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Nationalism and the longing to belong, with best regards to Igor Shafarevich

September 15, 2016

When I recently packed up my office files, how I could resist re-reading some of the old letters in my files? In 1992, there was a major controversy at the US National Academy of Science over censuring their Foreign Member Igor Shafarevich for anti-semitic writings and actions. Added Feb.20, 2017: I just learned that Igor passed away yesterday in Moscow. Let me now dedicate this post to his memory. He was an old friend and we exchanged quite frank letters at that time (his letter to me is appended at the end of this post). I did not believe then and do not believe now that he was anti-semitic, but rather that he was a fervent believer in his country, its people and its traditions -- perhaps one should say its soul. Now, 24 years later, in a world with right wing movements sweeping the entire world and with the current US President, I found many things in that controversy very relevant

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today and it made me rethink my own beliefs.
Let me explain.

I met Shafarevich in 1962 at the Stockholm International Congress of Mathematics. I spent an evening drinking a bit more vodka than was good for me with Shafarevich and Manin. I met them next in 1979 in Moscow, neither having been allowed to travel to the West in the interim. (I recall Manin having a desk with a glass top under which he had kept all the many invitations he had been forced to decline.) But in the meantime, in spite of being so isolated, Shafarevich had built in Moscow one of the best groups of mathematicians working on the synergistic fusion of algebraic geometry with algebraic number theory. He has a strong personality, is a wonderful teacher and is also quite religious (Eastern Orthodox). In addition he has thought deeply about social science and how history molds the character of a country. He is now 93 and I am writing this blog wishing him well in these difficult times that, I think, have made his views important to revisit. Here is a quote from the last section of his essay "**Russophobia**" , (p.29 of this pdf) that provoked the 1992 controversy:

A thousand years of history have forged such national character traits as a belief that the destiny of the individual and the destinies of the people are inseparable in their deepest underlying layers and, at fateful moments of history, are merged; and such traits as a bond with the land—the land in the narrow sense of the word, which grows grain, and the Russian land. These traits have helped it endure terrible

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trials and to live and work under conditions that have at times been almost inhuman. All hope for our future lies in this ancient tradition. ...

..... We most likely are dealing here with a phenomenon to which present-day science's standard methods of "understanding" are completely inapplicable. It is easier to point out why individual people need *peoples*. Belonging to his people makes a person a participant in History and privy to the mysteries of the past and future. He can feel himself to be more than a particle of the "living matter" that is for some reason turned out by the gigantic factory of Nature. He is capable of feeling (usually subconsciously) the significance and lofty meaningfulness of humanity's earthly existence and his own role in it. Analogous to the "biological environment," the people is a person's "social environment": a marvelous creation supported and created by our actions, but not by our designs. In many respects it surpasses the capacity of our understanding, but it is also often touchingly defenseless in the face of our thoughtless interference. One can look at History as a two-sided process of interaction between the individual and his "social environment"— the people. We have said what the people gives the individual. For his part, the individual creates the forces that bind the people together and ensure its existence: language, folklore, art, and the recognition of its historical destiny.

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These words seem both romantic and an expression of the core of conservative appeals to preserve a country's traditions and cohesiveness, an appeal that we now hear around the world. The bulk of "Russophobia" is an attack on writers who, he believes, have denigrated the Russian "people" and who claim that the Russian peoples' salvation lies in replacing native Russian values with Western liberal and internationally oriented ideas. Naturally enough, some of these writers are Jews hence his being called anti-semitic in writing this essay. This seems quite ironic to me as the whole rationale for the state of Israel has been the restoration of Jewish traditions, language and religion, a homeland free of outside coercion. So his Jewish critics might have seen some parallels with their own aspirations rather than reading the essay as advocating a return to the days of pogroms. His letter to me, reproduced below, responds directly to some of the criticisms that he received.

However, my own upbringing and beliefs have always leaned towards these Western liberal values, so his essay has forced me to revisit my own biases. My own upbringing was in an international multi-cultural setting. My father had a PhD in anthropology and had started a school in Tanzania based on integrating tribes and teaching them basic technology and hygiene that they could bring back to their villages. Later he worked in the U.N. and invited home friends from many nations. It has always seemed an axiom to me that the world would gradually become one, each culture sharing its values with others and accepting the others' differences. How naive of me to

expect anything so simple! Conflicts were far away from our sheltered privileged neighborhood. The woes of the great depression were nowhere to be seen, the devastation of Hiroshima was a world away and I could blithely recite the Apostle's Creed when our neighborhood was not divided into religious ghettos.

Math is the most international profession so travel should have opened my eyes a bit: in 1963 I saw the still devastated Hiroshima with my own eyes; in 1967 I spent 2 weeks in Israel obeying the Torah with separate milk/meat meals; and later in 1967/68 I lived side by side with the highly visible poverty of third world Bombay. What I failed to fully appreciate was the passion with which Japan, Israel and India were all driven by their intact -- and strongly exclusive -- cultures. I was never called a "gaijin" (a strange foreigner) in the largely closed society of Japan though I'm sure that is how I was seen. I saw the contrast between the brown earth on the "West Bank" and the green irrigated land in Israel but not the absence of any trust between the Palestinian and Jewish peoples. I saw people living in the streets and cleaning our apartment with rags in Bombay but not their label of "untouchable" or "dalit". Little did I know how strong Hindu culture is (though my wife, in love with Hindu myths, was enlightened by André Weil that she could not convert and the best she could hope for was to be born a dalit in her next life).

As I see it now, there is a major conflict, not to be papered over, between the tolerant international liberal viewpoint and the passion with which each culture maintains its

traditions and passes them on generation after generation. I grew up completely committed to the former and my whole life working freely with colleagues from every part of the world reinforced this. But now I hear and read more and more voices that say "not so fast". Our culture, our jobs, our very identities are vanishing. The rapidity with which technology is advancing and the immense growth of international wealth, private and corporate, all support only the "one per cent" and the educated with ties to multiple countries. Moreover, the ever expanding population of refugees relentlessly aggravates the conflict. Every countries' unique identity is threatened by these forces and every country has plenty of right wing politicians riding the reaction to it.

I don't believe there is any simple right or wrong here. Much of the problem is due to the rapidity of change now. Everyone's lifetime is long enough for them to see whole livelihoods and communities disappear. It makes no sense to demonize either side. This is the core issue in the US election this year: Clinton represented the liberal "politically correct" internationalist standpoint and promised merely to fine tune the hurricane of change; Trump wildly asserts he can restore a strong and prosperous America with mid-twentieth century values without giving a hint of how he intends to do this. So Igor, wherever you are, I now look back on your essay "Russophobia" with more sympathy. I still feel that the persecution of Dalits in India and the apartheid of Palestinians in their homeland are evil but I also see how powerful is everyone's link to their traditions. As you said "individual people need *peoples* ... (their) "social

environment": a marvelous creation supported and created by our actions". I am now living in a small town in Maine which, I suspect, embodies quite a bit of traditional American values. But even this is threatened by many outside forces, the warming of fishing grounds, the closure of the shore by one-percenters. Who knows whether this town will still be the same when my grandchildren grow up?

Nov.4, 1992

Dear Mumford,

Thank you for your friendly letter. Of course it is hopeless to explain "where I stand" in 1 or 2 pages but I will try to say what I can. Certainly the slogans of patriotism can lead to bad things, but I don't know what slogans can't. You know probably what were the consequences of the slogans "egalite, fraternite, liberte" during "la terreur" and how the idea of "God's own country" became a warrant for the genocide of North-American Indians. I do not see a danger of such tendencies in the movement of mild national flavor to which I belong. Of course, there is the famous "Pamyat" but it is (a) completely isolated, (b) extremely scanty, (c) without any influence at all in this country and (d) probably created exactly to draw a picture of "russian fascism" (but here I am not certain). I was interested to read about my participation in "political rallies where others have explicitly called for 'cleansing' the government of all Jews, the violent removal of Yeltsin and the re-conquest of

the former Soviet Union". I never heard such appeals. Of course Yeltsin is a disaster but the common idea is to remove him by constitutional means which is quite possible and even probable if only he himself will not break the Constitution. Indeed it was exactly he who proclaimed the idea to "disperse the parliament". The idea to "re-conquest" the Soviet Union would be stupid if not insane. However, many people, including me, hope the country will re-unite in its principal parts -- simply because the people will see what a tragedy its disruption brings. The lies that are written about me would be not very important. But it is really dangerous if your media are feeding you with information of the same quality on more important subjects. In our country this is exactly the case.

But I think one has to say truly that all fuss about me was provoked by what I wrote about Russian-Jewish relations. The subject is painful but it is never good to avoid difficult situations pretending they do not exist. I tried to write with greatest restraint. Some people say that what I have written may be correct but it can give rise to anger and violence. I do not believe this is probable. But what is the logic of my opponents? My paper is composed mainly of quotations. Why do they not address their appeals to people who write or publish such things that even a quotation from them can provoke violence? But what I have read about myself in American newspapers is beyond any logic. The foreign secretary of the NAS

accused me of interfering in the careers of young Jewish mathematicians and preventing them from publishing their papers. Probably such accusations are punishable by court! In reality I have taken many troubles to help my students of Jewish (or partly Jewish) origin -- such as Golod or Manin -- in their careers. Not, of course, because of their origin -- I tried to do the same for all my students. The President of the NAS even makes me responsible for the policy of the Steklov Institute, while Arnold is in the same Institute and Fadeev is even its vice-director, both foreign members of the NAS. Novikov is head of a department there. Are all of them responsible? I also read how I advocated on television the views of "Pamyat" while I did not even mention the name. Formerly I believed that the novel of M. Twain about his attempt to be elected a governor was a parody and a vast exaggeration. Now I think it is a rather accurate description of American life. However I received many letters of support from the the US and this comforts me.

With best wishes,

Shafarevich

The above post has been translated into Hungarian and posted by Fijavan Brenk [here](#). This is great but I just want to add that I was not trying to argue for or against Nationalistic movements in the above. I just wanted to say that, as an old man, I have come to understand

them better. Personally, I am still an internationalist through relatives, friends and colleagues.

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