

Part 4 of “Revolution. Risorgimento. Tradition.”*

More on the idea of total revolution

Let us go back now, after these distinctions, to our discussion of the idea of revolution as it found its ultimate expression in Marxism. Overall we can define it as the replacement of the quest for metaphysics (understood as an understanding of the inner rationality of reality, which implies the primacy of contemplation of an order to which we must conform in practice) with the quest to establish a meta-humanity, characterized by having recovered those powers from which humanity had to become alienated, during the development of history up to now, in order to project them into God. Already in this initial definition we had to use theological language. This did not happen by chance, because we are forced to do so whenever we try to express precisely any of the essential revolutionary themes. For example, we find a transposition of the idea of Redemption in the thesis of a self-liberation of mankind through history, or rather of a liberation operated by history, because during the second phase of Marx’s philosophy, starting from the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the very notions of human nature and essence disappear. Rather than redeeming itself, mankind is redeemed by history, but not in a fatalistic sense (because the laws of history are not viewed as a power looming above human individuals and shaping their destiny from outside). As another example, let us consider the idea of Grace, taken in its harshest version: after the Fall humankind has become a *massa damnata* and God’s grace operates a second creation, choosing the elect. Well, this idea of a second creation and a transfiguration of humankind comes back in revolutionary thought, but is also carried out by history and not by God. “By history and not by God:” thus, the “future” replaces the “beyond.” The “total overturning” which is intrinsic to the idea of revolution takes place first of all with respect to theology. In the context of this substitution-opposition all theological concepts come back within revolutionary thought, but completely transformed. In summary, total revolutionary thought implies a veritable *Summa Atheologica*.

We all heard people bring up certain essential themes regarding Marxian revolutionary thought. They are constantly mentioned in the writings both of its proponents and of its opponents: alienation and atheism, materialism and dialectics, philosophy of praxis and primacy of action, primacy of economics, structures and superstructures, abolition of metaphysical questions and exaltation of science, stateless and classless society, complete reduction of ethics to politics, primacy of politics which in practice leads to totalitarianism, replacement (which is also resolution) of philosophy by the revolution, intrinsic “totalitarianism” of the revolutionary attitude. Now, what matters for a rigorous interpretation is to consider these theses not one by one in isolation but in their systematic order. Consider the following analogy: just like none of Descartes’s philosophical theses can be understood truly rigorously outside of what Descartes calls the “chain of reasons,” the same is true of Marx. We must say that he never formulated explicitly this systematic order, which nevertheless is immanent within Marxian thought. Thus, if we look at his youthful writings the thesis about alienation seems to dominate; if we look at the

* Originally published in *L’Europa*, VI 17, October 15 1972, p. 129-141. The first three parts are in *The Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 49-58. © 2014 Carlo Lancellotti.

Manifesto, class struggle; if we look at the *Capital*, the economic interpretation of history. This explains why many interpreters, by emphasizing one or another of these themes, have effectively erased some others, speaking of “linguistic excesses” or “unfortunate sentences” motivated by revolutionary passion. This is not the method that must be followed by the historian. One must account for all of Marx’s themes as they are written, and keep in mind that Marx said what he wanted to say and nothing authorizes us to read him “according to the spirit” without rigorously respecting the letter of what he said.

As an example of the misunderstandings created by giving priority arbitrarily to one or another of these themes, let us consider the most recent case: the interpreters who have focused their attention on the concept of “alienation.” Let us understand, first of all, how this happened and why. In 1932 Marx’s youthful works were posthumously published, including the *Economical-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*¹ in which this theme was especially significant. After 1945 interest in the philosophy of Marx, which had progressively diminished in the years after 1900, reawakened in the West and especially in continental Europe, due to well-known political reasons. Now, at the time of this reawakening the prevailing philosophy was existentialism, which regarded human existence as the crucial question, in its individual aspects and in its dramatic features. Moreover, at that time several ethico-political and social factors motivated young people to sympathize with Marxism and to try and find ways to integrate it with their pre-existing ideas. What circumstances could be more favorable to the concept of alienation? The theme of existentialist philosophy was individual existence, and this Marxian concept was about the unhappy condition of the individual separated from society.

Hence the program of re-thinking all of Marxism starting from the concept of alienation. Let us now see the sequence of misunderstandings to which this assumption necessarily leads.

Indeed, if we emphasize the concept of alienation, taking it out of the Marxian context, or regarding as secondary other themes in this same context (in the *Manuscripts* themselves), we are led to think along the following lines: there is a social order in which people are reduced to things, instruments, objects of trade. Not just a few people, mind you, but everybody: alienation affects the rich no less than the poor² even though only the latter perceive it as a form of suffering because it is accompanied by misery. In fact, there is alienation whenever man only exists not “for” the others but “in function” of the others, viewed as bundles of material needs: he gets ahead inasmuch he is able to detect and satisfy other people’s material needs, inasmuch he views them as instruments for his personal success in that given society, a success which he cannot attain unless in the process he reduces himself to an instrument of their satisfaction.

Then, it becomes easy to think of Marx as a “moralist” or a “personalist” who detected a process of “depersonalization” (of reification, “thing-ization” and so on) which is “essential” to capitalist society. This latter, therefore, must not be reformed but “overturned.” But then, why is it that Marx never mentioned such moralism of his, that he mocked all invocations of morality and that he declared himself a materialist and an atheist? The reason is, these interpreters say, that his interest was not rigorously philosophic but rather ethico-political. He had understood that

1 [TN] International Publishers, New York 1964.

2 This theme is especially developed in another youthful work of Marx, *The Holy Family*.

capitalist society cannot be reformed through moral and religious sermons. Instead of reforming it, one must destroy it. And morality and religion are useless for this task; on the contrary, they must be fought to the extent that they are used to conceal the reality of facts. One must be a materialist in the sense of abandoning all spiritualistic rhetoric in order to view things from below (spiritualistic rhetoric has the purpose of obstructing this view and thus preventing a complete perception of reality). One must be a Machiavellian, in the sense that a politician knows that the majority of men are not good and that effective action requires a calculus of forces (hence the idea that Marxism should be considered above all from the perspective of “political science”). The more the political action to be carried out has to be revolutionary, the more this is the case. Therefore, the goal must be to organize those for whom alienation is inseparably associated with physical suffering and poverty, who actually are a very large majority.

Supposedly, the link between the revolutionary project and materialistic thought and atheistic thought has no other meaning. Today, however, the situation has changed. The further development of capitalism, in the form of neo-capitalism and the affluent society, tends to eliminate poverty, although it pushes alienation to the extreme limit (this fact that alienation remains and increases is the dominant theme of post-World War II neo-realistic literature). Therefore Marxism must abandon its anti-moralistic or anti-religious philosophical aspects, which have turned into hurdles to its revolutionary action. This argument was developed both by an atheistic type of existentialism and moralism on one side (for instance, by Sartre, an author in which Marxism was merged into existentialism in order to prevent any religious development of the latter) and by a certain type of “progressive Christianity” on the other side, without any opposition between the two sides, which maintained cordial mutual relations. Most of the new sociologists also agreed with this approach but via a different route, inasmuch as it effectively turned Marxism itself into political science. So did left-wing psychoanalysts, who tended to see in Marxism an *ante litteram* psychoanalysis of inter-personal relationships.

This interpretation, which was dominant until a few years ago, had negative consequences in every field, and was bound to have them, like all positions that compromise intellectual and moral integrity. In the field of religion it led to a confused mixture of theological and revolutionary elements. In the field of morals it weakened the awareness of personal responsibility by finding the cause of all evils in “alienating” society. As a result, it ended up effectively justifying all kinds of exceptions to the principles of morality.

However, here we are concerned with the question of a correct interpretation. In this respect, we must point out that the weakness of this argument is that it has nothing to do not only with Marx’s authentic thought, but with its practical development in the form of Leninist politics. As a consequence, it completely fails to understand both theoretical Marxism and Communism as a political reality. Hence, this argument is destined to muddle completely any objective appraisal of contemporary reality.

The best proof of what I said is that after his youthful period Marx never used any longer the word alienation, neither in the *Manifesto* nor in the *Capital*. Certainly we cannot say that he reneged on this idea. But in his *Theses on Feuerbach* he criticized the classical idea of an

unchangeable “nature” or “essence” that is present in every individual and constitutes man’s humanity. He reduced the individual to the sum total of his social relationships, thus introducing the idea of a collective humanity.

Certainly one can speak of alienation also about collective humanity. Indeed, it alienates away its powers by projecting them into an external reality, which it makes an object of worship and on which it depends: God and, in bourgeois society, the Capital. However, the word alienation suggests irresistibly that the individual man possesses a nature or a “freedom” that is worthy of respect and whose dignity is violated in some given society. It suggests, in brief, a “moral” consideration that Marx absolutely wants to eliminate.

Thus, the fact that this word never appears in later works is explained, in my judgment, by the critique of the last Platonic element still left in Feuerbach: the idea of a human essence.