

THE MAGIC OF MARXISM

by
Michael Polanyi

The success of Marxism in the Twentieth Century was due to a considerable extent to the convincing power of its teaching. Yet non-Marxist writers say that the system is illogical and that no political programme can be derived from the Marxian prediction of the inevitable destruction of Capitalism at the hands of the proletariat. For it is senseless to enlist fighters for a battle which is said to be already decided; while if the battle is not yet decided, you cannot predict its issue. This is about how Mr. Ayer has recently put the matter. ¹

I think we must accept this criticism. But we cannot possibly let the matter rest there. It is a fact that the alleged historic inevitability of Communism exercises a powerful appeal for Communism. If this appeal is due to a logical mistake, some compulsive tendency must be operating in favour of that mistake. A fallacy that is so universally convincing must have a coercive logic of its own. It is useless to show merely why it ought not to convince; we must discover why it does.

When you think of it in these terms you realise that the propagandistic power of scientific prediction is but one among many similar oddities in the armoury of Marxism. Its theory denies authenticity to moral motives in political life and yet its political appeal is passionately moral. What is more, this self-contradiction seems to supply the main impulse of the movement as conceived by Marx himself. Isaiah Berlin² has shown us Marx in the act of exercising his propagandistic genius by means of this self-contradictory principle. "The manuscripts of the numerous manifestos, professions of faith and programmes of action to which he appended his name (writes Mr. Berlin), still bear the strokes of the pen and the fierce marginal comments, with which he sought to obliterate all references to eternal justice, the equality of man, the rights of individuals or nations, the liberty of conscience, the fight for civilisation, and other such phrases which were the stock in trade . . . of the democratic movements of his time; he looked upon these as so much worthless cant, indicating confusion of thought and ineffectiveness in action." And well we know that it is not in spite of this contempt for justice, equality and liberty, but because of it that Marxism is accepted as the true champion of these same ideals - against the very nations openly professing them. Hannah Arendt observed rightly that "Bolshevik assurances inside and outside Russia that they do not recognise ordinary moral standards, have become a salacious of Communist propaganda . . ." ³

I could lengthen indefinitely the series of such paradoxes, but two more must suffice. The Soviets pride themselves on economic achievements, while they ruthlessly disregard the needs of their people. The prestige of their economic system thrives on imposing sacrifices. The second paradox is even more puzzling. The Soviets are acclaimed by eminent Western writers and painters whose very works are condemned and suppressed in Russia. And Czeslaw Milosz has shown that this appeal of the Soviets is in fact largely due to their proclaimed disgust with modern art and literature and to their determination to make all cultural pursuits subservient to the state. He records from his own experience in Poland that these sentiments and policies form part of the temptation offered by Marxism to the intellectuals. ⁴

1. ENCOUNTER, Vol. 5, No.4, p.32, 1955. A year before that, Mr. Flamenatz had summed up his analysis epigrammatically in German Marxism and Russian Communism (Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1954) as follows: ". . . whatever the relation of science and socialism as parts of the life of one man, what he can never be is a scientific socialist. Not even if his science predicts what his socialism approves. 'Scientific Socialism' is a logical absurdity, a myth, a revolutionary slogan, the happy inspiration of two moralists who wanted to be unlike all moralists before them."

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Professor H. H. Anton has re-examined the whole question once more in great detail, only to conclude that "The Marxist can derive moral precepts from his social science only to the extent that they already form, because of the vocabulary used, a concealed and unacknowledged part of it."

2. Isaiah Berlin, Karl Marx, Oxford University Press, 1939, p.10.

3. Hannah Arendt, The Burden of Our Time, London, 1951, p.301.

4. Czeslaw Milosz, La Grande Tentation, published by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Paris, 1952. The argument is enlarged in Czeslaw Milosz, The Captive Mind, London, 1953.

A chain of such highly successful inconsistencies recalls the state of physics before the discovery of quantum mechanics. Could it conceal here again the presence of a potent common principle? I think it does. And it even seems to bear a resemblance to quantum mechanics - so far as fallacy can resemble truth. The principle in question is 'Diamat' - that is Dialectical Materialism - the professed faith of Marxism, which its Western critics are too much inclined to treat as obvious nonsense. Like quantum mechanics, Diamat fuses two disparate principles into one. Two principles which in this case are nothing less than the two dominant mental passions of our age - one moral, the other intellectual - both equally unprecedented in history and equally irresistible to us today.

The first of these passions is our modern political dynamism. That is, the conviction that society can improve itself indefinitely by political means and that it must strive unceasingly to do so. This dynamism, whose early tentative stirrings can be traced back to the Enlightenment, first went into action on a narrow front in the American and French revolutions. But presently it widened into the great popular movements of the 19th century which ever since have incessantly harassed the existing social order by pressing for its progressive reform or its comprehensive subversion. Today these aspirations have spread over the globe. Moral demands of unlimited scope are made on society by peoples who until yesterday had lived in immemorial acceptance of exploitation and squalor. This dynamism is the overmastering moral passion of our time.

The dominant intellectual passion of our age is science. I mean the ideal of a completely objective view of all things, including man himself; a critical fanaticism which sternly reduces all human aspirations to tangible terms. "This alone I know with certainty (we read), namely that man's value judgments are guided absolutely by their desire for happiness, and are therefore merely an attempt to bolster up their illusions by arguments." This is not Marx speaking but Freud; and it could just as well be Helvetius, or Pizarov or Feuerbach. For it is the radical utilitarianism of our age, the fruit of our scientific objectivism, that speaks here.

I have said that Diamat amalgamates these two dominant ideals of our age. It fuses them together by an operation which has appealed to the human mind from the very dawn of thought. Levy Bruhl has called it 'participation'. To primitive thought no new born child is just himself - there is always a dead ancestor participating in him; a lion tearing a villager to pieces embodies the man's envious neighbour; plagues and fatalities are always endowed with the evil intentions of someone who sent them. By the same process of fusion philosophers assume that one thing exists in another, in which case the former is said to be immanent in the latter. We shall see that Marx amalgamated moral dynamism with radical utilitarianism by assuming that material interests are immanent in the moral aspirations of the bourgeoisie while morality is immanent in the material interests of the proletariat. This is what Marx's transformation of Socialism from a Utopia into a Science amounts to. We shall see that this transformation entails the whole series of internal contradictions of which I have given examples, and also lends them their curious convincing power.

To recognise this you must imagine that you are filled from the start - as Marx was - with a passion for Socialism and a horror of Capitalism. Looking in this light on the ideals of liberty, justice, brotherhood, you will observe, for example, that the Code Napoleon, based on these principles, was supremely effective in destroying the feudal order and in opening the way for the bourgeoisie with its system of private enterprise throughout Europe; and you will note that it has remained the guardian of the capitalist order ever since. Bourgeois ideals will appear therefore as a mere superstructure of capitalism, both in its opposition to a feudalism whose rule it has subverted and to the proletariat, whose enslavement it tries to perpetuate. Bourgeois interests will appear to be immanent in bourgeois moral ideals. This is the first kind of immanence; which I shall call the negative branch of Diamat.

Of course, bourgeois professions of liberty, justice, humanity, etc. could be denounced as dishonest on the very grounds of these ideals, as liberal reformers have so often done. But this would jettison the prestige of a scientific analysis in favour of an argument which a scientific outlook deprecates as futile emotionalism. Scientific socialism must therefore rigorously expunge such verbiage from its statements - and this is what Marx fiercely insisted upon.

1. S. Freud, Das Unbehagen in der Kultur, 1930, section VIII.

Look now on the other hand at Socialist revolutionary action. You are filled with a passionate desire to see the workers overthrow Capitalism and establish a realm of liberty, justice and brotherhood. But you cannot demand this in the name of liberty, justice and brotherhood, since this would be "futile emotionalism." So you must make Socialism from Utopia into a Science. You do so by affirming that the appropriation of the means of production by the proletariat will release a new flow of wealth now entrained by Capitalism. This affirmation satisfied the moral aspirations of Socialism and is accepted therefore as a scientific truth by those filled with these aspirations. Moral passions are thereby cast in the form of a scientific affirmation, which derives from them its convincing power. This is the second kind of immanence; the positive branch of Dialectic. It protects moral sentiments by a scientific disguise against being deprecated as mere emotionalism, and gives them a tangible content and a sense of scientific certainty.

You can now see that both branches operate by denying to morality any intrinsic force of its own and yet appeal by this very fact to moral passions. In the first case we are presented with an analysis of bourgeois ideals in terms of immanent bourgeois interests, and since the hidden motivation of this analysis is a condemnation of capitalism, the analysis turns into an unmasking of bourgeois hypocrisy. Since the analysis of moral professions in terms of material interests applies quite generally, it might be thought to discredit also the moral motives of this unmasking. But these motives are safe against this for they remain undeclared, and indeed, acting through the unmasking of bourgeois ideologies, they arouse - without ever pronouncing any moral judgment - powerful moral passions. This propagandistic effect is achieved precisely by announcing the unmasking in purely scientific terms, which are thus safe against being suspected of moralising purpose.

These scientific claims are, of course, ^{in fact} accepted only because they satisfy certain moral passions, and so they depend for their acceptance on their own propagandistic implications. We have here a self confirmatory reverberation between the theory of bourgeois ideologies and the concealed motives which underlay it. I shall call this a dynamo-objective coupling.

The transmutation of Socialist aspirations into the scientific prediction that a Socialist victory will result in a flow of general opulence is based on a similar coupling. Alleged scientific assertions which are accepted as such because they satisfy moral passions, will excite these passions further, and thus lend increased convincing power to the scientific affirmations in question - and so on, indefinitely.

Such a dynamo-objective coupling is also potent in its own defence. Any criticism of its scientific part is rebutted by the moral passions for which its science stands, while any moral objections to it are coldly brushed aside by invoking the inexorable verdict of its scientific findings. Each of the two components, the dynamic and the objective, takes it in turn to draw attention away from the other when that is under attack.

We can now turn to the logical fallacy exposed by the academic critics of Marxism in the fact that the prediction of an inevitable Socialist victory incites men to revolutionary action. I shall show that this paradox is resolved by revealing in it the operations of the dynamo-objective coupling between passion and prediction.

The major premise of Marxist predictions is the doctrine of progress, cast in utilitarian terms. It says that social conflict must always result in the victory of the side whose predominance will release greater sources of wealth for society as a whole. Assuming this to be true, you can gain political power and become a universal benefactor, by joining a section of society which would benefit most from a universally profitable change, and helping it to press for the change in question.

These are commonplaces; but they are transformed into a doctrine of revolutionary power by re-casting them into a scientific statement embodying the aspirations of Socialism. The statement will say: The victory of the working class over the bourgeoisie, which will release vast productive forces for society, is historically inevitable. This affirmation (which is supposed to complete the transformation of Socialism from a Utopia into a Science) gains its convincing power from the internal reverberations between its motive and its scientific poles - i.e. between the underlying social passion and the sociological theory satisfying these passions. But within this dynamo-objective coupling the logical objection against using a historic

prediction as an appeal to fight for the predicted outcome of history no longer arises. For the prediction is accepted only because we believe that the Socialist cause is just; its acceptance implies therefore that this cause is just, which implies in its turn that Socialist action is right. The prediction implies therefore a call to action; the logical paradox is disposed of.

But there is more to be added here. If our tormenting sense of bad faith would merely cause us to disguise our thirst for righteousness in the erudite terms of a specious sociology, the masquerade would perhaps be merely pitiful. Unfortunately moral passions undergo a fateful change, when decked out as scientific statements. I have hinted at these changes already when saying that any moral objection against Marxist action can be brushed aside by pointing at its scientific objectivity. We can see what has happened here: when transposed into equivalent scientific affirmations, the moral motive of Socialism was torn from its original moral context. It became an isolated moral passion, inaccessible to moral considerations. This is fanaticism; a fanaticism fixed to the materialistic equivalents of the original moral passion, that is to the interest of the working class or, more concretely, to the coercive powers of those who are held to represent the interests of the working class. It is a fanatical cult of power: moral man's flight into captivity.

This explains not only the deliberate unscrupulousness of modern totalitarianism, but also the moral appeal of its declared resolve to act unscrupulously. For this is taken to show that its power embodies righteousness, and therefore can acknowledge no higher obligation than to achieve and defend its own supremacy, which it must do at all cost. Those who rule in its name are believed to scorn mercy and honesty, not simply for reasons of expediency (as Machiavelli would already have allowed them to do) but on account of their moral superiority over the emotionalism, hypocrisy, and general woolliness of their moralising opponents. Therefore, sceptics who deny with contempt the reality of all moral motivations will rally fanatically to the moral support of such naked power.

To sum up so far. Dialect resolves the conflict between the dominant moral and intellectual passions of our time by affirming scientifically what is morally satisfying. This operates in two directions: negatively, by unmasking the moral professions of the unjust and positively, by impregnating with intrinsic righteousness the power of their destroyers. Both couplings are dynamic-objective. Both are motivated by moral passions, even while they deny the reality of moral motives. In both cases their professed nihilism serves as an expression of their own concealed moral motives and as an implied testimony to their honesty and inflexible determination. An underlying inordinate utopianism is transposed in both cases into the delight of a scientific death sentence; and its pedantic pronouncement - vibrant with hate and hope - reverberates in listeners whose rich humanity is blocked by intellectual scruples. For it offers them moral gratification through a profession of nihilism. They rally gratefully to a fanaticism which justifies itself by its contempt for morality.

We see that Marxism is falsely accused of materialism; its materialism is a disguise for its moral purpose. It is true that by their materialistic disguise, these moral aspirations are torn out of their moral context and are harnessed to the service of economic aggrandisement and political violence. But this does not turn the underlying Socialist dynamics into selfish love of comfort. The fervour of social enterprise has retained the emotional justification of Communist governments. Hence their persistent efforts to fill all economic activities with high moral significance; hence their gigantomania, their neglect of the most desperate popular needs, e.g. for better housing, in favour of ornate skyscrapers and underground marble halls; hence their whole curious economic system which revels in production and shies away from consumption. We in the West watch hopefully for every sign of true materialism in Soviet Russia. For if the regime once really consented to pursue material advantages, it would have lost its fanaticism. Love of comfort may be ignoble, but one may trust it to be accommodating.

Unmasking and impregnating - these two successive operations of Dialect apply to every form of thought in the transition from Capitalism to Socialism. Just as the bourgeois ideals of freedom and democracy, etc. are unmasked and a party-dictatorship is endowed instead with the quality of being intrinsically free and democratic, so also bourgeois art and literature are unmasked and the glorification of Socialism is endowed instead with the values of art and literature. All cultural life is subjected to a similar transformation which surrenders it totally to the interests of the Socialist state at the discretion of its absolute rulers. This is totalitarianism. Our question is why it appeals, or has appealed, to a notable number of intellectuals in free countries pursuing vocations which totalitarianism discredits and suppresses.

A first clue to this enigma is found in the word: 'unmasking'. Socialism was not alone in rebelling against bourgeois domination in the 19th century, nor was scientism the only weapon for attacking bourgeois ideals. Allied to these was a general alienation of the intellectuals. Satirical writers of earlier days, like Cervantes, a Moliere or a Swift, merely exercised an 'auto-critic' of existing society, without ever fundamentally dissenting from it. By contrast, the joint effects of the romantic and scientific movements engendered a modern cultural nihilism which repudiated the existing society as comprehensively as Marxism did. This happened when the excessive moral aspirations of modern man were disappointed by the normal complacency, selfishness, hypocrisy, etc. of man, and these shortcomings were accounted for by interpreting morality as a mere instrument of social repression, which people obey only if they cannot evade it. Once more - as in Marxism - moral nihilism is the mark of exceptionally strong moral passions, as Dostoevsky portrayed it in the student Bazarov, the literary archetype of philosophic nihilism.

Romantic individualism has also effectively contributed to the philosophic nihilism of our time. A craving for absolutely unscrupulous spontaneity, and an incurable suspicion of any articulate (and therefore somewhat conventional) assertion of value, is but the last station of romanticism.

While philosophic nihilists were admittedly radical individualists, yet they naturally tended to sympathize with revolutionary movements aiming at the total destruction of society. Even so, the fact that many of them would go so far as to give their fervent support to totalitarian governments, grimly hostile to their own vocation as intellectuals, still remains to be explained. It can be understood only in its historical setting.

We must acknowledge that personal nihilism has served for a century as an inspiration to literature and philosophy, both by itself and by provoking a reaction to itself. Loathing of bourgeois society, immorality and despair, have been prevailing themes of great fiction, poetry and philosophy on the continent of Europe since the middle of the 19th century. The names of Stendhal, Balzac, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Ibsen, Rimbaud, Gide, Th. Mann, Brecht, may suffice to lend weight to this observation. Anti-conventionalism which bred the modern bohemian has also stimulated in him a rebellious originality, which has renewed the fine arts by a profusion of masterpieces, unsurpassed in any previous period of history.

But these triumphs left their authors mortified by self-doubt. Their hatred of prevailing ideologies and spread (as in Marxism) into an attack on the very status of man and human thought. Peer Gynt at the end of his pilgrimage of pretences recognises himself in an onion: leaf after leaf of self-dramatization is peeled off, leaving nothing at the core. The bourgeois encyclopaedists Bourvard and Pasuchet lose themselves in a labyrinth of inanities. Musil's "Man Without Properties" has ceased to be, for he thinks about life instead of living it. The futile regress of "thoughts, thoughts about thoughts, thoughts about thoughts about thoughts" exhausts Sartre's Mathieu in "L'Age de la Raison": but a totally unreflecting man, like the "Stranger" of Camus, is equally cut off from reality, imprisoned in his private world.

We can then no longer say anything in good faith and all rational action becomes a lifeless banality; violence alone is still honest, but only gratuitous violence is authentic action. Arrived at this stage, the modern intellectual will include himself in his nauseated contempt for the moral and cultural futility of his time. Having rendered the universe utterly meaningless, he himself dissolves in the universal Waste Land.

If the intellectual is now attacked from the flank by Marxist unmaskers, who will lump him together with the bourgeoisie, his position becomes precarious. His own growing consciousness of living in a spiritual desert, tends to re-echo the Marxist analysis of his own art and science as mere superstructures of a contemptible capitalism. Moreover, any resistance to this attack would tend to prove its justice by forcing him into partnership with the bourgeoisie, and it also threatens to deprive him of his anti-bourgeois status on which his self-respect is founded. This dilemma suffices by itself to account for the surrender of men like Sartre, Aragon, Picasso, Bernal, Joliot-Curie, to a philosophy which denies the very existence of their intellectual pursuits. The more so, since - under the protection of their own bourgeois governments - they can happily continue to cultivate these.

The philosophic nihilist's hidden moral passions are available for political action if this can be based on nihilist assumptions, and a programme of violence fulfils this requirement. The nihilist intellectual can safely indulge his moral passions, by accepting the intrinsic goodness of an unscrupulous revolutionary power. Injected into the engines of violence, his moral passions are safe from being suspected of bad faith, and his whole person responds eagerly to a civic home of such acid-proof quality.

Admittedly, an artist or scientist will still find it difficult to accept the dreary cultural aims of a Communist dictatorship as the true fulfilment of his vocation. Yet he may try to overcome his revulsion for reasons that are not altogether base. For he is relieved thereby from belonging to the dying culture of a rotten society, or from not belonging to any society. He can then feel re-united to the broad masses marching towards a great future, honoured and well paid as their intellectual purveyor. It is true that in this role the artist is often reduced to a flatterer and the scientist to a technologist. But they may feel that this can be only temporary. For ultimately, the triumph of historic necessity must fulfil the needs of the mind, as those of the body; and after all, even in the meantime, often no more is demanded of him than an occasional lip-service to the official cultural policy.

Besides, the temptation is great to replace the standards, which the artist has set himself, by an objective rightness immanent in historic necessity. Such rightness will appear self-evident. For within a dynamo-objective coupling, a power may prove its historic necessity by the mere fact of its victory, and an orthodoxy ordained by such a power is of course inherently right. Its doctrines could be doubted only by breaking up the fundamental dynamo-objective coupling on which the whole Communist universe rests, and no mental resistance could be tougher. Combined with the intellectual's yearning for objective standards safe against self-doubt, its pressure may well prove irresistible.

Hitler greatly profited from the Bolshevik example, but his movement was rooted primarily in German Romantic nihilism. This taught that an outstanding individual is a law unto himself and may, as a statesman, unscrupulously impose his will on the rest of the world; and that a nation has likewise the right and the duty to fulfil its historic destiny, irrespective of moral obligations. This teaching contradicts the universal claim of morality, just as the mechanistic image of man does; it identifies morality with the self-fulfilment of the individual or the nation, and this issues in an emotionally charged variant of utilitarianism. As such, it could amalgamate a fierce patriotism with all the inordinate hopes of our age, and embody both in the aim of German world government under Hitler.

The immanence of these great moral passions in this programme explains the strong moral appeal which it made on members of the German Youth Movement by its very unscrupulousness. For wherever fanaticism combines with cynicism we must suspect a dynamo-objective coupling, and its presence is confirmed if we find that cynicism is making a moral appeal. Hitler's frenzy was primarily evil, but its appeal on the German youth was moral: they accepted evil actions as a moral duty. Their response was determined by the same convictions which Marx held about the nature of moral motives in public life. They believed that these were mere rationalisations of power, and that power alone was real. Hence their disgust of moralising and their moral passion for unscrupulous violence.

This analysis of the violent political movements of our age is the exact opposite of their Freudian interpretation. For we the prime mover is a moral passion throughout; namely the great upsurge of moral demands on social life, arising (for reasons not examined here) at the end of the 18th century. The metaphysical beliefs of scientific and romantic thought turned this passion into the unmasking of morality and into an inpregnation of naked power with an immanent moral value. Hence moralizing tended to turn into moral nihilism (as in Freud himself) and into fanatical adherence to morally sanctified material ends, as in modern totalitarianism.

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~~PHYSICS AND POLITICS~~

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The spreading of Marxism in Asia and Africa during the last 10 years should have made it clear to anyone who still doubted it, that the success of Communism is due to a considerable extent to the convincing power of its teaching.

Yet non-Marxist writers agree that the system is illogical. They say that no political programme can be derived from the Marxian prediction of the inevitable destruction of Capitalism at the hands of the proletariat: for it is senseless to enlist fighters for a battle which is said to be already decided; while if the battle is not yet decided, you cannot predict its issue. This is about how Mr. Ayer has recently put the matter.¹ A year before that Mr. Flamenatz had summed up his analysis epigrammatically: ". . . whatever the relation of science and socialism as parts of the life of one man, what he can never be is a scientific socialist. Not even if his science predicts what his socialism approves. 'Scientific socialism' is a logical absurdity, a myth, a revolutionary slogan, the happy inspiration of two moralists who wanted to be unlike all moralists before them."² In a recent book on Marxism Professor H.B. Acton has re-examined the whole question once more in great detail, only to conclude that "The Marxist can derive moral precepts from his social science only to the extent that they already form, because of the vocabulary used, a concealed and unacknowledged part of it."³

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To demonstrate this you must be filled from the start - as Marx was - with the passions of Utopia and must be convinced therefore that Capitalism is unjust and has to be overthrown. Suppose now you apply in this light a materialist interpretation to the ideals of liberty, justice, fraternity. You will observe then, for example, that the Code Napoleon, based on these principles, was supremely effective in destroying the feudal order and in opening the way for the bourgeoisie with its system of private enterprise throughout Europe; and you will note that it has remained the guardian of the capitalist order ever since. Bourgeois ideals will appear therefore as a super-structure of capitalism, both in its opposition to a feudalism whose rule it has subverted and to the proletariat, whose enslavement it tries to perpetuate.

Bourgeois professions of liberty, justice, humanity, etc. could of course be denounced as dishonest on the very grounds of these ideals, as liberal reformers have so often done. But this would jettison the prestige of a scientific analysis in favour of an argument which a scientific outlook deprecates as futile emotionalism. Scientific socialism must rigorously expunge such verbiage from its statements - and this is what Marx fiercely insisted upon.

Here we can see the solution of one paradox - mentioned second on my list - coming gradually within sight. We are presented with an analysis of bourgeois ideals in terms of a theory which destroys the authenticity of all professions of morality by denying to morality any intrinsic force of its own. But since the hidden driving force motivating this analysis is a moral passion which condemns capitalism and is resolved to overthrow it, the analysis turns into an unmasking of bourgeois hypocrisy. The paradox is complete. We see how a moral force setting in motion a scientific analysis arrives at denouncing an alleged hypocrisy by an argument which denies authenticity to all moral motives. And we see therefore also how the Marxist doctrine, having injected its moral passions into a destructive analysis of all moral motives, can appeal by this very fact to the moral aspirations of men. For men recognise its destructive analysis of morality as the scientific spearhead of the doctrine's own moral purpose.

1. S. Freud, Das Unbehagen in der Kultur, 1930, section VIII.

The Marxist system formulates its positive intentions in a similarly paradoxical manner. A passionate desire to see the workers overthrow Capitalism and establish a realm of justice, etc., is given a utilitarian expression by affirming that the appropriation of the means of production by the proletariat will release a new flow of wealth now entrained by capitalism. The morally good having been equated with the materially useful, the Socialist demand for justice and liberty for the workers is expressed by affirming that the workers' victory will produce general opulence. This affirmation is accordingly accepted by those filled with Socialist aspirations as transposing their demand for social justice in the form of a scientific statement. This offers great advantages. Moral sentiments are protected by a scientific disguise against being deprecated as mere emotionalism and are endowed instead with a sense of scientific certainty; while the affirmation itself, which derives its scientific convincing power from the passions which it satisfies, strengthens in return the very sentiments that support it. These self-exciting internal reverberations tend to intensify indefinitely the convictions of those who have once accepted a scientific formulation of their moral passions.

X Such a dynamo-objective coupling (as we may call it) is also potent in its own defence. Any criticism of its scientific part is rebutted by the moral passions for which it stands, while any moral objections to it are coldly brushed aside by invoking the inexorable verdict of its social theory. Each of the two components, the dynamic and the objective, takes it in turn to draw attention away from the other when that is under attack.

The illogical propagandistic power exercised by the prediction of socialist victory can be analysed on similar lines. The doctrine underlying this prediction may be regarded as an extension of utilitarianism to the behaviour of society as a whole. It says that in all social movements the general interests of society will tend to prevail, so that social conflict must always result in the victory of the sections whose predominance will release greater sources of wealth for society as a whole. This doctrine finds some support in the overall historic trend towards rising prosperity and in the plausibility of the assumption that those who would benefit most by any new stage of economic development would eagerly press for it, while it would be opposed by those who would lose by it; in consequence of which it is advantageous to select a section of society which would benefit most from a certain universally profitable reform and to seek political power by its support for the purpose of achieving the reform in question.

These commonplaces are transformed into a doctrine of revolutionary power by re-casting them into a scientific statement embodying the aspirations of Socialism. It says then: The victory of the working class over the bourgeoisie, which will release vast productive forces for society, is historically inevitable. This affirmation, which completes the supposed transformation of Socialism from a utopia into a science, is a dynamo-objective coupling of the same type as the affirmation that the victory of the working class will release enormous productive resources; and its great convincing power is due accordingly once more to the internal reverberations between its emotive and its scientific poles - i.e. between the underlying social passion and the sociological theory expressing it.

Within this dynamo-objective coupling the logical objection against using a historic prediction as an appeal to fight for the predicted outcome of history no longer arises. Both the call to action and the prediction flow from the same concealed moral impulses.

The justice of the Socialist cause calls directly for Socialist action; but it also entails by its transposition into utilitarian terms the double affirmation that the victory of Socialism will release vast new productive forces and is therefore inevitable. These affirmations are accepted as valid only if the Socialist cause is accepted as just; they imply therefore that the Socialist cause is just, which in its turn implies of course that Socialist action is right. The prediction of Socialist victory is seen to imply therefore that Socialist action is right! Q.e.d. The logical paradox is disposed of.

But in order to understand the deliberate unscrupulousness of modern totalitarianism and the moral appeal of its declared resolve to act unscrupulously, we must go a step further and observe the changes which moral passions tend to undergo when disguised as scientific statements. I have hinted at these ^{changes} already when saying that any moral objection against Marxist action can be brushed aside by pointing to its scientific objectivity. We can see what has happened here: when transposed into equivalent scientific affirmations, the moral motive of Socialism was torn from its original moral context. It became an isolated moral passion, inaccessible to moral considerations. This is fanaticism; a fanaticism fixed to the materialistic equivalents of the original moral passion, that is to the naked interest of the working class or, more concretely, to the naked power of those who are held to represent the interests of the working class.

Thus the scientific reformulation of the Socialist programme envisages society as divided between conflicting class interests and between the powers serving these opposing interests. Anti-social powers (like that of the bourgeoisie today) are doomed, socially beneficent powers (like that of the working class today) are irresistible; all devotion must be poured into the engines of the latter and all hatred directed against the former. Good power can do no wrong and hence any opposition to it is absolutely evil. The former can have no higher obligation than to achieve and defend its own supremacy. It must do so at all cost, and hence its intrinsic rightness will manifest itself as absolute unscrupulousness. Those who rule in its name will scorn mercy and honesty, not simply for reasons of expediency (as Machiavelli would already have allowed them to do) but with a sense of intellectual and moral superiority over the emotionalism, hypocrisy and general woolliness of their moralizing opponents. And sceptics who deny authenticity to all overtly moral motivations will rally fanatically to the moral support of such naked power.

Such is the structure and such the appeal of scientific Socialism. It may now be re-stated in terms of 'immanences' which bring out its connection with its Hegelian ancestry. I have spoken of two alternative relations of immanence between interests and morality. Material interests are taken to be immanent in moral motives when the ideals of society are said to express the interests of its antiquated ruling class. This amounts to an unmasking of moral motives as unconscious material interests. The relation of immanence is reversed when revolutionary ideals are transposed into material prospects and into the predicted inevitability of such prospects. Moral aspirations are then rendered immanent in the pursuit of these material interests and in the exercise of power on behalf of them. This is the inverse of an unmasking: we may call it the impregnation of a material aim with an intrinsic moral value.

In spite of their inverse structures, the processes of moral unmasking and moral impregnation are both the outcome of the same metaphysical premises. They both flow from the denial that moral motives are real and both serve to express an intense moral passion on the very grounds of this denial. Thus, in the first case, a horror of capitalism is expressed by exposing its moral claims as unreal, deceptive, hypocritical; and in the second, a devotion to

Socialism is disguised as a science which implicitly sanctifies merciless revolutionary violence. Both formulae appeal to the public by moral motives transposed into scientific statements. They artfully combine thereby the two dominant passions of our age, its moral and intellectual ideals, to a teaching in which these two mutually enhance each other's convincing power and form jointly an overwhelming weapon of propaganda.

Marxism is falsely accused of materialism: its materialism is a disguise for its moral purpose. It is true that by their materialistic disguise these moral aspirations are torn out of their moral context and are harnessed to the service of economic aggrandizement and political violence. But this does not turn the underlying Socialist dynamic into love of comfort. The fervour of social enterprise has remained the emotional justification of Communist governments. Hence their persistent efforts to fill all economic activities with high moral significance; hence their gigantomania, their neglect of the most desperate popular needs, e.g. for better housing, in favour of ornate skyscrapers and underground marble halls; hence their whole curious economic system which revolts in production and shies away from consumption. We in the West watch hopefully for every sign of true materialism in Soviet Russia. For if the regime once really consented to pursue material advantages, it would have lost its fanaticism. Love of comfort may be ignoble, but one may trust it to be accommodating.

Unmasking and impregnating - these two successive operations of Dialectic apply to every form of thought in the transition from Capitalism to Socialism. Just as the bourgeois ideals of freedom and democracy, etc. are unmasked and a party-dictatorship is endowed instead with the quality of being intrinsically free and democratic, so also bourgeois art and literature are unmasked and the glorification of Socialism is endowed instead with the values of art and literature. All cultural life is subjected to a similar transformation which surrenders it totally to the interests of the Socialist state at the discretion of its absolute rulers. This is totalitarianism. Our question is why it appeals, or has appealed, to a notable number of intellectuals in free countries pursuing vocations which totalitarianism discredits and suppresses.

A first clue to this enigma is found in the word: 'unmasking'. Socialism was not alone in rebelling against the bourgeois dominion in the 19th century, nor was scientism the only weapon for attacking bourgeois thought. Allied to them was a general alienation of the intellectuals. There have been satirical writers before, Cervantes, a Moliere or a Swift, merely exercised an 'auto-critic' of existing society, without ever fundamentally dissenting from it. By contrast, the joint effects of the romantic and scientific movements engendered a modern nihilism which repudiated the existing society as comprehensively as Marxism does. Its intellectual history has been told by H. de Lubac in "Le Drame de l'Humanisme Athée" and by Albert Camus in "L'Homme Revolte". Brilliant images of 20th century nihilism are to be found also in Rauschning's "Germany's Revolution of Nihilism",¹ Heiden's "Der Führer" and in Hannah Arendt's "The Burden of our Time". Though philosophic nihilists were radical individualists, they naturally tended to sympathise with revolutionary movements aiming at the total destruction of society. But the fact that many of them could go far beyond this and give their fervent support to totalitarian governments grimly hostile to their own vocation as intellectuals, still remains to be explained. This paradox can be resolved only by looking back on its historical setting.

1. See also Rauschning "Hitler Speaks", "Makers of Destruction" and "The Beast from the Abyss" as well as Leslie Paul "The Annihilation of Man". Faber, London, 1944.

Personal nihilism has served for a century as an inspiration to literature and philosophy, both by itself and by provoking a reaction to itself. Loathing of bourgeois society, immoralism and despair have been prevailing themes of great fiction, poetry and philosophy on the continent of Europe since the middle of the 19th century. The names of Turgenev, Dostojewski, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Ibsen, Rimbaud, Gide, Th. Mann, Brecht, Eliot suffice to lend weight to this observation. Anti-conventionalism which bred the modern bohemian has also stimulated in him a rebellious originality which has renewed the fine arts by a profusion of masterpieces unsurpassed in any previous period of history.

But these triumphs left their authors mortified by self-doubt. Their hatred of prevailing ideologies had spread (as in Marxism) into an attack on the very status of man and human thought. Peer Gynt at the end of his pilgrimage of pretences recognises himself in an onion: leaf after leaf of self-dramatisation is peeled off, leaving nothing at the core. The bourgeois encyclopaedists Bouvard and Pécuchet lose themselves in a labyrinth of inanities. Modern self-consciousness dissolves man's very existence; Musil's "Man Without Properties" has ceased to be, for he thinks about life instead of living it. The futile regress of "thought, thoughts about thoughts, thoughts about thoughts about thoughts" exhausts Sartre's Mathieu in "L'Age de la Raison". But "L'Etranger" by Camus shows that a totally unreflecting man is equally cut off from reality, imprisoned in his private world.

Man can then no longer say anything in good faith and all reasonable action becomes a lifeless banality. Violence alone is still honest, but only gratuitous violence is authentic action. Having arrived at this stage (marked by Gide, Céline, Lautréamont, Breton) the modern intellectual is liable henceforth to include himself in his nauseated contempt for the moral and cultural futility of his time. Having rendered the universe utterly meaningless, he too dissolves in the universal Waste Land.

If the intellectual is attacked now from the flank by Marxist unmaskers, who lump him together with the bourgeoisie, his position becomes precarious. His own growing consciousness of living in a spiritual desert tends to re-echo the Marxian analysis of his own art and science as mere superstructures of a contemptible capitalism. Moreover, any resistance to this attack would tend to prove its justice by forcing him into partnership with the bourgeoisie; and it also threatens to deprive him of his anti-bourgeois status or which his self-respect is founded. This dilemma suffices by itself to account for the surrender of men like Sartre, Aragon, Picasso, Bernal, Joliot-Curie, to a philosophy which denies the very existence of their intellectual pursuits. The more so, since they can happily continue to cultivate these as before, under the protection of their own bourgeois governments.

The second part of Marxist conversion, the actual transference of the moral and intellectual aspirations of the intellectual to the service of the Communist Party, is a stiffer task, but even so, not without powerful attractions. We must set aside here for the moment the contribution of romanticism to the depreciation of universal standards of morality in our times. Apart from this contribution, the moral nihilism of the modern intellectual is the outcome of the same combination of dynamism and scientism to which other people of our age are subject. It originates in the excessive moral aspirations of modern man, which are inevitably disappointed by the normal complacency, selfishness, hypocrisy, etc. of man; the disappointment being followed by the attempt to account for these moral shortcomings by interpreting morality as a mere instrument of social repression which people obey only if they cannot evade it. Once more (as in Marxism) moral nihilism is the mark of exceptionally strong moral passions, as we meet in the student Bazarov, the literary archetype of such nihilism. We know how faithfully Turgenev portrayed in Bazarov the noble fervour of the Russian intelligentsia in its nihilist phase.

The nihilist's hidden moral passions are available for political action if the action can be based on nihilist assumptions. A programme of violence fulfils this requirement. The nihilist intellectual can safely release his moral passions by accepting the intrinsic goodness of an unscrupulous revolutionary power. When injected into the engines of a party professing stark violence, his moral passions are safe from suspecting themselves of bad faith and his whole person responds eagerly to the offer of a civic home of such acid-proof quality.

The intellectual will find it more difficult to accept that the dreary cultural aims of a Communist dictatorship are the true fulfilment of his vocation. But ^{again} there will be some compensation for doing this. He is relieved by it from the torment of belonging to the dying culture of a rotten society; a society from which he is isolated. Honoured and well paid as their intellectual purveyor, he feels re-united now to the broad masses marching towards a great future. It is true that in this role the artist is often reduced to a flatterer and the scientist to a technologist. But they feel that this can be only temporary. Ultimately, the triumph of historic necessity will fulfil the needs of the mind as those of the body; and after all, quite often no more than lip-service is demanded even in the meantime; to the official cultural policy.

It may seem absurd to accept that all artistic value must lie in the service of the Communist Party, but the temptation is great to transpose explicit standards, set by the artist to himself, by a rightness that is immanent in historic necessity. Doubts arising in respect to the universality of self-set standards can be set aside. Within a dynamo-objective coupling, a rising power proves its historic necessity by the mere fact of its victory; the universal validity of its claim is immanent in this tangible physical fact. An orthodoxy ordained by such a power is inherently right, in the sense that it cannot be doubted, except by breaking up the fundamental dynamo-objective coupling on which the whole Communist universe rests. No spiritual compulsion could be heavier. However painful, it may yet prove irresistible; particularly since it offers the beatitude of inherently right standards imposed from outside, which are thus absolutely safe against self-doubt.

Romantic nihilism has made no contribution to Communism but it entered substantially into the making of Nazism. The doctrine that an outstanding individual is a law unto himself and may, as a statesman, unscrupulously impose his will on the rest of the world, or that a nation has the right and the duty to fulfil its historic destiny irrespective of moral obligations - such doctrines are romantic variants of utilitarianism. Being romantic, they can readily embody from the start a fierce patriotism and all the inordinate political hopes of our age in some great action, such as the achievement of supremacy for one nation under the absolute rule of one leader.

The immanence of these great moral passions in this programme explains the strong moral appeal which it made on members of the German Youth Movement by its very unscrupulousness. For whenever fanaticism combines with cynicism we must suspect a dynamo-objective coupling, and its presence is confirmed if we find that cynicism is making a moral appeal. Hitler's frenzy was primarily evil, but its appeal on the German youth was moral: they accepted evil actions as a moral duty. Their response was determined by the same convictions which Marx held about the nature of moral motives in public life. They believed that these were mere rationalisations of power, and that power alone was real. Hence their disgust of moralising and their moral passion for unscrupulous violence.

This interpretation of the violent political movements of our age is the exact opposite of their Freudian interpretation. I believe the prime mover is a moral passion throughout; namely the great upsurge of moral demands on social life, arising (for reasons not examined here) at the end of the 18th century. The metaphysical beliefs of scientific and romantic thought turned this passion into the unmasking of morality and into an impregnation of naked power with an immanent moral value. Hence moralising tended to turn into moral nihilism (as in Freud himself) and into fanatical adherence to morally sanctified material ends - as in modern totalitarianism.