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Karl Marx is considered, apart from being a theorist and a fighter, to have been an excellent observer of *Zeitgeschichte* of his age, rather like Alexis de Tocqueville or Hippolyte Taine.¹ Little is said on the larger dimension of works such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* or *The Civil War in France*. My aim here is not, of course, the exegesis of what is called, disparagingly, his journalism.

I would like, however, to say a few words about what we should call – with all the necessary diffidence – the Marxian style of political analysis. There have been outstanding practitioners of this genre from Karl Kautsky to this day, but their work has not enjoyed the sustained critical attention that philosophy and economics have had in the Marxist tradition. Marx's own *modus operandi* relies on a mostly implicit philosophy of history, which can be read quite clearly through his political writings. These writings are not instances to exemplify a theory; they are steps in a revolutionary strategy: this is strategic analysis to serve a cause, albeit a cause emerging from the analysis.

Marx's political point of view is usually regarded as *engagé*, and while there can be no doubt of his commitment to the proletariat as an empirical group and as a political-party-in-becoming, his attitude is not exclusively or even mainly indignation about the injustice visited on workers and sufferers – the usual stance of the Left – but a search for signs: a search for signs of revolution, but not in the sense in seeking for portents. (Are the processes in society pointing towards the preconceived goal?) On the contrary, looking for signs of a revolution that is going on, behind the backs of people, a revolution hidden by the very nature of capitalism wherein everything essential is hidden.

One of the chief aims of revolutionary politics is to make manifest whatever is hidden behind the façade of capitalism, a system that is far from being obvious. Problems that should have been set out at the point of production appear as problems of consumption,

circulation, distribution or redistribution. On the other hand, law and government presented by customary (i.e., moralistic) socialist criticism as a fraud will appear as embodying liberty and equality in fact, the reality of exploitation and oppression being fully reconcilable with a juridical form which is by no means a mere epiphenomenon.

Appearance is real: the state form and ideology (as motivation for action) are real enough. Prices, savings, investments, expanding and contracting markets are realities. Ethnic supremacies, cultural practices, sexual habits are real sources of pride, sorrow, creative inspiration, hatred and destruction. Freedom of contract, equality before the law, universal suffrage, disestablishment of the (state) church are not simply devices to mislead the oppressed and to mould them into obedience; they are the results of monumental struggles, and their reality – both in people's minds and in actual state practices backed by 'legitimate' coercion and a professional apparatus to deliver it – defines a social life different from that of societies lacking them.

At the same time, this reality is not the ultimate one in Marxian analysis. Reality here itself is a cluster of signs, but not simply in the sense of a crude essence/appearance dichotomy where the historical materialist will see the 'economy' shining through, as if 'the economy' was a separate thing.

No analysis, Marxist or otherwise, can be content with the authorised version of what institutions – through their official representatives – think of themselves. Many people think that Marxian political analysis is but an especially acute variety of this banality. But no, Marx and Engels would describe in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* how it is capitalism itself that unveils everything that is hidden, profanes everything that is holy.

The iconoclastic revelations of radical theory pale in comparison to the iconoclastic, disrespectful and illusionless image capitalism presents of human existence. The first true intellectual effort of Marx – and so it should be for every Marxist, I think – was not to disbelieve the evidence (and show how biased its usual presentation was), but to believe it in spite of the incredulity of moralistic, idealist and (still important for his age) Christian social theories that society was indeed what the bourgeoisie said it was – a merciless, competitive battlefield quite independent of people's wishes for a more benign and safer environment – and to believe that this was mirrored by a system of motivations in the behaviour of the 'modern' person which admits no sentimentality. It is not true

human nature distorted by demonic capitalism that needs saving, restoration or rehabilitation, but it is human nature *displayed* by capitalism that needs understanding.

Looking for signs of revolution in this material would be to remain content with Joseph Schumpeter's creative destruction or Antonio Gramsci's passive revolution, that is, recognising without further ado that the only revolutionary force in the world is still capitalism and the only revolutionary class still the bourgeoisie. 'Newness', radical change, invention and devastation are beyond doubt still the work of capitalism. This would be the all-encompassing truth were it not for the radical *historismus* of Marx's thought.

Capitalism is history – the 'human nature' that is 'displayed' by capitalism is an historical figure which appears 'natural' not only because that opinion (e.g., that there are acquisitive and competitive 'instincts in man') serves the interests of 'the system', but also because all varieties of 'human nature' are historical, transient, subject to change and consequently all varieties seem 'natural'. The immense 'second nature', the artificial environment, 'the industrial landscape' wrought by capitalism are not excrescences of an eternal humanity (however distorted), but the embodiment of the only possible human essence which is by definition non-eternal, that is, essential in its historicity, impermanent, a work in progress.

This historical specificity breaks through the texture of the everlasting present as a sign of revolution – when transience appears, when the smooth surface of any 'system' is punctured, when the fundamental contradiction is no longer a structural feature with the impersonality and *impassibilité* of fate, but a 'problem' to be solved, usually in the shape of an injustice to be redressed that stirs and spurs people into political action. There are characteristic moments when you are suddenly confronted with unexpectedly improved historical visibility; such is defeat. The *coup d'état* of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (1851–2), the bloodbath following the Paris Commune (1871; incidentally, the first time the French bourgeoisie sided with the occupying German army to put down the French proletariat, the second time being 1939–40 when they preferred the Third Reich to the *Front populaire*) has shown the irregularities – which, if Marx had been the rigid economic determinist and two-classes theorist he is still described as, should have driven him to despair – showing the revolution going on, unnoticed by those who shed their blood, as only the drama of disaster, chaos, rotting flesh. This drama is perennially contrasted by the establishment with order, good government, business as usual.

But political analysis mindful of transience and conscious of the occult character of modern capitalism, sharpened by the awareness of catastrophe, could see something else. Marx's so-called journalism and pamphleteering are decisive testimony to the peculiarity of class rule in a society dominated, weighed down by abstract labour and dead labour. Marx saw that the domination of capital may benefit the bourgeoisie, but it does not mean that the bourgeoisie as an empirical group is always or even usually dominant in all capitalist societies. Capitalist societies have always lived in the iron cage of updated Roman law, of a severely punitive state, subservient to standing armies (and later to security apparatuses) and to the church. Bureaucratic elites were never bourgeois in spirit or *esprit de corps*, nor were the intelligentsia ever all that friendly to 'commercial society', opposing it from Left and Right (in an 'adversarial culture').

The introduction of universal (or enlarged) manhood suffrage in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – a democratic panacea against unilateral bourgeois domination – in societies still with a farming or peasant majority has favoured political pluralities slanted towards Catholic and nationalist parties on the Right and towards social democracy on the Left. In all countries of Continental Europe the army played a decisive political role (cf. the Bonapartes, the Dreyfus affair, the alliance of the Crown with the officer caste in the case of Franz Joseph I, Wilhelm II and Nicholas II, and the subsequent part played by military dictators everywhere).

The wedge between the absolute domination of capital and the bourgeoisie's tenuous hold on actual power – a contrast which explains the success of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte and the triumph of the French bourgeoisie over the Paris workers only with the aid of the monarchist and Catholic anti-bourgeois army and the putative German enemy, not to mention the inevitable compromise with the economically unviable landed estate, landed aristocracy and landed gentry – led Marx to calculate power relationships as not only favourable to proletarian revolution but also as an occult revolution in the making. There is no significant trace in his mature writings of a one-on-one Final Battle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, apart from a few conventional phrases on behalf of the movement.

This is not only the realism of a social observer aware of the numerical inferiority of the industrial working class but also an understanding of the rule of capital: impersonal, indirect, institutional. The importance of conquest, public order, policing,

the imposition of conformism, deference and obedience to the law – to put it less courteously: the protection of privilege in a juridically and constitutionally egalitarian regime – was in no doubt. For coercion to be exercised in an orderly way, the bourgeoisie had to relinquish undivided class rule after feeble and self-contradictory revolutionary attempts of its own. The many 18th Brumaires keep repeating themselves.

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When talking about ‘1989’, scholars of ‘transformation’ are, or frequently had been, the dupes of a reversed Stalinist discourse. They are searching for one ruling class taking the place of another. They suppose that if the revolutions/counter-revolutions of 1989 failed to replace the personnel of the ‘communist’ *nomenklatura* and apparatus with another, then the democratic ‘turn’ (*die Wende*) did not take place or, conversely, if another group of ‘leading cadres’ occupied the commanding heights of ‘the economy’ and of ‘the state’, then ‘socialism’ was defeated by capitalism. ‘Nothing important happened really’ is one extreme example of these unfruitful, although popular, controversies; ‘everything is lost’ is the other.

These extremes, which have more sophisticated versions, fail to grasp the nature of (to use a neutral term for the moment) Soviet-style societies and the nature of capitalist ‘modernity’, let alone the nature of twentieth-century government. Apart from what we may think about this,² it ought to be clearly stated that at least one of the most crucial characteristics of capitalism – the separation of the producers from the means of production – has never been transcended. This separation, assured by history (the dispossession or bankruptcy of smallholders and craftsmen), law and the state and by the ongoing process of socialisation of (private) property, is a given of all modern societies, an especially determining factor for the ensuing statecraft.

For protecting property effectively, the state has to establish a powerful legal framework. Its foundations originate in Roman law and prescribe the right of free disposal of assets owned. Legal ownership is unassailable: the fact that the part of wealth which is capital is petrified abstract labour does not result in ownership rights for the workers, whose share (the wage) appears as a mere contractual obligation fulfilled by the owner for the non-possessing worker according to mutual agreement, external to capital. Otherwise, if the non-paid part of labour were paid in ownership

rights, the proletariat would buy out the capitalists and would have done so centuries ago.

Soviet-style 'socialism' assumed that 'nationalisations' have meant something like that. Hence the proletariat or 'the people' allegedly took possession of capital. But 'property rights' were not exercised by individuals or communities of workers, and the wage system remained in place. Surplus was reinvested by agencies separate from and independent of the working class, and consumption quotas were established by similar, also separate, agencies. The fusion of producer and means of production would also have meant a tendential suppression of the social division of labour that never happened.

It is quite correct to say that the 'Soviet system' was state capitalism in the final analysis, but this well-established thesis needs important qualifications. Last-ditch defenders of the defunct system – an important section of what remains of the 'Left' in Eastern Europe – are wont to argue against this, citing not systemic features but policies. On the whole, the policies of the 'communist' parties in power were mostly egalitarian. After a first, brutal 'modernising' period of accumulation, backed by large amounts of forced labour, the second, post-Stalinist period tried to create an Eastern version of the welfare state, bolstering individual consumption, cheap housing, mass entertainment and the like.³ The problems familiar from the Western variety – debt, budget imbalances – appeared here also. The first generation of 'reformers' (Imre Nagy, Władysław Gomułka) rejected the old guard's obsession with balanced budgets and overproduction of investment goods; theirs was a quasi-Keynesian concept that had very little to do with the 'market reformism' of the second generation of 'reformers' (around 1968, exemplified by František Kriegel, Ota Šik, Rezső Nyers and others; the transition between the two generations was embodied by Włodzimierz Brus).

But these are only policies, consequences of systemic constraints. In Eastern Europe today it appears to most establishment observers in retrospect that the opposition between 'planning' and 'the market' mirrors the contrast between 'socialism' and 'capitalism'. This is a wholly naive view. The characteristics of modern societies are forcing us to ask: Is there anything to mediate between production and consumption, and are the aims of production (and therefore the way in which the social division of labour is fashioned) established by the mediator? In one case it is the market, in the other the state planning authority that is doing the mediating. Establishing the character, the amount, the technical level of production – then

establishing the wages, the consumer choice, the dimensions of 'free' social services – is tantamount to being the main power decision-maker in any society. In both cases, the mediator and the decision-maker are impersonal institutions (the market and the planning authority, and the legal/coercive guarantees which make their functioning possible), but of course their class bias is different, as are the beneficiaries. (It appears obvious now that in the social struggles in the 'Eastern Bloc' the battle was engaged and fought at the point of production – party versus workers' councils – and when this shifted to battles around accumulation and redistribution, the Soviet system was doomed.⁴)

The differences are considerable but they do not exhaust the whole problematic.

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To explain the particularity of the pre-1989 Eastern Bloc regimes one has to turn to the interpretation of institutional solutions in order to enable us to say what has changed, beyond what is obvious and much talked about. The main issue is 'the party'. I shall not go into the intriguing question of the origins of the ruling 'communist' parties and of their national varieties. What I shall consider is the party's mature form, since this is what is least understood.

The transition to the 'mature form' – in my opinion one of the most important questions in modern world history – happened during revolution when the small militant sect of 'professional revolutionaries' was transformed into a gigantic mass movement, a key instrument of state power, and it has not lost its worldview, founding myth and unique moral faith. This is astonishing. Also, it shows a belief in politics that is unprecedented or unparalleled. Consider this: the revolutionary regimes of Lenin and Trotsky – unlike the revolutionary communist regimes in Bavaria and Hungary (about which more below) – did not waver in their determination to realise socialism and in their firm belief that what they were undertaking was 'the construction of socialism', albeit quite clearly understanding that the society they were creating had absolutely nothing to do with the communist ideal, *exclusively on the evidence that their party was exercising sovereign power!*

In the historic jargon of the Far Left this was and still is called 'substitutionism', a mendacious procedure whereby the proletariat substitutes itself for the liberated community, the party for the proletariat, the Central Committee for the party, the dictator for

the Central Committee. Viewed from the outside, this has certainly been (increasingly) the case but it was not what the communist vanguard thought at the time while putting down resistance and stifling dissent. It may have been the result of Bolshevik policy; however, the result is not the essence. What did Communist Party rule equated with socialism mean to the men – and few women – who first embodied this peculiar kind of proletarian dictatorship?

Here we shall have to turn to the metaphysician of the party, Georg Lukács. His idea of the proletarian party underwent two phases. In the 1919 Socialist and Federated Council Republic of Hungary (to give it its cumbersome but ideologically correct name) he and his comrades regarded the party precisely as Ludwig Wittgenstein regarded his early philosophy: the ladder you climb in order to mount the wall, and, when over, you discard. In the Hungarian ‘Commune’, as it was called by its adherents, at the moment of the conquest of power and the merger of the social democratic and communist parties, the short-lived (six months) party was practically dissolved, its place taken by the workers’ councils. Even the Hungarian Red Army was organised according to trade union branches: there was a metalworkers’ division, a shoemakers’ division, a typesetters’ division, and so on, all supremely effective, the only conceivable successor to a disbanded royal force. The first-generation Hungarian communists believed that it was the proletarian community as such which ought to rule, not an elitist, conspiratorial group of fanatic militants.

The Hungarian Commune was beyond doubt a harsh dictatorship, but a dictatorship exercised, at least in part, by non-representative, direct democracy bodies. The central organs comprised delegates with *mandat impératif*, subject to recall and procedures not manipulated by nonexistent political organisations, only by chaos. After the defeat in August 1919, the exiles and émigrés, pondering the causes of their failure, thought that the main reason was probably the absence of a true Bolshevik Party of the Leninist type. The Hungarian communists were Luxemburgists or the followers of the greatest Hungarian Marxist thinker of the age, Ervin Szabó (who died just before the revolution) who happened to be an anarcho-syndicalist. They, including Lukács, became acquainted with Lenin’s, Zinoviev’s, Bukharin’s and Trotsky’s work and the Russian experience as such only in exile.

Lukács rewrote some of his extraordinary essays from 1918–19 in Vienna after the fall, in order to account for the necessary change in his thinking. *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (1923)

is largely a presentation of this change; when arguing against Rosa Luxemburg and the Ultra-Left, he is in part arguing against himself. (The original Hungarian versions are not translated.) His crucial study of the party problem, rather neglected of late (Lukács, pp. 295–342), shows the innovative political idea of Bolshevism in all its outrageous boldness. Lukács writes:

Organisation is the form of mediation between theory and practice. And, as in every dialectical relationship, the terms of the relation only acquire concreteness and reality in and by virtue of this mediation . . . Every 'theoretical' tendency or clash of views must immediately develop an organisational arm if it is to rise above the level of pure theory or abstract opinion, that is to say, if it really intends to point the way to its own fulfillment in practice. However, it would be an error to suppose that every instance of organised action can constitute a real and a reliable index of the validity of conflicting opinions or even of their compatibility or incompatibility. . . . [I]t must possess a function within a historical process and its mediating role between past and future must be understood. However, an analysis that would see an organised action in terms of the lessons it contained for the future . . . sees the problem in terms of organisation . . . It seeks out the *essential determinants* that connect theory and practice.⁵

This violent transformation of the idea ('theory') into action ('practice') depends on the nature of history in which it proceeds and of the agent who executes or undergoes it. 'Unless the proletariat wishes to share the fate of the bourgeoisie and perish wretchedly and ignominiously in the death throes of capitalism, it must accomplish this task in full consciousness.'⁶

During the great revolutionary wave between 1917 and 1923 and later, after the ebbing of the communist tide, Lukács and his comrades realised that the actual edification of a socialist or communist society was out of the question. Some, like Karl Korsch and Anton Pannekoek, opted for a 'revolution within the revolution', while the Leninists – Lukács, Bloch, Brecht – opted for the construction of a revolutionary-philosophical 'church', the party (a parallel noticed and elaborated by Alain Badiou in his magnificent book on the Apostle Paul) that was destined to represent the communist invariance and the true doctrine always applied to reality (to the very miserable reality of state capitalism and of modernising campaigns aimed at further reification and being reified

themselves); Trotsky's permanent revolution has its counterpart in Lukács's permanent philosophical praxis:

The struggle of the Communist Party is focused upon the class consciousness of the proletariat. Its organisational separation from the class does not mean in this case that it wishes to do battle *for its interests on its behalf and in its place*. . . . The process of revolution is . . . synonymous with the process of the development of proletarian class consciousness. The fact that the organisation of the Communist Party becomes detached from the broad mass of the class is itself a function of the stratification of consciousness within the class. . . . The Communist Party must exist as an independent organisation so that the proletariat may be able to see its own class consciousness given historical shape . . . and so that the whole class may become fully aware of its own existence as a class.⁷

This is the secret of the famous 'imputed consciousness' (the philosophically correct consciousness of the working class it does not have empirically). The soul of the imputed consciousness is possessed by a body: the party. The 'historical shape' of class consciousness grows an 'organisational arm': and this is, of course, a consequence of the utter failure of the October Revolution. The post-revolutionary, and in important respects counter-revolutionary, society is supposed to be governed *à contre-courant* and *à contre-coeur* by the party, assumed to remain invariant, that is, revolutionary, during the siege from without and within.

This position is summed up by one of the most brilliant minds of the 1968 generation thus:

The Communist Party functions as a non-empirical *volonté générale*, an absolute consciousness that shapes itself through the voluntary self-discipline of empirical individuals. The Communist Party is the non-empirical *volonté générale* of the proletariat enlightened about itself; it is no transcendental subject which would present [*darstellt*] the totality of its voluntarily disciplined, empirical individuals – but it is non-empirical itself . . .⁸

Abstraction is being made of the *volonté de tous*, and this is, of course, diametrically opposed to all basic Marxian intentions which do not and cannot contain any 'party metaphysics' as they are aimed at a radical dissolution of all 'real abstractions' (in Alfred

Sohn-Rethel's sense) and a radically nominalist reduction of all reified substances (such as capital) to human practices.

We all know that the party did not remain what Lukács predicted it would be through all vicissitudes, but the traces of its origins in the proletarian *volonté générale* subsisted and help to explain what it was. Intellectually, it was a combination of a hyper-rationalistic planning authority and of an ideological guarantor of the 'popular' – egalitarian and plebeian – moral character of the regime that tried desperately to separate the political power of the 'working class' (meaning the party leadership and its proletarian client elites) from the commodity-producing industrial society, based politically on compulsion and co-optation. The imaginary fusion of the state and civil society in the self-contradictory concept of 'socialist state property' (an imaginary end to the separation of the 'economy' and 'politics' characteristic of bourgeois liberal regimes) was supplanted (and contradicted) by the role of the party as the supreme and exclusively political ultimate authority and repository of true doctrine. This accounts for the exaggerated belief of party leaders in rationality (science and technology) and irrational, authoritarian mobilisation (say the word and we follow). The detachment of the party from the 'large masses' (in fact, from the state capitalist reality, alienation, exploitation and oppression passionately denied by a formulaic utopian propaganda) was also key to its temporary success. It was impervious to 'empirical' tragedy as it did not 'represent' experience but reason. The well-known communist sophistry and demagoguery that could explain anything away, including the Gulag and the Stalin–Hitler pact, originated in the party's intellectual 'independence' or autonomy *vis-à-vis* the exploitative, alienated, reified, oppressive character of the regime which it led and from which it was 'detached'. At the same time, it was the only version of modern rationality known ideologically to most people in the twentieth century (capitalism being reconfigured as a spontaneous, 'organic' and thus 'irrational' order by such leading theorists as Joseph Schumpeter, Friedrich-August von Hayek and Alexandre Kojève, contradicting Émile Durkheim and Max Weber), and 1989 was experienced by many as the final (and deserved) collapse of Reason.

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The existence and the rule of the *parti unique* (or *Staatspartei*) is at least as important an historical question as parliamentarism or

the 'independent' judiciary in Western capitalist societies in the nineteenth century.

The rule of the party is what makes all the difference, planning and redistribution not being specific enough. The party – unlike in right-wing dictatorships, with the possible exception of Franco's Spain – did not disappear or lose its importance once in power. The party, in contradistinction to its primary idea proposed classically in *What Is To Be Done*, was an extraordinary and highly effective instrument of government unlike any other.

It was an instrument chosen (or, rather, gradually discovered) by a militant elite of former Marxists as a result of the collapse of their expectations of world revolution, especially in Western Europe. It went through many successive phases, but it had to respond to a pressing need. The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the 'communist' victories after the Second World War succeeded in promising things like peace without annexations, bread and land; that is, they had to satisfy bourgeois revolutionary, democratic longings pertaining to the nation-state, small property and general welfare. The specifically socialist aims of their own movement – postponed *sine die* – were vested in their political rule, and the communist perspective was to be upheld only by the longevity or permanence of this rule. A steered, directed development was to be kept on the right track only by a strategic perspective of many decades, perhaps centuries. In a non-socialist society – from the beginning the Bolshevik elite understood this clearly, as shown by Lenin's last writings and even Lukács's *Lenin* book (1924) – it was only political power that really distinguished revolutionary, 'post-capitalist' societies from the rest.

If the disalienating end of the proletariat was not (yet) conceivable – with an end to wage labour and commodity production – the political primacy and cultural hegemony of the working class had to be preserved. The dual power, in which most of the running of day-to-day government business was left to the state bureaucracy and the security apparatus, was nonetheless based on a movement where the political primacy of the working class was preserved within a sort of parallel society. The society at large may not have had a proletarian majority, but the party did. Ultimate control rested with the party. This is the principle of the *nomenklatura*: the *nomenklatura* was a complex list of appointed jobs and functions the filling of which was entrusted to various party committees. The appointment of, say, the Rector of Budapest University depended on the Central Committee, but that of the head of the university library on the Fifth District Committee. Personal proposals were

accepted from the university 'basic organisation' (party cell) and the higher echelons of the party had to decide. Once appointed, the learned officials tasked with managing the university and its library enjoyed considerable autonomy, but if they wanted to keep their position they had to consult their respective party organisations even if they were not party members.

As some of the appointed jobs had national importance, many local party organisations had a disproportionate influence over national politics. But it was for the Centre to decide which organisation was called on to exercise such power. Some factory 'cells' (sometimes an organisation of many thousands of members) were traditionally headed by Central Committee members. The 'communist' workers of that factory who elected their secretary (who, even if he was not properly elected, had to be reasonably popular with the party members on the shop floor) had some influence in areas where their local leader had his. The party was primarily an institution of indoctrination, adult education and ideological – however ritualised – debate. For the large mass of party members this did not entail any privilege or material advantage.

Even if society as such was quiescent or subdued, the party was always mobilised. Meetings and the reading and regurgitating of party 'literature' took considerable time. A sense of belonging and a common faith were deliberately fostered. A 'communist morality' of puritanism, frugality, discipline, self-improvement and self-education (inherited from the classic workers' movement) had been undeniable social realities within the party, linked to an awareness of an occult elite – after all, they were a bunch of working stiff's supposed to be the leading members of the ruling class without the selfishness and greed usually associated with this. This is not to say that careerism, opportunism, conformism or even fear were not among the reasons to join, but the idea was that the party and its altruistic militants were the bastion of socialist life and morality among a mixed society of transition.

The party did not repeat the mistake of the church in introducing general infant baptism. So it did not really need a clergy and monastic orders. The 'baptism' of party membership was adult anabaptism reserved for the elect. The regime called itself 'socialist', but true socialism obtained only in the party. So when you hear ageing East European 'communists' calling their beloved regime just that, they have an experience to rely on: their very real membership of a select society motivated by a legitimising ideology directed at the future and imbued with a rationalistic philosophy and a cult of science that

gave it the semblance of knowledge and an old-fashioned morality extolling hard work, unstinting effort, equal dignity, respect for the downtrodden, international solidarity and intellectual daring. Rather more than what subaltern classes usually get.

This is a far cry from the subversive, hypercritical, opposition mood of the Western and Southern Far Left also called 'communist', but not so different from the proletarian corporatist (*Arbeiterstand* as opposed to *Arbeiterklasse*) organisation of old European social democracy and its trade union counterpart. The well-known charges against 'real socialism' – that it was a class society and that it was a dictatorship – are true enough. But again, the authentic class relationships, as in any other society dominated by capital, were hidden, and political power and the too little appreciated institutional memory of political organisations superseded them. The working class did not rule as a class, but the rulers were mostly of proletarian extraction, upward mobility and equalising redistribution were strong and, unlike today, plebeian ways and virtues were esteemed, anti-egalitarian tendencies were kept strictly within meritocratic bounds and the bourgeois variety of 'sinful pride', individualism, disparaged. The party was the visible sign that in spite of actual inequality and oppression a hereditary aristocracy – the traditional foe of all plebeians in history – was not to be reborn (and it wasn't) and the party's inner belief of a Good Order excluded (and condemned morally) any contempt for and indifference towards the poor. Unlike bourgeois societies, the party – the 'leading force' in a pretty repressive and exploitative state capitalist tyranny – did not try to justify inequality, which it declared as a transitory, maybe necessary but essentially despicable phenomenon. Political power in plebeian hands was not wholly an illusion, and those who rebelled against Soviet-style regimes had to reject equality in the name of liberty more grimly than any well-heeled neo-conservative in a City consultancy or think-tank sinecure. Opposing egalitarianism is one of the most onerous tasks facing any class or caste society. The plain and public opposition of the doctrinally pure party and the doctrinally impure ('transitional') society offered a lasting symbolic solution, both being concomitantly defended as 'people power' (*Volksmacht*) threatened by inegalitarian disorder and the evil of a self-seeking, profit-maximising, rich bourgeois ruling class alien to the common good and its interests opposed to those of the masses. In the beginning, the party was not perceived as a ruling class, as the customary material privileges following from belonging to any master class were not essential or characteristic. Pecuniary or

biopolitical advantage inherent in any aristocratic or class society was blurred and uncertain in the case of the party. Nor were lineage and inheritance (inevitable in the case of private property) usually important in the selection of the party elites, except towards the end.

The party's ethos had become self-contradictory precisely because of its sincere egalitarianism. It extolled welfare and consumption in the 1960s and so diluted its puritanical and altruistic morals. To sustain such policies it had to have recourse to credits, to international trade, to markets. It needed liquid capital, so it had to allow ever-growing inegalitarian practices in order to maintain both motivation and legitimation. It had gradually replaced the promise of a distant non-exploitative, classless, non-oppressive, unalienated society with the promise of ever-rising consumption, comfort and fun. And so it offered competition to the West, where it could only lose.

Hence the exaggeratedly political approach to changes in Eastern Europe that appears so odd to outside observers. East Europeans, theoretically sophisticated or not, know that the former regime they hate or like was not any kind of communist society bereft of the customary drawbacks of a modern class society centred on gain and loss, but they see what has taken the place of the party. The party appears, of course, dated, quaint or worse, but mostly something of the past. Its promise was not (and it is not remembered as) liberation but equality and respect for the working man (with stress on the gender). At the same time, people seem to forget a few fundamental structural characteristics of the party.

The party was organised as a network of *workplace* cells, so it was not centred on constituencies (electoral districts, ridings) as there were no contested elections. The power of the party was not based on citizens in their private lives 'at home' (which is the case of bourgeois electoral parties in 'pluralistic' representative systems) as consumers and 'families' at rest in their dwellings, but on producers. It was primarily power over producers that was the aim. The party's task was the imposition of production goals, mobilisation for increased work intensity and speed, work discipline, the imposition of a ready acceptance of longer working hours and of lower real wages, and the prevention of strikes (illegal anyway) and other forms of proletarian protest. As shown by sociological research, the real centres of power had been the large state firms or trusts. Little wonder that the only effective weapon against the party had been the workers' councils, both in Hungary in 1956 and in Poland from 1981 onwards (Solidarność was not a trade union, but a network

of workers' councils, organised not by branches but by factory and region, exactly like the 'Communist' Party). The fight was there, at the source of real power.

The workers' councils may have fought the party (they had to, everywhere) but – coming after all from the same tradition, consciously or not – any power based on communities of producers cannot be sustained (however repressive and however exclusively political) under the dominance of the market.

In Poland, quite symbolically, the party and its enemy, the workers' councils, failed together. Both ended – for different, even perhaps opposite, reasons – in advocating the new market regime, and in consequence had become incredibly unpopular and completely lost their relevance. By this time, the party's specific and peculiar power was much diluted, with the partial exception of the German Democratic Republic – but even there, power was shared with the Soviet Russian military authorities and security services – in various ways. In Poland, it was the army (in spite of the Party's traditional fear of Thermidor and Brumaire, of Bonapartism), the junta of Generals Wojciech Jaruzelski, Florian Siwicki and Czesław Kiszczak, the coup of 13 December 1981 (technically it was what is called *autogolpe* in Latin America) that put an end to the party's primacy. In other countries, party power had been outsourced to the security services, the regular government, quangos, reform committees, managers of large enterprises, the Central Planning Office, the National Bank, the research institutes of the Academies of Sciences, regional bosses and the increasingly independent, liberal and/or nationalist media. The party fell victim to partial power centres in Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia, and in all these places the shadowy, formerly quite insignificant regular government (Council of Ministers) gained in influence.

But by that time all heirs to the traditional workers' movement were in disarray. Let us recall these European moments: 1977–9: the Italian Communist Party sides with the bourgeoisie, the Vatican and the secret services in the struggle against the Far Left, hails NATO, proposes austerity measures and a second edition of the *compromesso storico*, condemns Soviet action in Afghanistan (and later the Polish coup). Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romanian regime turns from 'national communism' to outright fascism with part-Maoist paraphernalia and 'cultural revolution' techniques used for ethnicist purposes; open persecution of minorities. 1979: Margaret Thatcher's long reign commences, Labour – especially the Labour Left – defeated, veers to the right, miners' strike and trade unions

defeated, privatisations, cuts. 1981: military coup in Poland against the workers' councils (Solidarność). 1981–2: François Mitterrand's and the communists' *programme commun* revoked under pressure. German and Austrian social democracy sides with the Soviet Union against Solidarność (and with the United States and Thatcher against Mitterrand). Separatist nationalism and radical market reforms are tearing Yugoslavia apart. East German intellectuals emigrate *en masse* to the West. West Germany's Far Left disarms and disbands, and in part goes Green. Democratic opposition (dissidence) appears openly in Hungary and throws down the gauntlet. Yuri Vladimirovitch Andropov, the head of the KGB, elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, completing the 18th Brumaire begun in Warsaw. General Jaruzelski also named First Secretary of the Communist Party.

Democratic/reformist, repressive/dictatorial, emancipatory/autonomist versions of European socialism were all on the way to annihilation.

* * *

In Eastern Europe, capitalism without a bourgeoisie was replaced by capitalism without a bourgeoisie. All this happened precisely when the strategic position on which the erstwhile philosophical foundations of the One Party had been established disappeared in the West: the constellation of the structural given of any capitalist society – the existence of a propertied and a property-less class whose relation to one another is mediated by money and contract – which seems identical with the political opposition of cultural-political groupings largely identified with the great antagonists (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) lost its relevance. Hegemonic culture and adversary (or counter-hegemonic) culture (anti-socialist and socialist) seemed to be more than themselves; they could believe authentically that they 'represented' something larger than themselves: either 'the Class' (the organised, militant, right-thinking working class, bearers of a post-capitalist future) or 'civilisation' (a purported combination of tradition, individual freedom, common sense, nation, religion, family, choice and the like).

Technological changes, the softening of conflict by the welfare state East and West, growing real wages and expanding employment, changes in habitat, health, hygiene, sexual mores, leisure, the culture industry, home-ownership, share-ownership, the motor car, the classlessness of popular culture, the defeat of Left radicalism

(1968–79), the exacerbation of racial conflicts and the advent of political Islam all contributed to the disappearance of class *from the surface* – for class, naturally, continues to exist, but has joined the other occult characteristics of capitalism, concealed in the depths. Its irrelevance is political, so it has joined other aspects of bourgeois society as defined by the bourgeoisie: the separation of spheres, in this case the separation of politics from the economy now extends to the proletariat, which has lost its political identity.

In the Soviet Bloc, the historical and philosophical figure of the proletarian was linked to the centrality of the party as the safeguard of the working class's political identity. 'People power' or 'proletarian power' was transformed after the market reforms of the 1960s and 1970s into sheer and banal state power, and the commissars became managers and rulers without the mystique of exercising power for an ultimate – and for the purposes of class power, perverse – reason that has for ever prevented the party from successfully legitimising a separated power structure and an exploitative social system apart from putting it in the perspective of a fundamentally different (communist) future. The twentieth century, under the aegis – according to Alain Badiou – of *la passion du réel*, that is, a commitment to changing the world and changing oneself, had been sublated by the twin defeats of ideological and theoretical communism (according to Guy Debord, these two are mortal enemies) and led to a humble and unassuming acceptance of the present, culturally known to us from *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. This embracing of defeat was largely inspired by 1989 in Eastern Europe.

The origins of the regime change in the Soviet Bloc were political. The promise of the incipient democratic movements – the rule of law, a competitive electoral system, recognition of rights, an end to censorship, removal of absurd restrictions (e.g., on travel) – had been egalitarian in a constitutional and legal sense, by no means opposed to the main official doctrine of the previous regime (and I do not mean the *abuses* of that regime, such as nationalism, racism and heterosexism, which violated its avowed principles), but sited the battlefield firmly away from production. In Hungary, in the only radical episode of the democratic transition period – the 'four times yes' referendum campaign, of which I was one of the main orators – opinion demanded an end to workplace party cells and to similarly workplace-based paramilitary party militia, thereby forcing the party to compete with the new political forces in a field where people were not employees and co-workers but consumers, tenants, home-owners and *private citizens* in the full sense of the

word. Politics was confined to the workplace before 1989; it was banned from there after 1989.

From a state of complete unfreedom, East Europeans progressed to a state of freedom of the unfree. From a fraudulent pseudo-equality (from the 1960s onwards, Norway and Japan were more egalitarian in relation to income and housing than the Comecon/Warsaw Pact countries) they have progressed to an equality of the non-equal. (It is, incidentally, the Aristotelian definition of democracy.) As the grounding structural determination of modern capitalist society – the separation of producers from the means of production, while it is only the fusion of the two that enables commodity production, a fusion made possible only (and mediated) by money (the voluntary and regulated sale of labour power) – remained in place throughout the Soviet period, it came as no surprise to the property-less (the population without capital assets, known previously as proletarians). The expectation was that the impersonal ownership of assets – a tendency observed by Marx and Engels: from the individual owner to the limited liability company to the *ideeller Gesamtkapitalist*, the state parallel to the increasing autonomy and preponderance of the executive branch of government – which reached its more exacerbated point, its apogee, in ‘socialism’ (i.e., tyrannical-bureaucratic state capitalism), would be replaced by the ownership, control and social influence of the bourgeoisie.

Well, this bourgeoisie did not materialise in ex-Soviet Eastern Europe. First, the barely competitive East European economy, freed from restraints and protectionist barriers (and the advantages brought to it by the threat of Soviet military might), was largely destroyed. The state enterprises bought for a song by the multinationals had been closed down and their consumer markets shanghaied. A new utopia of a society without industrial and agricultural production, only with services and consumption, was instantly created, along with unprecedented rates of unemployment so that huge masses of people were simply pensioned off while still young. The liberal myth according to which people’s dependence on the state (the government) would decrease after the demise of ‘socialism’ was proved tragically wrong: people depend on the state for their livelihood more passively and more completely than ever. East European societies could not survive a single day without comprehensive social welfare programmes never seen in the West or in the ‘communist’ East before 1989. It is these indispensable social welfare programmes that East European ‘liberal democratic’ parties

and governments attempted to cut radically, thereby easing the way for post-fascism which promises social benefits for the middle class, terror for the ethnically and sexually defined 'criminal classes' (immigrants and Roma), authority, deference, cohesion, athleticism, cleanliness and no nonsense for every able-bodied, young, male, white, autochthonous, hetero, 'Christian' gentile.

Not even the impersonal, abstract, distant, politically ungraspable character of capital has changed. It is seen by manipulated public opinion as a plot by absentee landlords and kings across the sea but, alas, there are no lords and kings, only investment funds, global banks and transnational financial services, which have no will and no worldview, but are merely obeying the abstract command of growth, expansion and accumulation. The only true novelty is the competitive electoral (multi-party) system, together with the increased role of the judiciary and of the uncensored media. It would be heartless – and wrong – to say that this has not brought about any genuine change for the better. At the very least it has given pleasure to millions, glad to see the discomfiture of their formerly proud masters and taking delight in disorder, disrespect and a joyous display of hatred. It has been a fresh experience for East Europeans – something commonplace in the West – to despise openly those at the top, to express the carnivalesque egalitarian sense of being governed by imbeciles.

If we are looking for signs, let us read Benjamin, quoted and explained by Esther Leslie:

[In the chess automaton there was] actually a hunchback dwarf, who was an expert chess player and who sat inside and guided the puppet's hands by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet known as 'historical materialism' is always supposed to win. It can easily be a match for everyone if it ropes in the services of theology, which today, as the story goes, is small and ugly and must, as it is, keep out of sight.⁹

The dwarf, theology, 'might represent a moment of Geist, or consciousness, it is "supposed to win", but it can only win if the class recovers enough to "master" its technology'.

East Europeans have been forced to understand the changes they were obliged by circumstances to undergo, superficially, as another instance of a liberating mirage and, more deeply, as political, and therefore as subject to a philosophical shaping of will. Political

theology – something common in Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and, yes, Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt – may very well prove to be the dwarf in the machine. What is being contested when speaking of 1989 is a question of dignity. The Communist Party, while certainly having abandoned any kind of socialist project, insisted on representing an egalitarian mind-set, unlike any other power structure in world history. The price was despotism. Now that despotism has ended, the re-establishment of plebeian dignity is the commencement of something new.

The dwarf in the machine will show us that merely political changes, a freedom that stops at the factory gate (or the office door), a duality wherein the free citizen is but a cipher executing technological blueprints and algorithms, while at home he or she is, as a citizen, the sovereign, and this duality will always reproduce what we have believed to have escaped for ever. Classical capitalism has hidden the 'economy' and thus it has enabled a political revolution led by communists which, in spite of everything, has not touched the centre of exploitation. Contemporary capitalism hides politics as well. East Europeans are bound to know that political power struggles are intrinsically linked to the essentials of life, as pure politics of the democratic kind has not improved their lives because it did not address the occult characteristics of the regime.

In order to make this easier to understand, let us address a problem apparently common to both East and West – the problem of equality – in order to demonstrate the peculiarity of a development subsequent to the triumph and the demise of revolution, a market capitalism totally alien to the democratic longings of the nineteenth century – liberty, subjectivity, autonomy – the traces of which can still be found in Western self-images of late capitalism.

It is widely accepted that the main agent of equality in a modern class society is the state, the only force capable of imposing and effectuating redistribution, channelling, in some regimes – such as the social democratic welfare state – the assets deducted via taxation from capital assets to citizens who do not possess such assets through various mechanisms from social assistance to state investments in the public interest. This function of the state is determined largely by two intertwined combats: the class struggle and the hegemonic battle. Here, it is important to recall a distinction made by Nicos Poulantzas in his seminal essay, 'Preliminaries to the Study of Hegemony in the State', namely that the Gramscian notion of hegemony contradicts the 'subjectivistic' view of the young Marx wherein the subject is totally alienated and his or her subjectivity

projected into an enchanted netherworld of 'ideology', by necessity a 'false consciousness', whereas in hegemony we are dealing with something objective, that is, political.

In the modern state, politically men exist differently from the way in which they exist in the sphere of civil society. This fixing of political human man as a free individual, equal to all others, does not as such constitute a mystifying 'ideology.' It consists in a real relationship between men – albeit an abstract and formal one – but only in the political sphere, in an objective structure required by relations of class domination in the capitalist formation. The specific rôle of ideologies consists in resolving, through numerous mediations, the real division of men-producers into private beings and public beings, in presenting – and this is what their 'mystifying' character consists in – their real relations in civil society as a replica of their political relations, in persuading them that what they are globally is their political relations in the state.¹⁰

Both in 'real socialism' (i.e., bureaucratic state capitalism) and in 'proper' (i.e., private property-based) market capitalism the state is seen officially as a class-neutral agency with the civil service as the 'universal class' at its helm. Officially, again, the neutrality of the state is assured by the tendentially classless society, which is both the fundamental 'state aim' and a putatively enfolding 'reality' in the former case, and by the rule of law which is supposed to be centred on justice and fairness as a 'state aim' in the latter.

It could be asserted that in both cases – whatever the empirical facts – it is equality of some sort which defines the civic condition (unlike in fascism). The differences are subtle but relevant. In 'real socialism' the state itself is considered a servant only, serving first the universal class-in-becoming, the proletariat and, second, the party. The egalitarian feature of the 'socialist state' is a consequence of its anomalous position: the state as an organ of oppression ought to wither away – in a tendentially classless society there is nobody to oppress – so the least it can do is to oppress in an egalitarian direction and watch state capitalism to prevent it evolving in the direction of a fully-fledged exploitative class society. The kernel of this is, of course, the party. The party represents the link between theory and production. The theory is a theory of liberation, and at the point of production the party represents control, motivated by the morals of abnegation, altruism, commitment and voluntary

effort, that is, a counter-theory to the fundamentally hedonistic (or eudæmonistic) philosophy of Marxism.

This would cause the grounding (and dissolving) debate of 'real socialism' to be a discussion of the normative content of 'socialism.' Heretics – to whose tradition the present author belongs – would say, 'this is *not* socialism' (the party, of course, stating the contrary). *Der Verräter, Stalin, bist Du*, shouted Willi Münzenberg. In the late phases of Soviet-style society, the second generation of dissidents (frequently the same people in a second act of their lives) would say no kind of 'socialism' will do, 'real' or 'utopian'.

This was the moment when the specificity of 'real socialism' came to an end. But before that, in 1956 or in 1968, the conflict was normative and philosophical. 'True socialism' opposed 'false socialism', the right idea of the party sought to contradict the wrong idea of the party. This is how it has been ascertained that the egalitarian leanings of the party were no substitute for liberation. It was found that true equality could only be the consequence of (and philosophically the inference from) disalienation and de-reification. That pure philosophical politics was not enough; what is more, a *critical* philosophy was needed for really liberating, in other words, proletarian politics, critical in the sense of uncovering the underlying, occult determinations of social life. The liberationist theory of the party meeting exploitation at the point of production fails as it does not address the main contradiction: the separation of the producer from the means of production which the party enforces instead of the market. But being philosophical, unlike the market, it fails philosophically: the party can be (and was) refuted, the market, which does not speak, cannot be.

Both the party and the market can equalise people only as consumers ('private beings') which means sustaining a hierarchy that is free to equalise or not. It can be (and often is) forced to pursue egalitarian policies, but with the state being neutral it does not and cannot 'naturally' contain the principle of equality and it contradicts it by force, being what it is. At the same time, inequality refutes the claims of 'real socialism' and it cannot refute the claims of market capitalism.

The so-called communist heritage in Eastern Europe – and one day in China and Vietnam – means that nobody is content with the silence of the market. Inequality is not being taken for granted, and it is thus that the only force offering legitimacy for inequality (post-fascism) can find a large audience. The liberal responses to post-fascism are unsatisfactory because they are affirming one kind

of inequality (the competitive kind) while criticising another (the racial or ethnic kind), undermining their egalitarian claims, and thus appearing – and perhaps being – hypocritical. The dilemma of the party (legitimising liberation and legitimising equality, harmonising the two by the moral terror of productivist and accumulationist coercion while trying to be the representatives of the producers precisely at their workplace) has been solved by its resounding defeat while trying to be kinder to consumers. But this does not mean that this solution is the market in the sense of an exit from exploitation and oppression. It is barely the demonstration that all along the market has been the secret of Soviet society. The party has replaced the market, therefore it has become the market.

East Europeans have an intuitive grasp of this. When subscribing to the lie according to which ‘nothing has really happened’ they are obscurely aware of a fundamental position unchanged: they have never been, nor are they now, the owners. They can be offered goods and services by redistributionist policies if they succeed in cornering the establishment to give in to their, mostly but not always, consumerist demands, but these policies can obviously always be reversed if their might is reduced. The conflicted, dilemmatic legitimising strategy of the Party has taught us that equality can be guaranteed only by a yet never seen reversal of property relations. In spite, or perhaps because, of the failure of the October Revolution and its sequels, the communist question persists.

NOTES

1. This chapter was first published in *Angelaki*, vol. 15, no. 3, December 2010.
2. See G. M. Tamás, ‘A Capitalism Pure and Simple’, *Left Curve*, vol. 32, 2008, pp. 66–75; ‘Counter-Revolution against a Counter-Revolution’, *Left Curve*, vol. 33, 2009, pp. 61–7; and ‘Counter-Revolution against a Counter-Revolution’ (expanded), *Maska* (Ljubljana), vols. 121–122, Spring 2009, pp. 16–30 [bilingual Slovene/English].
3. G. M. Tamás, ‘A Talk at Potsdam: The End of Three Equilibria: East/West, Labour/Capital, Left/Right’, in *Hidden Histories – New Identities*, ed. Inka Thuncke, Potsdam and Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung/argobooks, 2010, pp. 12–19.
4. See David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Post-Communist Europe*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2005.
5. Georg Lukács, ‘Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organisation’, *History and Class Consciousness*, 1923, pp. 299–300.
6. Lukács, ‘Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organisation’, p. 314.
7. Lukács, ‘Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organisation’, p. 326.

8. Hans-Jürgen Krahl, 'Zu Lukács: Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein', 1967–68. Hans-Jürgen Krahl, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*, 1971. 5th ed. Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 2008, p. 181.
9. Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*. London: Pluto, 2000, pp. 172–3.
10. Nicos Poulantzas, *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, ed. James Martin, London: Verso, 2008, p. 95.

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**FIRST THE
TRANSITION,
THEN
THE
CRASH**

Eastern Europe in the 2000s