§ The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism

The downfall of the Roman Empire lasted three centuries. Two years have sufficed, without the aid of foreign barbarians, to dislocate irreparably the worldwide network of power directed from Moscow, its ambitions for world hegemony, and the economic, political, and social relationships that held it together. Search as one might, it is impossible to find a historical analogy to this pulverization of what seemed just yesterday a steel fortress. The granite monolith has suddenly shown itself to be held together with its own saliva, while the horrors, monstrosities, lies, and absurdities being revealed day after day have proved to be even more incredible than anything the most acerbic critics among us had been able to affirm.

At the same time as are vanishing these Bolsheviks for whom “no fortress is impregnable” (Stalin), the nebula of “Marxism-Leninism,” which for more than a half century had almost everywhere played the role of dominant ideology, fascinating some, obliging others to take a stand in relation to it, has gone up in smoke. What remains of Marxism, “the unsurpassable philosophy of our time” (Sartre)? Upon what map, with what magnifying glass, will one now discover the “new continent of historical materialism,” in what antique shop will one purchase the scissors to make the “epistemological break” (Althusser) that was to have relegated to the status of worn-out metaphysical speculations reflection upon society and history, replacing it with “the science of Capital”? Hardly is it worth mentioning now that one will search in vain for the least connection between anything said and done today [1990] by Mr. Gorbachev and, not Marxist-Leninist “ideology,” but any idea whatsoever.

After the fact, the suddenness of the collapse may seem as if it could go
without saying. Was not this ideology, from the first years after the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in Russia, in head-on contradiction with reality—and was not this reality, despite the combined efforts of Communists, fellow travelers, and even the respectable press of Western countries (which, for the most part, had swallowed whole the Moscow Trials), visible and knowable for those who wanted to see and to know? Considered in itself, had it not reached the height of incoherence and inconsistency?

But the enigma is thereby only doubled. How and why was this huge scaffolding capable of holding up for so long? Claiming to be “science” and “ideological criticism,” Marxism-Leninism promised the radical liberation of the human being, the instauration of a “really democratic” and “rational” society—and it came into being as the hitherto matchless figure of mass slavery, terror, “planned” poverty, absurdity, lies, and obscurantism. How was this unprecedented historical fraud able to operate for so long?

Where Marxism-Leninism settled into power, the answer may appear simple: thirst for power and self-interest for some, Terror for all. This response is inadequate, for even in these cases the seizure of power has almost everywhere been made possible by a large popular mobilization. Nor does this response say anything about its near-universal attraction. To elucidate that attraction would require an analysis of world history over the past century and a half.

Here we must limit ourselves to two factors. First, Marxism-Leninism presented itself as the continuation, the radicalization of the emancipatory, democratic, revolutionary project of the West. This presentation was all the more credible as it was for a long time—as everyone today happily forgets—the only thing seemingly opposed to the beauties of capitalism, both in the world’s metropolises and in the colonies. Behind this, however, there is something more, and here lies its historical novelty. On the surface, there is what is called an ideology: a labyrinthine “scientific theory” (Marx’s) sufficient to keep hordes of intellectuals occupied until the end of their lives; a simplified version, a vulgate of this theory (first formulated by Marx himself), with an explanatory force adequate for the mere faithful; finally, a “hidden” version for the true initiates, first appearing with Lenin, that makes the absolute power of the Party the supreme objective and the Archimedean point for “the transformation of history.” (I am not speaking here of the summits of the Apparatuses, where pure and simple obsession for power, coupled with total cynicism, has reigned at least since Stalin.)
Holding together this edifice, however, were not "ideas," or readings. It was, rather, a new imaginary, which developed and changed in two separate ages. In the properly "Marxist" phase, during the era in which the old religious faith was dissolving, it was, as we know, the imaginary of secular salvation. The project of emancipation, of freedom as activity, of the people as author of its own history, was inverted into an imaginary of a Promised Land, within reach and guaranteed by the substitute for transcendence that had been produced by that age, namely, "scientific theory."1

In the following, Leninist phase, this element, while it did not disappear, found itself increasingly supplanted by another: more than the "laws of history," it is the Party, its boss, their actual power, power itself, brute force that became not only the guarantor but the ultimate point of fascination and fixation for representations and desires. At issue here is not fear of force—real and immense though it is where Communism is in power—but the positive attraction force exercises over human beings. If we do not understand that, we will never understand the history of the twentieth century, neither Nazism nor Communism. In the latter case, the combination of what people would like to believe and of force has long proved irresistible. And it is only from the moment when this force no longer succeeded in imposing itself (Poland, Afghanistan), only when it became clear that neither Russian tanks nor H-bombs could "resolve" all problems, that the rout truly began and that the various brooks of decomposition united in the Niagara that has been pouring down in torrents since the Summer of 1988 (the first demonstrations in Lithuania).

**Marx and Marxism**

The strongest reservations and the most radical criticisms with regard to Marx cancel neither his importance as a thinker nor the grandeur of his effort. People will still be reflecting upon Marx when they will search with difficulty in dictionaries for the names of Messrs. von Hayek and Friedman. It is not, however, by the effect of his work that Marx has played his immense role in actual history. He would have been only another Hobbes, Montesquieu, or Tocqueville, had a dogma not been able to be drawn from him—and had his writings not so lent themselves. And if they do so lend themselves, this is because his theory contains more than just the elements of that dogma.

The vulgate, derived from Engels, which claims that Marx's sources
were Hegel, Ricardo, and the French "utopian" socialists, masks half the truth. Marx is equally the inheritor of the emancipatory or democratic movement—whence his fascination, to the very end of his life, for the French Revolution and even, in his youth, for the Greek polis and démos. This movement of emancipation, this project of autonomy, had already been in motion for centuries in Europe and had culminated in the Great Revolution. But the Revolution left an enormous, and double, deficit. By furnishing it with new bases, the Revolution maintained and even accentuated an immense inequality of actual power in society, rooted in economic and social inequalities. It maintained and reinforced the strength and structure of state bureaucracy, "checked" to a superficial degree by a stratum of professional "representatives" separated from the people.

First in England and then on the Continent, the nascent workers' movement responded to these deficiencies as well as to the inhuman existence to which capitalism, spreading with lightning speed, had subjected the working class. The seeds of Marx's most important ideas on the transformation of society—notably that of the self-government of the producers—are to be found not in the writings of the utopian socialists but in the press organs and self-organizing activity of English workers from 1810 to 1840, long before Marx first began writing. The nascent workers' movement thus appears as the logical continuation of a democratic movement broken off midway.

At the same time, however, another project, another social-historical imaginary came on the scene. This is the capitalist imaginary, which transformed social reality before one's very eyes and clearly seemed destined to rule the world. Contrary to a confused prejudice still dominant today—and which is at the basis of the contemporary version of classical "liberalism"—the capitalist imaginary stands in direct contradiction to the project of emancipation and autonomy. Back in 1906, Max Weber derided the idea that capitalism might have anything at all to do with democracy, and one can still share a laugh with him when thinking of South Africa, Taiwan, or Japan from 1870 to 1945 and even today. Capitalism subordinates everything to the "development of the forces of production"; people as producers, and then as consumers, are to be made completely subordinate to it. The unlimited expansion of rational mastery—pseudomastery and pseudorationality, as is abundantly clear today—thus became the other great imaginary signification of the modern world, powerfully embodied in the realms of technique and organization.

The totalitarian potentialities of this project are readily apparent—and
fully visible in the classical capitalist factory. If capitalism neither in that
epoch nor later succeeded in transforming society into one huge factory,
with a single command structure and a single logic (which, after their own
fashion and in a certain manner, Nazism and Communism later tried to
do), this was due to rivalries and struggles between capitalist groupings
and nations—but especially to the resistance the democratic movement
offered, from the very outset, on the societal level and to the workers’
struggles on the factory level.

The contamination of the emancipatory project of autonomy by the
capitalist imaginary of technical and organizational rationality, with its
assurance of automatic “progress” in history, occurred rather early on (it is
already found in Saint-Simon). It is Marx, however, who was the principal
theoretician and artisan of the penetration into the workers’ and socialist
movement of ideas which made technique, production, and the economy
into the central factors. Thus, via a retroactive projection of the spirit of
capitalism, Marx interpreted the whole of human history as being the
result of the evolution of the forces of production—an evolution which,
barring some catastrophic accident, was to “guarantee” our future free-
dom. Upon reworking, political economy was brought into action in order
to show the “inevitability” of the path to socialism—just as Hegelian
philosophy, “put back on its feet,” was used to unveil a Reason secretly at
work in history, realized in technique, and capable of assuring the final
reconciliation of all with all and of each with each. Millenarian and
apocalyptic expectations of immemorial origin were thenceforth given a
scientific “foundation” fully consonant with the imaginary of the age. As
“last class,” the proletariat received its mission as Savior, and yet its actions
were necessarily to be dictated by its “real conditions of existence,” them-
sev- selves tirelessly fashioned by the action of economic laws that had to force
it to liberate humanity as it liberated itself.

The Effects of Marxism

One forgets all too easily today the enormous explanatory power the
Marxist conceptual outlook, even in its vulgar versions, long seemed to
possess. It revealed and denounced the mystifications of classical liberal-
ism, showed that the economy operates for capital and for profit (a fact
which, to their bewilderment, American sociologists have come to dis-
cover over the past twenty years), and predicted the worldwide expansion
and concentration of capitalism. Economic crises have succeeded one another for more than a century with almost natural regularity, producing poverty, unemployment, and an absurd destruction of wealth. The carnage of World War I, the Great Depression of 1929–33, and the rise of fascism could only be understood at the time as striking confirmations of Marxist conclusions—and the issue of the actual rigorousness of the arguments leading to these conclusions held little weight when compared to the crushing mass of the real situation.

Nevertheless, under pressure from the workers’ struggle, which continued nonstop, capitalism was obliged to transform itself. From the end of the nineteenth century onward, the claim that capitalism would inevitably lead to (absolute or relative) pauperization was disproved by the rise in real wages and by reductions in work time. Enlargement of domestic markets through increased mass consumption gradually became the conscious strategy of the ruling strata and, after 1945, Keynesian policies more or less assured an approximation of full employment. An abyss came to separate Marxian theory from actual reality in the world’s wealthy countries. However, with the aid of theoretical acrobatics, to which national movements in the former colonies of these countries seemingly lent support, some people transferred onto the countries of the Third World and onto the “wretched of the Earth” the role of “builder of socialism” which Marx had imputed, with less unlikelihood, to the industrial proletariat of the advanced countries.

The Marxist doctrine has undoubtedly aided people enormously to believe—therefore, to struggle. But Marxism was not the necessary condition for these struggles which have changed both the condition of the ruling class and capitalism itself, as is shown by the countries (for example, Anglo-Saxon) into which Marxism has been able to penetrate only to a slight degree. And there was a very heavy price to be paid.

If this strange alchemy, in which are combined (economic) “science,” a rationalist metaphysics of history, and a secular eschatology, has been able to exert for so long such a powerful appeal, it is because the resulting mixture responded to the thirst for certainty and to the hope for a salvation guaranteed, in the last analysis, by something much greater than the fragile and uncertain activities of human beings, namely, the “laws of history.” It thus imported into the workers’ movement a pseudoreligious dimension ripe with catastrophes to come. In the same gesture, it also introduced into this movement the monstrous notion of orthodoxy. Here again, Marx’s
exclamation (in private), “I am not Marxist,” bears little weight in comparison with the real situation. The person who says “orthodoxy” says need for appointed guardians of orthodoxy, for ideological and political functionaries, as well as demonization of heretics. Joined with modern societies’ irrepressible tendency toward bureaucracy, which from the end of the nineteenth century onward penetrated into and came to dominate the workers’ movement itself, orthodoxy powerfully contributed to the establishment of Party-Churches. It also led to a near-complete sterilization of thought. “Revolutionary theory” became Talmudic commentary on sacred texts, and Marxism itself, faced with the immense scientific, cultural, artistic upheavals which began to accumulate around 1890, either remained completely aphonic or limited itself to characterizing these changes as products of bourgeois decadence. One text by Lukács and a few phrases from Trotsky and Gramsci do not suffice to weaken this diagnosis.

Homologous with and parallel to these developments is the transformation Marxism enticed the movement’s participants into making. During the greater part of the nineteenth century, the working class of the industrializing countries brought itself through a process of self-constitution, taught itself to read and write and educated itself, and gave rise to a type of self-reliant individual who was confident in his own forces and his own judgment, who taught himself as much as he could, who thought for himself, and who never abandoned critical reflection. In getting a corner on the workers’ movement, Marxism replaced this individual with the militant activist who is indoctrinated in the teachings of a gospel; who believes in the organization, in the theory, and in the bosses who possess this theory and interpret it; who tends to obey them unconditionally; who identifies with them; and who is capable, most of the time, of breaking with this identification only by falling apart.

Leninist Totalitarianism

Some of the elements of what became totalitarianism thus had already been set in place: the phantasm of total mastery inherited from capitalism, orthodoxy, fetishism for organization, the idea of a “historical necessity” capable of justifying everything in the name of ultimate salvation. It would be absurd, however, to make of Marxism—still less of Marx himself—the father of totalitarianism, as has been done with demagogic ease for the past sixty years. For as much as (and, numerically, more than) Leninism,
Marxism has been continued in the form of social democracy, about which one can say everything one wants except that it is totalitarian, and which has not had any trouble finding in Marx all the necessary quotations for its polemics against Bolshevism in power.

The true creator of totalitarianism is Lenin. The internal contradictions of this personage would be of little account if they did not illustrate, once again, the absurdity of “rational” explanations of history. A sorcerer’s apprentice who swore only by “science,” inhuman yet without any doubt sincere and unmotivated by personal interest, extraordinarily lucid about his adversaries and blind concerning himself as he went about rebuilding the Czarist state Apparatus after having destroyed it and protesting against this reconstruction, the creator of bureaucratic commissions designed to struggle against the bureaucracy which he himself made proliferate, in the end he appears both as the near-exclusive artisan of a fantastic upheaval and as a piece of straw floating on the flood of events. Nevertheless, it was Lenin himself who created the institution without which totalitarianism is inconceivable and which is today falling into ruin: the totalitarian party, the Leninist party, which is, all rolled into one, ideological Church, militant army, state Apparatus already in nuce when it still is held “in a taxi carriage,” and factory where each has his place in a strict hierarchy with a strict division of labor. Of these elements, which had long existed already, but in dispersion, Lenin made a synthesis and conferred a new signification upon the whole that he made of them. Orthodoxy and discipline were carried to the limit (Trotsky boasted of the comparison of the Bolshevik party to the order of Jesuits) and extended onto an international level. The principle that “those who are not with us are to be exterminated” was applied without mercy, the modern means of Terror were invented, organized, and applied en masse. Above all, the obsession for power, power for the sake of power, power as end in itself, by every means possible and little matter what for, emerged and took hold, no longer as personal trait but as social-historical determinant. It was no longer a matter of seizing power so as to introduce definite changes; it was a matter of introducing the changes that allow one to stay in power and to reinforce that power nonstop.

In 1917, Lenin knew one thing and one thing only: that the moment to take power had come and that tomorrow it would be too late. But what to do with it? He did not know, and he said so: our teachers unfortunately have not told us what to do in order to build socialism. Later on, he was also to say: “This is Thermidor. But we shan’t let ourselves be guillotined.
We shall make a Thermidor ourselves.” This must be understood as meaning: if, in order to retain power, we must turn our orientation completely upside down, we shall do so. Indeed, he did so several times over. (Later on, Stalin brought this art to absolute perfection.) A single fixed point was ruthlessly maintained throughout the most incredible changes in course: the limitless expansion of the power of the Party, the transformation of all institutions, starting with the State, into its mere instrumental appendages, and, finally, the pretense, not simply that the Party is directing society or even speaking in society’s name, but that it is in fact society itself.

The Failure of Totalitarianism

Under Stalin, this project attained its extreme and demented form. Also, beginning with his death its failure began to become apparent. Totalitarianism is not some immutable essence. It has a history, one which we shall not retrace here but which, it must be recalled, is in the main that of the resistance by people and things to the phantasm that society can be totally resorbed, and history completely shaped, by the power of the Party.

Those who denied the validity of the notion of totalitarianism are going on the offensive again today. They draw their argument from the very fact that the regime is collapsing (with such a logic, no regime in history would ever have existed) or that it has encountered internal resistances. Clearly, these criticisms share in the phantasm of totalitarianism: totalitarianism could and should have been, for better or worse, what it claimed to be: a faultless monolith. It was not what it said it was—therefore, quite simply, it was not.

Those who, however, have discussed the Russian regime seriously (I am not speaking of Reader’s Digest or Ms. Kirkpatrick) have never fallen victims to this mirage. They have emphasized and analyzed its internal contradictions and antinomies: indifference and passive resistance on the part of the population; sabotage and wastage of industrial as well as agricultural production; the deep-seated irrationality of the system, from its own point of view, due to its own delirious bureaucratization; decisions made according to the whims of the Autocrat or of the clique that has succeeded in imposing its will; a universal conspiracy of deception, which has become a structural trait of the system and condition for the survival of individuals, from zeks to Politburo members. All of this has been vividly
confirmed by the events that began in 1953 and by the information that has not stopped pouring in ever since: zek revolts in the camps after Stalin’s death, the East Berlin strikes in June 1953, Khrushchev’s Report, the Polish and Hungarian Revolutions in 1956, the Czechoslovak movement in 1968 and the Polish one in 1970, the flood of dissident literature, the Polish explosion of 1980 which made the country ungovernable.

After the failure of Khrushchev’s incoherent reforms, the necrosis which was eating away at the system and left it no escape but a flight in advance toward overarmament and external expansion had become manifest. I wrote about this in 1981, saying that one could no longer speak in terms of “classical” totalitarianism. To be sure, the regime could not have survived for seventy years had it not been able to create for itself large points of support within society, from the ultraprivileged bureaucracy down to the various strata that have successively benefitted from a degree of “social promotion.” In particular, it created a type of behavior, and an anthropological type of individual, ruled by apathy and cynicism, preoccupied solely with tiny and precious improvements which, by dint of guile and intrigues, this individual can add to its private niche.

On this last point, the regime has half succeeded, as is shown by the extreme slowness of popular reactions in Russia even after 1985. But it has also half failed, as is best seen, paradoxically, within the party Apparatus itself. When the force of circumstances (impasses in Poland and Afghanistan, the pressure of American rearmmament in the face of its own growing technological and economic retardation, the inability to bear any longer the costs of its overextension worldwide) showed that the evolution toward “stratocracy,” dominant under Brezhnev, was becoming untenable in the long run, within the Apparatus and around an uncommonly capable leader a sufficiently large “reformist” group was able to emerge, impose itself, and impose a series of changes that would have been unimaginable shortly beforehand—among which was the official death certificate of single-party rule drawn up on March 13, 1990. What the future holds for these changes remains totally obscure, but their effects are now and henceforth irreversible.

After the Deluge

Like Nazism, Marxism-Leninism allows us to gauge the folly and monstrosity of which human beings are capable, as well as their fascination
with brute force. More than Nazism, it allows us to gauge their capacity for self-delusion, for turning the most liberating ideas upside down, for making them the instruments of unlimited mystification. As it collapses, Marxism-Leninism seems to be burying beneath its ruins both the project of autonomy and politics itself. The active hate on the part of those, in the East, who have suffered under it leads them to reject any project other than the rapid adoption of the liberal-capitalist model. In the West, people's conviction that they live under the least bad regime possible will be reinforced, and this will hasten their sinking even further into irresponsibility, distraction, and withdrawal into the "private" sphere (now obviously less "private" than ever).

Not that these populations possess many illusions. In the United States, Lee Atwater, chairman of the Republican Party, speaking of the population's cynicism, says: "The American people think politics and politicians are full of baloney. They think the media and journalists are full of baloney. They think organized religion is full of baloney. They think big business is full of baloney. They think big labor is full of baloney." Everything we know about France indicates that the same state of mind prevails there, too. Yet actual behavior carries much more weight than opinions. Struggles against the system, even mere reactions, are tending to disappear. But capitalism changed and became somewhat tolerable only as a function of the economic, social, and political struggles that have marked the past two centuries. A capitalism torn by conflict and obliged to confront strong internal opposition, and a capitalism dealing only with lobbies and corporations, capable of quietly manipulating people and of buying them with a new gadget every year, are two completely different social-historical animals. Reality already offers abundant indications of this.

The monstrous history of Marxism-Leninism shows what an emancipatory movement cannot and should not be. It in no way allows us to conclude that the capitalism and the liberal oligarchy under which we now live embody the finally resolved secret of human history. The project of total mastery (which Marxism-Leninism took from capitalism and which, in both cases, was turned into its contrary) is a delusion.

It does not follow that we should suffer our history as a fatality. The idea of making a tabula rasa of everything that exists is a folly that leads toward crime. It does not follow that we should renounce that which has defined our history since the time of ancient Greece and to which Europe has
added new dimensions, namely, that we make our laws and our institutions, that we will our individual and collective autonomy, and that we alone can and should limit this autonomy. The term “equality” has served as a cover for a regime in which real inequalities were in fact worse than those of capitalism. We cannot, for all that, forget that there is no political freedom without political equality and that the latter is impossible when enormous inequalities of economic power, which translate directly into political power, not only exist but are growing. Marx’s idea that one could eliminate the market and money is an incoherent utopia. To understand that does not lead one to swallow the almightiness of money, or to believe in the “rationality” of an economy that has nothing to do with a genuine market and that is more and more coming to resemble a planetary casino. Just because there is no society without production and consumption does not mean that these latter moments should be erected into ultimate ends of human existence—which is the real substance of “individualism” and free-market “liberalism” today.

These are some of the conclusions to which the combined experience of the pulverization of Marxism-Leninism and the evolution of contemporary capitalism should lead. They are not the ones public opinion will draw immediately. Nevertheless, when the dust clears it is to these conclusions that humanity will have to come, unless it is to continue on its race toward an illusory “more and more” which, sooner or later, will shatter against the natural limits of the planet, if it does not collapse beforehand under the weight of the emptiness of its own meaning.