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THE ILLUSORY DIALECTIC: FROM ENLIGHTENMENT TO TOTALITARIANISM

"Enlightenment is totalitarian."
—Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno[1]

The specter of totalitarianism still hovered over the political landscape when *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published in 1947. Nazism had conquered Europe and it nearly won the war. But the state structure of the Soviet Union, its secret police, military style, propaganda, and "cult of the personality" were roughly the same as that of its fascist enemy while its anti-fascist ally the United States, whatever of its formal commitment to democracy, was tainted by racism, imperialist ambitions, and the looming specter of McCarthyism. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno saw the future appearing as present: and it was not the future that the Enlightenment had foretold. Its promises of cosmopolitanism, autonomy, and moral progress already seemed to have been betrayed by a "totally administered society." The bureaucratic imperatives of modernity were seen as everywhere putting the eradication of conscience and reflection on the agenda.[2] Thus, it seemed logical to claim that "resistance" can no longer be based upon the old illusions about tolerance, freedom, and the good society: critical theory should instead throw the individual a life-preserver or, better, toss a bottle with a new metaphysical message of freedom into the ocean since "in the age of the individual's liquidation, the question of individuality must be raised anew."[3]

It would probably have been impossible for anyone who had lived through the 1920s and 1930s, especially thinkers schooled in Hegel and Marx,

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 6.
2. "The idea that after this war life will continue 'normally' or even that culture might be 'rebuilt'—as if the rebuilding of culture were not already its negation—is idiotic. Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this is to be seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What more is this culture waiting for?" Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), 55.
3. Ibid., 129

not to think that modernity was implicated in the creation of totalitarianism. But Horkheimer and Adorno believed the source of this development derived from the Enlightenment. Liberal politics had apparently engendered its opposite: the liberal "provisional government" of February 1917 had made way for communism; Italian liberals folded in the face of Mussolini's "black shirts;" and Nazism emerged from the Weimar Republic. Progress seemed to have resulted in regression. Science and technology had not alleviated misery but instead made possible "total war"; *Bildung* was now tainted by propaganda; the manifold personality envisioned by Goethe and the philosophes had retreated in the face of "the mass man."[4] Discrete insights of this sort, however, only touch the surface. It became a matter of showing not merely the internal connection between totalitarianism and the Enlightenment, but how the germs of barbarism existed in western civilization from the beginning.

Given its epistemological influences and premises, critical theory was uniquely poised to make such an argument. Dialectics rests on the concept of immanence and in its idealist variant, which exhibited such a profound influence upon critical theory,[5] ideas retain their own dynamic; intentions generate unforeseen consequences; complexity becomes the sign of progress; mutually exclusive phenomena turn into contradictory manifestations of an organic whole; and philosophy changes in order to express the new meaning of a new epoch. These premises made it possible to understand the attack on religious myth orchestrated by the Enlightenment as merely the prelude for a war of "pure reason" on everything associated with "practical reason," including the exercise of conscience and the value of autonomy. Others would argue, by contrast, it was originally the attempt by Kant and Hegel to delimit the sphere of science by allowing for a realm "outside the space of representation" —-knowledge of which might even grasp the absolute—that helped philosophically fuel totalitarianism.[6] The ideal of the new totalizing philosophies was a fixed and finished utopia in which a "perfectly transparent language" would name all things with perfect clarity. From the first, however, totalitarianism was notorious for its perversion of language and its

4. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1932), 54ff.
5. Stephen Eric Bronner, "Sketching the Lineage: The Critical Method and the Idealist Tradition," in *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11ff.
6. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 242ff.

rejection of linguistic rigor.[7] Better then to show how progressive intentions produced unintended reactionary results and qualitative differences between regimes dissolved in favor of their common reliance on bureaucracy and instrumental rationality. Thus, the dogmatic claim of Hegel that the "whole is true" was transformed into the even more dramatic yet equally dogmatic assertion that "the whole is false."[8]

In the shadow of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, critical theory insisted that the cost of progress was too high. Utopian visions of harmony between the individual and society had only increased reification. Best then to emphasize the "non-identity" between subject and object and an explicitly "negative" understanding of dialectics intent upon preserving the individual from the incursions of a reified world. This new perspective in critical theory turned the tradition of Hegel and Marx upside down. It subordinated history to anthropology, politics to metaphysics, and any institutional concern with securing liberty to an indeterminate freedom experienced by the individual. In highlighting the unintentional transformation of the Enlightenment into totalitarianism, moreover, critical theory severed the connection between theory and practice. Modernity lost its specificity; its regimes lost their institutional determinations; and, with the communist betrayal of the revolutionary proletarian mission, organized politics ceased to serve as an avenue of change. Resistance instead became identified with the aesthetic-philosophical assertion of subjectivity, an anti-political form of politics, directed against a world ever more akin to a huge "business office in which the employees have created cliques that attempt to dominate one another though the situation has the flavor of Kafka since it has become questionable whether an employer actually

7. "Totalitarian propaganda is a form of violence. . . . Its argument is imposition; its counter-argument is intimidation. . . . Even the grammar of the fascist propagandist reflect his confused state of mind. In terms like *Geburtenschlacht* (battle of birth), *Opfer an der Idee* (sacrifice unto the idea) and *battaglia del grano,* and similar highpressure slogans, and in many sentences written in "Nazi German," subject and object are interchangeable. . . . It is typical of this language that nouns take the place of verbs as if human action were contained in a bureaucratic ukase. . . . In the Nazi meeting the speaker is a "drummer" not an advocate [and as for the language itself] what matters here is not the insane content of the message but the pseudo-revolutionary dynamism of its tenor—that particular blend of motion where no one moves, with freedom where everyone is obedient." Henry Pachter, "Fascist Propaganda and the Conquest of Power," in *Socialism in History: Political Essays of Henry Pachter* ed. Stephen Eric Bronner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 110ff.
8. Adorno, *Minima Moralia,* 50.

exists: it appears that the nasty, brutal, exploitative character of the system already exists in the competing groups waiting in the wings."[9]

Moving forward calls for bringing critical theory out of the metaphysical mist and the night in which all cows are black. It involves recognizing that the finest critics of reification might themselves have "reified" totalitarianism: extrapolating their historical experience into the future, ignoring movements and institutions, they would use it to make sense of very different non-totalitarian circumstances. New forms of critical theory must also begin asking whether the "individual" really is in danger of vanishing, and whether "instrumental reason" poses an inherent threat to subjectivity. They should start with seeking historical justifications rather than making metaphysical assertions for claims that the Enlightenment "dialectically" turned into its totalitarian opposite. New forms of critical theory should also reflect on whether the connection between totalitarianism and modernity is too simple. There are reasons why fascism should have found its mass base not in modern classes like the bourgeoisie and the proletariat but in pre-capitalist classes like the aristocracy, the petty-bourgeoisie, and the peasantry. In the same vein, it is crucial to consider whether the fascist assault on civilization may have been orchestrated less by individuals robbed of conscience and choice than men and women who consciously made the choice to join authoritarian movements with dogmatic ideologies indebted to the Counter-Enlightenment. Considering such a set of possibilities, however, means placing primacy on political history rather than metaphysics.

Enlightenment thought was deeply influenced by the values of a burgeoning capitalism with its emphasis upon self-interest, secularism, utility, innovation, experimentation, and a form of instrumental or scientific rationality that had little patience for scholastic speculations. Locke and Hume, Mandeville and Voltaire, Kant and Lessing, Jefferson and Madison, and most other citizens in the "republic of letters" called for a weak state—though admittedly one with checks and balances, an independent judiciary, and the capacity to preserve civil liberties. But that is only half the story. Most philosophes were also reformers and innovators seeking to link self-interest with the welfare of the community, the market with concern for the lowly and the insulted, and the liberal state with a commitment to social change. Liberals in the United States fused these two strands of the Enlightenment into a philosophy capable of gripping the masses first in the form of Progressivism during the beginning of

9. Max Horkheimer, "Letter to Theodor Adorno (13/11/1944)," in *Gesammelte Werke* 17: 604.

the twentieth century, then in the New Deal of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, next in the Civil Rights Movement, and finally in the Poor People's Movement. Given the democratic character and egalitarian aims of these movements—whatever their inadequacies—no historical or political justification exists for claiming that Anglo-American liberalism turned into its totalitarian opposite.

Admittedly, things were different in Europe. Seeking to forestall any repeat of the terror unleashed during French Revolution, Benjamin Constant and Madame de Stael highlighted the need for the separation of powers, the rule of law, and a constitutional order. But the defeat of the Revolutions of 1848 by reactionary forces, fighting against republicanism and socialism in the name of values inherited from the Counter-Enlightenment,[10] led continental liberalism to surrender its radical impulse. European liberals wound up exchanging the original cosmopolitanism associated with the Enlightenment for new imperialist aspirations, the old emphasis upon republicanism and civil liberties for support of existing monarchical regimes—and, in the case of Italian thinkers like Croce and Gentile, for a brief flirtation with fascism—and the spirit of social reform for an almost unqualified belief in the market. Thus, in contrast to its Anglo-American variant, continental liberalism ultimately served as little more than the political philosophy of the bourgeois gentlemen. Its advocates throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century, would essentially act as brokers between the authoritarian movements of the right and the socialist movements of the left. Until the anti-communist rebellions of 1989, in fact, continental liberal parties were never able to secure a mass base for their worldview—and, even today, they still have their problems. .

None of this is explicable by making reference to the erosion of the individual or the increasing hegemony of instrumental rationality: feudal social relations continued in most of Europe until the end of the First World War, a democratic institutional heritage was lacking; and—crudely speaking—the Counter-Enlightenment was successful in preventing its opponent from achieving ideological hegemony. For all that, however, Enlightenment ideals maintained their mass appeal. The socialist labor movement soon entered the breach and, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, wound up shouldering a "dual burden:"[11] its working class became intent upon realizing

10. Note the fine study by Joseph V. Femia, *Against the Masses: Varieties of Anti-Democratic Thought Since the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
11. Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound* 2nd Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 1ff.

the universal liberal political values inherited from the bourgeoisie while, simultaneously, furthering its own particular economic interests. Or, to put it another way, social democrats attempted to link what today we call "negative liberty" with "positive rights."

Enlightenment traditions were pivotal in shaping the social democratic worldview. Secularism, science, cosmopolitanism, contempt for class privilege, republican commitments, and a preoccupation with social reform influenced the most important intellectuals of the labor movement. Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein, and Rosa Luxemburg in Germany; Rudolf Hilferding and Viktor Adler in Austria; Georgii Plekhanov and Julius Martov in Russia, as well as Jean Jaurès and Leon Blum in France, were forthright in drawing the theoretical connections between Enlightenment political theory and socialism. Most were adherents of "orthodox Marxism" or influenced by it and, interestingly, social democracy was most successful under monarchies undergoing rapid industrialization in which the working class could champion republicanism.[12] It only made sense that the social democratic labor movement should have been the most consistent opponent of totalitarianism.[13]

Social democratic parties may have sent mixed signals by using revolutionary theory to foster the practice of reform in the early years of the twentieth century. They supported their nation-states in World War I.[14] They opposed the revolutionary movements that arose in the aftermath of the conflict; they often vacillated in moments of crisis. They also indulged in what might be termed an "ideology of compromise." But their tradition is still, for the most part, honorable: social democracy maintained the loyalty of the great majority of the working class throughout the twentieth century; it introduced the first democratic parties; and, still officially clinging to the ideology of "orthodox Marxism," it served as the mass base for all the republics introduced to Europe in 1920s.

12. Note the important work by John H. Kautsky, Social Democracy and the Aristocracy: Why Socialist Labor Movements Developed in some Industrial Countries and Not in Others (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2002).
13. See the fine studies by William David Jones, *The Lost Debate: German Socialist Intellectuals and Totalitarianism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
14. That decision is more complex than many might care to think: it involves not merely the spontaneous eruption of nationalist sentiments but also fear of repression and the existence of genuine constraints. Note the discussion in Stephen Eric Bronner, "In the Cradle of Modernity: The Labor Movement and the First World War," in *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 13ff.

Social democratic thinkers offered the first, the most incisive, and the most prophetic criticisms of communism:[15] Karl Kautsky warned of the dire political consequences attendant upon attempting to realize a socialist revolution in an economically undeveloped nation; Rosa Luxemburg prophesized that the use of terror would take on its own dynamic; and Léon Blum complained about their "moral incompatibility" between communists and socialists. The humanitarianism of the philosophes was not transformed into the dull positivism of social democrats supposedly lacking in political purpose and stripped of moral conscience. Such a view is simply inaccurate. With respect to the left, indeed, critical theory chose the wrong philosophical enemy: not the advocates of economic determinism, scientific rationality, and the mechanical stage theory of history but those committed to "voluntarism," preoccupied with "agency" and "consciousness," emphatic about the role of the "vanguard," insistent upon the power of *the will* to overcome all objective constraints, and inclined toward the "permanent revolution," were most susceptible to the totalitarian temptation.

Mussolini and Hitler always expressed admiration for Lenin and Stalin. All of them were voluntarists and embraced a politics of the will. All of them also explicitly opposed—albeit for different reasons— to social democracy and the liberal political legacy of the Enlightenment. Communism first gained its political identity, in fact, when Lenin sought to differentiate his movement, with its new commitment to a party dictatorship, from social democracy with its republican ideals. By the early 1920s, moreover, the Communist International had already passed resolutions stating its refusal to support parliamentary democracies and Stalin's famous refusal of 1928 to form a common front with the socialists against the Nazis, since they had supposedly become "twin brothers," hurt the anti-fascist cause far more than its enemies. With the same venom, movements of the far right despised liberals and social democrats everywhere in Europe. Germany was only the most notorious instance: its fascists condemned the "traitors" who provided their nation with a "stab in the back" during the First World War as well as the "November criminals" who signed the humiliating Treaty of Versailles and brought about the Weimar Republic. Both communism and fascism embraced a military vision

15. The most famous examples of what constitutes a veritable flood of criticisms—all projecting the authoritarian future—were offered in 1919 by Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971) and a work written in 1918, but only published in 1922, by Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder, 1970),

of the political party, identified their party with the state, relied upon a cult of the personality, and ruled through a mixture of propaganda and terror. Both considered terror a means and an end: both participated in creating what has justly been called a "concentration camp universe." Neither had any use for the liberal heritage of the philosophes or—what is the cornerstone of Enlightenment political theory—the need to curb the arbitrary exercise of power. Nevertheless, communists did evidence their admiration for the Enlightenment in a way that fascists did not.

Until 1917, in fact, Lenin had insisted that the revolution must initially introduce a republic and, within three years following the communist seizure of power, he identified socialism with modernization. But the real point is that the political legacy of the Enlightenment never influenced Lenin's organizational vision, his ethical perspective, his authoritarian style, or his political choices. His privileging of the "vanguard party" pitted him first against the liberal "provisional government" led by Alexander Kerensky in February 1917 then against the radically democratic "soviets," which Lenin had originally endorsed on the road to power and then crushed at Kronstadt in 1921,[16] then against the trade unions, and finally against any organization or "faction" capable of undermining the political hegemony of the communist party or its leadership. Conflict over the machinery of power is very different than conflict over philosophical claims, cultural experiments, and social reforms. The parallel between the philosophes and the communist vanguard is ultimately more symbolic than real.

Conservative and postmodern critics can note how both shared a commitment to progress, secularism, modernization, and even utopia. But these terms meant something very different for Communism than for the Enlightenment: Lenin was concerned with preserving the working class from the temptations of reform in the name of revolution while the philosophes opposed revolution and were everywhere intent upon introducing reforms; Lenin's vanguard was guided by the principle of "democratic centralism," which required that disagreements be kept within the confines of the party, while the philosophes constantly and openly battled among themselves; Lenin embraced a moral relativism predicated on class interest for his ethics while Enlightenment thinkers, for the most part, sought to uncover universal rules of moral judgment; Lenin never evidenced any concern with constraining his vanguard party while Enlightenment political theory highlighted the

16. Note the balanced discussion by Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (New York: Norton, 1970).

need to check and mitigate the exercise of power. Most important, while Enlightenment thinkers served as the radical expression of a burgeoning modernity, Leninism was always understood, using the language of Marxism,[17] as the political reflection of economic underdevelopment. That is probably why most postmodern and conservative critics have been content with establishing an indirect connection between communism and the Enlightenment that is mediated by Marx, the Jacobins, and the French Revolution.

Attempting to preserve Marx from authoritarian contamination, by scrupulously determining what he "really" meant, smacks of academic conceit: the communist tradition is obviously indebted to Marx.[18] Just as it is mistaken to view Leninism as the only possible outcome of Marxism, however, so is it equally mistaken to understand 1789 as the only revolution undertaken by the bourgeoisie. Social democracy is as legitimate an heir of Marx as Leninism—perhaps even more so given its belief in a stage theory of history and its explicit rejection of the tactics associated with revolutionary "insurrection"—and many orthodox Marxists, especially outside France, looked with particular admiration at the English Revolution. Karl Kautsky preferred it to the French Revolution, so did Rosa Luxemburg;[19] and Max Weber read with profit a classic work on the topic by Eduard Bernstein.[20] There are important political implications attendant upon this choice of revolution. Further research would probably indicate how—outside France—those socialists committed to republicanism and civil liberties looked across the English Channel while those with more authoritarian tendencies embraced the "legend" of 1793.

Lenin himself bought into that legend and he liked to speak of his communists as "Jacobins connected to the proletariat." In spite of this self-understanding, however, the philosophes were not Jacobins and the Jacobins

17. This general view of Karl Kautsky and other orthodox Marxist intellectuals was made particularly clear by Rosa Luxemburg, "Organizational Questions of Social Democracy," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 112ff.
18. A particularly incisive political analysis of this connection is provided by Arthur Rosenberg, *Geschichte des Bolschewismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Europaische Verlagsantalt, 1966).
19. Luxemburg could write from her jail cell on August 8, 1917 that: "I am now reading [Francois] Mignet and [Heinrich] Cunow on the French Revolution. What an inexhaustible drama, which grips and entrances one again and again! Yet I still find the English Revolution more powerful, splendid and full of imagination, even though it did run its course in such morose forms of Puritainism." *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* ed. Stephen Eric Bronner (2nd Edition: Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), 226.
20. Eduard Bernstein, *Cromwell and Communism: Socialism and Democracy in the Great English Revolution* , trans. H.J. Stenning (New York: Schocken, 1930).

were not Leninists. Thus, when considering the French Revolution, its dictatorial climax was not a party dictatorship because the Jacobin Club never provided a genuinely disciplined, centralized, and ideologically homogeneous organization to wield power.[21] It was actually in response to the perceived "weaknesses" of Robespierre and his followers that Filip Buonarroti, a survivor of the Babeuf conspiracy, launched the legend that the Jacobins provided the example for an educational dictatorship.[22] In fact, the Jacobins themselves had no need of doing so since they always held a majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Often forgotten is that democracy never recovered from the Thermidor and the fall of Robespierre. It was suspended in favor first of a new directorate and then Napoleon. There is indeed a sense in which "the revolutionaries were the philosophes' willing executioners."[23]

Even if the idea of a party dictatorship and the modern idea of the "nation" were introduced by Jacobinism, however, neither would be attributable to the Enlightenment. [24] Better to argue that the Enlightenment left Jacobinism in the lurch. Liberalism never seriously entertained the possibility of counter-revolution, or provided any thoughts on how to deal with it, and the Jacobins were the first to experience the consequences of these failings. It was the inability of the republic to wield authority in its defense that Buonarroti sought to overcome with his notion of an "educational dictatorship," which then passed over to Blanqui, to Peter Tkachev, and—finally—to Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The original liberal and republican beliefs of Robespierre and the Jacobins, who had initially opposed the death penalty and supported civil liberties in a relatively consistent fashion, degenerated not due to the increasing hegemony of "pure reason" but in the face of political exigencies created by the counter-revolution.

21. Richard Lowenthal, *Model or Ally? The Communist Powers and the Developing Countries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 52.
22. Ibid., 54.
23. Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 97.
24. "The Revolution was many things. It was an attempt to reform the government of France, a revolt against well-known abuses, a struggle to displace the privileged classes, and much more. But it was also, and this is what concerns us here, the embodiment of a great idea, the idea of the sovereignty of the people or nation. For a statement of the meaning of the principle of popular or national sovereignty, we do not have to go to the writings of the Enlightenment, and if we did we should not find it there." Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), 189.

As for Babeuf and Buanorrotti, like Lenin, they were never liberals to begin with. Both were instead democrats without institutional convictions, unconcerned with civil liberties, and unaware of the dynamics that might lead a revolution, like Saturn, to devour its children. Their romantic notions of democracy lacking in safeguards for individual liberty may well have provided an impetus for communism. But this has little to do with the general thrust of Enlightenment political theory or claims that its postulates somehow logically lead to "totalitarian" rather than "liberal" democracy.[25] Even if the oxymoronic notion of "totalitarian democracy" can be traced back to Rousseau,[26] a highly questionable assertion for a man whom Kant termed "the restorer of the rights of humanity," this would only vindicate his alienation from the general liberal political tenor of the Enlightenment and suggest that the treatment of him as an enemy by Voltaire and his friends was justified.

Alexander Herzen, the great liberal revolutionary, hit the mark with his prophetic claim that communism would become little more than the "Russian autocracy turned upside down." Lenin may have opposed the church, the aristocracy, and the other remnants of Russian feudalism with an ideology comprising voluntarism, science, and utopia. But his modernizing ambitions, no less than his initial utopian promises of a "soviet" regime, were coupled with contempt for the liberal political legacy. Communist leaders like Lenin and Stalin and Mao betrayed the Enlightenment insofar as they championed a state in which questioning authority became a crime, individualism was rendered illegitimate, civil liberties were ignored, and any attempt to constrain arbitrary power was identified with the "counter-revolution." Different policy choices made during the 1920s could have produced something other than a "totalitarian regime in the 1930s. Only the communist party, however, could make those choices. All organizations capable of competing for power, or providing institutional checks upon it, had already been crushed by 1923. This is not the place to deal with matters of historical exigency or whether Stalinism was a necessary outcome of Leninism.[27] But it is the place to challenge claims that—setting the stage for totalitarianism—

25. J. L. Talmon, *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952).
26. Even if one were to agree "that Rousseau's political thought is totalitarian, this would only serve to show that he had broken with the liberal individualist ideas of the Enlightenment, and that the *philosophes* were right in regarding him as their greatest enemy." Cobban, *In Search of Humanity*, 184
27. Bronner, "Leninism and Beyond," in *Socialism Unbound*, 78, 100ff.

Enlightenment reformers generated the belief that "reason is planning considered solely as planning," and that "the totalitarian order gives full reign to calculation and abides by science as such."[28] It is also the place to contest the even more misleading suggestion that Stalinism is the "quintessential Enlightenment utopia."[29]

Enlightenment thinkers maintained that the liberal rule of law incarnates the political exercise of reason.[30] This underpinned their belief that freedom lies in the law: "where there is no law there is no freedom" wrote John Locke in his *Second Treatise* and that sentiment was echoed both by Voltaire, who claimed that "freedom lies in living within the law," and Rousseau who put the matter beautifully when he wrote that "A free people obeys, but it does not serve. It has leaders, not masters. It obeys laws, but only laws. And it is by virtue of the law that it does not obey men." Enlightenment reform was, or its notion of "planning" was, intertwined with this view. Notions of planning forwarded by the philosophes presupposed the existence of conditions for debating any "plan," employing scientific criteria to judge its efficacy, calculating the consequences of introducing the plan, and fostering the security and well being of the majority.

Totalitarian forms of planning, no less than the values underpinning them, retain only the most remote association with the Enlightenment. Its goals and the perspectives of its most important representatives were very different. To be sure: if most of the populace was not ready for freedom then they would have to be made ready. All the philosophes knew, however, that this would take time and that it would require a new liberal form of civic and practical education. Indeed:

> Education formed an indispensable part of their reform schemes: peasants needed to be instructed in the use of new implements, merchants and manufacturers to be acquainted with new techniques or products, public servants to be trained to new tasks. But civic education was something else again. After all, like all good education, good civic education aimed at making the educator unnecessary. . . . [31]

28. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 89, 86.
29. Stephen Krotin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 364
30. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1969) 2: 441.
31. Gay, *The Enlightenment,* 2:499.

All this is a far cry from totalitarianism in which the leader or the party or history—not the liberal rule of law—incarnates "reason" or, better, the irrationalist equivalent, "destiny." Under a totalitarian system, individuals *should* not be able to calculate the consequences of social action; efficiency is defined by the needs of the leadership; and there is little concern for the rights or welfare of the individual. Stalinist "planning" was always ideologically driven, erratic, insulated from criticism, and concerned less with efficiency, or even industrial progress, than with securing the position of Stalin himself. Its plan was never based on an integrated program of development, modernization had no connection with meeting consumer needs, and inefficiency was built into it from the beginning.[32] This helped create the basis for a semi-legal black market and, more importantly, justification for the ongoing terror. Structuring the plan in that way, no less than enforcing it as Stalin did was a choice rather than a dialectical "necessity."[33] Whatever polemical usage he might have tried to make of Marxism or the Enlightenment heritage, moreover, Leszek Kolakowski is surely correct when he wrote that:

> Marxism under Stalin cannot be defined by any collection of statements, ideas, or concepts; it was not a question of propositions as such but of the fact that there existed an all-powerful authority competent to declare at any given moment what Marxism was and what it was not. "Marxism" meant nothing more or less than the current pronouncement of the authority in question, i.e. Stalin himself.[34]

Teleology and determinism, science and positivism, historical "laws" and "grand narratives," were actually taken seriously not by the communists, who used "science" to excuse every miscalculation and "historical necessity" to justify every crime, but rather by orthodox Marxists and social democrats. Neither Lenin nor Stalin nor Mao nor Pol Pot had much patience with economic determinism or claims concerning the "necessity" of passing through the "bourgeois" stage of history before the "proletarian" revolution could

32. These Stalinist models of planning, "which have given a bad name to socialism, are not the poorly managed samples of a basically sound structure, but monstrosities in their very conception." Pachter, "Three Economic Models," in *Socialism in History,* 43.
33. Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, 104ff.
34. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* 3 volumes, trans. P. S. Falla (New York, 1978) 3:4.

occur. Whether in terms of the role accorded the vanguard party, the idea of forced industrialization, the indoctrination of propaganda, or the use of terror, the impact of voluntarism, subjectivism, and the politics of the will were far stronger on totalitarianism than teleology and positivism. No wonder that even Antonio Gramsci—a forerunner of critical theory—should have initially viewed the events of 1917 as constituting a "revolution against *Das Kapital*."[35]

Communism may have been the "wind from the East." It may have brought the pre-industrial colonial nations, the vast majority of the world population, into the center of the socialist discourse. It was surely a force in fighting imperialist arrogance and racism. Its proponents were committed to modernization and the elimination of poverty, ignorance, and disease. But the failure of the Russian Revolution ultimately stems from the attempt to create a bourgeois republic without a bourgeoisie in February and the subsequent attempt to produce a proletarian revolution without a proletariat in October. Not modernity but the lack of it, the pre-modern conditions in which the communist revolutions took place, was the source of "left" totalitarianism. Or, to put it another way: Marxism turned totalitarian when its realization was attempted in conditions where a bourgeoisie and a working class, the dominant classes of the modern production process, were absent along with —most importantly for our purposes—indigenous political traditions grounded in the Enlightenment.

With respect to understanding totalitarianism of the left and the right, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* began with the wrong premises and drew the wrong conclusions. Crucial was its claim that the attack on metaphysics by Enlightenment notions of science undermined the exercise of conscience thereby unleashing a savage egoism. In contrast to bourgeois liberalism, however, fascist thinking is marked by the demand for irrational sacrifice for the race or the nation or the class. Thus, it would necessary to make the purely abstract assertion that "in the innermost recesses of humanism, as its very soul, there rages a frantic prisoner who, as a Fascist, turns the world into a prison."[36] The same connection between humanism and the prison would later find expression in the writings of Michel Foucault[37] which, also

35. Antonio Gramsci, "The Revolution against 'Capital'," in *Selections from the Political Writings 1919–1920*, ed. Quintin Hoare (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 34ff.
36. Adorno, *Minima Moralia,* 89.
37. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).

in keeping with the Frankfurt School, noted the exclusion of the mentally ill and children from universalistic worldviews like humanism and liberalism: the terms in which these groups should be treated, of course, are never discussed. There is also no reference to the reflexive element within humanism, its intrinsic belief in the dignity of the individual first raised by Pico della Mirandola, or the relevance of "rights" in addressing the claims of the weak and exploited.[38] Enough to claim that what the Enlightenment sought to destroy will reappear as its own product and that the "turn from the liberal to the total authoritarian state occurs on the basis of one and the same economic order and with regard to the unity of this economic base, we can say that it is liberalism that 'produces' the total-authoritarian state out of itself, as its own consummation at a more advanced stage of development."[39]

Capitalism cannot be blamed for Stalinism. But, then, the real issue for critical theory was always less the inequalities, imperatives, or conflicts produced by capitalism than the metaphysical critique of the "instrumental values underlying its production process and how the logic of the commodity form undermines all normative concerns.. This shifts the discussion from "capitalism" to "advanced industrial society" or "modernity." The anthropological merges with the historical critique of Enlightenment. Qualitative differences between regimes vanish and diverse regimes fall under the same rubric. The resulting standpoint is both fatalistic and didactic. What only became apparent at the end is now projected back to the beginning. The issue is no longer how totalitarianism might have been resisted, but how it emerged as the *telos*, the logical projection, of what preceded it.

Philosophy comes too late: the Owl of Minerva yawns at dusk. Enlightenment sets the stage for Weimar and Weimar for Hitler. Everything else is a combination of naïve hopes, ideology, and nostalgia. The image emerges of a society blithely and unwittingly walking into the abyss. The way opens for a library of mid-level novels and films produced by the culture industry that use fascism or Nazism as the backdrop, and that provide the audience with a frisson regarding the horrible result without offering any sense of how it was actually achieved. Political ethics becomes the province of the resigned prophet or simply the scold. Thus it only made sense for *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to claim that humans will "pay for the increase of their power

38. Ernst Bloch, *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, trans. Dennis J. Schmidt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

39. Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State," in *Negations*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 19.

with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator toward men. He knows them insofar as he can manipulate them."[40]

The meta-political and anthropological "dialectic" becomes a replacement for the analysis of political and historical conflicts. Progress will thus generate regression and modernity will inspire barbarism. If the alienation embedded within liberalism and the logic of science reaffirm illiberal forms of authority and the power of myth then fascism can be seen as an expression of what it opposed: the Enlightenment. This indeed makes it possible to interpret totalitarianism in terms of "the conditions that prevailed before its coming to power, not in a negative sense, but rather in terms of their positive continuation."[41] The point for Horkheimer and Adorno no less than their postmodern followers is not simply that fascism grows in liberal societies, but that totalitarianism is both the culmination of the anthropological enlightenment and the—albeit unintentional—product of the historical Enlightenment. In this way, though its lessons were actually quite limited, the Weimar Republic became a "parable" for the fragile character of liberal democracy in general.

This prejudice is sometimes seen as hindering the Frankfurt School from making differentiated political judgments in the aftermath of World War II. [42] There is also something to this claim. Members of the Frankfurt School, however, were often capable of discerning differences within the "totally administered society" in terms of everyday politics: Herbert Marcuse, for example, called upon American students to support George McGovern against Richard Nixon in the presidential elections of 1972. Horkheimer and Adorno were also aware that, in spite of their previous equation of "mass enlightenment" with "mass deception," education might mitigate threats to liberal norms.[43] The question is whether such pronouncements logically derive

40. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9, 87.
41. Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory, trans.* Benjamin Gregg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 71.
42. Richard Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 59
43. Regarding prejudice, it became possible to note that: "an aroused conscience is not enough if it does not stimulate a systematic search for an answer. . . . Our aim is not merely to describe prejudice but to explain it in order to help in its eradication. That is the challenge we would meet. Education means re-education, scientifically planned on the basis of understanding scientifically arrived at." Theodor W. Adorno et. Al, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Norton, 1950), v, ii..

from the theory or rather are insights whose determinations were essentially *ad hoc*. They certainly never received sustained political, philosophical, or anthropological justification. This would indeed have been difficult to provide: for, while it might still have been possible to claim that the "the whole is false," parts of the whole would now apparently need to be considered more or less "false" than others and in the same vein, if "wrong life cannot be lived rightly,"[44] the question arises whether in drawing such distinctions the fundamental principle of "negative dialectics" is being betrayed. These are crucial matters since only upon the assumption that the Enlightenment and totalitarianism are integrally related elements of "modernity" is it possible to speak about a "totally administered society" in which the metaphysical—or, better, philosophical-aesthetic—assertion of subjectivity must supplant explicitly political forms of resistance.

Totalitarianism did free the instincts from what is commonly called conscience and Horkheimer and Adorno are correct in their claim that "anti-Semitic behavior is generated in situations where blinded men robbed of their subjectivity are set loose as subjects and action becomes an autonomous end in itself and disguises its own purposelessness."[45] Linking this philosophical perspective with the Enlightenment, however, is possible only by broadening it to include its greatest and most self-conscious critics: Sade, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Nietzsche.[46] With any of them it can be said—though not for any of the major philosophes—that action becomes its own end and disguises its lack of purpose. It was again less either rationalism or positivism than voluntarism, though admittedly of a vitalist sort, which influenced the thinking of right-wing totalitarians, Henry Pachter was surely correct when he wrote that:

> The common denominator of all these undercurrents of European civilization was the new feeling that "life" had been slighted. It expressed itself in a vitalistic philosophy, which the Nazis bowdlerized into a murderous racism, the Fascists into a swaggering nationalism. Transposed onto

44. Adorno, *Minima Moralia,* 39.
45. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* 171.
46. Horkheimer would later term Nietzsche "the most radical enlightenment figure in all of philosophy." And in the general indeterminate way in which Horkheimer used the term "enlightenment" that might even be true. In terms of the values and political ideas deriving from the actual movement, however, such a claim is nonsense. Here, the unfortunate consequences of using one term in two different ways becomes apparent. Horkheimer, "Die Aufklaerung," pg. 574.

> the political scene—where it did not belong—this pseudo-rebellion appeared as sadism, clothed in the glitter of heroism.[47]

Not Sade, Schopenhauer, Bergson, or Nietzsche had the least identification with the principles of enlightenment political theory or the practice associated with it. They were anti-liberal, anti-socialist, anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian, anti-rationalist and anti-historical: enough of them and their followers, moreover, prized the very exercise of arbitrary power that enlightenment political theory sought to curb. There is something provocative about the later insistence of Adorno that "not least among the tasks now confronting thought is that of placing all the reactionary arguments against Western culture in the service of progressive enlightenment."[48] But the "progressive" character of this imperative was left hanging in the abstract. Thus, while important insights can obviously be gained from conservative thinkers, the potential contradictions generated by the attempt to merge right-wing ideology with left-wing practice were never taken into account.

Whatever the theoretical sweep of the argument advanced by *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* from the standpoint of history and politics, it was predicated on false concreteness and misplaced causality. Instrumental reason did not bring about Nazism or destroy the ability of individuals to make normative judgments: it is indeed time to move beyond this abstract and indeterminate perspective.. Instrumental reason and bureaucracy may have been the necessary, but they were not even the remotely sufficient condition for totalitarianism: all twentieth-century western movements have been bureaucratic and, by definition, modern.[49] The question is why fascism emerged victorious in some instances and failed in others and why totalitarianism arose in some dictatorial circumstances and not in others. Demands for historical specification explode metaphysical and anthropological forms of argumentation. The Nazi victory was the historical product of a political clash between real movements inspired by divergent intellectual traditions whose members were quite capable of making diverse judgments concerning both their interests and their values. Is it really that difficult to discern the debt to the Enlightenment of those democrats and socialists like Heinrich Mann or Harry Kessler or Rudolf Hilferding who defended the Weimar

47. Pachter, "Fascist Propaganda and the Conquest of Power," in *Socialism in History,* 119.
48. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pg. 192.
49. Note the criticism of such arguments by Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 68–84.

Republic as against the debt to the Counter-Enlightenment of those who sought to bring it down like Ernst Junger, Oswald Spengler, and the gang surrounding Hitler?

Fascism was not the product of some philosophical dialectic of enlightenment, but rather a self-conscious response to the Enlightenment and its two progressive political offspring, liberalism and socialism, by the successor to the Counter-Enlightenment. The mass base of the Italian Fascists and German Nazis, again, resided in premodern classes like the peasantry and the petty-bourgeoisie whose "non-synchronous" interests and values were threatened by the dominant classes in the modern production process: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. [50] In terms of German politics: most of the bourgeoisie identified with an increasingly impotent set of parties embracing a continental variant of liberalism while the majority of the working class voted until the end for their social democratic parties. All these political organizations supported the Weimar Republic and all were avowed enemies of the Nazis who made war on them in word and deed. The attempt to unify qualitatively different phenomena under a single rubric can only produce historical disorientation and political confusion. Better to have drawn the practical implications from *The Gay Sciuence* by Nietzsche, whom Adorno liked to quote for his philosophical insights, that: "to perceive resemblances everywhere, making everything alike, is a sign of weak eyesight."

Weak eyesight is precisely what results from the meta-political and meta-historical form of inquiry embraced by late critical theory and its postmodern acolytes. The reifying character of the approach becomes as total as the anthropological development culminating in the "totally administered society. There is no place for mediations or qualifications. A reactionary pseudo-universalism that is imperialist, racist, coercive, and irrationalist becomes conflated with a genuinely democratic universalism that is liberal, discursive, cosmopolitan, and critical. Each institution suffers equally from the impact of instrumental reason and there is never the genuine recognition that some institutions can expand or inhibit the range of free experience for citizens in ways others cannot. Bureaucracy is the problem, the "commodity form" is the culprit, and modernity is the enemy. The "whole" is what counts and no

50. See in particular the discussion of the practical and ideological role played by "non-synchronous contradictions" carried over into modernity from premodern epochs in an unreconciled state. Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), pgs. 45ff.

attempt to transform it is ever radical enough since either revolution or reform must, in some degree, make recourse to instrumental rationality.

Real conflicts thus get smothered in all-encompassing abstract categories and, because the "whole is false," distinctions between regimes and movements become purely *ad hoc.* What remains is only an impotent and self-serving "negative dialectic" intent upon preserving the individual from a reified reality, emphasizing the "non-identity" between subject and object, and remaining open for the "totally other." That is not merely inadequate but misguided in its general formulation. The repressive conditions this form of critique claims to contest are—even in theory—left intact. Solidarity is treated either as an arbitrary sentiment or a demand for conformity while enlightenment collapses into the "mass deception" of the culture industry. Critique has a different fate in store: it retreats into irrelevance. The theory of politics makes way for the politics of theory.[51] Unable to deal with political institutions and social movements, incapable of drawing qualitative distinctions between intellectual phenomena, the critical heir of the Enlightenment ultimately collapses from exhaustion. Thus, it turns into merely another instance of what Thomas Mann called a "power-protected inwardness."

51. Dick Howard, *The Specter of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 40.