobby Fischer Goes to War, Krastev managed to gain the support of Austrian-owned GSM operator Mtel, who subsidized the costs of the present print run. A Bulgarian edition of Eidinow and Edmond’s most recent title, "Rousseau's Dog," is now under discussion.

Credit

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