

LIVING WITHOUT AN ALTERNATIVE

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COMMUNISM has died. Some say, of senility. Some say, of shameful afflictions. All agree that it will stay dead for a long, long time.

The official opinion (whatever that means) of the affluent West greeted the news, arguably the least expected news of the century, with self-congratulating glee. The theme of the celebration is well known: 'our form of life' has once and for all proved both its viability and its superiority over any other real or imaginable form, our mixture of individual freedom and consumer market has emerged as the necessary and sufficient, truly universal principle of social organization, there will be no more traumatic turns of history, indeed no history to speak of. For 'our way of life' the world has become a safe place. The century remarkable for fighting its choices on the battlefield is over, ten years before appointed time. From now on, there will be just more of the good things that are.

In the din of celebration, the few voices of doubt are barely audible. Some doubts do not dare to be voiced. Some inarticulate worries have not even congealed into doubts fit to be put into words. One can only guess what they are.

Those who deployed communism as a bugbear with which to frighten disobedient children ('look what would become of you if you do not do what I told you to') and bring them to their senses, feel slightly uneasy: where are they to find a substitute for the service the late communism rendered? How to keep people thankful for however little they have if one cannot get credit for defending them from having less still?

Some categories of people have more radical and immediate reasons to be worried. The huge warfare bureaucracy, for instance. It lived off the threat of the communist evil empire, and lived all the better the more it could make the threat look real and terrifying. That bureaucracy presided over, and derived its life juices from, the biggest arms industry that existed in any peacetime of history. That industry did not need actual warfare to thrive: the initial push of the communist threat sufficed to assure continuous, exponential development. After that, it has acquired its own momentum of self-perpetuation and growth. Producers of defensive weapons competed with the merchants of the offensive ones; navies with air forces, tanks with rocketry units. New weapons had to be developed one day because the weapons invented the day before made inadequate or downright obsolete the weapons deployed the day before that. Or new weapons had to be developed just because the laboratories, filled with

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high class brains and kept constantly at the highest pitch of tension by tempting commissions, prestigious ambitions and professional rivalry, could not stop spawning ever new ideas; and because there were spare or idle technological resources eager to absorb them. And yet this cosy arrangement needed the communist threat to secure the steady inflow of life juices. The weapon industry less than anyone else can survive without enemy; its products have no value when no one is afraid and no one wants to frighten the others.

And there is another powerful industry that may bewail the passage of the communist enemy: thousands of university departments and research institutes, world-wide networks of congresses, conferences, publishing houses and journals all dedicated in full to 'Soviet and East European Studies' and now, much as the warfare bureaucracy, facing the prospect of redundancy. Like all well established and viable organizations (including the warfare bureaucracy), *sovietology* will certainly attempt to find a new topic to justify its continuing services, and this it can only do through constructing new targets to match its impressive human and material resources. And yet one doubts whether the new targets, however defined, would attract as in the past the funds and the benevolence of the powers that be in quantities sufficient to keep the industry at its recent level of material wealth, academic prestige and self-congratulatory mood.

These and similar worries may be quite serious for the interests they affect directly, yet the globality of disaster to which they refer is, to say the least, a matter of contention. There are, however, other consequences of the demise of communism which may have truly global deleterious effects for the survival of the very same 'form of life' whose ultimate triumph they ostensibly augur.

It is widely assumed, particularly in the right-most regions of the political spectrum, that the bankruptcy of the communist system must have delivered a mortal blow not just to the preachers and outspoken devotees of the communist faith, but to any cause, however loosely related to the 'left' tradition of disaffection, critique and dissent, of value-questioning, of alternative visions. It is assumed that the practical discreditation of communism (construed as 'the Other' of *our form of life*, as the *negative* totality which injects meaning into *our positivity*), preempts by proxy and disqualifies in advance any doubts about the unchallengeable superiority of the *really existing* regime of freedom and consumer market; that it discredits, moreover, any suggestion that this regime, even if technically more viable, may be still neither entirely flawless, nor the most just of conceivable orders; that it may be instead in urgent need of an overhaul and improvement. I will argue, however, that the assertion that the collapse of communism threatens the survival of the 'left alternative' and the left critique *alone* is invalid as a *non sequitur*; that such dangers as truly arise in the world that has abandoned the socialist alternative, ostensibly discredited once and for all by the now universally decried practices of its communist variant, apply to 'our form of life' (that

is, to the *really existing* regime of free consumers and free markets) in the same (perhaps even greater) measure than they do to its left critique; and that this circumstance may only render the continuation of critique more imperative that it otherwise would have been.

The historical meaning of the collapse of communism

What has been buried under the debris of the communist system? A number of totalitarian states, of course—specimens of a regime that left rule- unprotected individuals at the mercy of rule-free powers, and which insulated the self-reproduction of the political power-holders from all and any intervention by the powerless. The demise of the totalitarian state cannot, however, be said to be final or complete, as communism was just one of many political formulae of totalitarianism. Noncommunist totalitarianism is neither logically incongruent as a notion nor technically inoperative as a practice. Even a cursory survey of the panoply of extant political regimes would show that to issue a death certificate to totalitarianism just because its communist version has disintegrated would be, to say the least, a premature and unwise decision. Even if every former communist state makes the parliamentary democratic procedure and the observance of individual rights stick (not by itself a foregone conclusion), this would not mean that ‘the world has become safe for democracy’ and that the struggle between liberal and totalitarian principles heretofore coexisting inside contemporary body politics has been settled. To suggest that the communist utopia was the only virus responsible for totalitarian afflictions would be to propagate a dangerous illusion, one that is both theoretically incapacitating and politically disarming—for the future chances of democracy a costly, perhaps even lethal mistake.

There are, however, other graves hidden under the rubble that are still waiting to be uncovered in full. The fall of communism was a resounding defeat for the project of a *total order*—an artificially designed, all-embracing arrangement of human actions and their setting, one that follows the rules of reason instead of emerging from diffuse and uncoordinated activities of human agents; it was also the downfall of the grandiose dream of *remaking* nature—forcing it to yield ever more of anything human satisfaction may require, while disregarding or neutralizing such among its unplanned tendencies as could not be assigned any sensible human benefit; it demonstrated as well the ultimate frustration of the ambitions of global management, of replacing spontaneity with planning, of a transparent, monitored, supervised and deliberately shaped order in which nothing is left to chance and everything derives its meaning and *raison d’être* from the vision of a harmonious totality. In short, the fall of communism signalled the final retreat from the dreams and ambitions of *modernity*.

One of the most conspicuous traits of modernity was an overwhelming

urge to replace spontaneity, seen as meaningless and identified with chaos, by an order drawn by reason and constructed through legislative and controlling effort. That urge gestated (or was it gestated by?) what has become a specifically *modern* state: one that modelled its intentions and the prerogatives it claimed after the pattern of a gardener, a medical man, or an architect: a *gardening* state, a *therapeutic/surgical* state, a *space-managing* state. It was a gardening state, in so far as it usurped the right to set apart the 'useful' and the 'useless' plants, to select a final model of harmony that made some plants useful and others useless, and to propagate such plants as are useful while exterminating the useless ones. It was a therapeutic/surgical state, in so far as it set the standard of 'normality' and thus drew the borderline between the acceptable and the intolerable, between health and disease, fighting the second to support the first—and in so far as it cast its subjects in the role of the patients: the sites of ailments, yet not themselves agents able to defeat the malady without the instruction of a knowledgeable and resourceful tutor. It was a space-managing state, in so far as it was busy landscaping the wasteland (it was the landscaping intention that cast the operating territory as wasteland), subjecting all local features to one, unifying, homogenizing principle of harmony.

Communism and modernity

As it happened, communism took the precepts of modernity most seriously and set out to implement them in earnest. Indeed, its logic as a system had geared it to perform the gardening/therapeutic/architectural functions to the detriment of all, indeed any, prerequisites or demands unjustified by the reason of the enterprise. From the start, communism was one-sidedly adapted to the task of mobilizing social and natural resources in the name of modernization: the nineteenth-century, steam-and-iron ideal of modern plenty. It could—at least in its own view—compete with capitalists, but solely with the capitalist engaged in the same pursuits. Its trouble and its ultimate undoing was, as it transpired later, that what it could not do, and did not brace itself to do, was to match the performance of the capitalist, market-centred society once that society abandoned its steel mills and coal mines and moved into the post-modern age—once it passed over, in Jean Baudrillard's apt aphorism, from *metallurgy* to *semiurgy*. Stuck at its metallurgical stage, Soviet communism—as if to cast out devils—went on spending much of its surplus energy on fighting wide trousers, long hair, rock music and any other manifestations of semiurgical initiative.

Throughout its history, communism was modernity's most devout, vigorous and gallant champion—pious to the point of simplicity. It also claimed to be its only true champion. Indeed, it was under communist, not capitalist, auspices that the audacious dream of modernity, freed from obstacles by the merciless and seemingly omnipotent state, was pushed to

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its radical limits: grand designs, unlimited social engineering, huge and bulky technology, total transformation of nature. Deserts were irrigated (but they turned into salinated bogs); marshlands were dried (but they turned into deserts); massive gaspipes criss-crossed the land to remedy nature's whims in distributing its resources (but they kept exploding with a force unequalled by the natural disasters of yore); millions were lifted from the 'idiocy of rural life' (but they got poisoned by the effluvia of rationally designed industry, if they did not perish first on the way). Raped and crippled, nature failed to deliver the riches one hoped it would; the total scale of design only made the devastation total. Worse still, all that raping and crippling proved to be in vain. Life did not seem to turn more comfortable or happy, needs (even ones acknowledged by the state tutors) did not seem to be satisfied better than before, and the kingdom of reason and harmony seemed to be more distant than ever.

Communism and post-modernism

Even if communism could claim (erroneously, as it turned out in the end) to be capable of out-modernizing the *modernizers*, it has become apparent that it cannot seriously contemplate facing the challenge of the *post-modern* world. In that world, consumer choice is simultaneously the essential systematic requisite, the main factor of social integration, and the channel through which individual life-concerns are vented and problems resolved—while the state, grounding its expectation of discipline in the seduction of consumers rather than in the indoctrination and oppression of subjects, could—indeed has to—wash its hands of all matters ideological and thus make conscience a private affair.

Communism could perhaps coexist with other forms of modern life as their 'less developed', inferior sibling, and even offer a beacon of hope to those many who entertained the dream of joining, belatedly, the feast of modern plenty. But it could not survive the advent of the post-modern condition and its attendant values. It was the advent of the post-modern condition—the abandonment of modern ambitions and the de-étatization (often wrongly described as 'privatization') of social problems, the enthronement of seduction as the principal means of social control, the replacement of the structuring effort of the state by the self-construction of individual and tribal identities—that delivered to communism its *coup de grace*. It did so not so much by exposing once more the inefficiency of its services, as by devaluing—in no uncertain terms—the purpose which these services were meant to serve.

What the affluent West is in fact celebrating today is the official passing away of its own past: the last farewell to modern dream and modern arrogance. If the joyous immersion in post-modern fluidity and the sensuous bliss of aimless drift were poisoned by the residues of modern conscience—the urge to do something about those who suffer and clamour for something to be done—they seem unpolluted now. With communism,

the ghost of modernity has been exorcised. Social engineering, the principle of communal responsibility for individual fate, the duty to provide commonly for single survivals, the tendency to view personal tragedies as social problems, the commandment to strive collectively for shared justice—all such moral precepts as used to legitimize (some say motivate) modern practices have been compromised beyond repair by the spectacular collapse of the communist system. No more guilty conscience. No scruples. No supra-individual commitments contaminating individual enjoyment. The past has descended to its grave in disgrace.

The political significance of the collapse of communism

The demise of the communist system was also a defeat for the over-ambitious and over-protective state. Indeed it is because the last act of the protracted and tortuous process of demise was so final and dramatic that it is credible to describe ambitious and protective states as *over-ambitious* and *over-protective*. Such a state seemed to give its last breath at the Vaclavske Namesti and the city square of Timisoara, though it survived, albeit temporarily, Tienanmen Square. What discredited that state more than anything else (*de facto*, if not in theoretical interpretations) is that it revealed an unbelievable inner weakness; it surrendered to an unarmed crowd while ostensibly threatened by nothing more than that crowd's resolute refusal to go home. Such a weakness seems to be a sole property of the communist state, and can be easily, and gladly, ascribed to everything it stood for. Can one imagine a similar effect of a public gathering at Trafalgar Square? Or Champs Elysées? And can one imagine the gathering?

Because of the factors spelled out above, the subjects of the communist state could have more reasons to express disaffection than the population of most Western countries. But—a point not stressed strongly enough, if at all—they also had a greater possibility to make their disaffection effective and to re-forge it into systemic change. The overbearing state had to pay a price for the formidable volume of its concerns and entitlements—and the price was *vulnerability*. To assert the state's right to command and control is to assume responsibility for the effects. The doorstep on which to lay the blame is publicly known and clearly marked, and for each and any grievance it is *the same* doorstep. The state cannot help but cumulate and condense social dissent; nor can it help turning the edge of dissent against itself. The state is the major, and sufficient, factor in forging the variety of often incompatible complaints and bids into a unified opposition—at least for long enough to produce a dramatic showdown. The state that assumes the right to structure society also induces a tendency to political polarization: the conflicts that otherwise would remain diffuse and cut the population in many directions tend to be subsumed under one overriding opposition between the state and society.

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Thus it has not been proved that the illusory nature of state power and its incapacity to survive the mere refusal of obedience is solely the property of the communist state. What has been proved instead is that the communist regime created conditions most propitious to calling the bluff of state omnipotence. Most directly related to the nature of the regime was the possibility that refusal of obedience be synchronized, global and involving if not the total, then at least a sizeable part, of the population.

From the point of view of political sociology, the most important consequence of the present Western tendency to de-étatization of the growing number of previously state-managed areas is the *privatization of dissent*. With both the global balance of social activities and the logic of the life-process split into finely-sliced and mutually autonomous functions, disaffections arising along separate task-oriented activities have no ground on which to meet and merge. Disaffection tends to generate one-issue campaigns, and dissent is functionally dispersed and either depoliticized or politically diluted. Seldom, if ever, is the grievance directed against the state, the frantic efforts of political parties notwithstanding. More often than not it stops short even of blending into social movements; instead, it rebounds in more disillusionment with collective solutions to individual troubles, and blames the sufferer for unfulfilled potential. The difference between the two systems consists not so much in the size of the sum total of disaffection, as in the propensity of dissent in a communist system to cumulate to the point where the system is de-legitimated, and to condense into a system-subverting force.

It is for this reason that the sham of state omnipotence (sometimes represented in political theory as 'legitimacy'), even if it really were only a sham, would tend to remain invisible. Whether the communist and liberal-parliamentary states (one presiding over the command economy, the other letting loose the market game) do or do not share the inner weakness that only communist states have recently demonstrated, is bound to remain a moot question; it is unlikely to be put to a practical test. Hence the repeated assertions of the 'end of history', of the 'end of conflict', of 'from now on, more of the same' may boast immunity to empirical criticism. However wrong such assertions may *feel*, their detractors can find little in the political life of the apparently victorious system to make their doubts credible.

The philosopher's stone of the West

Indeed, what is often called *Western civilization* seems to have found the philosopher's stone all other civilizations sought in vain, and with it the warranty of its own immortality: it has succeeded in re-forging its *discontents* into the factors of its own *reproduction*. What could be described in other systems as aspects of 'dysfunctionality', manifestations of crisis and imminent breakdown, seem to add to this system's strength and vigour. Deprivation breeds and further enhances the alluring power of

market exchange, instead of gestating politically effective discontent; public risks and dangers spawned by 'single task' technologies and narrowly focused expertise supply further legitimation for problem-oriented action and generate demands for more technology and specialized expertise instead of questioning the wisdom of 'problem-limited' thinking and practice; impoverishment of the public sphere boosts the search for, and the seductive power of, private escapes from public squalor and further decimates the ranks of the potential defenders of the common weal. Above all, system-generated discontents are as subdivided as the agencies and actions that generate them. At most, such discontents lead to 'single-issue' campaigns that command intense commitment to the issue in focus while surrounding the narrow area of attention with a vast no-man's land of indifference and apathy. Party-political platforms do not reflect integrated group interests, real or postulated; instead, they are carefully patched together following a scrupulous calculation of relative popularity (that is, vote-generating capacity) of each single issue in the public attention. Party-political mobilization of votes does not detract from the volume of voters' apathy; indeed, one may say that the success of mobilization through single issues is conditional on the voters' inattention to the topics left out of focus.

As a result of all this, the current Western form of life, with its market-sponsored production of needs, privatization of grievances and single task actions, seems to be in a position strikingly different from that of the regionally localized civilizations of yore. It has neither effective enemies inside nor barbarians knocking at the gates, only adulators and imitators. It has practically (and apparently irrevocably) delegitimized all alternatives to itself. Having done this, it has rendered it uncannily difficult, nay impossible, to conceive of a different way of life in a form that would resist assimilation and hamper, rather than boost, the logic of its reproduction. Its courtly bards may therefore credibly pronounce it universal and *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The costs of victory

One aspect of the situation in which the Western form of life has found itself after the collapse of the communist alternative is the unprecedented freedom this form of life will from now on enjoy in construing 'the other' of itself, and, by the same token, in defining its own identity. We do not really know what effects such freedom may bring; we can learn little from history, since it knows of no similar situations. For most of historically formed civilization, 'the other' had had the power of self-constitution. Alternatives appeared as real contenders and resourceful enemies; as threats to be reckoned with, adapted to and actively staved off. Alternatives were sources of at least temporary dynamism even if the capacity for change proved in the end too limited to prevent ultimate defeat. For the better part of the twentieth century, communism seemed successfully

to play the role of such an alternative. Even before that, virtually from the beginning of the capitalist modernity, such a role was played by socialist movements. Vivid display of a social organization that focused on the ends which the capitalist modernity neglected made it necessary to broaden the systemic agenda, and enforced corrections which prevented the accumulation of potentially lethal dysfunctions. (The welfare state was the most conspicuous, but by no means the only, example.) This relative luxury of autonomous, self-constituted critique is now gone. The question is, where its functional substitute may be found, if at all.

The most immediate part of the answer is the radically enhanced role of intellectual, rational analysis and critique; the latter would now need to carry on its own shoulders a task shared in the past with the contenders in the political battle of systemic alternatives. What is at stake here is not merely an extension and intensification of the old role of intellectuals. Throughout the modern era, in which states have relied for their operative capacity mostly on ideological legitimation, intellectuals and their institutions—the universities most prominent among them—were first and foremost the suppliers of current or potential legitimating formulae, whether in their conformist or rebellious mode. These goods are not today much in demand, as the state by and large cedes the integrative task to the seductive attractions of the market. (This absence of demand stands behind the process dubbed the ‘crisis of universities’, the relentless erosion of the cultural role from which they derived their high status in the past.) This loss of state-assisted status, however alarming at the moment, may yet prove a blessing in disguise. Prised from automatically assumed or ascribed legitimizing for de-legitimizing function, intellectual work may share in general freedom of cultural creation derived from the present irrelevance of culture for systemic reproduction. (I have discussed this process more extensively in the third chapter of *Freedom*.¹) This gives intellectual work a chance of considerable autonomy; indeed, a radical shift of balance inside the modern power/knowledge syndrome becomes a distinct possibility.

On the other hand, the waning of the communist alternative lays bare the inner shortcomings of the market-centred version of freedom, previously either de-problematized or played down in confrontation with less alluring aspects of the system of comparative reference. Less can now be forgiven, less is likely to be placidly endured. An immanent critique of the maladies of freedom reduced to consumer choice will be less easy to dismiss by the old expedient of imputed approval of a discredited alternative, and the inanities the critique discloses will be more difficult to exonerate as ‘the lesser of two evils’. Market freedom would need to explain and defend itself in its own terms; and these are not particularly strong or cogent terms, especially when it comes to justifying its social and psychological costs.

¹ Z. Bauman, *Freedom*, Open University Press, 1989.

The costs are, indeed, enormous. And they can no longer be made less appealing by showing that the attempts which have been made to rectify them elsewhere have increased the total volume of human suffering instead of diminishing it. Those attempts are no longer on the agenda, yet the costs show no sign of abating and call for action no less loudly than before; only the call is now more poignant than ever since inactivity cannot be apologized for by proxy. The continuing polarization of well-being and life chances cannot be made less repulsive by pointing to the general impoverishment which had resulted elsewhere from efforts to remedy it. The traumas of privatized identity-construction cannot be easily white-washed by pointing to the stultifying effects of the totalitarian alternative. Indifference only thinly disguised by ostensive tolerance cannot be made more acceptable by the impotence of power-enforced coexistence. The reduction of citizenship to consumerism cannot be justified by reference to the even more gruesome effects of obligatory political mobilization. Ironical dismissal of forward dreaming loses much of its cogency once the now-discredited promotion of 'total order' and gardening utopias ceases to be its most conspicuous and tangible incarnation.

All this points to an opportunity. It does not necessarily guarantee success. (I have discussed above the astonishing ability of the post-modern habitat to absorb dissent and avant-garde-style criticism and to deploy them as the sources of its own renewed strength.) We, the residents of the post-modern habitat, live in a territory that admits of no clear options and no strategies that can even be *imagined* to be uncontroversially correct. We are better aware than ever before just how slippery are all the roads once pursued with single-minded determination. We know how easily the critique of 'market only' freedom may lead to the destruction of freedom as such. But we know as well—or we will learn soon, if we do not know it yet—that freedom confined to consumer choice is blatantly inadequate for the performance of the life-tasks that confront a privatized individuality (for instance, for the self-construction of identity); and that it therefore tends to be accompanied by the renaissance of the self-same irrationalities that grandiose projects of modernity wished to eradicate, while succeeding, at best, in their temporary suppression. Dangers lurk on both sides. The world without an alternative needs self-criticism as a condition of survival and decency. But it does not make the life of criticism easy.