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Tzvetan Todorov: Hope and Memory

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What Went Wrong in the Twentieth Century

The whole world—the whole vast space of
the Universe—shows the passive submission
of inanimate matter; life alone is the miracle
of freedom.

—*Vasily Grossman*, “The Sistine Madonna”

OUR LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

The Great War of 1914–18 left eight and a half million dead on the battlefield, maimed another six million, and slaughtered a further ten million civilians. In the same period, Turkey caused the deaths of over one and half million Armenians; Soviet Russia, which came into being in 1917, killed five million in the ensuing civil war and in the famine of 1922, four million in the course of political repression, and another six million in the artificial famine of 1932–33. The Second World War brought about the deaths of at least thirty-five million people in Europe alone (twenty-five million of them in the Soviet Union), including the annihilation of at least six million who were Jewish, or Romany, or mentally retarded. Allied bombing of civilian targets in Germany and Japan caused several hundred thousand further deaths. To which we must add the bloody conflicts between the European powers and their colonial populations: the French in Madagascar, Indochina, and Algeria; the British in Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus; and so on.

Such are the dates and crude statistics of the major killing fields of the twentieth century. If the eighteenth century is commonly known as the “Age of Enlightenment,” should we not therefore call the twentieth century the “Age of Darkness”? The recitation of the list of the massacres and miseries of the past century, with its monstrous numbers blotting out the individuals who ought to be recalled one by one, is enough to make you give up trying to

make sense of it. But to renounce understanding would be to lose everything.

The history of the twentieth century in Europe cannot be separated from the history of totalitarianism. The original totalitarian state, Soviet Russia, arose in the course of the Great War, and as a consequence of it, and thus bears the mark of that war very deeply. Nazi Germany followed soon after. The Second World War began with the two totalitarian states in alliance and turned into a merciless battle between them. The second half of the century was structured by the Cold War between the West and the Communist world. So the century that recently ended was dominated by the battle between totalitarianism and democracy and by the shorter struggle between the two branches of totalitarianism itself. Now that these conflicts have ceased, an overall picture emerges: it seems that, so as to put right what had previously been wrong, European nations tried one medicine, found the cure to be far worse than the malady, and so rejected it. Seen in that light, the twentieth century appears to have been an extended historical digression. The twenty-first century picks up the story as it was left at the end of the nineteenth.

Totalitarianism now belongs to the past; that particular disease has been beaten. But we need to understand what happened. As noted by Zheliu Zhelev, a former dissident who was briefly president of Bulgaria: before turning a page, you need to read it. It's a need that is an absolute necessity for those who, like myself, lived through the twentieth century. "You cannot prepare the future without clarifying the past," said Germaine Tillion in *A la recherche du vrai et du juste* (216). People who know the past from personal experience are duty bound to pass on its lessons to others. But what is the lesson of the twentieth century?

To tackle this question we need first to answer another one: what are the meanings of the terms "totalitarianism" and "democracy"?

Both terms are designations of what are now called "ideal-type constructs." What is meant by this term, first introduced in the historical domain by Max Weber, is an intellectual tool, a mental model designed to make historical reality more comprehensible—without it being necessary for there to have been any complete or perfect implementation of the construct in the real world. In other words, an "ideal-type construct" is an extrapolation that

gives a sense to the underlying trend or dynamic of a political regime. Empirical reality may illustrate the “type” to a greater or lesser degree, may exhibit all or only some of its constituent elements, may do so for an entire period or only intermittently, and so on. It is important to grasp the distinction between the (ideal) model and its (concrete) applications. Some historians and sociologists still believe that they can do without conceptual tools altogether and rely exclusively on what they think is plain common sense. But “common sense” consists of nothing more or less than the abstract concepts and models wrapped up in conventional ways of saying things; as a result, commonsense commentators simply deprive themselves of any possibility of a critical understanding of their own conceptual tools. An “ideal type” is not in itself a statement of the true: its virtue lies in the degree to which it clarifies or helps us to understand empirical reality.

We are talking specifically about the political system, not about society as a whole and certainly not about specific dimensions of that society, such as its economy. It is obvious that the economic systems and social structures of political groups were completely different in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and nothing much would be gained by applying the same terminology to both of them.

Modern democracy, as an ideal-type construct, relies on twin principles, both of which were first formulated by John Locke in the seventeenth century, but which were articulated more clearly in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789 (the “practical experience” of the revolutionary period required the theory to be adjusted). It is to Benjamin Constant and his *Principles of Politics* (1806) that we owe this restatement of the two basic grounds of democracy: autonomy of the individual and autonomy of the collectivity.

Autonomy of the collectivity is of course a requirement that we have inherited from the classical world, and it is contained within the very term of “democracy,” which means “people power.” The key questions in this respect are: do the people really hold power, or is it held by only one part of the people, or by a single individual (king or tyrant)? Does the power that is held derive solely from human agency, or is it granted by a supernatural force, such as God, the shape of the universe, or ancestral tradition? Political autonomy in this sense of the word is possessed only by a collec-

tivity living under laws that it has made for itself and which it can modify as it wishes. Under this definition Athens was a democracy, despite the fact that its restrictive definition of “the people” excluded three-quarters of its population — women, slaves, and foreigners.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Christian states did not recognize political autonomy (which can also be called popular sovereignty) because they held the source of all power to be God. In the fourteenth century, however, William of Ockham went back to the early Christian principle that “God’s realm was not of this world” when he declared that God was not responsible for the order and disorder of the world. Power over men, he said, belongs to men alone, and so he sided with the emperor in his struggle with the pope, who sought to combine spiritual and temporal power. From then on, the assertion of political autonomy grew ever more forceful, and it finally triumphed in the American and French Revolutions. “Every legitimate government is republican,” stated Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Social Contract* of 1761 (II.6), adding in an important footnote: “I understand by this word . . . any government guided by the general will, which is the law”; even a monarchy could be “republican” in Rousseau’s sense, provided it conformed to the fundamental principle of being governed by the “general will” of the people. In this kind of argument, “democracy,” “collective autonomy,” “popular sovereignty,” “general will,” and “republic” are closely related terms.

The French Revolution seized power from monarchs and thrust it upon the people (still defined restrictively). It did not turn out too well: terror, not freedom, reigned. Where did we go wrong? asked liberal thinkers, that is to say, those who supported the idea of popular sovereignty. What had been forgotten was the necessity of balancing collective autonomy with individual autonomy: the one does not derive from the other, they are two separate principles. John Locke had said it a century before: “The power of the society or legislative assembly constituted by [men] can never be supposed to extend further than the common good” (182). In the wake of the French Revolution, liberal minds like Sieyès, Condorcet, and Benjamin Constant realized full well that the power that had passed from the king to the people’s representatives remained just as absolute (if not more so). The revolution-

aries believed they were breaking away from the *ancien régime*, but in truth they were perpetuating one of its most damaging features. The individual aspires to autonomy no less than the collectivity, which can flourish only if the individual is protected not only from powers that lie outside his domain (such as the divine right of kings) but also from the power of the people and its representatives. That power can go so far, but no further than the limits that are set by “the common good.”

“Liberal democracy” as applied to modern democratic states is thus constituted by the conjunction of two separate principles. Alternatively you can see two competing sides within liberal democracies—the “republican” and the “liberal,” which Benjamin Constant called the “freedom of the Ancients” and the “freedom of the Moderns.” Each has existed in the absence of the other. There was popular sovereignty without any protection for the freedom of the individual in ancient Greece; there have been monarchs ruling by divine right over societies where individual liberties were protected. What signals the birth of modernity in the political sphere is precisely the combination of these two principles.

Does this mean to say that modern democracies are states that know nothing higher than the expression of will, be it collective or individual? Could crime become legitimate if the people wished it and the individual accepted it? No. There is something higher than the general and the individual will—not the will of God, but the notion of justice. The supreme role of justice, however, is not specific to liberal democracies; it is the basic assumption of any legitimate political association and of any just state. Whatever form the association takes—tribal grouping, hereditary monarchy, or liberal democracy—it can only be legitimate if it accepts the basic purpose of ensuring the well-being of its members and the exercise of justice in their relationships with each other. Michael Kohlhaas, in the famous story by Heinrich von Kleist, does not live in a democracy, but that does not prevent him from protesting the injustice done to him or from pursuing his rights. No state can tolerate the arbitrary and selfish use of power. Like any legitimate state, democracy recognizes that the unwritten law that puts the political entity in the service of its subjects—and thereby asserts the respect that is due to them—should override the expression of the people’s will just as it over-

rules individual autonomy. For this reason, we can describe as “crimes” some of the things that are allowed by the laws of such and such a country (for instance, the death penalty), or describe some expressions of the popular will (such as Hitler’s rise to power) as “disasters.”

Liberal democracies belong to the generic category of legitimate states and to the species of legitimate states that respect collective and individual autonomy. Several additional rules stand alongside the two principles (on which they depend more or less directly) and make up our image of democracy. For example, the idea of equal rights for all (and everything that ensues from this idea) substantially amplifies the autonomy of the collective. If the people are sovereign, then all its members should share in power, with no distinction between any of the constituent parts of the people. Thus in a democracy the laws are the same for all, for the rich as for the poor, for the famous as for the humble. But actual democracies can be very imperfect, even while remaining true to their ideal-type construct. Sometimes they exclude large parts of the population from taking part in political life (in France, the poor had no vote until 1848; women had no vote until 1944). Universal adult suffrage is now part of our common definition of democracy, which is why the apartheid system in South Africa could not be included. Moreover, universal suffrage is almost always used to elect representatives, not to decide directly on each issue facing the collectivity. Despite apparent exceptions (such as California “propositions,” the consultations of some Swiss cantons, and French referendums), modern liberal democracies use indirect means of decision in the overwhelming majority of cases.

The autonomy of the individual is never total, for it is only exercised within a limited sphere, the domain of private life. The most effective way of ensuring it—so effective that it has become more or less synonymous with freedom and can be seen as an end in itself—is *pluralism*. Pluralism has applications in many aspects of social life, but its meaning and purpose are always the same: plurality ensures the autonomy of the individual. It has its foundation in the separation of the theological and political domains that was launched by William of Ockham. It is important to emphasize that it is a separation of the two domains, not the triumph of the one over the other. Democracy does not require citizens to cease believing in God; it requires them only to contain

their beliefs within the private sphere, and to allow their fellows to hold different beliefs. Democracy is a secular system, not an atheistic one. It does not set any particular ideal for each individual life but only ensures peaceful relations between varying ideals—as long as none of them contradicts the underlying principle of justice.

Individual lives engage with different spheres, and these too must remain separated. The basic separation in this respect is between public and private life, mirroring our distinction between the collective and the individual. Benjamin Constant was well aware that the two spheres follow different rules. Just as personal autonomy does not derive from the autonomy of the collective, so the world of personal relations remains distinct from the relations that exist between people by virtue of living together in the same society. The latter dimension of human life is what the state is supposed to take charge of, more or less imperfectly; and the theoretical aim of the action of the state is justice. But that does not hold at all for personal relations where individuals become unique and irreplaceable in each others' eyes. The personal world does not rest on principles of equality and justice: it is a web of preferences and exclusions, and its highest point is love. A democratic state—and this is very revealing—does not legislate on love; ideally, it should be the reverse. “Love must always watch over justice,” says Emmanuel Levinas in his account of humanism as the philosophy of democracy (108). There has to be a way of adapting impersonal law in relation to real people.

Within the public sphere there has to be a separation of the economic and political domains: it is not appropriate for those with political power also to control the economy entirely. That is why orthodox Marxism is incompatible with liberal democracy: public ownership of the means of production puts economic power in the hands of those who already possess political power. Private property, insofar as it ensures the autonomy of the individual, is in accordance with the spirit of democracy, even if it is not sufficient to ensure its triumph. On the other hand, despite conservatives' beliefs about the power of a market economy to solve social problems, a political culture entirely subservient to the economic sphere is equally alien to a true democracy.

In a democracy political life respects the pluralist principle. The individual is protected by laws from encroachments by the hold-

ers of power, as a consequence of the separation of powers on which Montesquieu first insisted. Montesquieu's *moderation* required the executive and the legislative functions of government to be kept separate, and for both to be kept separate from the judiciary. The ideal state, in his view, could take the form of a monarchy or a republic indifferently, as long as it respected the tripartition of powers, which is another name for the pluralist principle protecting the autonomy of the individual. The exercise of power is here clearly separated from the making of the laws that determine how power is to be exercised. In this view, society is not a battlefield for the different forces it contains but a law-governed state underpinned by a tacit contract to which all citizens are bound.

The same principle requires the existence of a plurality of political organizations — or parties — from among which citizens may make a free choice. Elections are organized, one party comes to power, but the other(s) retain specific rights as the “loyal opposition.” This mirrors the way that in the social sphere, minorities submit to the will of the majority while also retaining the right to conduct their private lives as they please. Public associations and organizations of all kinds must also show different political allegiances — and they may, of course, claim none at all. Finally, information services — libraries, newspapers, radio, television, and so on — must also be plural, that is to say, they must not all be controlled by the same political agenda.

The pluralist system that checks political power and guarantees the autonomy of the individual has its own limits. For example, a democratic state can allow no pluralism in the legitimate use of force. The state alone disposes of an army and police force, and it represses the private use of violence, including incitement to the private use of force. Similarly, although the state prescribes no specific form of the good life, it must exclude some forms that are at variance with its own principles. People who preach the use of force, for instance, or who exercise discrimination against particular groups are punished, because they undermine the principle of equality before the law. Limitations of the pluralist principle can be extended to other domains without forfeiting the democratic structure of a society. In France, for instance, there is only one official language, and only one recognized form of high school graduation. But these are optional limitations. What is not optional are the forms of pluralism listed here.

The American and the French Revolutions in the late eighteenth century ushered in the era of liberal democracies in Europe and North America. Though many obstacles lay in their path, modern political regimes of this kind grew in strength and solidity throughout the nineteenth century. As the distinction between faith and reason grew ever clearer, so did the separation of church and state. This evolution was not to everybody's taste. Many Frenchmen continued to side with the old (prerevolutionary) order, and they often valued more highly this or that aspect of the vanished world than the world they saw before them. Modern society was indeed far from perfect. The autonomy of the individual, for all the benefits it brought, involved the loss of many traditional points of reference and created radically new kinds of poverty.

Conservative thinkers (that is, those who put a higher value on the past than on the present) made two specific criticisms of democracy. Both address real features of modern societies, whose downside is what the conservatives see most clearly. First, the loss of social cohesion. Because democratic societies are "individualistic," guaranteeing the autonomy of the individual, they sacrifice social interaction, which is the lifeblood of society itself. Public space shrinks and withers, the private sphere expands beyond imagination, and society begins to fall apart. Democratic states, the conservatives say, will soon be nothing more than collections of isolated and miserable individuals. Second, the bond of shared or common values will disappear (in conservative thinking of this kind, democracy is a "nihilistic" creed): it began with the separation of church and state, and it will end up with the loss of all common points of reference, when each person will choose his or her own values without regard for values held by others.

Both these points were endlessly repeated throughout the nineteenth century — and we should not forget that Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Ernest Renan, who are now counted among the greatest French minds of the period, despised and denigrated the idea as well as the practice of democracy. However, their critique of democracy did not give rise to any violent political action, and it seems we are dealing essentially with nostalgia for a partly imaginary past. In the later part of the century, things change: the dream of a better society becomes projected into the future instead of being cast back onto the past. This is the general context in which the totalitarian project arose. That project integrated the

conservative critique of democracy—its destruction of social cohesion and the withering of common values—and proposed remedies that required radical political action.

THE IDEAL TYPE OF TOTALITARIANISM

What do we mean by a “totalitarian” regime? From Hannah Arendt to Krzysztof Pomian, historians and political scientists have spent the past century identifying and describing its characteristics. The easiest way to begin might be to compare the new notion of totalitarianism to the ideal-type construct of democracy. Its two guiding principles of the autonomy of the collectivity and the autonomy of the individual are handled differently. Totalitarian thinking simply rejects the autonomy of the individual—which was also the target of conservative criticism. In a totalitarian view the *I* of the individual must be replaced by the *we* of the group. Logically, pluralism is also discarded and replaced by its opposite, *monism*. In this respect a totalitarian state is the exact opposite of a democratic state.

Monism (which can be taken as a synonym for “totalitarian”) has two complementary aspects, which are not always equally implemented. On the one hand, individual life is no longer divided between a free private sphere and a regulated public sphere; instead, everything in it, including beliefs, tastes, and affections, becomes part of a unified whole which must conform to a public standard. So the personal world vanishes inside an all-encompassing, impersonal order. Love loses its special status as a private space over which the individual has exclusive control; it can no longer seek to sway the implementation of justice. The downgrading of the individual also affects interpersonal relations. The freedom of love is incompatible with a totalitarian state.

On the other hand, a totalitarian system imposes monism in all aspects of public life so as to reach toward the ideal of an organically unified and “bonded” community. By making state dogma out of a single ideal, by requiring subjects to subscribe to it, by establishing itself as a “virtuous state,” totalitarianism effectively restores the old unity of the theological and the political—it makes the pope the emperor, or the emperor pope. In a totalitarian regime, economics is subordinated to the political sphere

(through nationalization or other forms of control) despite the ideological assertion (in the case of Communism) that politics depends on economics. It is also a single-party system, which is tantamount to abolishing political parties altogether, and it also takes control of all other types of public organizations and associations. Consequently, totalitarian systems, unlike conservative movements, do not favor traditional religions (save if they swear allegiance). Social unification gives form to a new social hierarchy: the masses obey party members, party members obey the nomenklatura (the party elite), and these in turn are the servants of the inner circle of leaders at whose apex sits the supreme commander, or “guide.” All information services are controlled by the regime; no dissident opinion can be expressed. The totalitarian state obviously also maintains the monopoly that democratic states exercise over the legitimate use of force (so that “state,” “party,” and police end up being synonymous with each other).

Communism, as it was implemented by Lenin, then Stalin, and subsequently by their disciples in other countries, gives its own specific content to ideology, but it also gives it a peculiar status. The distinction between politics and ideology—between means and ends—started to lose its meaning immediately after the October Revolution of 1917. Up to that point, it had been possible to believe that revolution, party, and terror were the tools needed to create an ideal society. But once the party was in power, the separation of ends and means became impossible, and the monism that characterizes totalitarian regimes became fully apparent. Even the term of “ideocracy” becomes inappropriate because the only “idea” involved was the triumph of Communism. There was no truth of Communism that could be reached by means external to the party. It was as if the church had taken the place of God.

This peculiar position of ideology makes it a little easier to understand the persecution of the Bolshevik old guard between 1934 and 1939. It has often been asked why in that period the terror cut its broadest swath through the ranks of the most faithful and most committed. The same issue arises in Eastern Europe just after the Second World War: the purges of those years (1949–53) did not so much clear out the lukewarm or the doubters as the staunchest fighters among the Communist leadership—Kostov in Bulgaria, Laszlo Rajk in Hungary, Slansky in Czecho-

slovakia. These men were to all appearances the Communist movement's greatest servants. Should we think of the misfortunes that befell them in terms of the sufferings of the "perfect and upright" man called Job? Or cast them in the same light as Seneca's virtuous Stoics—good and generous men beset with afflictions and sorely tried by the very gods who looked well on them? Was their persecution a mark of distinction, a privilege of Communist virtue? The question is worth pursuing because, as we now know, the Central European purges were not spontaneous events but the coordinated expressions of a single drive and intention coming from Moscow.

If the Communist regime had wanted people to follow their own individual paths toward the ideal or to make their own interpretations of the doctrine, then the old Bolsheviks who had fought with Lenin and the purged leaders of the Central European countries would have been leading candidates. But that is not what it really meant to be a committed Communist. No individual autonomy—in thought or in action—could be allowed, because only the party could be right. If all you had to do to be a good Communist was to seek the best way forward for yourself, the monist-totalitarian structure would be seriously damaged; you would have become your own legitimation, instead of receiving legitimacy from the proper authority, that is to say, from the party and its guide. No such breach in the monist fabric could be tolerated by the general secretary, who thus took on the task of eliminating or crushing any cadres suspected of wanting to think and act by their own lights. The relationship of ideology and power was very similar in Nazi Germany. Quite early on, Hitler liquidated comrades in arms of unquestionable ideological fervor and insisted on absolute fidelity not to abstract Nazi doctrine (in any case, you could hardly call *Mein Kampf* a philosophical treatise) but to power as embodied in the person of the Führer—a demand made explicit in the oath sworn by members of the SS. The concentration and personalization of power were very similar in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Totalitarianism claims to uphold and abide by the second principle of democratic states, the autonomy of the collective, together with its consequences, but in fact it empties the principle of its content. On paper, the sovereignty of the people is respected, but in practice the "general will" is hijacked to benefit the leadership group, which uses elections as plebiscites (with a

single candidate standing, collecting 99 percent of the votes cast). All are held to be equal before the law, but in truth the law is not applied to members of the inner circles of power, and it offers no protection to opponents of the regime, who are subjected to arbitrary persecution. The ideal of equality is proclaimed, but in fact totalitarian society is riddled with complex hierarchies and levels of privilege. Members of some social groups have specific rights, but members of other groups do not have the right to a passport, to walk down particular streets, to use “special” shops, to send their children to special schools, and to use holiday resorts. Such discrepancy between official discourse and reality—the fictitious, illusory nature of the way the world is represented—became one of the salient features of Stalinist society.

In this respect, the real differences between democracy and totalitarianism were effectively masked. On the other hand, a degree of genuine continuity exists between the two types of regime in respect of foreign policy and international relations. Liberal democracy is primarily concerned with the internal workings of a given state and does not really determine the conduct of foreign affairs. In the nineteenth century, international relations operated in what earlier centuries had termed a “state of nature,” an arena where might countered might, with no reference to right. In that period, the democratic states with the most advanced internal societies—France and Britain—were also at the forefront of colonial expansion, and each sought world domination. They renounced military conquest in the twentieth century and sought instead to gain economic influence over the greatest possible area. Totalitarian states acted no differently in their early stages: at each opportunity, they annexed territories or whole countries, and, like the democratic nations, they cloaked their imperialist policies in declarations of generosity. Of course, the regimes that they installed in annexed lands were of a different type: totalitarian dictatorship is quite different from colonial domination.

This new kind of state arose in Europe in the wake of the Great War—first in Russia, then in Italy, and lastly, in 1933, in Germany.

Even from the schematic exposition of the two types of regime given so far, the reader can surely deduce that my own preference is for democracy. However, I must point out another significant difference between the two systems that may explain, in part, why my own preference is not shared by all. Totalitarianism holds

out the hope of plenitude, harmony, and happiness. The promise has not been kept so far, to be sure, but the promise remains, and people can still tell themselves that next time it will come out right and salvation will be at hand. Liberal democracy offers no such prospect, all it guarantees is that each individual will be allowed to seek his or her own happiness, harmony, and plenitude. At best it provides citizens with peace and order, gives them a role in the conduct of public affairs, and ensures fairness in their relations with each other and with the state. But it certainly does not promise them salvation. Autonomy means having the right to seek for yourself; but finding is a different matter. Kant seemed to believe that people would positively appreciate leaving behind “the status of child, in which [they] remain by their own fault,” but to be honest, it is by no means obvious that everyone prefers being an adult to remaining a child.

The promise of happiness for all allows us to identify the family to which totalitarian doctrine intrinsically belongs: in theory, totalitarianism is a form of utopianism, and, in the long context of European history, utopian thinking is a form of millenarism, of which it constitutes the atheist version.

Millenarism was a heretical form of Christianity that promised its believers that they would gain salvation in this world, without waiting for the hereafter. Christ’s original message made a clear separation between the two spheres, which was why Saint Paul could assert that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians, 3.28) without undermining in any way the real differences between masters, slaves, women, men, Jews, Greeks and so forth, since the unity and equality of all people would arise only in the City of God, and religion did not propose any changes to the order of the secular world. It is true that when Catholicism became a state religion, it broke this rule by concerning itself with the affairs of this world; but it never promised salvation in this life.

That promise was made, however, by Christian millenarians from the end of the thirteenth century on. Segarelli, for instance, declared that the Day of Judgment was nigh, and that there would first be a millennium, a reign of a thousand years that would begin with the return of the Messiah. His disciples thus thought that it was time to rid the rich of their possessions and to create perfect equality on earth. In the fifteenth century, the

Taborites (a radical sect in Bohemia) believed that Christ's return was imminent, and that his kingdom on earth would be a millennium of equality and abundance—for which it was time to prepare. In the following century, Thomas Münzer led a millenarist revolt in Germany, denouncing the wealth of princes and of the church, and inciting the peasants to rob them so as to speed the arrival of the Heavenly Kingdom on earth.

Utopianism differs from medieval and Protestant millenarism in that it seeks to build a perfect society by man's efforts alone, without reference to God, and is thus twice removed from original Christian doctrine. Utopianism takes its name from Thomas More's *Utopia*, which was an intellectual construction, an image of an ideal society. Utopias can have many functions, as tools for thinking, or as modes of criticizing existing societies; but only *utopianism* seeks to bring utopia to the real world. Christian millenarism called for the use of force to anticipate God's action on earth; utopianism is also inseparable from constraint and violence, because it seeks to install perfection in the here and now while acknowledging that men themselves are imperfect. The Russian philosopher of religion, Semyon Frank, noted in 1941 that "utopianism, which presupposes that the social order can be made to embody goodness, tends intrinsically toward despotism" (92). Totalitarian doctrines are instances of utopianism (the only known instances in the twentieth century) and, by the same token, variants of millenarism—and that means that they belong, as do all doctrines of salvation, to the field of religion. It is, of course, no coincidence that this Godless religion prospered in a period marked by the decline of Christianity.

All the same, the origins of totalitarian utopianism are quite paradoxical for a religion. They lie in a doctrine that was developed before the rise of totalitarian states, before the twentieth century, and which seems at first glance to have absolutely nothing in common with religion. We must now turn to this earlier ideology, which we shall call scientism.

SCIENTISM AND HUMANISM

Scientism as a doctrine starts from the hypothesis that the real world is an entirely coherent structure. It follows that the world is transparent, that it can be known entirely and without residue

by the human mind. The task of acquiring such knowledge is delegated to the requisite praxis, called science. No fragment of the material or spiritual world, of the animate or inanimate domain, can ultimately resist the grasp of science.

This basic postulate has one obvious consequence. If human science can indeed unravel all the secrets of nature, if it can identify all the causes of all facts and all beings, then it should be possible to modify the processes involved and to steer them in a more desirable direction. Science is a tool of knowledge, but it underpins *techne*, a tool for changing the world. We are all familiar with this kind of derivation—as in the story of early man, who first discovers that fire is hot, then learns to control it, and so comes to heat his own home, changing forever his “natural” climate. More recently, men grasped that some cows gave more milk than others and that some seeds gave more wheat per acre, so they superimposed “artificial selection” on to natural selection. There is no contradiction here between an entirely determined universe, which rules out freedom of action, and the free will of the scientist-technician, which presupposes freedom. On the contrary: if the transparency of the real includes the human world, then there is nothing to stop us from imagining how to create “new man,” a human species without the blemishes of the original strain. The logic of livestock breeding ought to work for humankind as well. Alain Besançon sums up the cult of science thus: “[K]nowledge opens the gateway to salvation” (119).

To what end should the transformation of humankind be directed? Who is authorized to identify and understand both the imperfections of the present, and the kind of perfection to which we might aspire? The answers were easy in the initial examples. It went without saying that people wanted to be warm and to eat their fill. What is good for people is good, absolutely. But what is the position when it is a question of changing *humankind* itself? Scientism has its own answer—namely, that henceforth science alone will provide the solution. The ends of humankind and of the world become a secondary effect, an automatic by-product of the search for knowledge—so automatic, in fact, that followers of the cult of science often don’t bother to formulate them. In his famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Marx merely asserts that “the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (245). So not only does

techne (transformation of the world) follow on directly from knowledge (interpretation of the world), but the nature of the transformation doesn't even deserve mentioning, because it is the ineluctable product of knowledge. The French historian Hippolyte Taine put it more explicitly some decades later: "Science seeks only the truth but in the end it discovers an ethics" (110).

The notion that social and individual ideals are the products of science has another important consequence. If the will alone sets ultimate ends, then each of us must allow that one man's choice of ends may not coincide with his neighbor's; as a result, forms of tolerance, compromise, and accommodation ought to be necessary. Many different concepts of the good life could in principle coexist. But scientific results are not like that: in science, wrong ideas are discarded without mercy; no one would even think of requesting a little more tolerance for hypotheses that have been refuted. There is no room for more than one version of scientific truth; errors are many, but the truth is one, and so pluralism becomes an irrelevant concept. If the ideal is the result of demonstration and not of an opinion, then it has to be accepted without protest.

Scientism derives from the existence of scientific practice, but it is not itself scientific. Its basic postulate—the complete transparency of the real—cannot be proved; the same is true of its implementation in the construction of ultimate ends through the process of knowledge. From start to finish, the cult of science requires an act of faith ("faith in reason," in Ernest Renan's phrase), which is why it belongs not to the family of the sciences but to the family of religions. To prove this, you only have to look at the attitude taken by totalitarian societies toward their own political objectives: whereas the general rule in scientific activity is to be as open as possible to criticism, totalitarian societies require blind submission and the silencing of all and any objections—just as religions do.

It has to be emphasized that scientism is not science but a world view that grew, funguslike, on the trunk of science. That is why totalitarian systems can embrace the cult of science and still not foster the development of scientific research. There is a very good reason for this: science requires submission to the quest for truth, not submission to dogma. Communists and Nazis thus backed off from the search for new knowledge: the latter denounced

“Jewish science” (and did without Einstein’s physics), and the former repudiated “bourgeois biology” (and jettisoned Mendel’s genetics). Challenging Lyssenko’s biology, Pavlov’s psychology, or Marr’s linguistics in the USSR could take you straight to the gulag. That was how these two societies turned themselves into scientific backwaters. Anyway, totalitarians don’t really need cutting-edge science to carry out their greatest misdeeds: firearms, poison gas, and truncheons aren’t made by geniuses. All the same, a real connection to science existed in these systems, but it had undergone a mutation: it had become “possible” to grasp the universe in its totality and to seek to improve it in a no less “total” manner. This mutation, related to the birth of science, transformed timeless human evil into a new, surprising, and specifically modern form of evil. It ushered in a radically new chapter in the history of humanity that could be entitled “What Went Wrong in the Twentieth Century.”

The monism of totalitarian regimes comes from the same axiom of the cult of science. Because there is only one rational way of grasping the entire universe, there is no reason to maintain artificial distinctions such as those between different social groups, between the different spheres of individual life (public and private), or between different opinions. Truth is one, and so should the human world be.

What is the historical place of the cult of science? Within the French tradition, its origins lie in the work of René Descartes. His first step was to exclude from the field of rational knowledge everything related to God; but “on matters where we are not instructed by divine faith,” he wrote, total knowledge was possible provided its truth was “established by scrutiny,” that is to say, by reason and will alone (*Selected Writings*, 188–89). Consequently man may “acquire absolute mastery over all [his] passions” and think of himself also as a master of nature, “in some sense like unto God” (*Selected Writings*, 238). Armed with such knowledge, a single “architect” could in principle reconfigure the organization of nations and their relationships to citizens (Descartes did not regard this as desirable but as possible). Lastly, in Descartes’s thinking, the direction of such change would be guided by the search for knowledge alone, and the common good would flow automatically from the works of philosophers: “[T]he truth which they contain, being highly clear and certain, will take

away all ground of dispute and thus dispose men's minds to gentleness and concord" (*Meditations*, 122–23).

Descartes's ideas were elaborated and systematized by the "materialist" philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Let's follow nature in all things instead of hobbling ourselves with moral rules, said Diderot with a touch of irony: that presupposes, first, that we know what nature is (and who but men of science can provide us with such knowledge?) and, second, that we obey the precepts that follow automatically from such knowledge. However, scientism entered the political field most significantly in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789, for the new state was held to be founded not on arbitrary traditions but on the rule of reason. Such was the prestige of science throughout the nineteenth century that its cult flourished among all kinds of thinkers — both friends and foes of the Revolution — who all hoped to replace a collapsing religion with the rule of science. The utopian philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon can be found alongside positivists such as Auguste Comte and dilettante conservatives like Arthur de Gobineau among the propagators of the cult of science, together with erudite historians like Renan and Taine, who were both critics of democratic government and opinion leaders for the liberal intelligentsia. In this period the two main variants of the cult also emerge: the cult of historical science, represented most powerfully by Karl Marx, and the cult of biological science, of which Gobineau may be seen as a representative figure.

The cult of science thus belongs indisputably to modernity, if we understand by this word any doctrine asserting that the laws of society come neither from God nor from tradition but from human volition; and the cult also obviously implies the existence of science as a form of knowledge acquired by human reason alone, rather than by mechanical transmission down the generations. But despite what so many fashionable thinkers continue to proclaim, scientism is not the ineluctable end product or the hidden truth of all forms of modernity; totalitarianism, although it was inspired by the principles of the cult, is not the secret and fatal destiny of democracy. What these thinkers forget is that there is more than one strand of thought within modernity: neither the principle of self-reliance, nor the egalitarian ideal, nor the requirement of autonomy, nor rationalism leads automat-

ically, of itself, toward totalitarianism. Scientism is constantly opposed by other doctrines that can also claim to be part of modernity in the broad sense. This conflict sets science-cult thinkers against people who can be considered to be the philosophers of democracy—that is, humanists—in a particularly revealing way.

Humanists do not accept the initial postulate of the complete transparency of the real and thus reject the idea that it is possible to know the universe without residue. Montesquieu, an eighteenth-century standard-bearer of humanism, raised two objections. First, with respect to any fragment of the universe, what is now called the “principle of precaution” must apply. The universe, he says, may of course be coherent in a way that is in principle discoverable; but principle and practice are very far apart. Concretely, the causes of a phenomenon are so varied and their interactions are so complex that we can never be sure of what we know; and as long as there is doubt, it is better to refrain from radical and irreversible action (which is not to say we should refrain from all action). Second, and more fundamentally, no knowledge can ever be claimed to be absolute and definitive, for the very claim deprives it of the status of knowledge and turns it into an act of faith. The ambitions of all utopian thinking were thus spiked from the start by Montesquieu’s humanism, which, by disallowing the global transparency of the real, permits only local and provisional improvement. Both the cult of science and humanist thinking aspire to universality—but not to the same kind of universality. Scientism is based on the universality of reason, and it assumes that the solutions devised by science are by definition appropriate for all men, even if they cause suffering or even death to some. Humanism, on the other hand, asserts the universality of the human: all human beings have the same rights and deserve the same respect, whether or not they live in the same ways.

There is more to this. The human world is not just a part of the universe; it is also a singular world in its own right. Its specific difference is that human beings are aware of being themselves, and thus able to detach themselves from their own being and to act against the grain of the forces they experience. “Man, as a physical being, is, like other bodies, governed by invariable laws. As an intelligent being, he incessantly transgresses the laws estab-

lished by God and changes those which he himself has established,” wrote Montesquieu (*Spirit of Laws*, 101). Alexis de Tocqueville, when his friend Gobineau argued that individuals obey the laws of their own race, responded that “human societies, like persons, become something worthwhile only through the use of their liberty” (309). To believe you can know a man in his entirety is not to know men at all. Even our knowledge of animals is imperfect: today’s milking cow could be sterile tomorrow. But our knowledge of men must always be incomplete, given that men are animals endowed with freedom. We can never know what they will do tomorrow.

There is also a logical contortion involved in trying to derive what should be from what is. What can be observed most easily in the world of human action is not right, but might, with the stronger preying on the weaker. But might is not right. To those who try to deduce right from might, Rousseau’s rejoinder in *The Social Contract* remains entirely pertinent: “One could use a more consistent method, but not one more favorable to Tyrants” (1.§2). So, to decide on the direction of change, it is not enough to observe and analyze facts, tasks for which science is well suited; we must also appeal to aims that are the objects of free choice, which presupposes arguments for and against. Ideals can never be true or false; they can only be of a higher or lower kind.

The major criticism that Rousseau made of the Enlightenment’s cult-of-science contemporaries can be summed up thus: knowledge does not make morals, and educated people are not necessarily good. (Of course, Rousseau was also a man of the Enlightenment, but in a much deeper sense than Voltaire or Helvetius.) As he put it in one of his more memorable expressions: “We can be men without being scholars” (*Émile*, 290). To come back to political systems: true democracy is democracy for all, not just for the learned or educated. Rousseau’s politics implies not knowledge of the truth but freedom (autonomy) of the will. He favors pluralism, not monism, because not just error but also human desire is many.

The project of democracy, grounded in humanist thinking, does not lead to paradise on earth. It does not disregard the evil that is in man and in the world, nor does it simply resign itself to their existence; but it does not assert as an axiomatic belief that such

evil can be eradicated once and for all. Montaigne said: “Good and ill are of one substance with our life” (*Essays*, 1237); and Rousseau declared that “good and evil flow from the same spring” (“Lettre sur la vertu,” 325). Good and ill are “of one substance” with human life because they are the fruits of our freedom, of our ability to choose at every point between several courses of action. Their common source is human sociability and human incompleteness, for these make us need other people to guarantee our sense of existing. But our need of others can be satisfied in two ways. We can cherish other people and seek to make them happy; or else we can subjugate and humiliate them so as to enjoy power over them. Humanists understand and accept the inseparability of good and evil and thus abandon the very idea of a global, definitive solution to human problems: in this view, men cannot be freed from the evil that is in them unless they are “freed” from their very humanity. It would be vain to hope that some better political system or more effective technology could provide a once-and-for-all solution to the suffering of humankind.

Lastly, scientism and humanism take opposite views of the aims of human societies. The former, by evacuating all subjectivity from its vision, takes no account of the contingency of individual wills; the aims of society should derive from the observation of impersonal processes that characterize all humanity, if not the universe in its entirety. Nature, the world, and humanity give the orders; individuals submit to them. In a humanist view, on the other hand, individuals are not to be reduced to mere means. Such reductiveness, according to Kant, is admissible when done partially and temporarily, in order to reach an intermediate objective; but the ultimate aim always remains specific human beings—all of humanity, but seen one by one, as people.

THE BIRTH OF TOTALITARIAN DOCTRINE

Since time immemorial men have used violence to impose good. The French Revolution had no need of a science-based justification to legitimate The Terror of 1793–94; and so we can see that the use of force is not intrinsically linked to the cult of science. At a particular point in history, however, a conjunction occurred

bringing together several preexisting strands: revolutionary ardor, implying the use of force; the millenarian dream of building an earthly paradise here and now; and the pseudoscientific doctrine asserting that complete knowledge of the human species was about to become available. The moment of this meeting marks the birth of totalitarian ideology. Even when power is acquired by peaceful means (as was Hitler's, unlike Mussolini's or Lenin's), the idea of creating a new society of new men and of solving all problems once and for all through an inevitable revolution always remains the basis of totalitarian societies. People can subscribe to the cult of science without being millenarists and without approving the use of violence (many of today's technocrats would fit this category); others may be revolutionaries without subscribing to the cult of science (and a whole group of early twentieth-century poets who called for a cataclysm belong to this category). But only when the three strands of violence, millenarism, and the cult of science come together can we talk of totalitarianism proper.

Neither revolutionary violence nor millenarian dreams lead to totalitarianism of and by themselves. The intellectual premises of totalitarianism are only fully established when these strands are wound together with a drive toward the total mastery of the universe propelled not just by scientific thinking but more precisely by scientism. With its forerunners in Cartesian radicalism and eighteenth-century materialism, the cult of science reaches its zenith in the nineteenth century, and that is when the totalitarian project first emerged. (We are speaking here exclusively of the ideological roots of totalitarianism, and not of its many other sources in the economic, social, and party-political domains.)

When do we find the first sketches of a genuinely totalitarian society? Marx and Gobineau both published their main works around the middle of the nineteenth century, but neither of them offer a detailed map of a future society (Gobineau, moreover, far from being utopian, foresees only decline). The theoretical and fictional works of Chernishevsky, which were so inspirational for Lenin, date from the 1860s: *The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy* came out in 1860, and the didactic novel *What Is to Be Done?* was published in 1863. Nechaiev's *Revolutionary Catechism*, which actually deals more with revolutionary practice than with the creation of a new society, was drafted in 1869 and

published in 1871. One of the most revealing but least-known texts in this connection is Ernest Renan's third *Dialogue philosophique*, which dates from 1871. In it, a character called Théocriste lays out for probably the very first time the main features of a totalitarian state.

First of all, Théocriste says, the ultimate ends of society cannot be derived from the demands of individuals, but only from the requirements of the whole species, if not from the entirety of the living world. The great law of life is simply the "will to exist," which is more powerful than all the laws and conventions made by man. This law of life means that the stronger defeat and rule over the weaker. From this point of view, the fate of individuals is unimportant; people may be disposed of for a higher purpose. "The sacrifice of a living being for a purpose set by nature is legitimate." Now, because the laws of nature must be followed, the first task is to know what those laws are, says Renan's character, and that task must be entrusted to scholars. But as scholars come to acquire such knowledge, they also quite naturally acquire power. "The elite of intelligent beings, masters of the most important secrets of the world, would dominate the world through the powerful tools it would have at its disposal, and would impose the reign of the greatest reason possible." The world would be ruled not by philosopher-kings but by "positivist tyrants." However, they would not be obliged to follow the natural order of the universe once they had unlocked its secrets. Their job would be quite the opposite, in fact, and, like any technician, they would further nature's work by improving the species. "Science works on from where nature left off." The species must be perfected, and a new man must be created with greater intellectual and physical abilities. If necessary, substandard examples of humanity would be eliminated.

A state established on these principles would be contrary to democracy on every point. Its aim would not be to give power to all but to restrict it to the best; far from fostering equality, it would promote supermen. Freedom of the individual, tolerance, and cooperation would have no role, because the truth would be available—and the truth is one. It requires submission, not debate. "The great work would be done by science and not by democracy." This is an argument in favor of the efficiency of this

new state — and it would be more efficient than a democratic system with its constant need to consult, to understand, to persuade. Renan's contrast between science and democracy might seem surprising, but it is also very revealing. Science and democracy are fruits of the same branch; they both owe their existence to the casting off of the yoke of tradition and the assertion of autonomy. But if science is transformed from a way of learning about the world into a pattern for society and a fount of ideals (in other words, a cult), then it comes into conflict with democracy. Searching for truth must not be confused with seeking good.

Théocriste imagines that the new scientific state would need the right tools to run smoothly and that a necessary one would be terror. The trouble with the old religion-based tyrannies, he says, is that they could only threaten to send their subjects to hell for disobeying, and that wasn't nearly powerful enough. In any case, now that people have stopped believing in hellfire and devils, they think they can do what they like. This gap has to be plugged "not with a chimerical hell of unproven reality, but with a real hell." Setting up a death camp that would send shivers into every spine and instill unconditional obedience in all would be justified by the fact that it would serve the good of the species. "The being in possession of scientific knowledge would put unlimited terror in the service of truth." To put its terror policies into practice, the government of Renan's future scientific state would use a corps of specially trained men — "obedient robots unable to feel moral revulsion and prepared for any level of ferocity." Fifty years later, in his proposal to establish the Soviet Secret Police, Dzerzhinsky called for a force made up of "determined comrades — solid, hard men without pity" (quoted in Courtois, 57).

As for foreign policy, Renan imagines that the ruling sages would try to develop an absolute weapon that would ensure the immediate destruction of a large proportion of its enemies' population, and, once they had done so, they would easily acquire universal domination. "When some of reason's elite come to possess the means of destroying the planet, they would have sovereignty; this elite would rule by absolute terror, since they would have the existence of all in their hands." Intellectual power would thus give rise to material power.

We have to concede that the main features of Renan's utopia

accurately predict, point for point, the shape of utopias that would be set up more than half a century later. Renan's forecast is especially close to the Nazi project, which also had a biological pretext for its plan to create "new men." What's more, the French scholar conceived of his utopia coming into being not in France, but in Germany, which he saw as a country "showing little regard for equality or even for the dignity of the individual." All the same, Renan's utopia is not far removed from Communist society either, even if the similarity is less overt. Communism may have used the rhetoric of egalitarianism, but it did not implement it by any means. In practice, the leadership role given to the party, and the requirement of absolute submission to the leadership within the party, made Communism just as much a cult of superman as any other totalitarian system. Despite the egalitarian slogans, daily life under Communism was rigidly hierarchical.

The cult of science combined with utopian thinking is integral to the totalitarian project. But can we be sure that democracy is entirely untainted by this cult? As a matter of fact, scientism is present in democracy, as one strand among others. Whenever we believe we have cracked the secrets of the world and that we ought to change it in some way that springs directly from our knowledge of its secrets—whether in physics, biology, or economics—then we too fall into the cult of science, irrespective of the political system under which we live. Overreliance on science actually happens rather often in democratic countries. When political decisions are presented as the ineluctable effects of economic laws promulgated by experts, or of natural laws that only medical or biological researchers can understand fully, then we are the prey of the cult of science. Politicians naturally prefer to take cover behind experts. However, there will always be a fundamental difference between democracy and totalitarianism as long as this kind of subservience to the cult of science stops short of being an all-embracing, utopian plan for an immediately realizable perfect society. To turn the tables on Renan, we should rather say that the "great work" is to be done by democracy, not by science. Instead of society serving science, science should be at the service of society. That is also why democracy does not preach revolution, does not use terror, and generally favors pluralism over monism.

It is indeed fortunate for us all that modern democracies do not

aspire to bring perfection to this world or to improve the human race—for unlike the mere apprentice sorcerers that were the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century, modern democracies would now be capable of going a long way down that road. They possess unrivaled means of surveillance and control, they command weapons that can indeed destroy the planet, and there are scientists within them who are close to mastering the genetic code and thus to being able to produce new species, quite literally. Compared with genetic manipulation, the crude tools of reeducation and terror used by the Communists to create “new man,” or the Nazis’ recourse to birth control policy and the elimination of allegedly inferior “races” and individuals, now seem prehistoric.

If it turns its back on utopianism, does democracy have to also abandon all hope of a better world? Not at all. Democracy is not necessarily conservative; it does not have to resign itself to accepting the world as it is. There is no reason at all to be trapped in the logic of the excluded middle, which totalitarians tried to impose on people’s minds: you do not have to choose between giving up all ideals and accepting any means whatsoever to achieve an ideal. Democracy also seeks to replace what is with what should be—but it does not claim that rationality alone can deduce what should be from what is. Lenin was a monist and therefore considered economics to be wholly dependent on politics. In a democracy, economic and political power are independent of each other, but that does not mean they have to be isolated. Economic forces try to make political agents dependent on them; politicians, in their turn, can and must place limits on economic agents, in the name of their society’s ideals. A democratic utopia has a right to exist, provided that no one tries to make it come true in the here and now by the use of force.

What do people need? The citizens of democratic states, or at least their spokespersons, have often believed that people seek only to satisfy their immediate wishes and their material needs—greater comfort, more facilities, increased leisure. In this respect, totalitarian strategists have had much stronger anthropological and psychological insights. It is certainly true that people need comfort and convenience, but, at a less overt but actually more fundamental level, they also need goods that the material world cannot provide. People want their life to have a sense: they want their existence to have its allotted place in the order of the uni-

verse, and they want some way of connecting themselves to the absolute. Unlike democracy, totalitarianism claims to meet these deeper needs, and for that reason it was freely chosen by the peoples involved. We must not forget that Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler were wished for and loved by the masses.

Democracies put their own existence in jeopardy if they neglect the human need for transcendence. But how can we prevent the need for transcendence from opening the door once again to catastrophes of the kind that twentieth-century totalitarian systems brought with them? Not by ignoring human aspirations, but by separating them quite firmly from the public sphere. The absolute may not move comfortably along the corridors of power, but it cannot be expected simply to go away. Christ's original message was quite clear. When he said, "My kingdom is not of this world," he did not mean that his kingdom does not exist; he meant to say that his kingdom is not to be found in public institutions but in people's hearts and minds. For the many centuries when Christianity became and remained a state religion, this message was, so to speak, bracketed out. Today, people's relationship to transcendence is no less necessary than it ever was, but to ward off any future totalitarian aberration, it must be kept out of political life; a new Jerusalem should never be built in this land, but it should bring inner light to the lives of all. Ecstasy can be found in the contemplation of a work of art or a natural landscape; it can be found in philosophical speculation or in hearing a child laugh. Democracy does not meet our need for salvation and for the absolute; but it cannot allow itself to forget that those needs exist.

WAR AS THE TRUTH OF LIFE

Totalitarian ideology takes its basic premise about human society from the modern cult of science—namely, that war is the rule of life, which is always a fight to the death. It simplifies and rigidifies Darwinian notions of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, and applies them to human society. The laws of social evolution are similarly expressed in sub-Darwinian language: the class struggle, the war of the sexes, racial conflict, national wars. In totalitarian thinking, no social group can avoid being ruled by

its “will to exist” (in Renan’s phrase) or by the conflicts to which that inevitably gives rise. Just like later ideologists of race, Karl Marx used the language of Darwinian natural history in his preface to *Capital*: “The evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history” (137); and it is no coincidence, as Hannah Arendt reminded us, that Engels called his friend “the Darwin of history.” However, it was Lenin and Hitler who most obviously took from Darwin their idea of the “struggle for life” and of conflict as the general law of life and of history. All life is political, and politics is war. Alain Besançon notes that Lenin’s admiration for Clausewitz did not stop him from turning the latter’s famous maxim on its head, contending that “Politics is the continuation of war by other means.”

The idea that war is the natural state of man has ancient origins (the dictum *homo homini lupus* dates back to Roman times), and it certainly did not first arise in Darwin or in the writings of his vulgarizers. In totalitarian thinking, however, it is presented as an irrefutable truth, with all the prestige of a scientific discovery; and again we see that totalitarianism owes its very existence to the cult of science. Henceforth the world is divided into two: us and them, friend and foe—be they two classes, two races, or what have you—locked in mortal combat. The best thing to do, once this truth is accepted, is to put ourselves on nature’s side, to “work on from where nature left off,” as Renan said, and to complement natural selection with artificial selection. The gas chambers of Auschwitz and the elimination of the kulaks are already implicit in such thinking. The very vocabulary of Lenin and Hitler was perfectly explicit in this respect. The enemy is first dehumanized by terms like “vermin,” “snake,” or “jackal”; this makes his elimination more acceptable. “The enemies of liberty must be exterminated without mercy,” said Lenin; there has to be “a bloody war of extermination” to “put down the counter-revolutionary rabble.” Totalitarianism is always Manichaeic, dividing the world into two mutually exclusive parties, the good and the bad, aiming to annihilate the latter.

Putting these principles into everyday practice necessarily involves the use of generalized terror in domestic policy. Lenin inaugurated it at the start of the Soviet state, and he made no apology when defending the use of terror: “We have to state explicitly that terror is in principle and politically correct, and that what

underpins it and makes it legitimate is its necessity” (*Sob. Soch.*, 39:405). In Communist countries the “dictatorship of the proletariat” became a cover term for police terror: that is to say, mass murder, torture, and threats of physical violence, together with that most convenient institution known as the concentration camp. (All totalitarian states have used camps.) Life in the camps is both imprisonment and torture, for they are punishment camps, and the inmates are never certain that they will ever get out. Other forms of terror reign over the rest of the country. Constant and ubiquitous surveillance means that acts of insubordination or of mere nonconformity may be denounced, and perpetrators punished by deportation, by being thrown out of their jobs or apartments, by withdrawal of their and their children’s right to enroll at a university or to travel overseas, and so on. The list of possible sanctions is infinite.

Terror is not an optional feature but a basic and integral part of totalitarian societies. It is therefore pointless to study such states without reference to terror, as various “revisionist” schools of history have tried to do, as if the tensions in these societies ran along classical lines. The link became quite obvious in 1989: as soon as terror was suspended (when the police and the military were not ordered to fire on demonstrators), the Communist totalitarian states tumbled like a house of cards.

In the foreign domain, terror takes on its familiar face of war (or its milder face of Cold War); all alliances are necessarily provisional. The aim remains domination; the means are those appropriate to the circumstances. Ultimately, the totalitarian framework justifies violence in many different ways. First, violence is the law of life and of survival. But, second, it is the right of the possessors of scientific truth. Why get bogged down in discussion when you know where to go and what to do?

It is essential for totalitarian societies to divide humanity into two mutually exclusive halves. They have no place for neutrality: the lukewarm are opponents, opponents are enemies. Because it treats “difference” as “opposition,” totalitarianism is radically impervious to otherness—that is, it denies the existence of a *thou* that is comparable to an *I* if not interchangeable with it, while also remaining irreducibly distinct from it. Totalitarian thinking—which is far more widespread than totalitarian states—could indeed be defined as a mind-set that gives no legitimate

place to otherness and plurality. Its slogan could well be this pearl of wisdom from Simone de Beauvoir: “Truth is one, error is many. It is therefore no coincidence if the right wing claims to be pluralist” (1539). But it would not be right to play the same game in reverse and to assert that the left is necessarily totalitarian. The style of thought revealed by Beauvoir’s remark extends the principle of war to civil life, and it makes the internal enemy no less deserving of death than the foreign foe. In this respect totalitarianism runs counter to universalism, which favors the ideal of peace.

This point is worth some attention. It is often said that Communism is based on a universalist ideology, and this alleged fact makes it difficult to bring it together with Nazism under the single heading of “totalitarian,” since Nazism was explicitly anti-universalist. Raymond Aron, one of the staunchest and clearest opponents of Communist thinking and politics, asserted in his classic analysis of the issue that one of the two totalitarian ideologies was “universal and humanitarian,” the other “nationalistic, racial, and anything but humane.” This allowed him to talk of the “noble aspirations” of the Communist dream, of the Communists’ “belief in universal and humanitarian values,” of their will “inspired by a humanitarian ideal” (*Democracy and Totalitarianism*, 197, 198).

There is a real problem here. Is Aron talking about the Communist ideal in the most general sense — Communism as it can be found at various historical moments, consisting of the very Christian aspiration toward justice, equality, and fraternity? If he is, then it is hard to see how he can consider it sufficient to describe the regime and the policies that came out of the October Revolution as “Communist.” Or is he really talking about the Soviet state set up by Lenin? If that is the case, then, quite bafflingly, Aron sees it exactly and exclusively as its own propaganda would have us see it. After all, what was special about Leninism was that it broke with Marxist and socialist traditions by abandoning all ambitions of universalism. (Lenin denounced traditionalists of this kind as “social democrat,” even as “social traitors,” and its successors as “social Fascists.”) Victory, for Lenin, involved the physical elimination of a part of the population specified for the purposes of the struggle as “the bourgeois” or as “the enemy.”

Communism seeks the happiness of humanity but only once

the “bad guys” have been separated out from it, and that is what Nazism envisaged too. How is it possible to believe in the universal validity of the doctrine when it asserts that it is based on struggle, violence, permanent revolution, hatred, dictatorship, and war? It justifies itself on the grounds that the proletariat is the majority and the bourgeoisie the minority—but that already takes us a long way away from universal ideals. But Lenin’s other great contribution to the theory of Communism is the leading role of the party in controlling the proletarian masses: and so even the argument for the greatest good of the majority cannot stand. Lenin would surely have been greatly amused by Aron’s attempt to present him as a humanist.

Aron’s words were written in 1958 and it may well be that even someone as clear-sighted as he lacked relevant knowledge not only of how Communism was implemented when it was in power but also of its political program. Nonetheless, in the same pages of *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, Aron describes Soviet Communists as “a party which grants itself the right to use violence against all its enemies, in a land where, to begin with, it was in a minority.” So how then does he come to see this inevitable and systematic use of violence as an instance of “universal humanitarian values”? It seems that the Cold War context of his writing forced him to take Soviet propaganda more seriously than it deserved and to turn a blind eye to various features of Communist ideology that he was in fact perfectly able to discern.

All this rather undermines Aron’s comparison of the two totalitarian regimes. He comes to the conclusion that “whatever the similarities, the difference [between Nazism and Communism] is fundamental.” One of the two demonstrates “a will to build a new regime and maybe a new kind of man, by any means”; the other, “a literally diabolical will to destroy a pseudo-race.” This difference really derives only from Aron’s tendentious presentation of the two regimes: he focuses on the Soviet’s self-proclaimed aims but on the Nazis’ actual methods. Such comparison between ends and means are not justifiable. Hitler wanted to destroy the Jewish pseudo-race to purify his people and to produce a better Aryan race (the “new man”) and, it goes without saying, a new kind of regime. To call this diabolical does not help us to understand it. Conversely, Stalin reckoned it was necessary, in order to achieve his aims, to destroy the pseudo-class of the kulaks whom

he deliberately sent to their deaths by firing squad and famine. That is what “by any means” means. The ideals of both regimes jettison universal ambitions: Hitler wanted to create a nation, and eventually a whole world, free of Jews; Stalin clamored for a society without classes, that is to say, without the bourgeois. In both cases, one segment of humanity was written off. The only real difference lies in the techniques used to achieve these identical policy aims.

So when Aron asserts the specificity of Hitler’s rule by declaring in his conclusion that “no other head of state in modern history ever decided in cold blood to organize the industrial extermination of six million of his fellow-men,” we have to answer him with the fact that in 1932–33, a head of state called Joseph Stalin did decide in cold blood to organize—not in an industrial manner, but in a no less brutal one—the extermination of six million of his fellow men, the farmers and peasants of the Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Kazakhstan. Actually, Aron does not seem to have been aware of these massacres, the greatest ever carried out by the Soviet authorities.

We must therefore stress that the renunciation of universalism is no less characteristic of Communism, which professes universal ideals, than it is of Nazism, which, from its origins in nationalist movements, openly declares its own particularism. The point is that the “international” in Communist propaganda does not mean “universal.” In practice Communism was as “particularist” as Nazism, since it explicitly asserted that its stated ideal did not extend to the whole of humanity. “Transnational” did not mean “transclass,” and the elimination of one part of humanity was always the precondition. Kaganovich, one of Stalin’s henchmen, put it very clearly: “You must think of humanity as one great body, but one that requires constant surgery. Need I remind you that surgery cannot be performed without cutting membranes, without destroying tissues, without the spilling of blood?” (quoted by Kahan, 309). The only real difference is that in one case the division of humanity is “horizontal,” based on national frontiers, and in the other it is “vertical,” between the different layers of a single society: national and racial war for Nazism, and the class struggle for Communism.

Even this distinction is hardly fundamental. Shortly after the October Revolution, and in any case after Lenin’s death in 1924,

the interests of world revolution became increasingly indistinguishable from the interests of its incarnation in Soviet Russia. What was good for the one was good for the other, and vice versa. This equation made internationalist aims merge with the interests of a single country. The Komintern, allegedly the expression of international revolution, was simultaneously the agent of the Russian intelligence services as well as a tool of Soviet expansionism and of its drive toward hegemony. Komintern cadres who failed to grasp this unification of functions soon ended up in the gulag or in front of a firing squad. Soviet internationalism was indistinguishable from the defense of national interests abroad. The Second World War allowed this truth to be seen in full light: just like imperial Russia in times gone by, Soviet Russia annexed immense areas previously belonging to its western neighbors—in Romania (Bessarabia), in Poland, and in Finland (the area known as Eastern Karelia)—as well as entire states (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia simply disappeared), all the better to set them on the fast track to socialism. During the war, whole ethnic groups and nations were redefined as “class enemies” by Stalin and were therefore oppressed, deported, or eradicated. The same drift, more or less, happened in Nazi Germany, where racial genocide merged with “class genocide” in the elimination of specific *kinds* of Poles and Russians.

I should add that Aron himself changed his view on this. In the “Epilogue” to his memoirs of 1983—a text that should be seen as his political testament—he wrote this: “Communism is no less hateful to me than Nazism was. The argument that I once used to distinguish class messianism from race messianism no longer impresses me very much. The apparent universality of the former has become, in the last analysis, an illusion. . . . It sanctifies conflicts or wars rather than preserving, across frontiers, the fragile links of a common faith” (471).

Democracy and the humanist thinking that underlies it are entirely in opposition to totalitarianism, in the sense that they really do constitute a universalist creed. The principle of universalism is at its weakest in foreign relations, where democratic countries continue to rely on force even if they no longer have recourse to war, at least in principle, because the form of domination now sought is primarily economic. But in the domestic arena universalism is inescapable, because all policy is conducted in the name

of the collectivity and for the benefit of all. This gives rise to an unending search for the common good and also to the need for each constituency within the social body to sacrifice some of its interests—for democratic politics is the art of compromise. In a democracy conflicts are not solved by the elimination of one of the opposing sides; instead, oppositions (which must arise in any human grouping) are turned into complementarities. Far from preventing the recognition of otherness, universalism actually fosters it. What really undermines respect for the other is when difference is treated as opposition and as hostility—a path leading directly to totalitarianism. In the latter system, where the distant ideal is one of universal peace and harmony, the means of reaching it include the physical elimination of all who stand in the way. The initial victory of the revolution can never be sufficient: in Stalin's view, the class struggle would only get more intense as time went by, even in the homeland of Communism, which was of course also surrounded by external enemies.

The grammar of humanism has three persons: *I*, who exercises his or her autonomy; *thou*, who is equivalent to an *I* but totally distinct from *me* (each *thou* can also be an *I*, and vice versa), and who may be in turn (or even at the same time) my colleague, my competitor, my counselor, the object of my love, and so forth; and *they*, who form the community to which an *I* belongs, beyond one-to-one relationships, and which is, in the last analysis, the whole of humanity, all of whose members are entitled to equal dignity. But the grammar of totalitarianism has only two persons: *us*, among whom the distinctions between individual *I*s have been suppressed; and *them*, the enemies who must be fought, not to say slaughtered. In a distant future, when utopia will have been made real on earth, *they* will be nothing more than slaves (in Nazi ideology) or they will have ceased to exist (in the Communist vision, which will then have a grammar with only one person).

The paradox of totalitarian ideology is that, in making unity its supreme ideal, it ultimately returns to the same vision as that of democracy's conservative critics. For such critics, democracy's great flaw was the nihilistic individualism that it fostered. By imposing a single rule on a whole society and by requiring every one in it to obey the party's directives, totalitarian states make individualism impossible; and by drawing its values from the cult of

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science and by making them obligatory, totalitarianism is supposed to eradicate nihilism as well.

THE TWO-EDGED KNIFE

Totalitarian ideology is a complex construction and (to borrow a phrase from Dostoyevsky) like a knife with two edges. It seeks to reconcile demands that are ultimately incompatible. This makes it vulnerable, because one day the contradictions will pull too hard on each other and bring down the whole house of cards; but it also gives totalitarianism a special strength, because, in the interim, its divergent principles allow it to appeal more widely, and it can stop up a breach in one area by invoking a contradictory value. Overall, however, there are three main fault lines within totalitarian ideology.

The first tension arises from the elementary philosophical opposition between determinism and free will. The totalitarian view is that everything that happens in the world is the result of inflexible causality (social and historic causality for one kind of totalitarianism, biological causality for the other). Everything that happens has to happen, because everything is determined by irreversible causes. On the other hand, the future is in our own hands: we have an ideal, and we must do everything necessary to realize that ideal. We are ready to sweep away the past so as to build a better world and even a better kind of man. The cult of science dissolves the contradiction between determinism and free will by introducing a third term, that of “scientific” knowledge. If the world is entirely knowable, if historical materialism does indeed show us the real laws of all societies, and if biology reveals the truth of all living things, then we who possess this knowledge not only have the power to explain existing forms of society and of life, but we also have the power to transform them in the direction we choose. That is how *techne*, which lies in the domain of the will, can claim to have the authority of science, which in itself seeks only to lay bare what is determined.

This tension is less easy to dissipate, however, when the desired object of knowledge is not a self-repeating cycle of human societies but univocal history moving toward a single end. If you take this teleological view and also believe that the future course of

human history is ineluctably determined from the outset, then how can you justify making sacrifices in order to accelerate it along a path already set? Communists and Nazis alike claimed to know the destination to which history was leading them—but they intervened in the most active way possible (in a “revolution”) to alter its path.

The second major ambiguity in the philosophical premises of totalitarianism relates to the question of modernity. Totalitarianism is simultaneously antimodern (as its fatalism shows) and archmodern (as illustrated by its activism). In placing the interests of the group above those of the person and social values above individual ones, totalitarianism harks back to traditional societies and in that respect must be counted as conservative and antimodern. In addition, and despite the egalitarian rhetoric of Soviet Russia, totalitarian societies are as hierarchical as any traditional society. The cult of the supreme leader is another characteristic of both totalitarian and of premodern societies. On the other hand, totalitarian societies are also in favor of many things that we customarily consider to be modern, notably industrialization, globalization, and technical innovation. Communist Russia industrialized at breakneck speed; Hitler was the herald of the “people’s car” and built the first autobahns. So we can see that the modernizing aspirations of these regimes were not exclusively directed toward improving military effectiveness. It seems that in totalitarian systems relationships with *things* take the place that relationships with *persons* would have had in a traditional or premodern society.

This fracture was particularly acute in Nazism, which draped itself in a mantle of Gothic traditions, Nordic gods, ancient Germanic customs, and nature, over which men have no power. The simultaneously modern and antimodern stance of Nazism allowed it to attract support from people who would otherwise have remained miles apart—ranging from believers in biological determinism and eugenics to people like Martin Heidegger who dreamed only of freeing the world from the reign of *techné*.

Although it was less visible in Soviet Russia, where “progress” was the official aim, the same tension between modernizing and antimodern tendencies existed. Even Lenin’s famous formula, “Communism = electrification + all power to the soviets,” betrays this duality. On the one hand, the Communist state was an

industrial society in which economic factors played the major role; but it was also the opposite, that is to say, a society ruled by a moral, ideological, and theological ideal, and prepared to sacrifice efficiency on the altar of its self-image. Electrification and the power of the soviets can lead in opposite directions. Should a good engineer get sacked because he is not a good Communist? Or should electrification be carried out by competent technicians even if they are not party members? Both answers held sway at different times when it was not possible to avoid the question. I remember my father facing this problem again and again. He ran a library information service, and his dilemma was between hiring people who could read Western languages (and who must thus have had a bourgeois education, since that was the only way they could have learned French, English, German, etc.), and taking on good Communists who could read only Bulgarian and, at most, Russian. He chose the first solution and lost his job because of it.

All the same, there is a feature common to the two prongs of the dilemma, which makes it more manageable. Neither “electrification” nor “power to the soviets” makes the individual the ultimate aim of our actions; the aim is either on a level above the individual (the people, the proletariat, the party) or below it (technology, industrialization). This is probably the most striking feature of totalitarian regimes, historically speaking: from the beginning of the twentieth century they stood against the rising tide of individualism, and they exploited all the frustrations borne on the crest of that wave.

The third central ambiguity of totalitarianism relates to the place of ideology, and on this theoreticians remain divided. The pioneers in the field, such as Raymond Aron, see totalitarian regimes as ideocracies, as states legitimated by their ideologies, where ideological correctness is the supreme criterion; power is but the instrument, in this analysis, and the aim is a political ideal. Other theorists, many of whom were dissidents from Eastern bloc countries, take a quite different view, at least as far as Communism is concerned. Cornelius Castoriadis for instance, claims that Communist ideology was just a facade, and that in practice Soviet power served no aim other than its own increase; in this analysis, there was no ideocracy, only a “stratocracy” — power for power’s sake, the will to will.

To clarify this point, a brief digression on the history of the Communist variant of the totalitarian state seems necessary. Because the Nazi state lasted only twelve years before it was swept away by the Allied victory, Communism, which lasted for seventy-four, and which died of “natural” causes, not by war or revolution, offers a much richer object of analysis.

It is customary to periodize the history of Soviet Russia by the reigns of its all-powerful “guides,” and we follow the custom. The main divisions are between the era of Lenin (1917–24); the Stalin period (to 1953); the era of Khrushchev (forced out in 1964); and the Brezhnev period (died 1982). What is also obvious is that the main structural changes in the regime do not fit this periodization.

The first big change was in the role of terror. Lenin initiated it, and Stalin maintained it, at higher and lower levels of intensity at different times. But after Stalin’s death there was a change not in the level of terror but in its nature. Mass executions were suspended, many of the gulags were closed, and torture and deportation were abandoned in favor of bureaucratic penalties and pressure within the professions. There were still plenty of acts of persecution and even new measures such as the use of psychiatric hospitals for political prisoners, but the victims were individuals, not whole categories of people. Admittedly, people had by then learned the lessons of terror, and every wisp of revolt had long been smashed. And, of course, the Khrushchev years were still very far from offering “bourgeois” legality or individual freedom; surveillance was universal, and the law offered no protection to the individual from arbitrary acts by the authorities. Nonetheless, what the “thaw” made possible was the emergence of the dissidents—people who expressed their hostility to the state more or less openly. Under Lenin and Stalin, that could not have happened; dissidents were immediately annihilated. Under Khrushchev, they were “only” kept under surveillance, oppressed, and, at the worst, sent to a camp or to a psychiatric ward.

The second modification has already been mentioned: the submerging of the internationalist ideal under an imperialistic, nationalist foreign policy (masked by the unchanging rhetoric of internationalism). The third change, by far the most important, was similarly obscured by the language of propaganda. After Stalin’s death, the ideology of Communism becomes an increasingly

empty shell. Nobody really believed in the millenarist promise of universal salvation any more, and the collectivist ideal was mentioned less often. Idealism was replaced by the usual accompaniments of the lust for power—the pursuit of wealth, of privilege, and of personal interests. In place of the Bolshevik old guard and fanatical believers in the Communist creed came self-serving bureaucrats and cynical careerists.

There is always a gulf between doctrine and reality, but the ways in which it was handled before and after the sea change I've described were quite different. Under Lenin and Stalin, when a disparity between language and reality was noticed, people sought to change reality. Lenin imposed the Soviet republic, Stalin collectivized the land and industrialized the country. No matter the price in human suffering and economic disaster, the main objective was to implement a program and thus to reduce the gap between theory and practice, between representation and reality. After Stalin's death the gap between language and world was no smaller, but efforts were made not to reduce it, but to mask it. From then on, official language began to lead an entirely independent life of its own, unrelated to the real world. Economic planners became less concerned with carrying out the plan than with fiddling the figures so as to benefit personally from their "success." Soviet Russia became a kingdom of camouflage, a state made of smoke and mirrors. Communist ideology was supposed to be in charge, but, save for a few exceptions, the only rule was the lust for power and personal advantage. Exactly the same change came over the other Communist countries in the Eastern bloc, with some variations related to different national contexts.

As a former citizen of a totalitarian country, I can bear personal witness to this. In the 1950s, the period that I can recall, ideology was in nearly all cases a complete sham—yet it was also indispensable. We lived in a pseudo-ideocracy. My friends and I felt we were living in a world of lies, where words designating ideals—peace, freedom, equality, prosperity—had come to mean their opposites. Despite this, official ideology remained a reasonably coherent rhetorical machine that allowed a few remaining fanatics to survive and gave the majority (consisting of conformists) a way of rationalizing the situation in which they found themselves. And everyone was a conformist, at least for part of the time. So ideology was necessary, and it had to be this ideology

and not another, even if it was most often a means rather than an end. The importance of the masking effect of ideology cannot be overestimated. I should add that on the whole we preferred to deal with sincere and “honest” Communists rather than with cynics whose only loyalty was to authority. The fact that they had made a personal choice to believe, and were not just bowing down to the party, proved they had not entirely abandoned their individual autonomy; paradoxically, their commitment to Communism could serve as a rampart against the arbitrary use of power.

The change in the role of ideology, from a central to a merely superficial aspect of the regime, also explains another disparity. Official slogans declared that all individual interests and the interests of all individuals were secondary to the interests of the collectivity. But ordinary citizens of totalitarian countries saw a quite different reality—a reign of unrestrained personal interests, with each seeking his own best advantage. The “common interest” was just wrapping paper. Totalitarianism offers a critique of individualism in the name of an organic community, but it actually created something that completely contradicted its professed aims, for it ended up producing “masses” made of juxtaposed individuals, devoid of any positive public allegiance. When the ideological facade crumpled in 1989 or 1991, it was plain to see: outside the tiny fraction of former dissidents, Soviet citizens knew no rule save that of selfishness.

The last, and lesser, change happened in the 1970s, under Brezhnev, and it was but a small twist to the monist basis of totalitarianism. The twin spheres of public and private life were once again permitted to be distinct. It became possible to lead a private life that was independent of public norms (which remained dependent on ideology); people could henceforth choose more or less freely how they dressed, where they went on vacation, or where to travel abroad.

These observations on the history of Communist totalitarianism, alongside the comparison with Nazism, allow us to identify the hard core of totalitarianism itself and to hierarchize its characteristics. It requires an initial phase of revolution, which overcomes all resistance and eliminates all real and imaginary internal opposition. It then constitutes itself around the suppression of individual autonomy and freedom, and subjects all to an absolute

authority through the use of terror or repression. Finally, there are the consequences of this chosen principle—struggle as the law of life, the equivalence of difference and opposition, and the rejection of political and economic pluralism.

On the other hand, some other aspects of a totalitarian regime, including some of its most visible features, can be removed without altering the “ideal-type construct” of totalitarianism—mass terror, for instance, which was only necessary during the transitional phase (even though the “transition” lasted for half of the life of the USSR). Even more strikingly, scientism can cease to be the motor of policy. Although it was essential during the initial phase, once its destructive work was done, it could be turned into a mere facade.

These progressive transformations of the totalitarian regime were accelerated, multiplied, and intensified by Gorbachev in the period of perestroika and glasnost, and they allowed it to die a peaceful death, much as Spain was able to manage a transition from the Franco regime to a modern society after 1975. However, the damage done by Communism was far more profound, and it continues to hamper the countries of the old Eastern bloc. The Cold War, which set democracy and totalitarianism against each other after the end of the Second World War, thus ended with the unconditional defeat of one of the parties. This defeat was not the result of external intervention (as it was for Nazi Germany) but of the collapse of the totalitarian system in itself.

The end of the story could seem quite hopeful, because it supports the view that a political system that suppresses and scorns individual freedom to that extent must eventually collapse. Seventy-four years is far too long a time for a person, but it is merely a moment in history. Communism died for a whole set of political, economic, and social reasons, but also because of a change in the mentalities of both ordinary people and the leadership. Everyone had come to aspire to forms of the good life that the Communist regime could not provide—personal safety and peace, material plenty, and individual freedom. These values were hampered by totalitarianism but fostered by democracy. Of course, democracy does not offer collective salvation nor does it promise happiness on earth; but it does guarantee that there won't be a knock on the door before dawn and that men in gray uniforms won't take you off for interrogation. The prospect of arrest is not

really attractive even to party cadres with all their special privileges. In addition, democratic regimes keep the store shelves full, and we should not be so foolish as to despise people who would rather have this particular side effect of “capitalism” than the shortages endemic to Communist societies.

The collapse of the Communist system, however, has not brought the citizens of Eastern Europe or of the former USSR the happiness they expected. The party had usurped the authority of the state, and as a result the fall of Communism made it plain that there was no state any longer. Having no state is far worse than having a bad one: its absence creates an open house for brute force and for a terrifying rising tide of crime. Much the same could be said of all the values of the public sphere: tainted by the fraudulent uses made of them under Communism, they have become unusable today. That’s what Adam Michnik meant when he joked that “The worst thing about Communism is what comes after.” The regime had corrupted political institutions, but also, as we discovered only after its fall, it had ravaged the environment, the economy, and human souls. Children will perforce pay for the errors of their parents for many years to come. And there is a high price to pay for the freedom that has recently been won. Comfortable habits, economic routines, a basic level of amenity (at least equal to the bed and board you get in prison without even asking) have all had to be given up. Citizens of these recently de-Communized countries sometimes wonder whether the life of a free pauper really is better than the life of a well-treated slave. No one can be sure that these peoples are near the end of their sufferings. Only one thing is sure, but it tips the scale: totalitarian society does not bring salvation.