

When the Party Commits Suicide

Slavoj Žižek

1 Dec 1999

Contents

The Communist Sacrifice	4
Stalin-Abraham against Bukharin-Isaac	7
The Stalinist <i>jouissance</i>	12
Lenin versus Stalin	15
When the Discourse Implodes	18
The Radical Ambiguity of Stalinism	22

Finally, in the deluge of the conservative-liberal "Black Books" on Stalinist "totalitarianism," a work which not only meets the highest standards of historical research, but also enables us to grasp the unique social dynamics that culminated in the great purges of the 30s: J. Arch Getty's and Oleg V. Naumov's *The Road to Terror*.¹ Based on the archives of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party which were only recently made available to historians, this book is an extraordinary achievement already at the level of narrative presentation: historical documents (the minutes of the CC sessions, party decrees, private and official letters) are introduced and accompanied by a substantial commentary which displays a theoretical stringency rarely met in historians (suffice it to mention references to Foucault, Bourdieu, and modern linguistics in order to explain the functioning of the ritual of self-accusation in the show trials). Furthermore, the picture that emerges of this period from the late 20ies - the failure of the collectivization of agriculture - to the late 30ies - the sudden stop of the "irrational" terror - is much more complex than the image of Stalin ruthlessly realizing his demoniac project of total domination: the great purges are put in their context, rendered visible as the result of the way the top nomenklatura (mis)perceived their situation. In the eyes of Stalin and his immediate entourage, the Bolshevik rule was unstable, out of control, permanently threatened by the centrifugal forces - far more than the gratuitous sadistic display of power, the Stalinist terror was an implicit admission of the inability to run a country through the "normal" chains of administrative command. In order to properly measure the impact of *The Road to Terror*, one should start with the paradox of the revolutionary sacrifice.

¹ J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov. *The Road to Terror. Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-39*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1999.

The Communist Sacrifice

Once we enter the Stalinist universe of the ridiculous sublime, the ultimate form of sacrifice is no longer the tragic fate of the fighter dedicated to the Cause, but a much more radical self-sacrifice. Let me elucidate it apropos of the Khmer Rouge rule in Cambodia, when there were no public trials, no ritualized public self-accusations comparable to Stalinist show trials:

people simply disappeared in the night, they were dragged away, and nobody dared to speak or ask about it.¹

The [...] paradox of the power edifice in which the public structure and its obscene hidden double overlap: instead of the usual public-symbolic power structure sustained by the obscene invisible network of apparatuses, we have the public power structure which directly treats ITSELF as an anonymous, secret, hidden body. As such, the Khmer Rouge regime was a kind of political equivalent to the famous publicity description of the Linda Fiorentino utterly evil femme fatale character from John Dahl's neo-noir *The Last Seduction*: "Most people have a dark side... she had nothing else."

In the same way, while most of the political regimes have a dark side of obscene secret rituals and apparatuses, the Khmer Rouge regime had nothing else... This is probably "totalitarianism" at its unsurpassed purest - how did this take place?

The key act of the Stalinist Communist Party is the official consecration of its History (no wonder that THE Stalinist book was the infamous *History of VKP(b)*) - only at this point, the Party symbolically starts to exist. However, the Communist Party of Cambodia had to remain "illegal" as long as the key problem of its history was not solved: when did its founding congress take place? In 1951, the CP of Cambodia was established as part of the Vietnam-dominated Indochinese CP; in 1960, the "autonomous" Cambodian CP was formed. How to make a choice here? Till the mid 70ies, the Khmer Rouge, although already fiercely autonomous and nationalist, still needed the support of Vietnam; so their official historian Keo Meas made an almost Freudian compromise-solution, proclaiming as the official birthdate of the Party September 30 1951 - the YEAR of the founding of the Cambodian wing of the Indochinese CP and the DAY of the 1960 congress of the autonomous Cambodian CP. (History, of course, is here treated as a pure domain of meaning without regard for facts: the chosen date

¹ For the historical data, we rely here on the otherwise standard Western liberal journalist report by Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over. Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*, New York: Public Affairs 1998.

reflected the present political balance, not historical accuracy.) In 1976, however, the Khmer Rouge Cambodia was strong enough to break from the Vietnam tutelage - what better way to signal this than to CHANGE THE DATE of the party foundation, i.e. to rewrite history and to acknowledge as the true date the date of the constitution of the autonomous Cambodian CP, September 30 1960?

However, it is now that the true Stalinist deadlock emerges: how, then, to explain the embarrassing fact that, till now, the CP publicly cited another date as its grounding moment? To publicly acknowledge that the previous date was a pragmatic, politically opportune manoeuvre was, of course, unthinkable - so, logically, the only solution was to discover a plot. No wonder, then, that Keo Meas was arrested and tortured to confess (in an act of supreme irony, his confession was dated September 30 1976) that he proposed the compromise date in order to disguise the existence of an underground, parallel Cambodian Communist party controlled by Vietnam and destined to subvert from within the true, authentic, PC of Cambodia... Is this not a perfect example of the properly paranoiac redoubling - the Party has to remain underground, a secret organization, and can only appear publicly when it rejects/externalizes this underground existence in its uncanny double, in another parallel secret Party? Now we can also understand the logic of the highest Communist sacrifice: by confessing to his treason, Keo Meas enabled the Party to propose a consistent history of its origins, taking upon himself the guilt for the past opportunistic compromises. These compromises were NECESSARY at that time: so [...] the sign of correct orientation; in this sense, it was possible to speak of "healthy symptoms," as in the following criticism of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony by the arch-Stalinist composer Isaac Dunayevsky:

"The brilliant mastery of the Fifth Symphony [...] does not preclude the fact that it does not by any means display all the healthy symptoms for the development of Soviet Symphonic Music."²

Why, then, use the term "symptom"? Because, precisely, one can never be sure if a positive feature really is what it pretends to be: what if someone just feigns to faithfully follow the party line in order to conceal his true counterrevolutionary attitude? A similar paradox is discernible already in the Christian superego dialectic of Law and its transgression (sin): this dialectic does not reside only in the fact that Law itself cites its own transgression, that it generates the desire for its own violation; our obedience to the Law itself is not "natural," spontaneous, but always-already mediated by the (repression of the) desire to transgress the Law. When we obey the Law, we do it as part of a desperate strategy to fight against our desire to transgress it, so the more rigorously we OBEY the Law, the more we bear witness to the fact that, deep in ourselves, we feel the pressure of the desire to indulge in sin. Superego feeling of guilt is therefore right: the more we obey the Law, the more we are guilty, because this

² Quoted from Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich. A Life Remembered*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995, p. 134.

obedience effectively IS a defense against our sinful desire, and, in Christianity, the desire (intention) to sin equals act itself - if you just covet your neighbor's wife, you already commit adultery. This Christian superego attitude is perhaps best rendered by T. S. Eliot's line from his *Murder in the Cathedral*, "the highest form of treason: to do the right thing for the wrong reason" - even when you do the right thing, you do it in order to counteract, and thus conceal, the basic vileness of your true nature...³

Perhaps, a reference to Nicolas Malebranche allows us to throw some further light on this procedure. In the standard version of modernity, ethical experience is constrained to the domain of "subjective values" as opposed to "objective facts". While endorsing this modern line of separation between "subjective" and "objective," between "values" and "facts," Malebranche transposed it WITHIN the very ethical domain, as the split between "subjective" Virtue and "objective" Grace - I can be "subjectively" virtuous, but this in no way guarantees my "objective" salvation in the eyes of God; the distribution of Grace which decides my salvation depends on totally "objective" laws, strictly comparable to the laws of material Nature. Do we not encounter another version of this same objectivization in the Stalinist show trial: I can be subjectively honest, but if I am not touched by the Grace of the insight into the necessity of Communism, all my ethical integrity will make me no more than an honest small-bourgeois humanitarian opposed to the Communist Cause, and, in spite of my subjective honesty, I'll remain forever "objectively guilty"? These paradoxes cannot be dismissed as the simple machinations of the "totalitarian" power - they harbor a genuine tragic dimension overlooked by the standard liberal diatribes against "totalitarianism."

³ This logic was nicely formulated by Ayn Rand apropos of the anti-trust laws: everything a capitalist does becomes a crime - if his prices are higher than the others' prices, he exploits his monopolistic position; if they are lower, he practices unfair competition; if they are the same, it's collusion and conspiracy to undermine true competition... And is this not similar to the time of the patient's arrival in psychoanalysis? If the patient is late, it's a hysterical provocation; if he is early, it's an obsessional compulsion; if he arrives exactly on time, it is a perverse ritual.

Stalin-Abraham against Bukharin-Isaac

How, then, is this horrifying position subjectivized? As Jacques Lacan indicated, the lack of the tragedy proper in the modern condition renders this condition even more horrifying: the fact is that, in spite of all the horrors of gulag and holocaust, from capitalism onwards there are no longer tragedies proper - the victims in concentration camps or the victims of the Stalinist show trials were not in a properly tragic predicament, their situation was not without comic or at least ridiculous aspects, and for that reason all the more horrifying - there is a horror so deep that it can no longer be "sublimated" into tragic dignity, and is for that reason approachable only through an eerie imitation/doubling of the parody itself. We have perhaps THE exemplary case of this obscene comicality of the horror beyond tragedy in the Stalinist discourse. The Kafkaesque quality of the eerie laughter that erupted among the public during Bukharin's last speech in front of the Central Committee on 23 February 1937 hinges on the radical discord between the speaker's utter seriousness (he is talking about his possible suicide, and why he will not commit it, since it could hurt the Party, but will rather go on with the hunger strike till his death) and the reaction of the Central Committee members:

"Bukharin: I won't shoot myself because then people will say that I killed myself so as to harm the party. But if I die, as it were, from an illness, then what will you lose by it? (Laughter.)

Voices: Blackmailer!

Voroshilov: You scoundrel! Keep your trap shut! How vile! How dare you speak like that!

Bukharin: But you must understand - it's very hard for me to go on living.

Stalin: And it's easy for us?

Voroshilov: Did you hear that: 'I won't shoot myself, but I will die'?

Bukharin: It's easy for you to talk about me. What will you lose, after all? Look, if I am a saboteur, a son of a bitch, then why spare me? I make no claims to anything. I am just describing what's on my mind, what I am going through. If this in any way entails any political damage, however minute, then, no question about it, I'll do whatever you say. (Laughter.)

Why are you laughing? There is absolutely nothing funny about any of this..."¹

Do we not have here, enacted in real life, the uncanny logic of Josef K.'s first interrogation in *The Trial*?

"'Well, then,' said the Examining Magistrate, turning over the leaves and addressing K. with an air of authority, 'you are a house-painter?' 'No,' said K., 'I'm the junior manager of a large Bank.' This answer evoked such a hearty outburst of laughter from the Right party that K. had to laugh too. People doubled up with their hands on their knees and shook as if in spasms of coughing."²

The discord that provokes laughter is here radical: from the Stalinist point of view, suicide was deprived of any subjective authenticity, it was simply instrumentalized, reduced to one of the "most cunning" forms of the counterrevolutionary plot - Molotov put it clearly on 4 December 1936:

"Tomsky's suicide was a plot, a premeditated act. Tomsky had arranged, not with one person but with several people, to commit suicide and therefore to strike a blow once again at the Central Committee."³

And Stalin repeated it later at the same Central Committee plenum:

"Here you see one of the ultimate and most cunning and easiest means by which one can spit at and deceive the party one last time before dying, before leaving the world. That, Comrade Bukharin, is the underlying reason for these last suicides."⁴

This utter denial of subjectivity is rendered explicit from Stalin's following Kafkaesque reply to Bukharin:

"Stalin: We believed in you, we decorated you with the Order of Lenin, we moved you up the ladder and we were mistaken. Isn't it true, Comrade Bukharin?

Bukharin: It's true, it's true, I have said the same myself.

¹ *The Road to Terror*, p. 370. The same uncanny laughter also appeared at other places: "Bukharin: Whatever they are testifying against me is not true. (Laughter, noise in the room.) Why are you laughing? There is nothing funny in all this." (Op.cit., p. 394)

² Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1985, p. 48.

³ *The Road to Terror*, p. 315-6.

⁴ Op.cit., p. 322.

Stalin: [apparently paraphrasing and mocking Bukharin] You can go ahead and shoot me, if you like. That's your business. But I don't want my honor to be besmirched. And what testimony does he give today? That's what happens, Comrade Bukharin.

Bukharin: But I cannot admit, either today or tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, anything which I am not guilty of. (Noise in the room.)

Stalin: I'm not saying anything personal about you [informal ty]."⁵

In such a universe, of course, there is no place for even the most formal and empty right of subjectivity, on which Bukharin continues to insist:

"Bukharin: [...] I confessed that from 1930 to 1932 I committed many political sins. I have come to understand this. But with the same forcefulness with which I confess my real guilt, with that same forcefulness I deny the guilt which is thrust upon me, and I shall deny it forever. And not because it has only personal significance, but because I believe that no one should under any circumstances take upon himself anything superfluous, especially when the party doesn't need it, when the country doesn't need it, when I don't need it. (Noise in the room, laughter)

[...]

The whole tragedy of my situation lies in this, that this Piatakov and others like him so poisoned the atmosphere, such an atmosphere arose that no one believes human feelings - not emotions, not the impulses of the heart, not tears. (Laughter.) Many manifestations of human feeling, which had earlier represented a form of proof - and there was nothing shameful in this - have today lost their validity and force.

Kaganovich: You practiced too much duplicity!

Bukharin: Comrades, let me say the following concerning what happened!

Khlopliankin: It's time to throw you in prison!

Bukharin: What?

Khlopliankin: You should have been thrown in prison a long time ago!

Bukharin: Well, go on, throw me in prison. So you think the fact that you are yelling: 'Throw him in prison!' will make me talk differently? No, it won't."⁶

⁵ Op.cit., p. 321.

⁶ Op.cit., p. 399.

The Central Committee was concerned neither with the objective truth-value nor with the subjective sincerity of Bukharin's proclamations of innocence; it was only interested in what kind of "signal" his reluctance to confess is sending to the Party and the public: a "signal" that, ultimately, the entire "Trotskyist-Zinovievist trial" is a ritualistic farce. By refusing to confess, Bukharin and Rykov

"give their signals to their like-minded friends, namely: Work in greater secrecy. If you are caught, don't confess. That's their policy. Not only have they cast doubt on the investigation in pursuing their defense. In defending themselves, they have also necessarily cast doubt on the Trotskyist-Zinovievist trial".⁷

Nonetheless, Bukharin heroically stuck to his subjectivity to the end - in his letter to Stalin from 10 December 1937, while making it clear that he will obey the ritual IN PUBLIC ("In order to avoid any misunderstandings, I will say to you from the outset that, as far as the world at large (society) is concerned, (...) I have no intention of recanting anything I've written down (confessed)".⁸), he still desperately addressed Stalin as a person, professing his innocence:

"Oh, Lord, if only there were some device which would have made it possible for you to see my soul flayed and ripped open! If only you could see how I am attached to you, body and soul [...]. Well, so much for 'psychology' - forgive me. No angel will appear now to snatch Abraham's sword from his hand. My fatal destiny shall be fulfilled.

[...] My conscience is clear before you now, Koba. I ask you one final time for your forgiveness (only in your heart, not otherwise). For that reason I embrace you in my mind. Farewell and remember kindly your wretched N. Bukharin."⁹

What causes Bukharin such trauma is not the ritual of his public humiliation and punishment, but the possibility that Stalin may really believe the charges against Bukharin:

"There is something great and bold about the political idea of a general purge. (...) I know all too well that great plans, great ideas, and great interests take precedence over everything, and I know that it would be petty for me to place the question of my own person on a par with the universal-historical resting, first and foremost, on your shoulders. But it is here that I feel my deepest agony and find myself facing my chief, agonizing paradox.

⁷ Op.cit., p. 404-405.

⁸ Op.cit., p. 556.

⁹ Op.cit., p. 558-60.

(...) If I were absolutely sure that your thoughts ran precisely along this path, then I would feel so much more at peace with myself. Well, so what! If it must be, then so be it! But believe me, my heart boils over when I think that you might believe that I am guilty of these crimes and that in your heart of hearts you yourself think that I am really guilty of all these horrors. In that case, what would it mean?”¹⁰

One should be very attentive to what these lines mean. Within the standard logic of guilt and responsibility, Stalin could have been pardoned if he were really to believe in Bukharin's guilt, while his accusing of Bukharin in the case of being aware of his innocence would have been an unpardonable ethical sin. Bukharin inverts this relationship: if Stalin accuses Bukharin of monstrous crimes while fully aware that this accusations are false, he is behaving as a proper Bolshevik, placing the needs of the Party higher than the needs of the individual, which is for Bukharin totally acceptable. What is, on the contrary, fully unbearable to him is the possibility that Stalin really believed in Bukharin's guilt.

¹⁰ Op.cit., p. 558.

The Stalinist *jouissance*

Bukharin thus still clings to the logic of confession deployed by Foucault - as if the Stalinist demand of a confession effectively aimed at the accused's deep self-examination that would unearth the most intimate secret in the hearts of hearts. More precisely, Bukharin's fatal mistake was to think that he can in a way have his cake and eat it: to the very end, while professing utter devotion to the party and to Stalin personally, he was not ready to renounce the minimum of subjective autonomy. He was ready to plead guilty IN PUBLIC if the party needs his confession, but he wanted there, in the inner circle, between his comrades, to be made clear that he was not really guilty, but just conceded to play the necessary role in the public ritual. This, precisely, the party could not give him: the ritual loses its performative power the moment it is explicitly designated as a mere ritual. No wonder that, when Bukharin and other accused insisted on their innocence, the Central Committee perceived this as an inadmissible tormenting of the Party by the accused: it is not the accused who is tormented by the Party, it is the Party leadership that is tormented by those who refuse to confess their crimes - and some members of the Central Committee even praised Stalin's "angelic patience" which allowed the accused to go on tormenting the Party for years, instead of fully acknowledging that they are scum, vipers to be exterminated:

"Mezhlauk: I ought to tell you that we are not tormenting you. On the contrary, you are tormenting us in the basest, most impermissible way.

Voices: That's right! That's right!

(...)

Mezhlauk: You have been tormenting the party over many, many years, and it is only thanks to the angelic patience of Comrade Stalin that we have not torn you politically to pieces for your vile, terroristic work. [...] Pitiful cowards, base cowards. There is no place for you either on the Central Committee or in the party. The only place for you is [...]the party one last time before dying, before leaving the world. That, Comrade Bukharin, is the underlying reason for these last suicides."¹

This utter denial of subjectivity is rendered explicit from Stalin's following Kafkaesque reply to Bukharin:

¹ Op.cit., p. 387-8.

"Stalin: We believed in you, we decorated you with the Order of Lenin, we moved you up the ladder and we were mistaken. Isn't it true? (...)"

(...) subjective autonomy from which one's guilt can be discussed at the level of facts, i.e. in the position which openly proclaims the gap between reality and ritual of confession. For the Central Committee, the ultimate form of treason is this very sticking to the minimum of personal autonomy. Bukharin's message to the Central Committee was: "I am ready to give you everything BUT THAT (the empty form of my personal autonomy)!" - and, of course, it was precisely THAT that the Central Committee wanted from him more than anything else... What is interesting here is how subjective authenticity and the examination of objective facts are not opposed but put together, as the two sides of the same treacherous behaviour, both opposed to the Party ritual. And the ultimate proof that such disregard for the facts had a certain paradoxical ethical dignity is that we find it also in the opposite, "positive" case - say, of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg who - although they WERE guilty of spying, as recent declassified documents demonstrate - heroically insisted on their innocence up to the death chamber, while fully aware that a confession would have spared their lives. They were in a way "sincerely lying": although factually guilty, they were not guilty in a "deeper" sense - precisely in the sense in which the accused in the Stalinist trials was guilty even if factually innocent. - So, to put things in a proper perspective: ultimately, the reproach of the Central Committee members to Bukharin was that he was not ruthless enough, that he retained traces of human weakness, of "soft-heartedness":

"Voroshilov: Bukharin is a sincere and honest man, but I fear for Bukharin no less than for Tomsky and Rykov. Why do I fear for Bukharin? Because he is a soft-hearted person. Whether this is good or bad I do not know, but in our present situation this soft-heartedness is not needed. It is a poor assistant and adviser in matters of policy because it, this soft-heartedness, may undermine not only the soft-hearted person himself but also the party's cause. Bukharin is a very soft-hearted person."²

In Kantian terms, this "soft-heartedness" (in which it is easy to recognize a distant echo of Lenin's reaction against listening to Beethoven's *Appassionata*: one must not listen to such music too much, because it makes you soft, and all of a sudden you want to cuddle your enemies instead of mercilessly destroying them...) is, of course, the remainder of the "pathological" sentimentality that blurs the subject's pure ethical stance. And here, at this key point, it is crucial to resist the "humanist" temptation of opposing to this Stalinist ruthless self-instrumentalization any kind of "Bukharinian" natural goodness, of the tender understanding of and compassion with common human frailty, as if the problem with the Stalinist Communists resided in their ruthless, self-erasing, dedication to the Communist cause, which turned them into monstrous ethical

² Op.cit., p. 100.

automata and made them forget common human feelings and sympathies. On the contrary, the problem with the Stalinist Communists was that they were NOT "pure" enough, and got caught in the perverse economy of duty: "I know this is heavy and can be painful, but what can I do, this is my duty..." The standard motto of ethical rigor is "There is no excuse for not accomplishing one's duty!"; although Kant's "Du kannst, denn du sollst! (You can, because you must!)" seems to offer a new version of this motto, he implicitly complements it with its much more uncanny inversion: "There is no excuse for accomplishing one's duty!"³ The reference to duty as the excuse to do our duty should be rejected as hypocritical; suffice it to recall the proverbial example of a severe sadistic teacher who subjects his pupils to merciless discipline and torture. Of course, his excuse to himself (and to others) is: "I myself find it hard to exert such pressure on the poor kids, but what can I do - it's my duty!" The more pertinent example of it is precisely that of a Stalinist Communist who loves mankind, but nonetheless performs horrible purges and executions; his heart is breaking while he is doing it, but he cannot help it, it's his Duty towards the Progress of Humanity... What we encounter here is the properly perverse attitude of adopting the position of the pure instrument of the big Other's Will: it's not my responsibility, it's not me who is effectively doing it, I am merely an instrument of the higher Historical Necessity... The obscene jouissance of this situation is generated by the fact that I conceive of myself as exculpated for what I am doing: isn't it nice to be able to inflict pain on others with the full awareness that I'm not responsible for it, that I merely fulfill the Other's Will... this is what Kantian ethics prohibits. This position of the sadist pervert provides the answer to the question: How can the subject be guilty when he merely realizes an "objective", externally imposed necessity? By subjectively assuming this "objective necessity," i.e. by finding enjoyment in what is imposed on him.⁴ So, at its most radical, Kantian ethics is NOT "sadist," but precisely what prohibits assuming the position of a Sadean executioner. What, then, does this tell us about the respective status of coldness in Kant and in Sade? The conclusion to be drawn is not that Sade sticks to cruel coldness, while Kant somehow has to allow for human compassion, but quite the opposite: it is only the Kantian subject that is effectively thoroughly cold (apathetic), while the sadist is not "cold" enough, his "apathy" is a fake, a lure concealing the all too passionate engagement on behalf of the Other's jouissance. And, of course, the same goes for the passage from Lenin to Stalin: the revolutionary political counterpoint to Lacan's Kant avec Sade is undoubtedly Lenin avec Stalin, i.e. it is only with Stalin that the Leninist revolutionary subject turns into the perverse object-instrument of the big Other's *jouissance*.

³ For a more detailed account of this key feature of Kant's ethics, see Chapter II of Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, London: Verso 1996.

⁴ See Alenka Župancic, *The Ethics of the Real*, London: Verso Books 1999.

Lenin versus Stalin

Let us make this point clear apropos of Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*, THE attempt to deploy the philosophical stance of the Leninist revolutionary practice. Can Lukacs really be dismissed as the advocate of such a pseudo-Hegelian assertion of proletariat as the absolute Subject-Object of History? Let us focus on the concrete political background of *History and Class Consciousness*, in which Lukacs still speaks as a fully engaged revolutionary. To put it in somewhat rough and simplified terms, the choice, for the revolutionary forces in the Russia of 1917, in the difficult situation in which the bourgeoisie was not able to bring to the end the democratic revolution, was the following one: - on the one hand, the Menshevik stance was that of the obedience to the logic of the "objective stages of development": first democratic revolution, then proletarian revolution. In the whirlpool of 1917, instead of capitalizing from the gradual disintegration of State apparatuses and building upon the widespread popular discontent and resistance against the Provisional Government, all radical parties should resist the temptation to push the moment too far and rather join forces with democratic bourgeois elements in order to first achieve the democratic revolution, waiting patiently for the "mature" revolutionary situation. From this point, a socialist takeover in 1917, when the situation was not yet "ripe," would trigger a regression to primitive terror... (Although this fear of the catastrophic terrorist consequences of a "premature" uprising may seem to augur the shadow of Stalinism, the ideology of Stalinism effectively marks a RETURN to this "objectivist" logic of the necessary stages of development.¹) - on the other hand, the Leninist stance was to take a leap, throwing oneself into the paradox of the situation, seizing the opportunity and INTERVENING, even if the situation was "premature," with a wager that this very "premature" intervention will radically change the "objective" relationship of forces itself, within which the initial situation appeared as "premature," i.e. that it will undermine the very standard the reference to which told us that the situation was "premature."

Here, one must be careful not to miss the point: it is not that, in contrast to Mensheviks and skeptics among the Bolsheviks themselves, Lenin thought that the complex situation of 1917, i.e. the growing dissatisfaction of the broad masses with the irresolute politics of the Provisional Government, offered a unique chance of "jumping over" one phase (the democratic bourgeois revolution), of "condensing" the two necessary

¹ Let us also not forget that, in the weeks before October Revolution, when the debate was raging between Bolsheviks, Stalin did take side against Lenin's proposal for an immediate Bolshevik takeover, arguing, along the Menshevik lines, that the situation is not yet "ripe," and that, instead of such dangerous "adventurism," one should endorse a broad coalition of all anti-Tsarist forces.

consecutive stages (democratic bourgeois revolution and proletarian revolution) into one. Such a notion still accepts the fundamental underlying objectivist "reified" logic of the "necessary stages of development," it merely allows for the different rhythm of its course in different concrete circumstances (i.e. in some countries, the second stage can immediately follow the first one). In contrast to this, Lenin's point is much stronger: ultimately, there is no objective logic of the "necessary stages of development," since "complications" arising from the intricate texture of concrete situations and/or from the unanticipated results of "subjective" interventions always derail the straight course of things. As Lenin was keen in observing, the fact of colonialism and of the over-exploited masses in Asia, Africa and Latin America radically affects and "displaces" the "straight" class struggle in the developed capitalist countries - to speak about "class struggle" without taking into account colonialism is an empty abstraction which, translated into practical politics, can only result in condoning the "civilizing" role of colonialism and thus, by subordinating the anti-colonialist struggle of the Asian masses to the "true" class struggle in developed Western states, de facto accepting that bourgeoisie defines the terms of the class struggle... (Again, one can discern here the unexpected closeness to the Althusserian "overdetermination": there is no ultimate rule so that, with a reference to it, one can measure "exceptions" - in actual history, there are in a way only exceptions.) One is tempted to resort here to Lacanian terms: what is at stake in this alternative is the (in)existence of the "big Other": Mensheviks relied on the all-embracing foundation of the positive logic of historical development, while Bolsheviks (Lenin, at least) were aware that "the big Other doesn't exist" - a political intervention proper does not occur within the coordinates of some underlying global matrix, since what it achieves is precisely the "reshuffling" of this very global matrix.

This, then, is the reason why Lukacs had such admiration for Lenin: his Lenin was the one who, apropos of the split in the Russian Social Democracy into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, when the two factions fought about a precise formulation of who can be a party member as defined in the party program, wrote: "Sometimes, the fate of the entire working class movement for long years to come can be decided by a word or two in the party program." Or the Lenin who, when he saw the chance for the revolutionary takeover in the late 1917, said: "History will never forgive us if we miss this opportunity!" At a more general level, the history of capitalism is a long history of how the predominant ideologico-political framework was able to accommodate (and to soften the subversive edge of) the movements and demands that seemed to threaten its very survival. Say, for a long time, sexual libertarians thought that monogamic sexual repression is necessary for the survival of capitalism - now we know that capitalism can not only tolerate, but even actively incite and exploit forms of "perverse" sexuality, not to mention promiscuous indulgence in sexual pleasures. However, the conclusion to be drawn from it is NOT that capitalism has the endless ability to integrate and thus cut off the subversive edge of all particular demands - the question of timing, of "seizing the moment," is crucial here. A certain particular demand possesses, in a certain moment, the global detonating power, it functions as a metaphoric stand-in

for the global revolution: if we unconditionally insist on it, the system will explode; if, however, we wait too long, the metaphoric short-circuit between this particular demand and the global overthrow is dissolved, and the System can, with sneering hypocritical satisfaction, make the gesture of "You wanted this? Here you have it!", without anything really radical happening. The art of what Lukacs called *Augenblick* (the moment when, briefly, there is an opening for an ACT to intervene into a situation) is the art of seizing the right moment, of aggravating the conflict BEFORE the System can accommodate itself to our demand. So we have here a Lukacs who is much more "Gramscian" and conjecturalist/contingentian than it is usually assumed - the Lukacsean *Augenblick* is unexpectedly close to what, today, Alain Badiou endeavours to formulate as the Event: an intervention that cannot be accounted for in the terms of its pre-existing "objective conditions."² The crux of Lukacs's argumentation is to reject the reduction of the act to its "historical circumstances": there are no neutral "objective conditions", i.e. (in Hegelese) all presuppositions are already minimally posited.

² See Alain Badiou, *L'être et l'évènement*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 1988.

When the Discourse Implodes

The key to the social dynamics of Stalinism resides in its exception: in the unique moment when, in the second half of 1937, for a couple of months, its ritualistic discourse broke down. That is to say, till 1937, purges and trials followed a pattern with clear rules, solidifying the nomenklatura, cementing its unity, providing an account of the causes of the failures in the guise of ritualized scapegoating (there is famine, chaos in industry, etc., because of the Trotskyite saboteurs...). However, with the highest point of the terror in the Fall of 1937, the implicit discursive rules were broken by Stalin himself: in an all-against-all orgy of destruction, the nomenklatura, inclusive of its highest strata, started to devour and destroy itself - a process aptly designated as the "Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks" ("The Storm of 1937: The Party Commits Suicide," as one of the subtitles of *The Road to Terror* reads) - this period, "that of the 'blind terror,' marks the temporary eclipse of the discursive strategy. It is as if the Stalinists, prisoners of their fears and iron discipline, had decided that they could not rule any longer by rhetorical means."¹ For this reason, the texts on mass shooting in this period were no longer the usual normative/prescriptive ritualized incantations aimed to discipline the broad public of rank-and-file party members and of the population at large. Even the empty symbols of the enemies ("Trotskyites") which, in each previous stage of the terror, were filled with new content, were now largely dropped - what remained was just the fluctuating targeting of new and new arbitrary groups: different "suspicious" nationalities (Germans, Poles, Estonians...), stamp collectors with foreign contacts, Soviet citizens studying esperanto, up to Mongolian lamas, all this just to help the executioners to meet the quotas of liquidations that each district had to fulfill (these quotas were decided by the Politburo in Moscow as a kind of mock production targets in central planning - say, after a discussion, the weekly quota for Far East was elevated from 1,500 to 2,000, and the quota for Ukraine dropped from 3,500 to 3,000). Here, even the paranoiac reference to anti-Soviet conspiracy was instrumentalized with regard to meeting the quotas for liquidations - first there was the formal, a priori, act of determining quotas, and the ensuing fluctuating categorizations of the enemies (English spies, Trotskyites, saboteurs...) were ultimately reduced to a procedure that allowed the executioners to identify individuals to be arrested and shot:

"This was not a targeting of enemies, but blind rage and panic. It reflected not control of events but a recognition that the regime lacked regularized

¹ *The Road to Terror*, p. 480.

control mechanisms. It was not policy but the failure of policy. It was a sign of failure to rule with anything but force.”²

So, in this unique point, we pass from language as discourse, as social link, to language as pure instrument. And what should be emphasized again and again, against the standard liberal demonizing vision of Stalin as a perverse Master systematically pursuing a diabolical plan of mass murder, is that this utmost brutal violent exercise of power as the power over life and death coincided with - or, rather, was the expression of, the mode of existence of - its exact opposite, the total incapacity to govern the country through "normal" authority and executive measures. In the Stalinist terror, the Politburo acted in panic, trying desperately to master and regulate the events, to get the situation under control. This implicit acknowledgment of impotence is also the hidden truth of the divinization of the Stalinist Leader into a supreme Genius who can give advice on almost any topic, from how to repair a tractor to how to raise flowers: what this Leader's intervention into everyday life means is that things do not function at the utmost everyday level - what kind of country is this, in which the supreme Leader himself has to dispense advice about how to repair tractors? It is here that we should recall Stalin's above-quoted condemnation of (the accused individual's) suicide as a plot to deal the last blow to the Party: perhaps, we should read the suicide of the Party itself in late 1937 in the opposite way, not as a "signal," but as an authentic act of the collective subject, beyond any instrumentality.

In his analysis of the paranoia of the German judge Schreber, Freud reminds us that what we usually consider as madness (the paranoid scenario of the conspiracy against the subject) is effectively already an attempt at recovery: after the complete psychotic breakdown, the paranoid construct is an attempt of the subject to reestablish a kind of order in his universe, a frame of reference enabling him to acquire a "cognitive mapping."³ Along the same lines, one is tempted to claim that, when, in late 1937, the Stalinist paranoid discourse reached its apogee and set in motion its own dissolution as a social link, the 1938 arrest and liquidation of Yezhov himself, Stalin's main executioner in 1937, was effectively the attempt at recovery, at stabilizing the uncontrolled fury of self-destruction that broke out in 1937: the purge of Yezhov was a kind of meta-purge, the purge to end all purges (he was accused precisely of killing thousands of innocent Bolsheviks on behalf of foreign powers - the irony of it being that the accusation was literally true: he did organize the killing of the thousands of innocent Bolsheviks...). However, the crucial point is that, although we are here reaching the limits of the Social, the level at which the social-symbolic link itself is approaching its self-destructive dissolution, this excess itself was nonetheless generated by a precise dynamic of the social struggle, by a series of shifting alignments and re-

² Op.cit., p. 481.

³ See Sigmund Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia," in *The Pelican Freud Library*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1979, p. 211.

alignments between the very top of the regime (Stalin and his narrow circle), the upper nomenklatura and the rank-and-file Party members:

"Thus in 1933 and 1935 Stalin and the Politburo united with all levels of the nomenklatura elite to screen, or purge, a helpless rank and file. The regional leaders then used those purges to consolidate their machines and expel 'inconvenient' people. This, in turn, brought about another alignment in 1936, in which Stalin and the Moscow nomenklatura sided with the rank and file, who complained of repression by the regional elites. In 1937 Stalin openly mobilized the 'party masses' against the nomenklatura as a whole; this provided an important strand in the Great Terror's destruction of the elite. But in 1938 the Politburo changed alignments and reinforced the authority of the regional nomenklatura as part of an attempt to restore order in the party during the terror."⁴

The situation thus exploded when Stalin made a risky move of directly appealing to the lower rank-and-file members themselves, soliciting them to articulate their complaint against the arbitrary rule of the local Party bosses (a move similar to the Mao's Great Cultural Revolution) - their fury at the regime, unable to express itself directly, exploded all the more viciously against the personalized substitute targets. Since the upper nomenklatura at the same time retained its executive power also in the purges themselves, this set in motion a self-destructive vicious cycle in which virtually everyone was threatened (of 82 district Party secretaries, 79 were shot). Another aspect of the spiralling vicious cycle was the very fluctuations of the directives from the top as to the thoroughness of the purges: the top demanded harsh measures, while at the same time warning against excesses, so the executors were put in an untenable position - ultimately, whatever they did was wrong. If they did not arrest enough traitors and discover enough conspiracies, they were considered lenient and supporting counterrevolution; so, under this pressure, in order to meet the quota, as it were, they had to fabricate evidence and invent plots - thereby exposing themselves to the criticism that they are themselves saboteurs, destroying thousands of honest Communists on behalf of the foreign powers... Stalin's strategy of addressing directly the party masses, co-opting their antibureaucratic attitudes, was thus very risky:

"This not only threatened to open elite politics to public scrutiny but also risked discrediting the entire Bolshevik regime, of which Stalin himself was a part. [...] Finally, in 1937, Stalin broke all the rules of the game - indeed, destroyed the game completely - and unleashed a terror of all against all."⁵

The shifting situation that aroused from this "breaking of all rules" was not without its horrifyingly-comic moments: when, in the Spring of 1937, Dmitri Shostakovich was

⁴ *The Road to Terror*, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*

ordered to appear in the headquarters of the NKVD, he was received by Zanchevsky, an investigator who, after a friendly introductory chat, started to inquire into Shostakovich's contacts with the (already arrested) Marshal Tukhachevsky: "It cannot be that you were at his home and that you did not talk about politics. For instance, the plot to assassinate Comrade Stalin?" After Shostakovich continued to deny any conversation about politics, Zanchevsky told him: "All right, today is Saturday, and you can go now. But I only give you until Monday. By that day you will without fail remember everything. You must recall every detail of the discussion regarding the plot against Stalin of which you were a witness." Shostakovich spent a nightmarish weekend at home and then returned to the NKVD headquarters on Monday morning, ready to be arrested. However, when he announced his name at the entrance and said that he came to see Zanchevsky, he was informed that "Zanchevsky isn't coming in today" - during this weekend, Zanchevsky himself was arrested as a spy.⁶

⁶ See Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich. A Life Remembered*, p. 124-5.

The Radical Ambiguity of Stalinism

In the notion of social antagonism, intrasocial differences (the topic of concrete social analysis) overlap with the difference between the Social as such and its Other. This overlapping becomes palpable in the highpoint of Stalinism, where the enemy is explicitly designated as non-human, as the excrement of humanity: the struggle of the Stalinist Party against the enemy becomes the struggle of humanity itself against the non-human excrement. At a different level, the same goes for the Nazi anti-Semitism, which is why Jews are also denied the basic humanity. And, again, this radical level of confrontation should not seduce us into abandoning the concrete social analysis of the holocaust. The problem with the academic holocaust-industry is precisely the elevation of the holocaust into the metaphysical diabolical Evil, irrational, apolitical, incomprehensible, approachable only through respectful silence. Holocaust is the ultimate traumatic point where the objectifying historical knowledge breaks down, where it has to acknowledge its worthlessness in front of a single witness, and, simultaneously, the point at which witnesses themselves had to concede that words fail them, that what they can share is ultimately only their silence as such. Holocaust is referred to as a mystery, the heart of darkness of our civilization; its enigma in advance negates all (explanatory) answers, defying knowledge and description, noncommunicable, lying outside historicization - it cannot be explained, visualized, represented, transmitted, since it marks the Void, the black hole, the end, the implosion, of the (narrative) universe. Accordingly, any attempt to locate it in its context, to politicize it, equals the anti-Semitic negation of its uniqueness... Here is one of the standard version of this exemption of the holocaust:

"A great Hassidic Master, the Rabbi of Kotsk, used to say, 'There are truths which can be communicated by the word; there are deeper truths than can be transmitted only by silence; and, on another level, are those which cannot be expressed, not even by silence.'

And yet, they must be communicated.

Here is the dilemma that confronts anyone who plunges into the concentration camp universe: How can one recount when - by the scale and weight of its horror - the event defies language?"¹

¹ "Foreword by Elie Wiesel," in Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows. Film and the Holocaust*, Cambridge (Ma): Cambridge University Press 1989, p. xi.

Are this not the terms that designate the Lacanian encounter of the Real? However, this very depoliticization of the holocaust, its elevation into the properly sublime Evil, the untouchable Exception out of reach of the "normal" political discourse, can also be a political act of utter cynical manipulation, a political intervention aiming at legitimizing a certain kind of hierarchical political relations. First, it is part of the postmodern strategy of depoliticization and/or victimization. Second, it disqualifies forms of the Third World violence for which Western states are (co)responsible as minor in comparison with the Absolute Evil of the holocaust. Third, it serves to cast a shadow on every radical political project, i.e. to reinforce the Denkverbot against the radical political imagination: "Are you aware that what you propose ultimately leads to the holocaust?"

Precisely as Marxists, we should then have no fear in acknowledging that the purges under Stalinism were in a way more "irrational" than the Fascist violence: paradoxically, this very excess is an unmistakable sign that, in contrast to Fascism, Stalinism was the case of a perverted authentic revolution. In Fascism, even in Nazi Germany, it was possible to survive, to maintain the appearance of a "normal" everyday life, if one did not involve oneself in any oppositional political activity (and, of course, if one were not of Jewish origins...), while in the Stalinism of the late 30ies, nobody was safe, everyone could be unexpectedly denounced, arrested and shot as a traitor. In other words, the "irrationality" of Nazism was "condensed" in anti-Semitism, in its belief in the Jewish plot, while the Stalinist "irrationality" pervaded the entire social body. For that reason, Nazi police investigators were still looking for proofs and traces of actual activity against the regime, while Stalinist investigators were engaged in clear and unambiguous fabrications (invented plots and sabotages, etc.).

However, this very violence inflicted by the Communist Power on its own members bears witness to the radical self-contradiction of the regime, i.e. to the fact that, at the origins of the regime, there was an "authentic" revolutionary project - incessant purges were necessary not only to erase the traces of the regime's own origins, but also as a kind of "return of the repressed," a reminder of the radical negativity at the heart of the regime. The Stalinist purges of high Party echelons relied on this fundamental betrayal: the accused were effectively guilty insofar as they, as the members of the new nomenklatura, betrayed the Revolution. The Stalinist terror is thus not simply the betrayal of the Revolution, i.e. the attempt to erase the traces of the authentic revolutionary past; it rather bears witness to a kind of "imp of perversity" which compels the post-revolutionary new order to (re)inscribe its betrayal of the Revolution within itself, to "reflect" it or "remark" it in the guise of arbitrary arrests and killings which threatened all members of the nomenklatura - as in psychoanalysis, the Stalinist confession of guilt conceals the true guilt. (As is well known, Stalin wisely recruited into the NKVD people of lower social origins who were thus able to act out their hatred of the nomenklatura by arresting and torturing high apparatchiks.) This inherent tension between the stability of the rule of the new nomenklatura and the perverted "return of the repressed" in the guise of the repeated purges of the ranks of

the nomenklatura is at the very heart of the Stalinist phenomenon: purges are the very form in which the betrayed revolutionary heritage survives and haunts the regime. The dream of Gennadi Zyuganov, the Communist presidential candidate in 1996 (things would have turned out OK in the Soviet Union if only Stalin had lived at least 5 years longer and accomplished his final project of having done with cosmopolitanism and bringing about the reconciliation between the Russian state and the Orthodox Church - in other words, if only Stalin had realized his anti-Semitic purge...), aims precisely at the point of pacification at which the revolutionary regime would finally get rid of its inherent tension and stabilize itself - the paradox, of course, is that in order to reach this stability, Stalin's last purge, the planned "mother of all purges" which was to take place in the Summer of 1953 and was prevented by his death, would have to succeed. Here, then, perhaps, the classic Trotsky's analysis of the Stalinist "Thermidor" is not fully adequate: the actual Thermidor happened only after Stalin's death (or, rather, even after Khrushchev's fall), with the Brezhnev years of "stagnation," when nomenklatura finally stabilized itself into a "new class." Stalinism proper is rather the enigmatic "vanishing mediator" between the authentic Leninist revolutionary outburst and its Thermidor. On the other hand, Trotsky was right in his prediction from the 30ies that the Soviet regime can end only in two ways: either a worker's revolt against it, or the nomenklatura will no longer be satisfied with political power, but will convert itself into capitalists who directly own the means of production. And, as *The Road to Terror* claims in its last paragraph, with a direct reference to Trotsky,² this second solution is what effectively happened: the new private owners of the means of production in ex-Socialist countries, especially in the Soviet Union, are in their large majority the members of the ex-nomenklatura, so one can say that the main event of the disintegration of "really existing Socialism" was the transformation of nomenklatura into a class of private owners. However, the ultimate irony of it is that the two opposite outcomes predicted by Trotsky seem combined in a strange way: what enabled the nomenklatura to become the direct owner of the means of production was the resistance to its political rule whose key component, at least in some cases (Solidarity in Poland), was the workers' revolt against the nomenklatura.

As Alain Badiou pointed out, in spite of its horrors and failures, the "really existing Socialism" was the only political force that - for some decades, at least - seemed to pose an effective threat to the global rule of capitalism, really scaring its representatives, driving them into paranoiac reaction. Since, today, capitalism defines and structures the totality of the human civilization, every "Communist" territory was and is - again, in spite of its horrors and failures - a kind of "liberated territory," as Fred Jameson put it apropos of Cuba. What we are dealing with here is the old structural notion of the gap between the Space and the positive content that fills it in: although, as to their positive content, the Communist regimes were mostly a dismal failure, generating terror and misery, they at the same time opened up a certain space, the space of utopian

² *The Road to Terror*, p. 586.

expectations which, among other things, enabled us to measure the failure of the really existing Socialism itself. What the anti-Communist dissidents as a rule tend to overlook is that the very space from which they themselves criticized and denounced the everyday terror and misery was opened and sustained by the Communist breakthrough, by its attempt to escape the logic of the Capital. In short, when dissidents like Havel denounced the existing Communist regime on behalf of authentic human solidarity, they (unknowingly, for the most part of it) spoke from the place opened up by Communism itself - which is why they tend to be so disappointed when the "really existing capitalism" does not meet the high expectations of their anti-Communist struggle. Perhaps, Vaclav Klaus, Havel's pragmatic double, was right when he dismissed Havel as a "socialist"...

The difficult task is thus to confront the radical ambiguity of the Stalinist ideology which, even at its most "totalitarian," still exudes an emancipatory potential. From my youth, I remember the memorable scene from a Soviet film about the civil war in 1919, in which Bolsheviks organize the public trial of a mother with a young diseased son, who is discovered to be the spy for the counter-revolutionary White forces. At the very beginning of the trial, an old Bolshevik strokes his long white mustache and says: "The sentence must be severe, but just!" The revolutionary court (the collective of the Bolshevik fighters) establishes that the cause of her enemy activity was her difficult social circumstances; the sentence is therefore that she be fully integrated into the socialist collective, taught to write and read and to acquire a proper education, while her son is to be given proper medical care. While the surprised mother bursts out crying, unable to understand the court's benevolence, the old Bolshevik again strokes his mustaches and nods in consent: "Yes, this is a severe, but just sentence!"

It is easy to claim, in a quick pseudo-Marxist way, that such scenes were simply the ideological legitimization of the most brutal terror. However, no matter how manipulative this scene is, no matter how contradicted it was by the arbitrary harshness of the actual "revolutionary justice," it nonetheless provided the spectators with new ethical standards by which reality is to be measured - the shocking outcome of this exercise of the revolutionary justice, the unexpected resignification of "severity" into severity towards social circumstances and generosity towards people, cannot but produce a sublime effect. In short, what we have here is an exemplary case of what Lacan called the "quilting point [point de capiton]," of an intervention that changes the coordinates of the very field of meaning: instead of pleading for generous tolerance against severe justice, the old Bolshevik redefines the meaning of "severe justice" itself in terms of excessive forgiveness and generosity. Even if this is a deceiving appearance, there is in a sense more truth in this appearance than in the harsh social reality that generated it.

The Ted K Archive

Slavoj Zizek
When the Party Commits Suicide
1 Dec 1999

lacan.com

www.thetedkarchive.com