

5. Marxist Ideology and Philosophy as Interpreted by Raymond Aron

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Abstract:

Without posing the objective of providing an exhaustive interpretation of Aron's thought on Marx and totalitarianism, we intend to identify several key concepts that emerge from an analysis of Aron's acclaimed work on the role played by Marxist-Leninist ideology in the development of the 20th-century philosophic thought.

Keywords:

Marx; Lenin; totalitarianism; Aron; Messianism; revolution; Bolshevism

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Communist Totalitarianism

The force of attraction between totalitarian parties emerges every time a serious economic crisis reveals a disproportion between the abilities of representative government systems and mass industrial society's need for effective guidance. The characteristics that make totalitarianism a radically anti-democratic political system are easy to spot for Aron: the identification of the party with the State, the standardisation of independent organisations, the transformation of one party's doctrine into national orthodoxy, and the violent behaviour and intimidating power of the police. Yet whereas the free societies of the West with their divisions of power and secular states represent a singular case in history, the Communist revolutionaries who dream of liberation more closely relate to despotism instead, whether consciously or not.

The Historical Genesis of Bolshevism

In terms of theory and practice alike, the Bolsheviks are Jacobins who were successful in their conquest of power. In Aron's interpretation, the Soviet regime is stamped with the Jacobin mentality and a mania for planning.

The Myths of Marxism-Leninism

For Aron, it is unquestionable that the Marxist thought created myths, and the first was most certainly that of the revolution. The myth of the Revolution fed by Marxism nourishes expectation for the long-awaited disruption of the ordinary process of human events. Does not the word revolution itself signify the abrupt substitution of one form of dominance by another through violence? Yet in the moment of its affirmation through revolution, power inevitably becomes tyrannical power exercised outside the law, and above all, expresses the will of a restricted group. From a strictly historical-interpretative point of view, Marxism offers three different concepts of revolution. The first is the seizure of power theorised by Louis-Auguste Blanqui, in which a small group of armed men take control of the State and transform its institutions. The second is an evolutionary approach, in which future society must mature in present society until the latter reaches its final crisis that leads to its redemption. Lastly, the third concept is that of permanent revolution, by which the workers' party exerts through its growth constant pressure on the bourgeois parties and exploits reforms that undermine the capitalistic order from within while simultaneously preparing for its own victory and the advent of Socialism.

The second myth consists of Marxist eschatology that attributes the role of the general public's saviour to the proletariat. The expressions used by the young Marx do not leave any room for doubting the Judeo-Christian origins of the myth of the working class, which is destined to redeem humanity through its suffering. The mission of the proletariat, the end of prehistory thanks to the Revolution, the reign of freedom; these are the keywords that reflect a millenarian interpretation of historical reality, which can be summarised as follows: the Messiah, revolutionary disruption, and the Kingdom of God. However, Aron perceives also the following aspect that links Marxism to religion: the Marxist intellectuals who aspire to revolution cite the writings of the young Marx in the same way that the Protestants dissatisfied with the Church cited the Gospels in open opposition to the Church's official doctrine. Just as for Christians, also for Communists doctrine offers a global interpretation of the universe, inspiring sentiment as for the Crusaders of every era and establishing a hierarchy of values and a code of behaviour. After all, is it not typical of prophecy to condemn the existing and construct a utopian image of what the world must be? Also, for this reason, the French scholar emphasises how the Marxist militant convinces himself of being a member of the close circle of the elite responsible for saving humanity. Precisely due to this Manichean approach, the Communist becomes a fanatic and divides humanity into two categories based on their attitude to this holy cause.

The third myth is Historical Materialism, which is nothing but a metaphysical materialism according to which not only is progress in the direction of a better society necessary but also history must inevitably lead to a classless society.

The fourth myth consists of the sacralization and historical de-contextualization of the factory worker. According to Moscow propaganda, the American worker is a pitiful pauper and the Soviet worker enjoys a wellbeing unknown in the West. Because the Soviet State has secured a monopoly over propaganda for itself and because it prohibits workers from crossing its borders, it succeeded in imposing its intentionally false view of the world.

The fifth myth is the myth of peace: any victory for the Communists, even a military victory, is a victory of peace. A Socialist nation is an inherently pacifist because Imperialism is an effect of the contradictions of Capitalism. War is legitimate only when it leads to the victory of Socialism, or in other words, the Communist party.

The sixth myth – the Promethean vision of history – is a direct consequence of the idolatry of history determined by historical dialectic materialism: the revolutionaries fail to realise that society cannot be rebuilt according to a plan; neither can one single objective be set for all of the humanity. As long as the intellectuals – Aron prophetically illustrated – fail to understand this, violence will continue to be determinant in the affirmation of power because it is linked to a truth that claims to be both historical and absolutist.

The Objective of Marxism

Marxism is an intellectual's philosophy that has instrumentalised certain parts of the proletariat, whereas Communism, as a political practice, utilises this pseudo-science to reach its own objective, that is to say the conquest of power. On the other hand, Marxism-Leninism implies the use of two doctrines: one addressed to the intellectuals and another addressed to those with the objective of manipulating the masses and conquering the power through civil war.

Christianity and Marxism

Christians are attracted to Marxist ideology by the persistence of echoes of a religious experience: like the first followers of Christ, militant proletarians live in expectation of a new world. If Catholic faith is not incompatible, as a rule, with a sympathy for progressive parties, for the workers' movement, or for planning, it is certainly incompatible with Marxist prophecy, as the latter sees in the evolution of history its path to salvation. Communist activists – and Christians likewise – are in reality driven by faith: not only do they desire a rational organization and exploitation of natural resources and communal life, they also aspire to dominion over both cosmic forces and society with the purpose of solving the mystery of human history and thus subtracting a humanity satisfied with itself from transcendence.

Propaganda and Historical Materialism

Another example of autointoxication generated by propaganda is the conviction of some Marxist intellectuals that Historical Materialism is not merely one interpretation of history but the only possible one. As affirmed by the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty in his essay *Humanism and Terror*, Marxism is not just an ordinary hypothesis, because it is the simple expression of the conditions without which there can be neither humanity, in the sense of a reciprocal relationship among people, nor rationality of history. In a certain sense – Aron points out – Historical Materialism is not a philosophy of history but *the* philosophy of history. In reality, dialectical materialism is the result of a metamorphosis of an idea into reality. Every regime is stigmatised, and one single principle attributed, and the principle of Capitalism is opposed to the principle of Feudalism or that of Socialism. Lastly, Marxism expresses itself as if regimes were contradictory and as if the passage from one to the other were comparable to the passage between thesis and antithesis. Aron notes that this leads to the creation of a twofold error: regimes are different, not contradictory, and the so-called intermediary forms are more frequent and longer lasting than pure forms. The search for a better intelligibility than that of arbitrary determinism and of the multitude of its imperatives is undeniably legitimate, but only if this search does not imply an act of faith through which the future is bent to the orders of reason. On the contrary, the worship of history to which Historical Materialism leads reserves the right to replace simple facts with meanings linked to a system of interpretation deemed definitive. In other words, Historical Materialism is an

authentic caricature of historical conscience, and it is therefore inevitable that worshipping history leads to seeing the other only as the enemy to be eliminated. When history does not progress according to Marxist expectations, the engineers of the soul required to accelerate the development of the dialectic relationship must intervene, as happened under Stalinism. This supposedly leads to education, propaganda, ideological training and militant atheism, with the objective of moulding individuals to an idea of Mankind that resembles that of Pavlov more than that of Marx. The intellectuals will then be replaced by ministers, commissars, theoreticians, and investigating judges armed with the methods of reflexology for the purpose of making people conform to what they should be naturally.

Antagonist Intellectuals

According to the French scholar, antagonist intellectuals can be grouped into three categories. Firstly, those who criticise the technique as such, and do so because they want to replace those in charge, suggesting the implementation of measures capable of mitigating the damage reported. Secondly, those who criticise the morale and refuse Colonialism and the alienation inherent to Capitalism but ignore the consequences of this refusal and the practical means of translating it into action. Lastly, those who criticise the dominant ideology and who rage against the existing world society on the whole in the name of a utopian society that must take form at some undefined moment in the future. In this regard, it is significant that Marxist-Leninist criticism adopts a moralistic view against one-half of the world while considering the revolutionary movement instead with indulgence. Another consequence of the ideological fanaticism of antagonist intellectuals is the fervent anti-Americanism according to which the United States is seen as the incarnation of all evil. It is indeed paradoxical – Aron notes – that these intellectuals who demand liberty and pluralism end up praising power systems that deny these fundamental freedoms and instead make a radical criticism of the bourgeois power systems that on the contrary ensure freedom of expression and protest.

Gnosis and Marxism-Leninism

Influenced by Eric Voegelin and Alain Besançon, Aron affirms that Marxism was originally a Gnosticism that becomes a secular religion of salvation through history. On one hand, Lenin shared with Marx the idea that Capitalism had to be destroyed and that Rule of Law, representative democracy, the autonomy of civil society, and both individual and collective freedoms had to be suppressed. On the other hand, Lenin created a political party – something Marx never did – that was built on a minority elite dedicated to the sacrosanct mission of conducting a never-ending holy war against the world of Capitalism. At the political and economic level, long before Stalin, Lenin implemented not only an authentic militarization of society but also an individual and collective ideologization. In this sense, war for Lenin is not only an internal affair that involved the elimination of all spontaneous tendencies towards bourgeois values but also an effort against the Capitalistic nations around him.

The absence of the constructive element in Marxist thought

One of the greatest omissions in the Marxist thought is evident in the absence of a real theory of politics, which comes to be substituted by a fairly vague prophetic vision of historical reality that demonstrates the possibility of interpreting the political alternative indicated by Marx (in *German Ideology*, for example) or in Jacobin terms or Anarcho-communism terms.

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