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BORIA SAX

What is a Dissident? My Correspondence With Lutz Rathenow

Lutz Rathenow and Boria Sax are preparing a longer publication based on their correspondence across the Berlin Wall during the seventies and eighties. This is document of an era which, though barely over, is already slipping from memory, even as it becomes an object of misplaced nostalgia. The following essay is conceived as a partial introduction.

If being a social “outsider” were as romantic as our books and movies have always made it seem, there probably wouldn’t be any outsiders at all. Our culture is saturated with a mystique of revolution to a point where just about everyone marketed as a celebrity is presented as an outsider, from Elvis to H. Ross Perot, from Allen Ginsburg to Ronald Reagan. In individual cases, such claims range from distortions and partial truths to complete nonsense. Collectively, such claims are one tremendous lie, which runs through our whole society.

In the former Soviet bloc, the lie was used to bolster the government, which proclaimed itself “revolutionary” and branded all opposition as “reactionary.” In the United States as well, a romanticized mystique of alienation is generally used to obscure a reality, in which profoundly individual perspectives are often ruthlessly suppressed. It is especially important to note this, because what we used to call “dissidence” is, as I will explain later, a form (more accurately, several forms) of social alienation. That is the broad topic of my discussion here.

The glamorization of alienation may serve as a palliative, to soften painful experience. It may also be used as a marketing tool. Neither of these reasons is necessarily reprehensible. But, whether the motivation be noble, tawdry or simply human, such romanticism generally distorts the record of our experience. Honesty requires that, in reconstructing events, I endeavor to avoid this.

For the government authorities in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe prior to about 1989, “dissidents” were contrary, egotistic, willful and, often enough, manipulated by Western powers. The dissidents themselves—whether liberal, religious, nationalistic or communist—, generally viewed

themselves as defenders of basic freedoms. The Western intelligentsia tended to be very uncomfortable with the term “dissident,” often dismissing it as a superficial media creation.

The meaningfulness of the term now seems beyond question, but our various ways of understanding it have blended. Those of us who supported the dissidents, and continue to admire them, should, by this time, be able to admit that they may often have made questionable decisions. Those who held back support, however, should certainly recognize that the dissidents, whatever their failings may sometimes have been, upheld high ideals under stressful and confusing conditions.

Lutz Rathenow was a “dissident” in East Germany. Corresponding with Lutz over more than a decade, I found myself abruptly initiated into the sort of amorphous fear that permeated East European society, without the experience necessary to put this in perspective. There were times when I would obsessively go over every turn of phrase in a letter, noticing every ambiguity and wondering how it might be received by the censors. It became surprisingly easy to imagine these unseen observers as almost omniscient beings, aware of everything either Lutz or I had done in our lives. At other times, I might forget about them almost entirely.

All of that began when I was a graduate student at the State University of Buffalo, and one of my professors, Dr. Erika Metzger, showed me a little magazine of poetry entitled *Klingsor* that she had published. It contained a couple of poems by Lutz Rathenow which she had smuggled out of East Germany. One of them was as follows:

In Auschwitz
Schweigen sollten wir
beim betrachten all dessen
Still sein sollten wir
ganz still
und schließen den mund
(worte sind hilflose kläger)
Schweigen sollten wir
obwohl wir nicht schweigen sollten

[In Auschwitz
We ought to be silent
as we contemplate all this
We should be still
completely still

should close our mouths
 (What use are words?)
 Because we should have spoken
 We should be silent now]

Auschwitz may be too large a theme for any poet. A pedant might have called this poem “bland” or something of the sort. Yet can anyone really say how poems fail or succeed? Though the sentiment may not have been original, and no images enlivened it, a passionate desire for righteousness reached me through those clumsy lines.

I got Lutz’s address and wrote to him. Those poems in *Klingsor* were, I later learned, his first publication abroad. He sent me more poems. In the first batch was the following piece, next to which he had written in the margin “important” (“wichtig”).

NOTIZ ZUR JAHRESZEIT

Herbst ist. Kein Baum
 zwingt die Blätter zu leben. Schmutz
 blüht in den Strassen. Tage,
 zertrömmelt vom Regen. Ein rastloses Sterben
 setzt an: aufwiegelt das Jahr
 zu noch kälteren Zeiten.

[CONCERNING THE SEASON

Autumn is. No tree
 supports its leaves. Dirt,
 blossoms in the street. Days,
 the pounding of rain: A restless dying
 begins: rouses the year
 to still colder times.]

In context, I understood the poem—correctly, I am still sure—as an allusion to the possibility of increased repression.

I translated and published a number of his poems, or at least tried to publish them. The high quality of his work is now widely appreciated by critics (the lines I have quoted are not much more than juvenilia). But there was not much American interest in his work. Journals devoted to Germany were reluctant to print work by dissidents, since that might endanger their contacts with the GDR, while other publishers were simply afraid of being stamped as “cold warriors.”

Although my contribution was very modest, Rathenow went on to make a reputation almost entirely through work smuggled out of the GDR and published illegally in the West. His first book, a collection of stories entitled *Mit dem Schlimmsten wird schon gerechnet* (*Prepared for the Worst*), appeared with a West German publisher in 1980 and immediately led to his arrest. Rathenow was released after about a month, though he refused either to emigrate or to refrain from Western contacts. The book of stories was followed by collections of poems

and dramas. I finally translated and edited a collection of his works entitled *Contacts/Kontakte*, which I had published in 1985 with The Poet’s Press.

Torn between the impulse to censor communication, to a point where it would be dull and innocuous, and curiosity, my exchange of letters with him would often acquire a disproportionate intensity. When I had something particularly sensitive to say, I would send a letter to Jürgen Fuchs, who would have it smuggled to Lutz. But, even then, I tried to be cautious. Words, given the possibility of censorship or worse, could become so charged with meaning that any misunderstandings could be magnified. But perhaps our letters were like written communications during the nineteenth century, epistles sent across a partially uncharted continent. The monetary cost was higher, the time of transport far greater and the carrier subject to many hazards along the way, circumstances that compelled people to choose their words with greater care.

It is an intensity that the medium of letters can not easily carry. I still don’t know for sure whether I tried to protect Lutz too much, or not enough, or whether I tried to do it in the right ways. A few times, I broke off correspondence, out of a combination of frustrations at misunderstandings, occasioned largely by the need for censorship, and the fear that Lutz would be hurt through association with me, somebody deeply involved with organizations like Amnesty International. I had spoken to the Helsinki Committee of the United States Congress on independent peace movements in Eastern Europe. I had prepared reports on the GDR and Hungary for the organization Human Rights Internet, and even wrote a report on GDR compliance with the United Nations Covenants, presented to the Human Rights Committee of the UN in Geneva. But Lutz wanted our letters to continue, and, after all, he was also in touch with exiled dissidents such as Jürgen Fuchs, people, in the eyes of the GDR, far more dangerous even than I. The authorities, had they decided to arrest him, would have had, under GDR law, plenty of excuses, so his protection lay mostly in publicity.

This concern, however, left me (and him) in an uneasy position between literary and political concerns. While much of Lutz’s writing seems tentative, he has, in my opinion, occasionally been able to achieve an intensity that is very rare in modern poetry. Here is one, somewhat random, example:

GLÜCK

Noch einmal diesen schönen Baum sehen
 in jenem langweiligen Mischwald
 Diese, Eiche, unter der wir rasten wollten
 als uns das Gewitter überrascht
 Doch wir rannten weiter, weg aus dem Wald
 in dem wir jetzt wieder stehen und
 jenen Baum betrachten, den ein Blitz
 nicht gefällt hat (Nur gespalten)

[LUCK

To see again this lovely tree
 inside that boring wood
 This one, an oak, beneath which we wished to rest
 When a storm took us by surprise
 But we ran further, away out of the wood
 Where we now stand again, and
 contemplate the tree, that lightning
 has not felled (only split)]¹

But, even in such a lovely piece, it was the misfortune of Lutz that his story seemed to overshadow his writing.

While I would not have translated and publicized his poetry without a certain belief in it, that was never my primary motivation. It is only in the past couple of years that I feel my critical distance is sufficient for me to feel reasonably confident in an evaluation of his work. Yet, even now, I cannot very well separate this work from his political engagement.

We do not always need to know something about an author in order to appreciate his or her writing. Virtually nothing is known about Dante or Shakespeare, yet this does not in the least prevent us from responding to their poetry. But once we do learn something about an author, I do not think it is possible to lay that knowledge aside in judging the literature. The work of Lutz is enhanced by his heroism, just as it may sometimes be diminished by his egotism. (Most unfortunately, since the days of Achilles, heroism and egotism have often gone together, but I think Lutz recognized the latter as a weakness and worked to overcome it.) Furthermore, in contrast to many poets, a relatively eventful life gave him something to write about.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of 1989, it has sometimes been hard for me to look back over our correspondence. I admire the civil courage that Lutz Rathenow showed as much as before. Sometimes I romanticized his struggle with the GDR authorities too much, but what else could I do? Wars are not romantic either, but we can hardly help making them seem that way, since they would otherwise be unbearable.

Now that the events are securely over, we should look for something in them that is universal. Lutz, I believe, still cannot help being a bit of an outsider in

some ways, any more than I can, though both of us have left our adolescent romanticism behind. And perhaps the meaning of our letters, with all their insight and their foolishness, is, in the end, two outsiders trying to come to terms with one another and with a period as strange and foolish as today.

Yet this formulation, while passably accurate, now sounds a bit archaic. The word "outsider" has begun to sound awkward today, while "dissident" has almost passed out of our vocabulary with the destruction of the Berlin Wall. Both concepts express, as I have already indicated, a "romantic" impulse, something that I will now attempt seriously to define. Romanticism is essentially an undercurrent of discontent which has accompanied modernity. While the movement embraced a vast range of political, religious and philosophic positions, the original romantics tended to prefer "nature" to civilization and "instinct" to calculation. They deplored the rise of commerce and industry as a fragmentation of society and desecration of the natural world. Romanticism was an impulse of rebellion.

"Dissidence" within the Eastern Bloc, like romanticism, was a sort of umbrella movement, embracing nationalists, religious people and communists, who had little in common beyond an opposition to the prevailing order. This was, in fact, the successor to romanticism. As such, government authorities recognized, dissent was, in a sense, "reactionary," though that is not necessarily a bad thing. Both romanticism and dissidence, as movements of opposition, could not survive in the absence of a dominant ideology. That the old words are now so inadequate shows the magnitude of changes in the last five years. Everyone is an outsider now.

¹Lutz Rathenow, *Contacts/Kontakte: Poems and Writing of Lutz Rathenow*, ed. and trans. Boria Sax (New York: The Poet's Press, 1985) 34-35. I have slightly altered the translation.