The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism

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planetary casino. Just because there is no society without production and consumption does not mean that these latter should be erected into ultimate ends of human existence—which is the real substance of “individualism” and free-market “liberalism” today.

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

Originally published as “L’Effondrement du marxisme-leninisme” in Le Monde, April 23–24, 1990. The author’s original title and other phrases dropped from the Le Monde edition have been restored.

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

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

After the fact, the suddenness of the collapse may seem as if it could go without saying. Was this ideology, from the first years
after the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in Russia, in head-on contra-
diction with reality—and was not this reality, despite the combined
efforts of Communists, fellow travelers and even the respectable
press of Western countries (which, for the most part, had swal-
lowed whole the Moscow Trials), visible and knowable for those
who wanted to see and to know? Considered in itself, did it not
reach the height of incoherence and inconsistency? But the enigma
only is doubled. How and why was this huge scaffolding capable
of holding up for so long? Claiming to be “science” and “ideolog-
cal criticism,” Marxism-Leninism promised the radical liberation
of the human being, the instauration of a “really democratic” and
“rational” society—and it came into being as the hitherto matchless
figure of mass slavery, terror, “planned” poverty, absurdity, lies and
obscurantism. How was this unprecedented historical fraud able to
operate for so long?

Where Marxism-Leninism settled into power, the answer may
appear simple: thirst for power and self-interest for some, Ter-
ror for all. This response is inadequate, for even in these cases
the seizure of power has almost everywhere been made possible
by a large popular mobilization. Nor does this response say any-
thing about its near-universal attraction. To elucidate that attrac-
tion would require an analysis of world history over the past cen-
tury and a half. Here we must limit ourselves to two factors. First,
Marxism-Leninism presented itself as the continuation, the radical-
ization of the emancipatory, democratic, revolutionary project of
the West. A presentation all the more credible as it was for a long
time—as everyone today happily forgets—the only one seemingly op-
posed to the beauties of capitalism, both in the metropolises as well
as in the colonies. Behind this, however, there is something more,
and here lies its historical novelty. On the surface, there is what
is called an ideology: a labyrinthine “scientific theory”—Marx’s—
sufficient to keep hordes of intellectuals occupied until the end of
their lives; a simplified version, a vulgate of this theory (first for-
mulated by Marx himself), with an explanatory force adequate for
behavior carries much more weight than opinions. Struggles against
the system, even mere reactions, are tending to disappear. But cap-
citalism changed and became somewhat tolerable only as a function
of the economic, social and political struggles which have marked
the past two centuries. A capitalism torn by conflict and obliged
to confront strong internal opposition, and a capitalism dealing
only with lobbies and corporations, capable of quietly manipulat-
posing people and of buying them with a new gadget every year, are
two completely different social-historical animals. Reality already
offers abundant indications of this.

The monstrous history of Marxism-Leninism shows what a
movement for emancipation cannot and should not be. It in no way
allows us to conclude that the capitalism and liberal oligarchy un-
der which we now live embody the finally resolved secret of human
history. The project of total mastery (which Marxism-Leninism
took from capitalism and which, in both cases, was turned into its
contrary) is a piece of delirium. It does not follow that we should
suffer our history as a fatality. The idea of making a tabula rasa of
everything that exists is a folly leading toward crime. It does not
follow that we should renounce that which has defined our history
since the time of ancient Greece and to which Europe has added
new dimensions, viz., that we make our laws and our institutions,
that we will our individual and collective autonomy, and that we
alone can and should limit this autonomy. The term “equality” has
served as a cover for a regime in which real inequalities were in
fact worse than those of capitalism. We cannot for all that forget
that there is no political freedom without political equality and that
the latter is impossible when enormous inequalities of economic
power, which translate directly into political power, not only exist
but are growing. Marx’s idea that one could eliminate the market
and money is an incoherent utopia. To understand that does not
lead one to swallow the almightiness of money, or to believe in
the “rationality” of an economy which has nothing to do with a
genuine market and which is more and more coming to resemble a
emerge, impose itself and impose a series of changes unimaginable shortly beforehand—among which was the official death certificate of single-party rule drawn up on March 13, 1990. What the future holds for these changes remains totally obscure, but their effects are now and henceforth irreversible.

**After the Deluge**

Like Nazism, Marxism-Leninism allows us to gauge the folly and monstrosity of which human beings are capable, as well as their fascination with Brute Force. More than Nazism, it allows us to gauge their capacity for self-delusion, for turning upside down the most liberating ideas, for making them the instruments of unlimited mystification.

As it collapses, Marxism-Leninism seems to be burying beneath its ruins both the project of autonomy and politics itself. The active hate on the part of those, in the East, who have suffered under it leads them to reject any project other than the rapid adoption of the liberal-capitalist model. In the West, people’s conviction that they live under the least bad regime possible will be reinforced, and this will hasten their sinking even further into irresponsibility, distraction and withdrawal into the “private” sphere (now obviously less “private” than ever).

Not that these populations possess many illusions. In the United States, Lee Atwater, Chairman of the Republican Party, speaking of the population’s cynicism, says: “The American people think politics and politicians are full of baloney. They think the media and journalists are full of baloney. They think organized religion is full of baloney. They think big business is full of baloney. They think big labor is full of baloney.”

Everything we know about France indicates that the same state of mind reigns there, too. Yet actual be-

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1 Father J.-Y. Calves [S.J.], trying with full Christian benevolence to help out his Marxist friends, instead clobbers them over the head when he speaks of the messianic component of Marxism in the April 14, 1990 issue of Le Monde.
various brooks of decomposition united in the Niagara which has been pouring down in torrents since the Summer of 1988 (the first demonstrations in Lithuania).

**Marx and Marxism**

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

The vulgate (derived from Engels), which attributed to Marx as sources Hegel, Ricardo and the French “utopian” socialists, masks half the truth. Marx is equally the inheritor of the emancipatory or democratic movement, whence his fascination, to the very end of his life, for the French Revolution and even, in his youth, for the Greek polls and demos. This movement of emancipation, this project of autonomy, had already been in motion for centuries in Europe and had reached its culmination with the Great Revolution.

But the Revolution left an enormous, and double, deficit. It maintained and even accentuated, in furnishing it with new bases, an immense inequality of actual power in society rooted in economic and social inequalities. It maintained and reinforced the strength and structure of state bureaucracy, “checked” to a superficial degree by a stratum of professional “representatives” separated from the people.

by the information which has not stopped pouring in since: zek revolts in the camps after Stalin’s death, the East Berlin strikes in June 1953, Crushchev’s Report, the Polish and Hungarian Revolutions in 1956, the Czechoslovak movement in 1968 and the Polish one in 1970, the flood of dissident literature, the Polish explosion of 1980 which made the country ungovernable.

After the failure of Krushchev’s incoherent reforms, the necrosis which was eating away at the system and left it no escape but a flight in advance toward over-armament and external expansion had become manifest. I wrote about this in 1981, saying that one could no longer speak in terms of “classical” totalitarianism.

Certainly too, the regime could not have survived for seventy years if it had not been able to create for itself large points of support within society, from the ultra-privileged bureaucracy down to the strata which have successively benefited from a degree of “social promotion”; in particular, a type of behavior, and an anthropological type of individual ruled by apathy and cynicism, preoccupied solely with tiny and precious improvements which, by dint of guile and intrigues, this individual can claim.

On this last point, the regime has half succeeded, as is shown by the extreme slowness of popular reactions in Russia even after 1985. But it has also half failed, as is best seen, paradoxically, within the party Apparatus itself. When the force of circumstances (impasses in Poland and Afghanistan, the pressure of American rearmament in the face of its own growing technological and economic retardation, the inability to bear any longer the costs of its overextension worldwide) showed that the evolution toward “stratocracy,” dominant under Brezhnev, was becoming untenable in the long run, within the Apparatus and around an uncommonly capable leader a sufficiently large “reformist” group was able to

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which we will not retrace here, but which, it must be recalled, is in
the main that of the resistance by people and things to the phan-
tasm that society can be totally reabsorbed, and history completely
shaped, by the power of the party.

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

Those who, however, have discussed the Russian regime seri-
ously (I am not speaking of Reader’s Digest or Ms. Kirkpatrick),
have never fallen victims to this mirage. They have emphasized
and analyzed its internal contradictions and antinomies. Indif-
erence and passive resistance on the part of the population; sabotage
and wastage of industrial as well as agricultural production; the
deep-seated irrationality of the system, from its own point of view,
due to its delirious bureaucratization; decisions made according to
the whims of the Autocrat or of the clique which has succeeded in
imposing its will; a universal conspiracy of deception, which has
become a structural trait of the system and condition for the sur-
vival of individuals, from zeks to Politburo members. All of this
has been vividly confirmed by the events which began in 1953 and

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

At the same time, however, another project, another social-
historical imaginary came on the scene: the capitalist imaginary,
which transformed social reality before one’s very eyes and clearly
seemed destined to rule the world.

Contrary to a confused prejudice still dominant today—and
which is at the basis of the contemporary version of classical
“liberalism”—the capitalist imaginary stands in direct contradic-
tion to the project of emancipation and autonomy. Back in 1906 Max
Weber derided the idea that capitalism might have anything at all
to do with democracy, and one can still share a laugh with him
when thinking of South Africa, Taiwan, or Japan from 1870 to 1945
and even today. Capitalism subordinates everything to the “devel-
opment of the forces of production”; people as producers, and then
as consumers, are to be made completely subordinate to it. The
unlimited expansion of rational mastery—pseudomastery and pseu-
dorationality, as is abundantly clear today—thus became the other
great imaginary signification of the modern world, powerfully em-
bodyed in the realms of technique and organization.

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

The contamination of the emancipatory project of autonomy by
the capitalist imaginary of technical and organizational rational-
ity, with its assurance of automatic “progress” in history, occurred
rather early on (it is already to be found in Saint-Simon). It is Marx,
however, who was the principal theoretician and artisan of the pen-
etration into the workers’ and socialist movement of ideas which
made technique, production and the economy the central factors.
Thus, via a retroactive projection of the spirit of capitalism, Marx in-
terpreted the whole of human history as the result of the evolution
of the forces of production—an evolution which, barring some cata-
srophic accident, was to “guarantee” our future freedom. Upon re-
working, political economy was brought into action in order to
show the “inevitability” of the path to socialism—a path which, once
embraced, would lead to the introduction of definite changes, it
was a matter of introducing the changes that allow one to stay in
power and to reinforce it nonstop. In 1917 Lenin knew one thing
and one thing only: that the moment to take power had come and
that tomorrow it would be too late.

But to do what with it? He did not know, and he said so: our
teachers unfortunately have not told us what to do in order to build
socialism. Later on, he will also say: “This is Thermidor. But we
shan’t let ourselves be guillotined. We shall make a Thermidor our-
selves.”3 This must be understood as meaning: if, in order to retain
power, we must turn our orientation completely upside down, we
shall do so. Indeed, he did so several times over. (Later on, Stalin
brought this art to absolute perfection.) A single fixed point was
ruthlessly maintained throughout the most incredible changes in
course: the limitless expansion of the power of the Party, the trans-
formation of all institutions, starting with the State, into its mere
instrumental appendages and, finally, the pretense, not simply that
the Party is directing society or even speaking in society’s name,
but that it is in fact society itself.

The Effects of Marxism

One forgets all too easily today the enormous explanatory power
the Marxist conceptual outlook, even in its vulgar versions, long
who are not with us are to be exterminated” was applied without
mercy, the modern means of Terror were invented, organized and
applied en masse. Above all, the obsession for power, power for
the sake of power, power as end in itself, by every means possi-
ble and little matter what for, emerged and took hold, no longer as
personal trait but as social-historical determinant. It was no longer
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The Failure of Totalitarianism

Under Stalin this project attained its extreme and demented form
Also, beginning with his death its failure began to become apparent
Totalitarianism is not an immutable essence. It has a history, one

3Translator: This quotation appears in Victor Serge’s Memoirs of a Revolution-
the bureaucracy which he himself made proliferate, in the end he appears both as the near-exclusive artisan of a fantastic upheaval and as a piece of straw on the flood of events. Nevertheless, it is he who created the institution without which totalitarianism is inconceivable and which is today falling into ruin: the totalitarian party, the Leninist party, which is, all rolled into one, ideological Church, militant army, state Apparatus already in nuce when it still is held “in a taxi carriage,” and factory where each has his/her place in a strict hierarchy with a strict division of labor. Of these elements, which had long existed, but in dispersion, Lenin made a synthesis and conferred a new signification upon the whole he made of them. Orthodoxy and discipline were carried to the limit (Trotsky boasted of the comparison of the Bolshevik party to the order of Jesuits) and extended onto an international level. The principle that “those

It is not without merit to recall for new generations a few of the "twenty-one conditions" adopted by the Second Congress of the Third International (July 17 — August 1, 1920): "... All the Party’s press organs must be run by reliable Communists. The... press and all the Party’s publishing institutions must be subordinated to the Party leadership. 9. The Communist cells [in the unions, etc.] must be completely subordinated to the Party as a whole. 12... In the present epoch of acute civil war the Communist Party will only be able to fulfill its duty if it is organized in as centralist a manner as possible, if iron discipline reigns within it and if the Party center, sustained by the confidence of the Party membership, is endowed with the fullest rights and authority and the most far-reaching powers. 13. The Communist Parties of those countries in which the Communists can carry out their work legally must from time to time undertake purges [re-registration] of the membership of their Party organizations in order to cleanse the Party systematically of the petty-bourgeois elements within it. 15. As a rule, the program of every Party belonging to the Communist International must be ratified by a regular Congress of the Communist International or by the Executive Committee [my emphasis—C.C.]. 16. All decisions of the Congresses of the Communist International and decisions of its Executive Committee [my emphasis—C.C.] are binding on all parties belonging to the Communist International..." ("Theses on the Conditions of Admission to the Communist International," in Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International [Atlantic Highlands, NJ.: Humanities Press, 1980], pp. 93, 95, 96.)

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seemed to possess. It revealed and denounced the mystifications of classical liberalism, showed that the economy operates for capital and for profit (a fact which, to their bewilderment, American sociologists have come to discover over the past twenty years), and predicted the worldwide expansion and concentration of capitalism. Economic crises have succeeded one another for more than a century with almost natural regularity, producing poverty, unemployment, and an absurd destruction of wealth. The carnage of the First World War, the Great Depression of 1929 through 1933, the rise of fascism could only be understood at the time as striking confirmations of Marxist conclusions—and the issue of the actual rigorousness of the arguments leading to these conclusions held little weight when compared to the crushing mass of the real situation.

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

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

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

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

Leninist Totalitarianism

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

The true creator of totalitarianism is Lenin. The internal contradictions of this personage would be of little account if they did not illustrate, once again, the absurdity of “rational” explanations of history. A sorcerer’s apprentice who swore only by “science,” inhuman and yet without any doubt sincere and unmotivated by personal interest, extraordinarily lucid about his adversaries and blind concerning himself as he rebuilt the Czarist state Apparatus after having destroyed it and protesting against this reconstruction, the creator of bureaucratic commissions designed to struggle against