

COMMUNISM THE SHADOWS OF A UTOPIA

by Edward Kanterian

Twenty-five years ago, communism, the political system dominant in Eastern Europe, collapsed. Two years later, in 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved. The People's Republic of China remained the sole communist power, but throughout the 1990s its anti-capitalist party line was watered down through the introduction of market-oriented reforms. Today, only one country can be said to be truly communist: North Korea. Communism, in the 1980s a mighty geopolitical force holding half of Europe and roughly one third of the world's population in its grip, is today confined to an internationally isolated prison state, one of the poorest countries on the planet.

How are we to remember the past of a utopia? By recounting the utopian dream? Or maybe by still dreaming the dream, hoping for it to come true? After all, as Alain Badiou puts it in his book *The Communist Hypothesis*,¹ "Communism is [still] the right hypothesis", and those who disagree "resign themselves to the market economy, to parliamentary democracy" – the true evils of our time, in Badiou's eyes.

But was communism just a dream, just a hypothesis? Did it not affect many people? Were not millions of lives destroyed in its name? According to *The Black Book of Communism*,² communism claimed about 100 million victims around the globe, including some 65 million in Mao's China and 20 million in the Soviet Union. Well, one might say: Communism is a beautiful dream, but it does not work in practice. But what sort of beauty are we supposed to attribute to a dream that, when forced upon reality, turns into a nightmare? The merit of a political vision needs to be judged primarily by what it actually achieves.

Since 1989, we have witnessed two quite different ways of

remembering communism in Europe, almost two disjoint cultures, with no relation to each other. The first way is commemorative and retributive – it is backward looking. The second way is affirmative and reconstructive – it is forward looking. More precisely, the first way looks at the past of communist utopia as a *past* utopia, a utopia that has been here, has left its mark, and is now gone for good. This way is concerned with the burdens and liabilities that the passing of communism through the world has bequeathed us. The second way looks at the past of communist utopia as a failure to realize the utopia's full potential, as something that never fully arrived. This way is concerned with the past only as a signpost for our still bright communist *future*.

THE BACKWARD-LOOKING culture developed almost exclusively in Eastern Europe, the place where communism reigned for four decades. Since 1989, people engaged with communism in Eastern Europe in a variety of ways, but all were backward looking. Communist ideology has been critically investigated, legal restitution and retribution have been sought, political lustration attempted, victims rehabilitated, memorials and museums built.

Of course, many of these things have been undertaken despite the resistance of the former communist *nomenklatura* and their heirs, who remain influential in many post-communist countries to this day. But not even these political forces base their legitimacy on their communist or socialist roots. (The G, the successor of East Germany's ruling SED, is a major exception.)

In contrast, there are those who still enjoy dreaming the dream, thinking of communism as the right hypothesis. While writing these lines, I am sitting in a café in Brussels. On the wall



North Korea is a communist country – the only one? Cuba still exists of course.

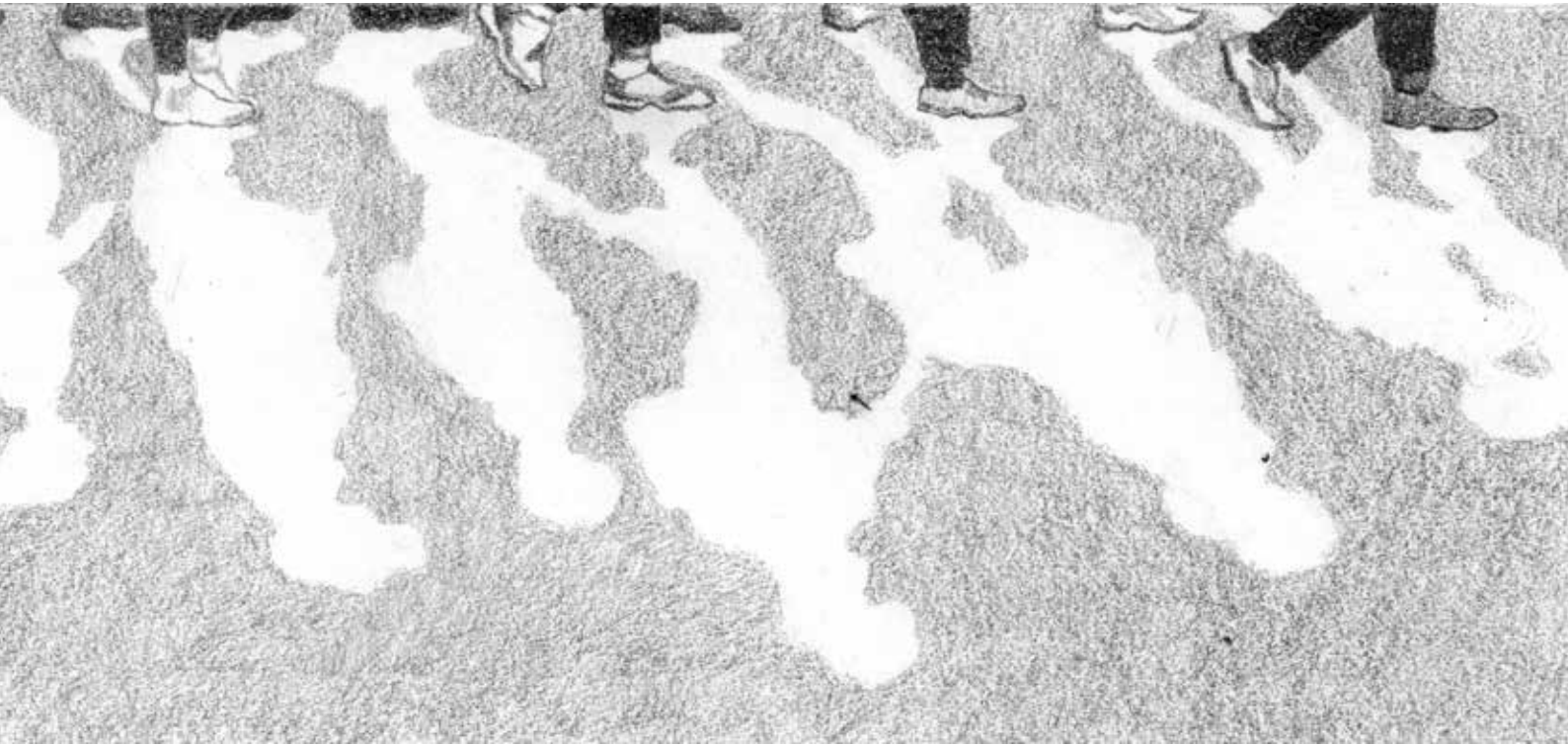


ILLUSTRATION: MOA THELANDER

in front of me is a poster displaying the hammer and sickle, a hand raising a rifle, and a Red Army soldier with a pistol. At my own university, I have seen students wearing T-shirts portraying communist leaders such as Stalin and Mao, two of the greatest mass murderers in history, as cool party guests. In Lyon you can visit a restaurant called À KGB, which describes itself as “un lieu authentique et mythique, entre tradition et modernité, avec un dépaysement garanti” (“an authentic, mythical place, both traditional and modern, guaranteed to whisk you away from your familiar surroundings”). This is particularly thoughtless if we remember that the roughly 18 million Russians who ended up in the Siberian slave camps had also been “whisked away to unfamiliar surroundings”). Such restaurants and bars exist elsewhere in the Western world (even here in Stockholm). Years ago, I asked the manager of À KGB whether he knew that Stalin, who is displayed on a poster as a cool guy wearing headphones, personally signed thousands of death warrants. His answer was, “Oh, but we are not making a political statement. It’s all just fun.” Fun it may be, but no restaurant manager in Western Europe would dare to open a Gestapo-themed nightclub or put up a poster of Himmler and the SS runes.

These examples show that communism has become part of our freewheeling Western cultural imagination. As 1989 slips into the past, communism is once again gaining a sort of romantic prominence among more educated audiences, especially given the influence of neo-communist authors such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Terry Eagleton. How then are we to remember communism? As a dream or a nightmare? As “the right hypothesis” or as a terrible hypothesis?

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski once wrote, “Marxism has been the greatest fantasy of our century”.³ Marxism was of course the underlying ideology of all communist states, a comprehensive theory of human society, history, and economics, purporting not only to explain our past, but also to predict and determine that the future will bring a classless, egalitarian communist society. This perfect society, in which the exploitation of man by his fellow men would cease to exist, was to be achieved, according to Marx, by the proletariat, the driving force of the redemption of humanity, and essentially through the abolition of private property (a phrase Marx himself used to summarize communism in *The Communist Manifesto*)⁴.

IN ONE SENSE, Marxism, or communism, was indeed a fantasy, since its utopian project was never realized. But in another sense it was a very real political project pursued by many countries. If we compare the real achievements of communist states with the predictions found in Marx, Engels, and Lenin, communism failed in a political sense. Not only did the classless communist society never arrive, but the standard of living in communist states was considerably lower than in capitalist states, and eventually communist regimes came to an end.

“IN ONE SENSE, MARXISM, OR COMMUNISM, WAS INDEED A FANTASY, SINCE ITS UTOPIAN PROJECT WAS NEVER REALIZED.”

Today, there is a popular argument employed to deny that communism has been refuted by the failure of the Soviet Union and its allies. The Soviet Union, the GDR, the People's Republic of Poland, the Socialist Republic of Romania, etc. were not communist countries, because they were oppressive states. And since there never has been a communist state, the argument goes communism has not been refuted by history.

It is not a very good argument. It is not in the interest of a communist to turn his doctrine into a mere irrefutable ideal: communism would then be comparable to certain religious doctrines; it would be removed from the sphere of the science of politics and lose its redemptive core, the aim to solve once for all the problems of human society. In principle, there needs to be a method to check whether a certain political system has been realized or not, *independently of our own political preferences*. In other words, we must be able to specify *descriptive conditions* for the realization of a political system. These descriptive conditions must be independent of a *normative* evaluation of the system.

Here is an analogy. An architect announces that he will build a house that can resist any earthquake. He finishes his work, an earthquake occurs, and the house collapses. The architect can't escape criticism by saying, "This was not the house I intended to build, since it was not earthquake-resistant!" This would be a feeble attempt to reject responsibility. Clearly, there are descriptive conditions of the house being erected (it is of a certain size, made of certain materials, etc.) and we have a "normative" evaluation (it is or is not earthquake-resistant). In the case of the house, the descriptive conditions are satisfied, but the normative evaluation is negative.

SIMILARLY, IN THE CASE of communism we have descriptive conditions for the establishment of a communist state (abolition of private property, dictatorship of the proletariat, one-party rule) and a normative evaluation ("the state is or is not an egalitarian and just society"). The descriptive conditions of communism were certainly satisfied in Eastern Europe: private property was nationalized everywhere and the dictatorship of the proletariat, represented by the one party, was established. So what is the result of the normative evaluation of the societies constructed by these measures?

As Anne Applebaum has demonstrated in her recent book *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956*,⁵ communism was imposed by the new Soviet rulers after the Second World War according to a more or less identical pattern, consisting of four stages.⁶

In every country, the NKVD first created a secret police, the necessary tool for the subsequent suppression of the opposition, real and imagined, i.e., any elements in society inimical to the communism project. To consider the example of my native country, Romania: Here the infamous secret service Securitate (officially, the "Security of the People") was founded by a decree (no. 221) as a new organ in the Interior Ministry in August 1948, after the old Romanian secret service had been infiltrated by Soviet agents (Serghei Nikonov, Pantelimon Bondarenko, Alexandru Nicoliski).⁷ The task of this new organ was explicitly stated as "the



Wing with detention cells in the former communist prison in Sighet, Romania, now a memorial.

defense of the conquests of democracy against the internal and external enemies" (Art. II). The decree also stipulated the death penalty for anti-communist activities (Art. VII:2).⁸

SECOND, THE MASS MEDIA were taken over and became propaganda tools, especially radio, given its extensive reach in those years. Third, various parts of civil society were harassed and eventually prohibited, including church and youth organizations, while at the same time the Communist Party was strengthened and in most cases taken over by party cadres who had been trained for this task during the war in special ideology schools. Fourth, ethnic cleansing through deportations took place.

These four steps made up the first wave of repression. Then came the second, more violent wave. In the two years after the war, free elections had taken place in most Eastern European countries occupied by the Soviets. A major reason for this is simply the fact that the Stalinists had trusted that the propaganda delivered by the mass media would suffice to convince the majority of the electorate to vote for their local communist party. This, however, did not happen. Astonishingly, no Communist party managed to obtain more than one third of the vote in any free election in Eastern Europe. Thus, beginning in 1947, free elections were suppressed and one-party rule was installed. Moreover, since society was resisting communist rule, more aggressive measures were taken to bring society into conformance with Marxist ideology. All forms of opposition were prohibited, especially traditional "bourgeois" parties; strict political censorship was instituted; opponents and "enemies of the people" were arrested; show trials were held and the convicts executed or sent to labor camps; and a system of informers was installed to survey and control the population. The net effect of these first years of "Stalinization" was that half the continent was effectively stripped of basic political and economic rights.

There is something puzzling about this outcome. Marx had stated that the proletariat was the engine of historical progress and Lenin had added that the Party was the vanguard of the proletariat. Both claims were meta-historical claims, stating necessary and indubitable truths about the historical direction of mankind and its ultimate redemption. Men will become free and equal in communism, by necessity, and they *will* want communism, by necessity. This prediction was an essential part of

Marxism, derived with the scientific certainty of dialectical materialism.

But in fact, the “proletariat”, once given the choice, i.e. free elections, did not bring the communists to power. The Marxist prediction failed. Society displayed a tendency to take a development different from what the doctrine was predicting. Given a choice, many workers and peasants voted for non-communist parties, such as the Peasants’ Party in Romania, the Polish People’s Party, etc. The Communists could have accepted this outcome and become one of several players in a multi-party system. But this would have meant adapting to a reality contradicting their ideology, in which there was no room for several political parties. Therefore, the Communists had to abolish free elections.

Since no communist government represented the will of the people, none was democratically legitimate. Interestingly, this fact stood in contradiction to the nominally democratic constitutions the Communists installed. For example, Article 3 of the Romanian constitution of 1948 stipulates that all state power emanates from and belongs to the people, and that the people exert their power through universal, equal, and secret elections.⁹

This basic contradiction between the constitution and the will of the people on the one hand and the ruling power and ideology on the other indicates that there was something paradoxical about the communist project. For this was a contradiction arising from within the core of the doctrine itself, its claim to bring liberation to all.

BEFORE TRYING TO UNDERSTAND this paradox, I will first give some examples of how the doctrine clashed with reality. One concerns my own uncle, also named Edward Kanterian. He was born in 1950 in Romania and attempted, at the age of 17, to escape over the border one night. A few months later, when he would have turned 18, his conscription order into the army should have arrived, but it did not. He was in all likelihood shot at the border, as thousands were. (Herta Müller describes such a shooting of an innocent citizen by Communist guards at the Romanian border in her novel *The Appointment*.)¹⁰ The state knew there was no point sending a conscription order to a ghost. My family has never heard anything from Edward. His name does not appear in any archives we have consulted (but there are others, still inaccessible). In the Armenian cemetery in Bucharest there is an empty grave with his name on it.

Another example, again that of a Romanian Armenian, was recently recounted to me by my father. This was the case of a man named Kantarian (not related). He was a train conductor in a sleeping car. One day during the height of Stalinism, he was

denounced by his housekeeper for possessing a collection of watches. The police arrested him. I found an entry on this man in a Romanian dictionary about the Romanian victims of Communist terror, edited by a survivor of Communist prisons, Cicerone Ionițoiu.¹¹ The entry reads:

KANTARIAN, Manuk. Born on December 27, 1892, in Asia Minor [Turkey]. Arrested in 1951. Died during detention in one of the camps at the Canal, on December 26, 1952.¹²

The “Canal”: in the early 1950s this was a name of horror, connected with the construction of an artificial shortcut between the Danube and the Black Sea. Much of this canal was built by political prisoners, slave workers really, people like Manuk Kantarian who had been identified as internal enemies of the communist economy. Manuk, born in Turkey, escaped the Armenian genocide in 1915 only to die in a communist camp for the mere possession of a collection of watches. Was communism the right hypothesis?

Tens of thousands of these slaves were held in labor camps at any given time. We don’t know their precise numbers, nor the precise numbers of the casualties. But we have a pretty clear picture of the inhuman conditions in which they lived and died: like the Nazi camps, they have been described by survivors. Here is a related description of political prisoners in a Siberian Gulag camp:

There behind the barbed wire was a row of creatures, distantly reminiscent of human beings [...] there were ten of them, skeletons of various sizes covered with brown, parchment-like skin, all stripped to the waist, with shaved heads and pendulous withered breasts. Their only clothing was some pathetic dirty underpants, and their shinbones projected from concave circles of emptiness. Women! Hunger, heat and hard toil had transformed them into dried specimens that still, unaccountably, clung to the last vestiges of life.¹³

Many other examples could be given, from many other places. One of the worst was the educational camp on the outskirts of the Romanian city of Pitești, where in 1949–1952 a barbaric experiment was undertaken to blur the distinction between victim and perpetrator. The experiment was based on the recruitment of inmates as torturers and “reeducators” of their fellow inmates, often their best friends, by various means: beating them senseless, forcing them to eat excrement, sexual abuse with anti-Christian connotations, and many other such things. Here is the recollection of an inmate turned into a torturer:

Costache Oprișan was almost a corpse. [Another inmate] laid him down, tied up his feet with ropes, called the others and myself, and ordered us to beat Oprișan. I was handed the club. I stopped thinking, I just beat him. It was not the threat that made me hit, but the confusion. I was beating the man whom I most treasured, my friend,

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my master, my brother, the man for whom I was ready to give my life.¹⁴

One of the main leaders of this experiment, Eugen Țurcanu, initially a member of the fascist Iron Guard, later a member of the Communist Party, kept a meticulous diary of nearly 2000 pages about the methods of Marxist “reeducation” and its results.¹⁵ Among these measures were pseudoreligious “sermons” held by Țurcanu. Here is one:

I am Țurcanu, the first and the last. [...] I am the true Gospel. I already have something to write on: your corpses. If Christ had gone through these hands, he would not have made it to the Cross! He would not have been resurrected, there would not have been any Christianity.¹⁶

ONE MIGHT BE TEMPTED to say that Țurcanu was simply insane. But were the prison guards, the prison director, and the Securitate officers running not just the Pitești prison, but the whole penitentiary system of camps and prisons spread all over Romania also simply mentally ill? According to investigations by Romulus Rusan, co-founder of the Sighet Memorial of the Victims of Communism in Romania, there were some 240 detention centers in the Stalinist period, in which at least 800,000 people were imprisoned at one time or another for political reasons.¹⁷ The Secretary of the Interior, Teohari Georgescu, reported in 1952 (by which time he was himself in prison) that the internal and external enemy had been hit hard during his tenure in 1945–1952. The Securitate had arrested over “100,000 bandits” and sentenced them “for conspiring against our regime”. This was because the Securitate’s officers had been vigorously instructed in “class hatred”, as Georgescu stressed.

The blueprint of this pattern of thinking and acting can be traced back to the Soviet Union. The Gulag was the huge Soviet penitentiary system of slave labor and educational camps for political opponents. There were some 480 individual camp systems, each one, according to Applebaum, “made up of hundreds, even thousands of individual camps or lagpunkts, sometimes spread out over thousands of square miles of otherwise empty tundra.”¹⁸ The systems held mostly peasants and workers, some 18 million between 1929 and 1953 alone, of whom roughly 4.5 million died in detention, under conditions almost impossible to imagine.

In December 1917, a few weeks after the Bolshevik takeover, Lenin created, by one of his first official decrees, the Cheka, the secret police which later became the NKVD and the KGB. By another

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early decree, Lenin also created the Gulag concentration camps, which were run by the Cheka. In its first two years alone, and especially during the Red Terror campaign in 1918, the Cheka executed countless “counterrevolutionaries” and “enemies of the people”, with an official death toll of at least 8,000–12,000, although plausible estimates have run to 50,000, 250,000, or even higher. Under Stalin’s Great Terror campaign in 1937–1938, some 680,000 “counterrevolutionaries” were killed by the Cheka, according to Donald Rayfield’s archival research.¹⁹ The Cheka executioners were operating in a methodical manner, following quotas for how many “enemies” were to be killed in a given region. They did not shy away from industrialized mass killing to reach these quotas. In some regions, they gassed their victims in 1937, anticipating Nazi technology by three years.²⁰ Rayfield writes:

Trucks advertising bread drove around the Urals, pumping exhaust gases into the rear compartment where naked prisoners lay roped together in stacks, until their loads were ready for the burial pits.²¹

While such technological precision was a later development of the Cheka, the *systematic* intent to kill opponents was manifest from the beginning. Witness this poem from 1921, by a certain Alexander Eiduk, a Cheka executioner:

There is no greater joy, no more beautiful music, than the cracking of broken lives and bones. And that is why I want to write something steadfast concerning your verdict: To the wall! Fire!

Eiduk published this poem in an anthology called “The smile of the Cheka”. Another Chekist, Martin Lacis, was the editor of a journal in which statistics about execution rates were published. He wrote in 1921:

The Cheka is the battle organ of the party of the future. [The Cheka] annihilates without [a court] trial or it isolates from society by imprisoning in concentration camps. Its word is law. [...] When interrogating, do not seek material evidence or proof of the accused’s words or deeds against Soviet power. The first question you must ask is: what class does [the accused] belong to, what education, upbringing, origin, or profession does he have? These questions must determine the accused’s fate. This is the meaning and essence of red terror. It doesn’t judge the enemy, it strikes him.²²

Such passages demonstrate the great extent to which terror was part of an official policy, intertwined with the communist ideology and institutionalized in the very first stage of communism. So the question as to whether Țurcanu was insane is misleading. It makes the communist crimes a matter of individual psychology, when in fact they were an expression of the system’s nature from the outset, whether in the early Soviet Union after WWI or in Romania in the 1950s.



Left and right: two posters of the Museum of Communism in Prague. Center: the “Communist Party” T-shirt, designed by Tom Burns.

There cannot be any doubt, then, that communism has failed, not only on political and economic, but especially on moral grounds. Every communist state was a far cry from the paradise the doctrine proposed. But what explains the criminal energy under communism, if not individual insanity? Collective insanity? That is just a metaphor. We need to explain what united and motivated these “insane” criminals, over different periods of time, in different countries. The most plausible answer, in my view, is the communist ideology itself, Marxism-Leninism.

SOME MARXISTS WILL protest here, wanting to dissociate Marx’s political theory from its Leninist interpretation. For instance, according to Marx, the proletariat itself was bound to revolt in the course of time.²³ But according to Lenin, the real proletariat was too weak to grasp the logic of history. It was prone to embrace “petty bourgeoisism” and “trade unionism”, and thus succumb to forms of capitalism. Another agent was therefore needed, professional revolutionaries, the intellectual vanguard of the proletariat – the Bolshevik party.²⁴ It was left to the party to impose communism, mercilessly (a favorite word of Lenin’s).

To be sure, Marx’s writings, especially his early ones, are more open-ended than Lenin’s political doctrine. But the path from Marx to Lenin, and then to Stalin and beyond, is not entirely spurious. Arguments to this end have been offered by various analysts, including Alain Besançon, Martin Malia, Richard Pipes, Hans Kelsen, Helmuth Plessner, and Leszek Kołakowski. I shall briefly review Kołakowski’s argument to make my case. It is found in Book One of his monumental *Main Currents of Marxism*, a book originally published in Polish in 1976, translated in 1978, and reissued in 2005, but unfortunately on the verge of being forgotten.²⁵

According to Kołakowski, there are three fundamental motifs in Marxism: the Romantic motif, the Faustian-Promethean motif, and the Enlightenment motif.²⁶

(1) The Romantic motif protests against the advent of modern, liberal society. In this society, citizens live in external relations to each other, each seeking his advantage, and are prevented from harming others by entering into a social contract in which each

citizen gives up part of his freedom. The legalism of such a society entails coercion and control, the distinction between personal life and social role, and thus the separation between citizens as private subjects, a separation regulated externally by power relations and the abstract forces of markets and money. Of course, in liberal democracies, such legalism is also meant to protect citizens’ freedom, dignity, and property against others and against the state. But for Marx, this legalism is worthless, just an expression of capitalist alienation. By contrast, in communism, money and property will be abolished, and thus any need for mediation and regulation between individuals and society will disappear. The needs and desires of all citizens

will be in perfect harmony. “Instead of freedom being conceived in the liberal fashion as the private sphere of non-interference with others, it becomes the voluntary unity of the individual with his fellow men”, writes Kołakowski.²⁷ A communist society will embody the principle “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”, as Marx wrote in *Critique of the Gotha Program* in 1875.²⁸

(2) The Faustian-Promethean motif is less theoretical. It involves faith in humanity’s unlimited powers of self-creation, in its ability to redeem itself. *Nota bene*: faith in *humanity’s* powers, not the individual’s. The species as a whole is able to progress, with the proletariat as its vanguard, even if at the expense of many individuals. Marx had little concern for our various limitations and weaknesses, for human suffering, death, illness, age, or sex, unless they were instrumental in the social liberation of the whole species. We note in this attitude a disregard for the fragility of the individual, something diametrically opposed to the ideals of liberal democracy.

(3) The Enlightenment motif relates to Marx’s belief in the existence of deterministic social laws comparable to the laws of nature. The laws are studied by dialectical materialism, Marx’s version of social science. As long as they are not recognized, these laws impose themselves on humans with utmost necessity. But with the advent of the proletariat, mankind becomes fully conscious of these laws, and their necessity turns into our freedom.

BUT EVEN IF THESE three motifs capture key aspects of Marx’s doctrines, how do they explain communist terror? After all, Marx developed a social philosophy, one open to a variety of interpretations. There is no obvious path from him to Lenin, to Lenin’s creation of the Cheka and the Gulag, and then to Stalin’s excesses and beyond.

But we need to look more closely. One thing these three motifs presuppose or express is an incredible confidence, without any sort of actual evidence, in the necessary arrival of a final point in mankind’s development, in which all societal evils will be abolished and all conflicts will end. The Romantic motif articulates

Humor is a strategy for survival. To mock the authorities is part of the resistance.

the main features of this future paradise in the form of a state in which all differences in a society are abolished. The Promethean motif expresses the voluntarist confidence in bringing about this paradise even at the cost of human lives. And the Enlightenment motif gives this belief the necessity of a scientific theory, only adding to the confidence with which we are supposed to believe in it. We have a combination of utopian faith with scientific certainty, a rather good mixture for fanaticism and social engineering. Witness Lenin:

The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true. It is comprehensive and harmonious, and provides men with an integral world outlook.²⁹

Since the appearance of [Marx's] *Capital* – the materialist conception of history is no longer a hypothesis, but a scientifically proven proposition.³⁰

KOŁAKOWSKI WORKS OUT this Marx-Lenin lineage in greater detail. It all relates to the Romantic motif of a unity of all society, the abolition of all antagonisms (property, law, state) and external relations between its members. Freedom is hereby determined by the degree of unity in a society.³¹ In a perfectly united society (communism), there cannot be any manifestation of the freedom of the individual that is not at the same time an expression of the unity of society. In particular, since the unity of society is represented by the proletariat, there cannot be any individual freedom that goes against the actions of the proletariat. If such resistance nevertheless arises, it will lead to the only possible societal conflict according to Marx, the clash of class *interests*, between two antagonistic *political* forces, the individual and the proletariat. But the communists already know who is and must be the winner of this clash: the proletariat. Hence, the clash between the individual conscience and the proletariat is a relic of the past. The dissenting individual conscience has no right to exist; it cannot exist in communism. To the extent to which it does exist, it is a challenge to the communist status quo and needs to be suppressed. Note that this logic identifies not only the dissenting individual conscience as an opponent, but any development deviating from the party line.

Of course, such deviations occurred constantly. Economic and social reality is recalcitrant, and can't be designed at the drawing board following a few simple principles. From the outset, the communist project faced great economic difficulties. Hence, anyone seen to be involved in the economic difficulties, whether they had brought those difficulties about intentionally or merely accidentally, was also identified as an enemy of the system, a relic of the past. The same was true of anyone providing the slightest evidence of clinging to the "bourgeois" conception of private property. This explains Manuk's tragedy and countless other tragedies of so-called class enemies, a category of oppression arising out of the need to explain the discrepancy between social reality and the figments of ideology.

The need for the proletariat to weed out relics of the past was a constant worry, indeed a kind of paranoia, of communist states.

(This worry about relapsing into a pre-communist state can be seen as one way to understand the phrase "communism and its memory".)

Thus emerged, right from the start, the need of, first, a special agency which has full class consciousness and knowledge of the march of history, the *Party*, and, second, an executive branch of the Party to weed out the shadows of the past, dissenting individuals, reactionary forces, petty bourgeois (kulaks and trade unionist workers). Thus also emerged the need for the Cheka, the Securitate, the Stasi, etc., as an *ideological police force*, "the battle organ of the party of the future" in Martin Laci's words, applying not the liberal rule of law and individual responsibility, but the ideological categories of class struggle. "What class does [the accused] belong to?" asked Martin Laci. The ideological police being the articulation of the will of the Party, and the Party being the articulation of the necessary march of history, there is no room in communism for a confrontation between the rights of the individual and the actions of the ideological police, and hence no room for the possibility of any wrongdoing by the ideological police against the individual. And so the Cheka, as Laci told us, "annihilates without trial" and isolates the class enemy "from society by imprisoning [him] in concentration camps".

This logic explains the continuous presence of oppression and surveillance in communist states, the Party's paranoia, its language of war, and the existence of the ideological police. Communism ultimately approximated a war conducted by the Party against the recalcitrant reality of human social existence. This verdict is troubling, if correct. For it presents communism as an amazing and terrible paradox.

IN AN IMPORTANT, but forgotten essay on communism from 1949, the legal theorist Hans Kelsen defined the state as a legal order, i.e. an order that "tries to bring about the desired human behavior by providing coercive acts as sanctions for the contrary behavior".³² According to this definition, every state must necessarily involve some degree of coercion, or at least an implicit reference to coercion in case the law is violated.

According to Kelsen, a liberal state will involve a minimum of coercion, just as much as is required to protect "certain vital interests, such as life and property".³³ A totalitarian state, however, will involve a maximum of coercion, providing little or no basis for the protection of life and property. Kelsen writes, "Nationalization of economic production [...] is the characteristic measure of expanding the scope of a state order towards totalitarianism".³⁴

And that was the essence of communism. Marx, Engels, and Lenin denounced all oppression and coercion, dreaming and

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desiring a society devoid of them. By a bewildering paradox, precisely the attempt to abolish all societal coercion and the state, as the greatest of all evils, led to the establishment of a state containing the *highest* degree of coercion and repression, a true and terrible Leviathan. It is to this end that we must cultivate the memory of communism, in a variety of ways, theoretical, historical, and moral, as I have tried to do in this essay. The memory of communism suggests the necessity of some coercion, some alienation, in our liberal democracies, in order to avoid the contingency, the calamity of *total* coercion and alienation, as endured by our fellow Europeans in the East.

I say this is a troubling verdict, for if *some* coercion and alienation is needed to sustain a human society, then this reflects a deep flaw in man as a social animal. In addition to paying tribute to the dead, the memory of communism helps us understand, first, the character of our own, liberal societies, second, our own social nature, and third, the limits of all social radicalism, of all political theology.³⁵ We should guard against the temptation to redeem mankind by political means, a temptation that was at the root of communism, and will no doubt return in other forms in the future. ❌

Note: This text is based on a lecture delivered at the Romanian Cultural Institute in Stockholm on November 4, 2014, to mark the 25th anniversary of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe.

references

- 1 Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2010).
- 2 *The Black Book of Communism*, ed. Stéphane Courtois (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).
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- 4 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848.
- 5 Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944–1956* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).
- 6 Applebaum discusses these four stages only with respect to three countries, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, but the pattern is comparable to what happened elsewhere.
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- 13 Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 335.
- 14 Markus Bauer, “Das Pitești-Experiment: Bei ihrer ungehinderten Machtentfaltung konnte sich die Securitate auf perverse Gewaltexzesse in den fünfziger Jahren stützen”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, July 1, 2011; <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/feuilleton/uebersicht/das-pitesti-experiment-1.11128190>.
- 15 Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Gulagul în conștiința românească: Memorialistica și literatura închisorilor și lagărelor comuniste* [Gulag in the Romanian consciousness: memories and literature from communist prisons and camps], (Bucharest: Editura Polirom, 2005), 154.
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- 17 See Romulus Rusan, *Cronologia și geografia represiunii comuniste în România* [The chronology and geography of communist repression in Romania] (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Academia Civică, 2007), 44; 61–62.
- 18 Anne Applebaum, “Gulag: Understanding the Magnitude of What Happened”, lecture, October 16, 2003, <http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/gulag-understanding-the-magnitude-of-what-happened>.
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- 22 Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen*, 74.
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- 27 *Ibid.*
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- 29 Lenin, *The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism* (1913), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/mar/x01.htm>.
- 30 Lenin, *What the “Friends of the People” Are and How They Fight the Social-Democrats* (1894), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1894/friends/>.
- 31 Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 343.
- 32 See also Hans Kelsen, *The Political Theory of Bolshevism: A Critical Analysis*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 5.
- 33 Kelsen, *The Political Theory of Bolshevism*, 6.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 For more on this, see Helmuth Plessner, *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*, trans. Andrew Wallace (New York: Prometheus, 1999; originally published in 1924). I have focused in this essay on the political, moral, and ideological aspects of communism. For a classical critique of communism on economic grounds, see Ludwig von Mises, “Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth”, in *Collectivist Economic Planning*, ed. F. A. Hayek (London: Routledge, 1935).