

SYMPOSIUM ON THE MEANING OF 1989
AND THE FUTURE OF THE LEFT

COMMUNISM: A POST-MORTEM

Zygmunt Bauman

Communism died of many maladies. The gravest and least curable among them, and the most likely to be proved congenital, was *irrelevance*.

Communism was made to the measure of modern hopes and promises. Socialism's younger, hot-headed, and impatient brother, it whole-heartedly shared in the family trust in the wonderful promises and prospects of modernity, and was awe-struck by the breath-taking vistas of society doing away with historical and natural necessity and by the idea of the ultimate subordination of nature to human needs and desires. But unlike the elder brother, it did not trust history to find the way to the millenium. Neither was it prepared to wait till history proved this mistrust wrong. Its war-cry was: "Kingdom of Reason – now!"

Like socialism (and all other staunch beliefs in modern values of technological progress, transformation of nature and a society of plenty), communism was thoroughly modern in its passionate conviction that good society can be only a society carefully designed, rationally managed and thoroughly industrialised. It was in the name of those shared modern values that socialism charged the capitalist administrators of modern progress with mismanagement, inefficiency and wastefulness. Communism accused socialism of failing to draw conclusions from the charges – stopping at critique, denunciations, and prodding where an instant dismissal of inept and corrupt administrators was in order.

Lenin's redefining of the socialist revolution as a *substitution for*, instead of *continuation of*, the bourgeois revolution, was the founding act of communism. According to the new creed, capitalism was a cancerous growth on the healthy body of modern progress, no more a necessary stage on the road to a society that would embody modern dreams. Capitalists could not be entrusted (as they once were by the founders of modern socialism, Marx and Engels) with even the preliminary job of site-clearing, 'melting the solids and profaning the sacred'. As a matter of fact, the site-clearing itself was neither a necessity, nor a job useful enough to justify the waste of time needed for its performance. As the principles of rationally organized, good society (more factories, more machines, more control over nature) were well known and agreed upon, one could proceed directly to usher any society (and particularly a society without factories, without machines, without the capitalists eager to build them, without the workers oppressed and exploited in the process of building) into a state designed by those principles. There was no point in waiting till the good society arrived through the action of workers,

fed up with the sufferings caused by the capitalist mismanagement of the progress. As one knew what the good society would be like, to delay or even slow down its construction was an unforgivable crime. Good society could be, had to be constructed right away, before the capitalists had a chance to mismanage and the workers to sample the outcomes of their mismanagement; or, rather, its designers should take over the management of society right away, without waiting for the consequences of mismanagement to show up. Capitalism was an unnecessary deflection from the path of Reason. Communism was a straight road to its Kingdom. Communism, Lenin would say, is Soviet power together with the 'electrification of the whole country': that is, modern technology and modern industry under a power conscious of its purpose in advance and leaving nothing to chance. Communism was modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture; modernity streamlined, purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable.

To be fair to Lenin and other communist dreamers, we ought to recall that the good society of the nineteenth-century economists and politicians, disciples of Smith, Ricardo, James and John Stuart Mill, was not a society of *growth* (difficult as it is today to comprehend), but a society of *stability* and *equilibrium*, one of a steady, well-balanced economy, catering to all needs of the population – not an economy beefing up and pushing to new limits the consumptive needs and capacities. Goodness of society was to be measured by its productive performance, by the degree of gratification of needs (given, 'objective', finite), not by the growing richness and spectacularity of its consumptive display. Let us recall as well that for the political theorists and practitioners of that century, disciplines of Hegel, Comte or Bentham, good society was one in which individual conscience was well geared to the 'common interest', one in which the State acted as the supreme embodiment and the spokesman for the interests of all, while the members of the body politic were guided by awareness and loyalty to societal needs. Cravings and conscience of the individuals *mattered* to the State and to society as a whole. The well-being of society hung on the universal acceptance of its central values; to be effective, the body politic had to *legitimize* itself in terms of those shared values (which meant that the values shared had to be those defended and pursued by the leaders of society and the organs of their leadership).

Let us also recall that long *after* the communist adventure started, the memories of such nineteenth-century vision found their most monumental codification in the theoretical system of Talcott Parsons. Even at such a late date this vision had been accepted on both sides of the capitalist/communist divide as the crowning of modern sociology, the culmination of social-scientific wisdom, the long-awaited universal framework for analysis and comprehension of social, economic and political realities. That theoretical system viewed society from the vantage point of the managerial office (that is, it posited society as first and foremost a managerial problem). It represented *equilibrium* as the supreme requisite and tendency of a social system, universal acceptance of *value-clusters* as the supreme means to that

function's fulfilment, the *coordination* of individual and societal needs as the most conspicuous measure of a society's equilibrium, and the needs themselves (in tune with virtually all psychological teachings and the whole of the received humanistic wisdom) as unpleasant states of tension and anxiety which would cease to exist at the moment of needs-satisfaction.

Finally, let us recall that well into the advanced stages of the communist experiment the capitalist world watched its progress with bated breath, having little doubt that however wanting the emerging system might have been in other respects, it was a managerial and economic success. What counted for this overt or tacit admiration was that the productive capacity of that society fast shortened the distance dividing it from the older and wealthier economies of the West. Giant steel mills (the more gigantic the better) and grandiose irrigation schemes (the vaster the better) were still accepted as the credible index of a well-managed society on the way to fulfilment of its mission: the satisfaction of the needs of its members. The communist state, in its own and admittedly unprepossessing way, seemed to serve the same ideals of the modern era which even its capitalist haters readily recognized as their own.

In these now uncannily distant times the audacious communist project seemed to make a lot of sense and was taken quite seriously by friends and the foes alike. Communism promised (or threatened, depending on the eye of the beholder) to do what anyone else was doing, only faster (remember the alluring charm of convergence theories?). The real doubts appeared when the others stopped doing it, while Communism went on chasing now abandoned targets; partly by inertia, but mostly for the fact that – being Communism in action – it could not do anything else.

In its practical implementation, Communism was a system 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 conviction – compete with capitalists, but solely with capitalists engaged in the same pursuits. 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 postmodern 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, spent its energy on fighting wide trousers, long hair, rock music and any other manifestations of semiurgical initiative).

Heller, Feher and Markus defined the communist society as *dictatorship over needs*: and this it was, though only in that later, 'postmodern', stage; the dictating of needs became an abomination *per se*, regardless of the degree to which the needs experienced by its objects had been provided for. This happened because the society that throughout its modern development viewed itself as a social arrangement aimed at the production capable of matching established needs, in its capitalist version turned consciously, explicitly and joyously to the production of new needs. Once seen as the state of suffering demanding reprieve, needs became now something to be

celebrated and enjoyed. Human happiness had been re-defined as the expansion of one's consuming capacity and the cultivation of new, more capacious and ever more refined needs.

For the social system, this meant that balanced economy would no longer do that, and constant growth was needed instead. For the individual, this meant *choice* as the foremost criterion of good life and personal success. Choice of the kind of person one would like to become (ever new personality-assembling kits are offered in the shops), choice of pleasures one would like to enjoy, choice of the very needs one would like to seek, adopt and gratify. Choice has turned into a value in its own right; the supreme value, in fact. What mattered now was that choice be allowed and made, not the things or states that are chosen. And it is precisely for *choice* that Communism, this dictatorship over needs, could not and would not ever provide – even if it could provide for the needs it itself dictated (which more often than not it spectacularly failed to do anyway).

Well fed and clad, educated and cosseted young East German professionals stampeding to the West did not pretend to be running away from disliked political philosophy; when pressed by the journalists, they admitted that what they were after (and what they could not get in the country they abandoned) was a wider assortment of goods in the shops and wider selection of holidays. On my recent visit to Sweden I was told by quite a few even better fed, clad and otherwise provided for intellectuals that – supremely efficient as it prides itself to be – the bureaucracy of the social-democratic state becomes ever more difficult to live with; and this due to the limits it puts on individual choice. I asked my conversationalists whether, given choice, they would abandon the doctor currently assigned by the National Health, or seek another school for their children. No, was the answer; the doctor is excellent, and so is the school our children attend; why on earth should we go elsewhere? But, they told me in the next sentence, I missed the point. Quite obviously, the point was not the quality of doctor or school, but the gratifying feeling of self-assertion, expressed in the act of consumer choice. This is what no bureaucratic provision, however lavish, could offer.

Even if Communism could hope (erroneously, as it turned out in the end) to out-modernize the modernizers, it has become apparent that it cannot seriously contemplate facing the challenge of the postmodern world. The world in which consumer choice is simultaneously the essential systemic 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 the consumers rather than indoctrination and oppression of the subjects, could (and had to) wash its hands of all matters ideological and thus make conscience a private affair.

Thorough, adamant and uncompromising *privatization* of all concerns which communism could not but *collectivize* (thus addressing all grievances to the state, having politicized them on the way) has been the main factor that rendered the postmodern society so spectacularly immune to the social

dissent to which the communist version of the modern state proved to be so eminently vulnerable. It is not necessarily the case that the denizens of postmodern – privatized and commodified – society enjoy a greater sum-total of happiness (one would still wish to know how to measure happiness objectively and compare it), and that they experience their worries as less serious and painful. What does truly matter is that it would not occur to them to lay the blame for such troubles they may suffer at the state's door, and even less to expect the remedies to be handed over through that door. The postmodern society proved to be a well-nigh perfect translating machine – one that interprets any extant and prospective *social* issue as a *private* concern (as if in a direct defiance of C. Wright Mills's very modern, very pre-postmodern description of, simultaneously, good democracy and good social science). It is not the 'ownership of means of production' that has been privatized (its 'private' character, to be sure, is ever more in doubt at the age of the mergers and the multinationals). The most seminal of privatizations was that of human problems and of the responsibility for their resolution. The politics that reduced its acknowledged responsibilities to the matters of public safety and otherwise declared its retreat from the tasks of social management, effectively de-socialized the ills of society and translated social injustice as individual ineptitude or neglect. Such politics is insufficiently attractive to awaken the citizen in a consumer; its stakes are not impressive enough to make it an object of the kind of anger that would be amenable to collectivization. In the postmodern society of consumers, failure rebounds in guilt and *shame*, not in political *protest*. Perhaps it triggers off all the familiar behavioural symptoms of Nietzsche-Scheler's *ressentiment*, but politically it disarms and gestates apathy.

Dissent is de-politicized, dissolved into yet more personal anxieties and concerns and thus deflected from the centres of societal power to private suppliers of consumer goods. The gap between desirable and achieved states of happiness results in the increased fascination with the allurements of the market and appropriation of commodities; the self-propagating mechanism of consumer-oriented economy is thereby lubricated, while political and social structures emerge unscathed and intact. With the definitions and particularly the avenues and mechanisms of social mobility privatized, all potentially explosive troubles (like frustrated personal ambitions, humiliating refusals of the public confirmation of self-definitions, blocked channels of advancement, even eviction from the sphere in which job-ascribed, publicly recognized meanings and identities are distributed), lead at best to a still more feverish search for market-supplied prescriptions, skills and tools of self- or image-improvement, or they finish up in the disconsolate resignation of the welfare recipient – that socially confirmed paragon of personal incompetence and impotence. In neither case are the outcomes invested with political meanings. Privatised ambitions pre-define frustration as an equally private matter, singularly unfit to be re-forged into a collective grievance.

The communist dictatorship over needs and monopoly over the means and procedures of needs-satisfaction makes the communist state an obvious

target of individual disaffection, but it cannot but collectivize individual frustrations in the same way it collectivized the vehicles of gratification. Here, the state is the agency to which complaints are addressed as naturally and matter-of-factly as have been the expectations of better life. Unlike in the postmodern world of privatized choices, the sources of diffuse unhappiness are not themselves diffuse and cannot be kept ex-directory; they are publicly announced, conspicuous and easy to locate. Admittedly, the communist regimes excelled in stifling the flow of information and pushed to elsewhere unknown heights the art of state secrecy, and yet they proved to be much less successful than market-oriented societies in dissipating and hiding the responsibility for socially produced ills, for irrational consequences of rational decisions and for overall mismanagement of social processes. They even failed to hide the fact of hiding information and thus stood accused, as of political crimes, of the kind of 'cover up' which market agencies of consumer society practice daily, effortlessly and without attracting attention (still less a public outcry).

Privatization of conscience – another accomplishment of the postmodern era – exposed one more fatal weakness of the communist regimes. For a prolonged period of their history, communist regimes remained dependent on the outdated institution of ideological legitimation as the primary vehicle of social integration. (Whenever relied upon, legitimation tends to be supplemented by political oppression and persecution, ferocious and often gory cultural crusades, thought control and casting all opposition as heresy and political crime.) Because of that reliance, and to their embarrassment and fury, communist regimes stayed captives of the ideological branch of the knowledge class. Communism could not but lift the intellectuals ('the creative intelligentsia') to the position of strategic systemic importance and thereby cast them as the buttress and simultaneously, the constant threat to the prerogatives of political managers. The political rulers could not assault, refute or denigrate the significance of intellectual function without by the same token sapping their own political claims and entitlements; for this reason, they were permanently hostages to the intellectuals' compliance and willingness to cooperate. Hence the paradox of the suppression of free thought (amounting to the expropriation of the intellectuals, as a class, of their social function) combined with the uniquely strong bargaining position of the victims.

The paradoxical nature of the rulers' status vis-a-vis the intellectuals was reflected in the ambiguous stance of the intellectuals towards the rulers. Intellectuals had to rebel time and again in the name of the self-same professional function which made them so important to the state in the first place ('we must be allowed to create freely to be of use to the state', went the frequently heard argument); and yet they enjoyed elsewhere unparalleled state patronage, lavished on the arts, creative writing and culture in general as a reward for present and future docility, but all the more generous for the poorly concealed dependence of the regime on intellectual services. Oppression of free thought was a round-about recognition of the supreme relevance of intellectual work; a perverted accolade, an underhand tribute to

a function the intellectuals, as a class, have long ago ceased to perform on the other side of the great political divide.

This play of repulsion and mutual attraction could, however, go on only for the duration of the 'primitive accumulation of authority'. Once firmly in the saddle and supported by the institutionalized mechanisms of self-perpetuation, the communist rulers felt less pressure to play the card of ideological legitimation. They could now withstand (or so they thought) the loosening of the link that bound them traditionally to the intellectual services. Insult was added to injury; already constrained in the exercise of their freedom, intellectuals found the very relevance of their work slighted. The demands of more scope argued in terms of 'you need us' now cut little ice and thus proved to be even less effective than before.

As for the intellectuals, they perceived the new situation as the decisive break in communication; as the end to the conversation and bargaining between creative intelligentsia and the political rulers. Constraints imposed on thought and expression could not be anymore, however perversely, exonerated or made bearable. In ever greater numbers the intellectuals refused to cooperate, however obliquely, with the rulers. Unlike in postmodern societies, with their de-politicization of intellectual dissent through the far-reaching privatization of needs and consciences (and the privatization of censorship by leaving it to the discretion of scattered commercial agencies), intellectual refusal to cooperate became a political dynamite under conditions of a dictatorship over needs. Here, it articulated itself as *political* opposition; as a challenge to the basic principles of the regime – to the very system of the communist rule. Unsweetened by state-sponsored adulation and admittedly disconnected from political relevance of intellectual functions, constraints upon intellectual freedom came to be experienced, as they should and always do, as unjustifiable and unendurable. But unlike the constraints upon creative freedom induced by the market and administered by the cultural managers of private corporations, this particular deprivation (like all other deprivations suffered under the communist regime) could be and promptly was addressed to a well-defined culprit and represented as a political crime. Disaffection of the intellectuals could not but become a political rebellion.

To sum up: Communism attracts, condenses, politicizes and turns against itself the popular disaffection that the postmodern, market-led society successfully deflects from its power institutions, disperses and de-politicizes. This is the basis of the irreparable technical inferiority of the communist version of modernization and of the inevitability of its fall. It was the advent of postmodernity, with its shifting of concerns from the productive to the consumptive sphere and its thorough privatization of needs, identities and consciences, that delivered the mortal blow to the communist adventure and spelled its demise.

All this is, of course, only the 'formal cause' of the recent dismantling of the communist regimes, certainly not its 'efficient cause'. Social formations do not fall just because they are irrational or technically inferior. Their technical inefficiency merely makes them vulnerable in the face of pressures

that more often than not arise from extrinsic sources, are but obliquely related to managerial troubles, and rarely address themselves directly to the issue of the system's technical ineptitude. The technical inferiority of Communism explains why the system proved to be so conspicuously 'accident prone' and such an exceptionally high insurance risk, why it invited targeted blows and – once the blows had been delivered – could not resist them for long.

As it happened, the blows (even if aimed at the same target) came from diverse quarters and were motivated by diverse reasons. To start with, East-European Communism was not only an alternative form of modernization, but also an equally obsolete, alternative version of early-modern colonialism. Suppressed nationalisms lent integrity and purpose to the rebellion against Communism, having construed it as first and foremost a foreign intrusion and a mark of the alien rule (the Great-Russian nationalism, which for obvious reasons cannot fight back under the slogans normally deployed by the conquered and colonized nations, resorted to the well-tried denigration of the oppressive regime as Jewish conspiracy). Powerful as it was in its own right, the nationalist factor was accompanied and reinforced by the new (and more acute than in the past) threats to the already low standards of living, caused by inept responses of the inert regime to the challenge of the last world-wide depression, by pressures of the intensified armaments race, by a series of planning errors and miscalculations, and by slow yet relentless dissipation of the 'work ethic' – all in addition to the general clumsiness of the command economy. There were more than enough causes for widespread discontent, with virtually every group and category of the population adding its own grudges and frustrations to the common pool of accusations focusing upon the communist state and system of social management. The point is, however, that the unique concentration of diverse discontents, through their convergence on one well defined, undisguised and obvious target, added considerably to their collective strength and assured them of the effectiveness they would not necessarily possess in another socio-political framework.

The collapse of Communism did not by itself prove that it was bound to produce more discontent, and more intense discontent, than those its modern alternatives are notorious for. It did prove, however, that Communism is by necessity much worse equipped to cope with such discontent than it generates. One advantage of capitalism in its postmodern version, most conspicuously demonstrated in recent confrontation, is first and foremost of a technical-systemic nature: it resides in the degree of protection against dissent that Communism proved incapable of even remotely approximating. Whatever might be the other, ideological and moral, objections raised politically against the communist rule, the communist project of grand social engineering collapsed ultimately because of the tendency of centrally managed systems to accumulate, rather than disperse and deflect, social discontent – and ultimately to condense it into an adverse power they cannot contain or resist.