

**THE CIVIL SOCIETY**

An Interview With Merab Mamardashvili

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An Editorial

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*The idea of the civil society is in the air these days. It is an old idea, of course, but one that seems to have a special resonance in the contemporary climate of social opinion. One notes a number of international conferences on the subject. In a recent article Daniel Bell surveyed this rebirth of interest and concluded that "the demand for a return to civil society is the demand for a return to a manageable scale of social life. It emphasizes voluntary associations, churches, and communities, arguing that decisions should be made locally and should not be controlled by the State and its bureaucracies."*

*This demand is keenly felt in the Soviet Union where the winds of glasnost and perestroika are blowing through established structures. Pre-eminent among those calling for a return to the civil society in the Soviet Union is Merab Mamardashvili, of the Institute of Philosophy, Academy of Sciences, in the Georgian Soviet Republic. Born in 1930 in the town of Gori, Georgia, Mamardashvili is one of a new breed of philosopher in the Soviet Union: outspoken, broadly read and international in repute. He is the author of many books and articles including *Forms and Contents of Thinking*, published in 1968; *The Problem of Objective Method in Psychology*, published in 1977; *Classic and Non-classic Ideals of Rationality*, published in 1984; *Phenomenology and its Role in Contemporary Philosophy and Consciousness* and *the Philosophical Calling*, both published in 1988; and *Cartesian Thoughts*, to be published this year. He was recently appointed a Richard D. Lombard International Fellow at the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, and late in the summer he conducted a series of seminars there. The following interview reflects what was on Mamardashvili's mind at that time.*

*CAR - What is it like being a professor in the Soviet Union today?*

*MM - I don't do much teaching. In the Soviet Union the functions of teaching and research are quite strictly separated.*

*CAR - Would you like to do more teaching?*

*MM - Not in the conditions as they exist now. Marxist-Lent philosophy is required of every student in the universities and it takes armies of professors to meet this demand. If I were a professor I would become part of that army and I wouldn't find that very interesting. Research is more energizing and liberating.*

*CAR - Where did you do your university degree?*

*MM - At the University of Moscow. That was a mistake. I should have stayed in Georgia.*

CAR - Why was it a mistake?

MM - Because there was no one there who could teach me anything I wanted to know. I was forced to learn by myself. So I taught myself English and German and later French and spent most of my time in the libraries reading.

CAR - Who did you read?

MM - A lot of modern philosophy but especially the classical thinkers. Plato, Descartes and Kant are my beloved philosophers.

CAR - Weren't those classics taught in Moscow?

MM - Only in highly truncated form and largely to be refuted as decadent thinkers. You have to remember I was a student in the late forties. Stalin was still in power and it was at the height of the anti-cosmopolitan ideology.

CAR - How do you describe yourself as a philosopher?

MM - In traditional terms I would be called a metaphysician.

CAR - You are also billed as a political philosopher.

MM - In traditional terms it is quite natural to go from metaphysics to political philosophy. Plato and Kant would be examples.

CAR - What is your main interest as a philosopher?

MM - The study of consciousness and the symbolic structures of consciousness.

CAR - How did you first become interested in philosophy?

MM - By way of life. By a sense of aloneness, as though I had come from another planet and found everything strange. At some point in life, quite early in life, I think we all have a sense of being wrenched out of the normal, of seeing ordinary things otherwise. Things that go by themselves for other people do not go by themselves for you. Life is full of signs to be interpreted, Most we let pass. Some, however, we think about. Then we become philosophers. Then the signs begin to shed light on events.

CAR - How early in life did this happen with you?

MM - I remember one day in the fifth grade we were studying a history of Egypt. In the text a slave complains about his life. He sees no good in it and wants to commit suicide in order to go to paradise. I have always remembered the slave's complaint and eventually I came to see reality as he saw it and that raised questions of justice and rights in my mind. But later I came to see that the slave was wrong in wanting to attain an ideal life through suicide. The ideal always has to be an aspect of the real to be effective. The above is in the below. We can't take short cuts through history. We can't jump out of history. Gradually it occurred to me that it was what Russia did: she jumped out of history and committed the metaphysical suicide of trying to bypass reality for the ideal.

CAR - Explain all of that.

MM - We have to go back. As a philosopher interested in the phenomenon of consciousness - how consciousness shapes reality, perceives reality and can be mistaken about reality - I naturally draw heavily on Kant whose work on this subject has not in my mind been surpassed. But it was actually through Marx that I came to the problem in the first place, especially what Marx had to say about false consciousness. The question that occurred to me was: could you have a social situation that so co-opted consciousness that no philosophical question could ever arise, that no ideas would ever come into our heads that were not controlled by the social situation. I also read Orwell as a student and Orwell and Marx converged on the question of how language functions to mediate reality and to let consciousness emerge or not emerge. So the whole question of critical thought

became central for me.

CAR - Are you a Marxist?

MM - No.

CAR - Why not?

MM - Because he was wrong about too many things.

CAR - What was he wrong about?

MM - I'll come to that. I was explaining about consciousness and history. So it occurred to me that the Soviet Union was a state that had complete control of the structures of consciousness, such that no critical questions could arise. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that this had long been the case, that a long history of Russia had prepared the advent of Marxist-Leninism and Stalinism and the kind of state the Soviet Union has become in the 20th century.

CAR - How far back in history do you go?

MM - Back at least to Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century. I think there we find the substitution of what I would call anthropomorphic thought for historical thought. Ivan destroyed Russian society, he left everything in ruins. You may recall that in his time the aristocracy was developing the idea that property was to be held in perpetuity. This posed a threat to the authority and the power of Ivan. So he invented a police force whose role was to spy on the enemies of the tsar. Not surprisingly, it turned out that there were quite a few such enemies and they were all property holders. In this way Ivan substituted the reality of the tsar as the central social and political reality. Nothing was important if it didn't coincide with the will of the tsar. All of society became an elongated shadow of the tsar. But shadows aren't real. From that time forward unreality became the condition of social life in Russia. Russia became a shadow society. That is why the Enlightenment bypassed Russia. And that is certainly one of the reasons why the October 1917 Revolution succeeded. It formalized a long ahistorical tradition, recreating the conditions that gave rise to it. It was unreality built on unreality. As a consequence, Soviet citizens are still always shadow boxing, getting 48 kinds of permission to do simple things, not knowing ever who holds their destiny in hand, finding every attempt at a rational action thwarted by the shadows.

CAR - You sound like Kafka.

MM - It was Kafka who described the state as enveloping us everywhere but we can find it nowhere.

CAR - This raises the tricky question of how we know when we are in history. Certainly Marx and Lenin thought they were in history, on the very cutting edge of history as a matter of fact.

MM - Some cultural symbols may help explain this better than analysis. During Lenin's funeral there were banners proclaiming such things as: communism is the cradle of humanity, we will lead humanity into paradise, let the little children come to us, and the like. Lenin was buried in a position and in clothes reminiscent of Christ in the tomb. This deliberate parodying of religious symbolism is in itself indicative of ahistorical thinking, which is to say a form of thought that postulates ideals in such a way that they can never effectively interact with the real. Similarly, at the level of analysis Marx mystified the social process by appealing to the utopian thinking of the classless society, which was an updated version of the Golden Age myth. But where does the Golden Age exist? Nowhere. U-topia. To be effective, symbolic thinking has to be a way of illuminating reality. The symbol of the Golden Age doesn't say such an age once existed and we must

recover it. It is not something material. It cannot be destroyed by a material event nor can it be realized in a material event. Now Marx took the Golden Age for a material event. He thought by getting rid of private property a classless society would come about. He converted a metaphysical entity into a material possibility. That is the mistake the alchemists made. They tried to turn material means into spiritual ends.

CAR - How much of this was Marx and how much those like Lenin who used his thought?

MM - Later thinkers elaborated, but the mistake is in Marx's own thinking.

CAR - So how do we know we are in history?

MM - Historical existence requires conscious human participation in the events of history. This is how I get from my philosophical concept of consciousness to a political theory. History begins with the ability to describe history reflectively, the ability to fill in the blank spaces and provide meaning. If I were to put it in terms of my theory of the civil society I would say that historical reality is disclosed by citizens deliberating together in public forums.

CAR - Tell us more about this theory.

MM - All my life I have lived in a compressed society. The distinction between the state and society was eliminated. Our public life was like a black hole in the universe, so dense that it collapsed in on itself. I will express my notion in an image. Think of a chess game. You cannot understand a chess game by examining the pawns; you cannot even understand a chess game by watching the moves; you can only understand a chess game by understanding the storm of psychic forces between the moves. Civic life is like that. It takes place in the pauses, in the intervals, in the spaces of public life. The poet Rilke spoke of *leben in figuren* - life as a play of symbols. I use spatial images to make the point that we need room to think, to find ourselves, to determine our common purposes. So the concept of civil society calls for some distinctions: between public and private, between state and society, between the ideal and the real, between the inner and outer worlds. The civil society is based on an act of belief that by trusting people to pursue their own interests a symmetry will develop between the private and public worlds, that our free actions will converge for the common good. During the War it used to be said that the Germans were well organized. But exactly the opposite was true. You cannot organize society by imposing everything from the outside, squashing and denigrating everything that arises spontaneously. That is what happened in the October Revolution. The state stepped in and tried to mediate everything. And that is the death of civil society. It condemns citizens to a life after death, a minimal life that is guaranteed by the state but cannot grow. But as a French poet says: *Personne ne veut se rendre son âme* - We don't want to sell our souls. Now we have to return to the foundations and think historically about how we got out of history. We have to lift up our heads and liberate independent social forces. I have to say here that Marx was absolutely blind to the existence and the importance of privacy as a condition of politics. Private property and classes as independent social agents are necessary conditions for the civil society. When nobody is independent no politics is possible. A state without citizens is a monstrosity. There is a great irony in Marx because in denying private property he created a worse form of private property. Do you know what that was?

CAR - What was it?

MM - Privilege. It's devastating. It leads to the worst kind of political corruption which is the arbitrary exercise of power.

*We in America have the strong impression that things are changing in the Soviet Union, that a new day is dawning.*

*MM - The cat is out of the bag and I do not think we can put it back in. Still, the outcome of the present efforts of glasnost and perestroika is far from certain. We are moving around in a kind of fog and no one is quite sure about what is going on. I personally, of course, support the reform efforts and I have since the early 50s. Stalin was still alive but even then the spirit of reform was in the air. One source was the earlier, humanistic Marx who spoke so eloquently about genuine human development and alienation. It struck many of us that however severe alienation might be in the capitalist countries it was certainly very severe also under Stalin. It was a great intellectual tragedy that Marx's thought did not develop along these lines rather than sinking in the morass of utopian thinking. The other source for reformist thought was the humanist tradition of the great Russian writers of the 19th century and the religious philosophers like Nicolas Berdyaev. Their thought was kept alive by members of the older generation, some of whom were in concentration camps, some of whom taught in obscure provincial schools, some of whom were in exile, and some of whom went my way of learning on their own and trying to stay out of trouble. In time we came to know one another and in time, too, we came to have a certain influence.*

*CAR - But you are not inclined to overestimate that influence?*

*MM - Far from it. There is still a very primitive social grammar in the Soviet Union, the result of long centuries of shadow existence. That is why Marxism struck so many as a sophisticated political and economic philosophy. People didn't know the difference and were not equipped to examine it critically, historically. There is still something woefully lacking in the average citizen's sense of reality, something broken in their relationship to the world around them. They lack drive, they lack a love of life, they lack the will to self-determination. They are people without consequence, that is people who cannot understand social processes, who are unable to make social judgments and who lack the ability every citizen must have to relate external events to their internal convictions. In Marxian language they are alienated. Some Westerners say what we need is a good Constitution. But we have a good Constitution, perhaps the most democratic and forward looking of any in existence. The problem is we have so few citizens who are capable of living according to it and realizing what is embodied in it. Recently I was talking to some university students. They were complaining about the presence of so many policemen on their campus. I said, Why don't you organize and get rid of them. These days that might have some chance of success. But they just gave me a blank look. That kind of self-determination hadn't occurred to them.*

*CAR - How then will reform come about? Can the state create a civil society in the process of reforming itself?*

*MM - No, absolutely not. The state is the problem not the solution. Although I must confess many of my colleagues think that is the way to go.*

*CAR - Is Gorbachev on the right track?*

*MM - I think so, unquestionably.*

*CAR - What are his chances of success?*

*MM - No one can say.*

*CAR - This seems to leave you in a very precarious situation for if the public spaces you desire were in fact created wouldn't there be a great danger that they would be*

occupied by the wrong people?

MM - There is no guarantee that the civil society is always benign. But we must take the risk. The civil society corresponds to the historical possibilities of man and history as a drama of good and evil. This is the dignity of man: the choice of good and evil.

CAR - Isn't this somewhat fatalistic. It seems to diminish the political effectiveness of the freedom you desire.

MM - There is no formula for human freedom or remedy for human idiocy. Political efficacy is not the issue. Freedom is the issue.

CAR - That seems to place you squarely with the great 19th century Russian writers.

MM - It places me in the mainstream of the Western tradition. It makes me an historical thinker.

CAR - What do you think the social role of the philosopher, or any thinker for that matter, should be? Should they speak out and be socially committed?

MM - Speaking out is not the only way of doing philosophy. Given my background, I could make a case for the philosopher as spy.

CAR - But don't you have a special responsibility to society?

MM - I will not be a martyr. I will speak to the leadership when it is ready to hear me. Meanwhile, in my own ways, I will encourage and educate the leadership.

CAR - We are still left with the question of how the reforms might concretely come about in the Soviet Union.

MM - Several things can be mentioned. To begin with, the idea of reform has taken root in the minds of many thinkers and a considerable number of politicians, who are not to be confused with the Party functionaries. There is considerable ethnic unrest which if properly channeled can help the reform movement; in some states like Latvia and Estonia the genetic memory is reborn in a fresh outburst of republican spirit; there is unprecedented innovation in satellite nations like Hungary and Poland. Also there is the force of world opinion and a growing sense of solidarity among nations. I am inclined to speculate that the ecology movement might be the strongest force for reform. The Green Movement is very strong in the Soviet Union. In any event, reform is decidedly begun and in my own view it is now or never, the last chance for the Soviet Union to get on course. If this moment passes another is not likely to come again soon.

CAR - Is the Cold War over?

MM - The Cold War was in part the result of the primitive social grammar I referred to. We spoke about capitalism and socialism as though they were two competing systems. But capitalism is not a system in the same way that socialism is a system. Capitalism, if we understand it as the way of maximizing profits by means of large, concentrated, but socially fragmented production - that capitalism is only one historical phenomenon among the many phenomena that characterize contemporary European society. It is one phenomenon existing along with other phenomena that are entirely different in nature, in what might be called the contemporary European civil society, urban industrial society. The entire energy, all of the culture in what I call urban industrial democracies, is channeled through many social institutions and by forces that have nothing inherently in common with what I would properly call the capitalist phenomenon, in the strict meaning of that word. A capitalist phenomenon does not, from its inherent nature, penetrate all of the phenomena of modern European and American society. In that sense, the capitalist system does not exist.

But that cannot be said about socialism. Socialism represents a system and a structure

*which from its internal nature has penetrated through all the other phenomena of our society, including the moral and ideological strata. Our problem, then, consists in this: that we have socialist systems in this sense, but there is no developed civil society. Western countries faced the problem, in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, of implementing the capitalist phenomenon in a civil society; for us the problem is to implement the socialist phenomenon - in other words to convert what is so far the only system, into becoming one phenomenon along with the other phenomena of a developed, articulated, and structured civil society in which socialism could really take its place. It would be one phenomenon. And it should take that place because socialism is a great European idea, one of the great European ideas.*

*CAR - Perhaps socialism along the lines of the welfare democracies of Western Europe?*

*MM - Oh no! I don't think welfare is a good thing at all.*

*CAR - Not even for the destitute?*

*MM - Of course, we have to help people. I am opposed to the principle of welfare because it makes people dependent. To be mature we have to know why and how we live, what are the sources of our existence. Ortega y Gasset wrote about the masses as dead tissue, meaning that large numbers of people have no relationship with the sources of their existence. We come to that understanding through work and responsibility. But the principle of welfare alienates people from such sources as Marx so well said in his early writings. When I speak of socialism as a great idea I mean the principle of self-determination. I mean in short citizens who are developed to such an extent that they have social judgment, and muscles for responsible and risky actions in a society where they cannot even imagine a life in which they would not recognize themselves - or be without consequence. I do not want to live the kind of life in which I would not recognize myself, and I could not consider that kind of life to be my life. Only such people may be called citizens. Not those who have the right to take part in public affairs, but those who are obligated and are capable of carrying out their duties in public life. This is an old Greek idea, one of the great achievements of Greek society: we have not simply rights, but the obligation to take part in public affairs, to resolve our own problems.*

*CAR - Did you learn that from Plato?*

*MM - Yes. What attracted me to Plato was his powerful metaphor of the cave in which he depicts people struggling with shadows. That was my problem too. And Plato showed a way out: he showed that the shadows can be transcended by consciousness, by the ideal. And he showed further that there was not a complete rupture between the ideal and the reality. The polis can contain an ideal world as one element of its sociality. The body social is the carrier of rationality. Plato did not make the mistake of Marxist-Leninism: he did not let the ideal determine the real. Rather he began with the real, with the shadows, and reached the ideal through the ideal. It corresponds to what Christian theologians call the incarnational principle, the idea that commitment to the concrete and fidelity to daily tasks and work well done can be a way of realizing the ideal. When Plato's thought came into the religious tradition it became bifurcated: the Western strand retained much of Plato's realism and by the time we get to the Puritans it is in full flower. The Eastern strand, which quite powerfully influenced Russia, embraced a more mystical, other-worldly interpretation, holding that salvation consisted in denying the world rather than working to realize its ideal possibilities.*

*CAR - You've mentioned Immanuel Kant several times. What political lessons do you draw from that very difficult philosopher?*

*MM - Kant believed that the structure of consciousness was the same in everyone so bringing intelligence to bear on social problems was by the same token within the grasp of all. He believed that the spread of reason by its own logic would result in greater freedom and more civil liberties. He spoke about governments treating people with the dignity that should be accorded rational people. The particular idea I like in Kant is what he says about "the citizen of the world." One of Kant's rules of thought was to always think through the eyes of another and thus become cosmopolitan in outlook. Today we must all think from each other's perspectives and thus become citizens of the world.*

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