

# COMUNIST MYTHOLOGY

## THE TWO FACES OF THE COMMUNIST MYTHOLOGY\*

**A**ny ideology can be treated and analyzed as a mythology<sup>1</sup>; each has a certain degree of a mythological load. The extreme case is that of those ideologies which are nothing other than transfigured mythologies. The weight of the imaginary is in a direct relationship with the ambition to mold or to transform things, which every ideological approach entertains. The re-building of society and the re-inventing of man are, of course, the highest, unsurpassed peaks, the area where modern mythologies come close to millenarianism and utopia.

The definition of the communist ideology as mythology, placed in the scientific patterns of the 19th century, may look common today, after history has proven the absolute utopia of the system first devised by Marx, then later amplified and implemented by his followers. But until recently, the study of Marxism making use of the instruments that analyze religions or utopias, has been a daring approach, and one which used to be somewhat sidelined. Mircea Eliade was one of the few exegetes who, in the 50s and 60s, identified the millenarian pattern of the Marxist and communist phenomenon<sup>2</sup>. As far as the image of the future is concerned, Marxism looks like a secularized form of millenarianism, a solution to get out of history, not through the grace of God, but through the functioning of the scientific laws that were so dear to the age of Marx.

However what singles out communism, as compared to any other ideology, is not so much the mythological aspect, which is there in the entire

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\* From Lucian Boia, „The Two Faces of Communist Mythology” in *Myths of Romanian Communism*, Nemira, Bucharest, 1998.

ideological spectrum, and with crushing weight in the transformative and totalitarian area of the range, but rather the very strange combination of two contradictory mythologies, connected to each other if necessary, but not mandatorily so, by the inevitable dialectics, the science of contradictions, a method able to reconcile all differences. The communist mythology may be defined as both *determinist* and *voluntarist*, *libertarian* and *totalitarian*, *democratic* and *elitist*, *internationalist* and *nationalist*, or, at the level of historical discourse, both *structural* and *event-based*.<sup>3</sup>

No matter what anyone says, sometimes with good reason, about the complexity of Marx's thought and the multiple nuances that can be identified in his work, the Marxist analysis is still marked by a deterministic principle, for a very simple reason, which won't go away: this is the way people thought in the 19th century, at a time when science was optimistically young and when scientific data and connections were articulated both rigorously and in a simplifying manner.

What can be more deterministic than the theory of value (and of surplus value), which is the foundation for the entire Marxist discourse about the present and the future? Labor was the only source of value Marx ever took into consideration, but not just any kind of labor: it was the physical labor of the proletariat. His wages only pay for part of the created value and the rest, the surplus value, goes to the capitalist. Following this process, at one pole of a society an increasing amount of wealth is accumulated and at the other pole there is increasing poverty. The social structure is simplified, until a stage is reached when the entire society will be like an enormous workshop, where a small group of capitalists will exploit the huge proletarian army. There is one more step separating this last stage of capitalism from the proletarian revolution and the communist society, a step that is taken to eliminate the parasitic and exploiting layer.

The march toward communism is, therefore, part of a perfect logic, in the direction of an inevitable economic, social, and historical law. As a true child of his century, Marx had a simplistic idea about the cause-effect relationship. He could only foresee one chain of events, while in fact a multitude of possible ways, of potentially different courses of history opened every time. The 20th century, so scientifically explained in the Marxist theory, in fact offered no convergence point with what Marx imagined:

Actually, this is the century when Marxist *determinism* slipped toward *voluntarism*. The "proletarian" revolutions, beginning with the Bolshevik

revolution in Russia, took place in a manner that was completely out of the initial deterministic scheme. The west had to be the engine of the communist revolution, namely capitalism that had reached its final stage, with state-of-the-art technology and radical social polarization. As is a well-known fact, communism was established—and endured for generations on end—not in the most developed societies, but in the most backward countries of this world, from Russia and China, to Angola and Ethiopia. It was brought about not by some economic foundation or social dynamics, but by *political voluntarism*, which made it mandatory. With Trotsky and Lenin, communism becomes voluntarist, rather than deterministic. A small group of people, well organized and having a very definite project for the future, were able to take over the government, and society was forced to go along the desired path. The word “impossible” disappeared from the communist vocabulary. A new economy, a new society, a new man, a new environment, everything became possible.

The changing of the world’s foundations was part of the original Marxist project. As Marx said, in an astonishing sentence (in *Thesen über Feuerbach*): “philosophers have done nothing but interpret the word in various manners; the important thing is to *change* it.” The world would change from its very foundations, the *International* proclaimed, making explicit reference to the final fight, in a typically millenarian language. All this had to happen, of course, in accordance with history, with the determinism and laws of history. But they happened against history, through a simple act of will and power.

Everything that appears aberrant in Ceausescu’s projects is in fact a very logical part of the great ideal project of communism. The re-building, on a new plane, of cities and villages, the leveling off of relief forms, the draining of the Danube Delta and of lakes, and the engineering of new ones (with precedents, in fact, in a long Soviet experience and with similar achievements in other communist countries, like North Korea), perfectly belong in the project to change the world from its very foundations, in the sounds of the *International* and of the *Thesen über Feuerbach*. Except, which was in fact a minor detail, that what seemed like a natural way had proven to be an imposed one.

The original project of communism sought first and foremost to *liberate man, alienated* man, as Marx put it, from the injustice, hypocrisy and lies of systems based on exploitation. Man would find his own nature, he would be freed. Any constraint had to disappear. The state itself, with all its institutions, would find its place in the *museum of antiquities* (the address

indicated by Engels). The family, in its turn, was to be radically changed, by asserting the equality of the sexes; it would tend to become a free union, easy to dissolve. The millenarian roots, namely anarchist, of Marxism, are as clear as they can be. The emphasis is placed mostly on the *individual*, rather than on the *social group*, except once the social contradictions were settled, the individual-society feud would no longer exist. The individual and society would become one. But still, what if contradictions are here to stay?

If they stay, and even more, if they deepen, what happens is exactly what has happened. The liberation of man takes the shape of the most horrible slavery history has ever known. Liberty is metamorphosed into totalitarianism. *Millenarianism* comes to be devoured by *utopia* (to the extent that, simplifying the two concepts, we see millenarianism in its liberating meaning, and utopia as a rigid, closed structure, raising communal values to privilege. Its strong structures triumphed, of course, over the evanescence of the millennial dream.)

In fact, there is nothing more natural than this new slip: the voluntary, forced construction of a new world needed a powerful instrument, capable of destroying and recreating, that could not be limited to one phase only, uttered in passing (the famous "dictatorship of the proletariat"), but it had to accompany and monitor the entire history of communism. The Marxist landmarks were kept, but devoid of meaning or postponed *sine die*. The disappearance of the state was to occur at the end of a process of permanent consolidation of the state (or of the "state-party," which in fact means the same thing.) An artificial construction, rather than a natural one, as Marx construed it, communism could only be generated and was only sustained by force, otherwise it would have dissolved by itself. Again, the theoretical contradiction was easy to settle: as nothing opposed the individual to society anymore, the emphasis could be shifted without any theoretical loss: what was good for society obviously became good for the individual.

The original communist mythology distinguished itself as profoundly democratic. The masses make history. Communism is built by the masses and for the masses. But the party is the representative of the masses: a first slip. And the second: the party takes the face of its leader. Communist mythology succeeded in a deeply dialectical endeavor to proclaim, with equal intensity, the decisive role of the *masses*, of the *party*, and of the *leader*: the role played by *everybody*, by an *elite*, and by *one man*. This displacement was in fact inevitable, once the totalitarian choice had been made.

Communism came forth as a *universalist* theory, both in the global meaning of its historical demonstration (humanity going through the same stages — hence the renunciation of the “asiatic mode of production” which un-necessarily complicated the schema — and which was also promised the glorious new society of tomorrow), and the solidarity which results from the principle of class struggle and from the preparation of the proletarian revolution. “Proletarians of all countries, unite!” Unite against the bourgeoisie of all countries. In Marx’ vision, nationalism, this motor of the 19th century, came from the class contradictions of that epoch and was to be annihilated, following the new revolution of social relations. It had no place in a communist world, the world of tomorrow. One huge irony of Marx’ scientific prophecies is the elimination of the national factor from what was to become the profoundly nationalistic history of the 20th century.

But a greater irony is offered by the assimilation and boost of nationalism into the communist doctrine, precisely that doctrine that had to bury nationalism once and for ever. Internationalist in its origins, communism evolved toward nationalism, and, in some cases, to extremely virulent forms of nationalism. There are many causes for this. Utopia itself is defined as a closed structure, rejecting any and all outside relations and influences. Whoever builds a utopia will inevitably become isolated (even from similar utopias.) The nationalist discourse also appears as the simplest, cheapest and most efficient compensation for the real difficulties a society goes through. The history of communism was, in fact, from beginning to end, the history of endless scarcity and disillusionment (amplified even further by the contrast between real life and the imaginary radiant future.) This serves to explain the exaggeration of nationalist motifs, the displacement of the accent from the future to the past, as well as blaming “the others” for inside failures.

The Soviet Union set the tone in an unprecedented amplification, beginning in the 30s, of the Russian historical achievements and national values (after a first stage when these had been shadowed, as long as the project for the future—still credible—meant a break with the past.) By 1950, an entire system had been developed, according to which, with few exceptions, all world science and technology had been created by Russian scientists. Romanian proto-chronism did nothing else, a few decades later, than take up and adapt this model. The extreme cases of asserting nationalism and cultural isolationism (the Soviet Union, North Korea, Romania, Albania) must not

hide the fact that the entire communist bloc evolved, at different speeds and in different variants, along the same direction. Even a very abstract state, made up of pieces, like the so-called Democratic Republic of Germany, discovered, in its last decade of existence, the virtues of nationalism, as an antidote for the frustrations of the present. An "East German" national history was invented, which coincided to a large extent with the history of Prussia. Strongly combated before, Frederick the Great came to be invoked as a symbol of identity. In Romanian historiography, the Dacian kings and Medieval voivodes ended up by marginalizing the revolutionary heroes of the 50s, the fighters for the "new world." The Dacian myth was revived in forms that were close to the mythology of the "extreme right" in the 30s: the Dacian state of Burebista came to be seen as the forerunner of Ceausescu's Romania. The division of the Romanian territory over the centuries, which had existed in reality, became unity without one fissure. A utopia of the future, communism sank increasingly deeply into a mystified past, in confrontation with the rest of the world and in isolation.

Walls kept being erected between the communist bloc and the rest of the world, but also between various communist nations, as well as between dominant ethnic groups and minorities within the same state. Meant to settle national issues for ever, communism did nothing but exacerbate them. Now at the end of this century, the virulence of the ethnic conflicts in the ex-communist zone of Europe more than proves this point. It is strange how a Zhirinovskiy-type phenomenon can be considered as part of the extreme right, or, at least, as a merging of communism and fascism. Neither fascism nor the extreme right have anything to do with it, as they have nothing to do with the former Yugoslavia. We are at the extreme point logically reached by the communist adventure.

History, the repository of the national identity, therefore became more than the invocation of a future that was increasingly uncertain and far away, the main argument of communist regimes. But what kind of history? There, too, a displacement took place, one that is no less significant.

The history elaborated by Marx is structural, issue-oriented and society-oriented. Beyond dispute, Marx remains an undeniable pioneer of the "new history." But as soon as communism forsook the determinist and internationalist motif, the historiographic landmarks inevitably changed. The class struggle and the succession of production modes no longer corresponded,

except partially, to the new goals, based on a voluntarist vision of the past, present and future—namely on the role played by political forces, the party, the leader—and on the assertion of national identities. The facts, obviously glorious, of a nation's own past and its great personalities came back to center-stage. Communist historiography finally tried to combine two formulas that were not exactly easy to put together: a history seeking to be structural, but generally reduced to an abstract, unconvincing sketch, and an event-centered history, with nationalist accents, close to the historical formula of the 19th century (a very characteristic evolution of Romanian historiography.) This way, a paradox emerged: simplifying, of course, a more complex historiographic range, we can say that during the past hundred years, “bourgeois” historiography evolved from emphasis placed on the event to structuralism, while the communist historiography went in the opposite direction, from Marxist structuralism to emphasis placed on the event.

It is interesting that such a generalised doubling of the founding myths by their opposites did not give rise to any great disturbance on a theoretical level. The quotations from the works of the founding fathers continued to coexist with the new formulas, often despite essential lack of agreement. The contradictions were either kept under control through the dialectical method, or just ignored. The double discourse lacking any logical principle was the origin of a mental deformation that was extremely dangerous, characterized by irresponsibility and dishonesty. In the end, anything could be asserted, demonstrated, believed, or, on the contrary, nothing could be believed anymore. Communism left behind, apart from economic disaster and physical and moral ruin, a state of great intellectual confusion, generated among other things by the multiple inadvertences of the communist discourse, obsessively perpetuated along decades.

The double mythology also serves to explain the inability exhibited by many people (mostly westerners, but also people who have lived under communism) to adequately understand the essence and functioning of the system. Nazism, with its simplistic mythology of the “master race,” continues to overshadow (and protect), through its crimes, the no less serious crimes (and even more numerous ones, in terms of the number of deaths and the disrupting of social structures for generations to come) committed by the

communist system. For a simple reason, namely that the cynical Nazi agenda was put into practice plank by plank, while, as far as communism is concerned, whoever wishes to do so, can separate the two sides of the mythology, namely he can separate the founding texts from what followed (even if what followed comes directly from the initial launching of the utopian mechanism.) Liberty, equality, the affirmation of the human personality, social justice, concord among nations, peace: all these elements of the mythological discourse seemed to meet the humanistic and democratic aspirations of the last two centuries. Even now, after the collapse of communism, the seductive part of its durable mythology is still protecting, even if not entirely, its memory, as if the double discourse, the illusion, the lie could be excuses for oppression and crime, or could at least be extenuating circumstances for the same. The intellectual demolition of communism will be even more difficult to accomplish than its material annihilation.

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<sup>1</sup> As an introduction to political mythology, see André Reszler, *Mythes politiques modernes*, Paris, 1981, and Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, Paris, 1986 and 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Paris, 1957; *Aspects du Mythe*, Paris, 1963. Similar interpretations in the works of Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, London, 1957; Jean Servier, *Histoire de l'utopie*, Paris, 1967 and 1991; Jean Pierre Sironneau: *Sécularisation et religions politiques*, Le Haye, Paris, New York, 1982. The classic work of Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 1945, goes the same way, debunking the scientific claims of Marxism.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of these issues, see Lucian Boia, *La Mythologie scientifique du communisme*, Paradigme, Caen, 1993.