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**Dr Mark  
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**MORAL MATTERS**

## Communism's evils are still in our midst

**Y**ESTERDAY, my friend Roger Scruton marked his 70th birthday by publishing a novel. *Notes From Underground* is 'set in the twilight years of the Czechoslovak communist regime', in a world 'in which every word and gesture bears a double meaning, as people seek to find truth amid the lies and love in the midst of betrayal'.

I was a young lecturer in UCD when I first encountered Scruton. He came to give the Agnes Cuming Lectures in Philosophy shortly after the collapse of communism in 1989.

What I didn't realise at the time was the extent of his activities behind the Iron Curtain.

Scruton's visit had a significant impact on my life. As I wrote in my book on Scruton in 2009, it was 'a message of love of affirmation and of hope in a world dedicated to their ruin'.

If Scruton could convey that message with conviction, it was because he was no ordinary philosopher. Unlike many left-wing intellectuals, who sought to undermine Western culture from the luxury of their university, Scruton took his message to the real enemy which he correctly identified as communism. He did so not only in writing, but also by visiting the underground resistance movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

*Notes From Underground* is based on his experiences in those benighted places during the mid-Eighties. Back then, cities like Prague 'lay like unopened coffins in the vault of time'. They were ghost towns where 'people seemed to notice nothing and to smile at no one'. From 'fixed and expressionless eyes', they would stare at shop windows whose only contents were 'bottled vegetables, a few slogans, perhaps a sculpted sausage or an artist's impression of a cheese'.

Of course, the people forced to live under such a demonic system were not fools. They were not duped by the endless propaganda which flowed like slurry from party headquarters. They knew the real message was that, 'things here cannot change, that you are not to hope or plan or strive, that everything has been fixed eternally, and that nothing remains for each successive generation but to append its signature to the fixed and senseless decree'.

Armed only with his message of hope, Scruton visited Prague to address a 'private seminar'. After ringing the doorbell of an old apartment, he heard a 'listening silence'

followed by 'shuffling footsteps'. He was escorted in to a room containing the 'battered remnants of Prague's intelligentsia: old professors in their shabby waistcoats; long-haired poets; fresh-faced students who had been denied admission to university for their parents' political "crimes"; priests and religious in plain clothes; a would-be rabbi; even a psychoanalyst'.

For such people, the communist posturing of so many Western intellectuals was a sin. Scruton, however, was not one of those.

If he stood out, it was because he courageously proclaimed that, in every place where communists had achieved power, they released 'what was lowest in human nature, rejoicing in destruction and despising every loyalty that was not motivated by cynical calculation'.

**I**N those shabby priests and poets, those who 'stood upright in the flow of lies', Scruton saw 'how civilisations survive'. In 1985, he was expelled from Czechoslovakia and placed on the Index of Undesirable Persons.

But not before he had strengthened those 'orderly souls' with a vision of a world 'in which virtue is rewarded and vice held at bay, a world that 'exactly corresponds to the faith that built the city of Prague, and whose traces remained in the hollow carcasses of buildings torn from their history and left to rot in the common graveyard'.

The Berlin Wall fell, and many of those 'orderly souls' emerged from the underground to assume positions of power. One of them was playwright Vaclav Havel, who became President of the Czech Republic. In 1998, he awarded Scruton with the Medal of Merit for services to the Czech people.

Looking back, it is hard to imagine that such a world existed in the relatively recent past. However, not only did it exist but, 25 years after its purported collapse, the spectre of communism still haunts Europe.

As Scruton wrote only last week: 'Few of the current generation of West European politicians have had to wrestle with the inner nature of the Soviet Union, or to explore the deep psychology of those like Vladimir Putin and his circle, who were formed as secret police officers under communism'.

*Notes From Underground* is a salutary warning from someone who has wrestled with that diabolical system. In reading it, we are reminded of a grim and terrifying reality which no one who values freedom can ever afford to forget.

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