

Tracing Radical Subjectivity Contra Stalinism, and Why This Takes Us to Fanon

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Abstract

Do we have an adequate concept to understand the status of revolutionary subjectivity when the revolutionary vanguard is in power? Such a concept will be crucial in a Marxist understanding of Stalinism. This will stop the relapse into the liberal human rights or 'humanist Marxist' (or 'socialism with a human face'), or even the poststructuralist (based, say, on the notion of hybridity), perspective of opposing Stalinism. These perspectives force us 'to throw the baby with the bathwater', reject Stalinism along with revolutionary subjectivity and the class struggle.

But first, we must therefore retrieve the history of those who formally sided with Stalin and his terror, particularly in the 1930s, 'willing' to give up 'their' human rights and liberty. They were 'Stalinists' only in name, for, more than that, they were driven by a 'passion for the real' and were the 'vanishing mediators' for the revolution.

Retrieving such a subjectivity from the jaws of Stalinism is essential to reject the 'totalitarian thesis'. Interestingly, it will be seen that such a subjectivity, with a similar form, is also being proposed by Frantz Fanon in the very different context of decolonisation. Additionally, it will be seen that the explanation of Stalinism as bureaucratic/state capitalism or as economism (Althusser) turns out to be severely lacking and in fact misleading, to the extent that it treats Stalinism as a monolithic 'system'. Such an approach is still held up within the framework of the totalitarian thesis.

Keywords

Radical subjectivity, class struggle, totalitarian, apocalyptic, human suffering, terror, Hannah Arendt

Today it does not at all feel misplaced to imagine that a post-capitalist world will emerge (only) through the interlude of a post-apocalyptic destruction. And it is not just popular culture (e.g. movies from *Elysium*, *The Hunger Games*, *Wall-E* to *Snowpiercer*) or extreme cases like the apocalyptic ISIS ('ISIS or The Flood') which conveys this feeling that only total destruction can resurrect or revive a new world, the Utopia.¹

Maurizio Lazzarato points out that we are living on borrowed time, we are 'eating up' the future as we live in the present, such that there is really no future.² As robots replace 'living labour', we lose the 'form-giving fire'. There is only a vast pool of 'general intellect' which is perhaps not even intellect but only machinic network. Not subjection

1 Ab 'Amr Al-Kin n , 1435 Ramadan.

2 Lazzarato 2012.

by Foucaultian norms, rules and laws, but machinic subjugation. The spectacle we see is the spectacle of our own demise.

No wonder then that theorists of subjectivity, subjectivation, and 'dialectical resolution' are left wondering "how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia".³ Fredric Jameson, bringing us back to the apocalyptic vision, wonders if the only way to kickstart History is by ending it.⁴ This line: "someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism", has almost become the zeitgeist of our times.⁵ So are these apocalyptic visions of post-capitalism here to stay?

The truly frightening point is that we have been there before: been in that end-point of apocalyptic destruction and untold human suffering from which History was supposedly to be kickstarted. What else is Stalinism but a certain passage through destruction and a zero-level of existence, all in the name of total transformation?

Varlam Shalamov's account of life in the Stalinist Gulag is perhaps a good starting-point. Chris Power puts it together in two powerful paragraphs:⁶

Shalamov's stories evoke the "world-like" camps as vast structures of pain, devourers of the men and women trapped within them. In *Dry Rations*, he writes: "All human emotions – love, friendship, envy, concern for one's fellow man, compassion, longing for fame, honesty – had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies during their long fasts." In *Typhoid Quarantine*, he catalogues the long-term effects of hard labour: clawed hands, frostbite, scurvy ulcers and pus-leaking toes. In *The Lepers*, an orderly is described as being trapped "in a terrible kettle where he himself was being boiled away".

Shalamov casts us into a world where prisoners sprinkle dirt in their wounds to extend their time away from the mines, and mutilate themselves for the same reason ("Kolya's happiness began the day his hand was blown off"); where men dig up the recently dead to steal their clothing ("You know the shorts are like new," Bagretsov said with satisfaction"); where the bunkmates of the poet Osip Mandelstam raise his hand "like a puppet" for two days after his death, so they can claim his bread ration...

Here, it is as though the living live in the zone of death, in the apocalyptic end-of-life zone. It is a humongous death hanging over and

3 Jameson 2003, p. 76.

4 As Jameson puts it: "a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here" (Ibid., p. 76).

5 Ibid., p. 76.

6 Power 2015.

eating up life. However, we also encounter what looks like a reversal: in the accounts of Andrei Platonov, death actually opens up space and possibly gives rise to life. In *The Foundation Pit*, we encounter a universe where something amazing takes place: "a flock of birds flying in the sky is compared to a group of men digging in the earth".⁷ These men, beaten by suffering and death, who have hit the zero-level of existence as in *Kolyma's tales*, now suddenly seem to enter that other plane which is also one of flying, in the sky, like birds: a reversal, from the pit to the sky, as though from death to life. Here, Stalin's 'ascent of labour' is not merely a bad joke, but seems to come alive in a way which we can only attempt to grasp. There is a reversal, unconvincing and bizarre.

Take for example the references to bodies huddled together in the Gulag camps and prisons where, under the horrid conditions, prisoners would develop skin diseases and basically start rotting. In what sense can we say that such bodies huddled together become, instead, as Fredric Jameson puts it, "the driving force of the Utopian impulse, which is over and over again characterised as a kind of huddling of destitute bodies together for warmth...".⁸ Here again we see a reversal being imagined. Degraded, huddled bodies stand for warmth as an early foreboding of the possibilities of Utopia.

There is the sky and there is the lake. But there is no separate sky on high and the lake below. Instead the lake is where the sky is 'created'. As we see in Platonov's *Chevengur*, "the lake creates a sky in her bosom, by immobilizing the image of the sky".⁹ So the limpid water of the lake reflects the sky and becomes "a reversed sky." The lake gives rise to the sky only by immobilising it as an image. In 'death', in immobility, there is the sky. More than that, for Platonov, this 'created sky' is actually the 'heavenly lake', essentially the post-apocalyptic utopia.

So there is what lies beneath - immobility, death - but this death is what *creates*. Death gives rise to space and life.¹⁰ There is a new approach: "the symbiotic juxtaposition of the heaven and the lake on the horizontal axis indicates a total eclipse of the hierarchical "top vs. bottom" order, evoking Platonov's quintessential cosmic vision of the "horizon of depth", where three layers of space (top-middle-bottom) merge into an organic whole."¹¹

Here we are perhaps closer to the reality of life under Stalinism. What Platonov allows us is to approach this life through its own

7 Ra 2004 p. 142. I here rely on this Dissertation work on Platonov.

8 Jameson 1994, p. 91.

9 Ra 2004, p. 98.

10 Ibid., p. 91.

11 Ibid., p. 99.

categories, without diminishing any of the suffering. In fact, his is a Utopia which highlights the violence, suffering and destitution "differing in that from so many traditional Utopian texts that purport somehow to resolve or eliminate the negative as such".¹²

The revolutionary "bonfire of class struggle" ("koster klassovoi bor'by") undergoes a mythic transformation into the "Fire of Inferno".¹³

Zero-level immanence

The collapse of hierarchies, the 'horizon of depth', the violence and destruction, the apocalyptic zero-point of life - all these now bizarrely delimit 'a first moment of **absolute immanence**',¹⁴ one where the conditions for imagining a true Utopia are being created: "it involves the very effort to find a way to begin imagining Utopia to begin with".¹⁵ "We might think of the new onset of the Utopian process as a kind of desiring to desire, a learning to desire".¹⁶

The point is that, without this clearing, without this destruction of the old world, the Utopias we imagine are still bound by the present. After all, "there can be no escape from ideology, that is from our own rationalisation of the blood guilt of our own positioning and class situation in this society".¹⁷

Under Stalinism we find those like Platonov beginning to imagine a Utopia: but from our perspective today we are removed, not just from this imagined Utopia, but also from the conditions that obtained then, the conditions of life under collectivisation about which we have few accounts with the kind of depth which we get in Platonov.¹⁸ We are removed from the scene of life under socialism. But even more, we can have no phenomenological experience of the 'reversal' or the 'horizon of depth'. We are twice removed from the purported utopia under Stalinism. Jameson therefore rightly raises "the question of the mode of access to an era whose structure of feeling is at least substantively different from our own".¹⁹

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12 Jameson 1994, p. 82.

13 Ra 2004, p. 133.

14 Jameson 1994, p. 89.

15 Ibid., p. 90.

16 Ibid., p. 90. The *going back is about projecting a new future*: to return the world to primordial chaos to force open the door to the future. But the point here is that the future is no more concrete or even imagined than what we only begin to conceive which is where the destruction of the present to make way for the absolute immanence of Platonov's world becomes *necessary*.

17 Ibid., p. 77.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 81.

Postcolonial Stalin?

Focusing on Platonov's mysticism or 'gnostic materialism' without losing sight of Stalin's terror then is a real challenge. This question regarding the 'mode of access' means that the reception of Stalinism today is an open-ended affair, particularly given the end of the Cold War and other geopolitical overdeterminations.

For example, the emergence of a postcolonial Stalin cannot be ruled out. A few academic somersaults and we might be presented with Stalinism as a counter to the Western narrative of history, of Progress and Development. Jameson anticipates as much when he refers to the possibility of a 'Second World literature', in contrast to Third World literature, in his discussion of Platonov. Clock time is here replaced with the time of the watchman, Charles Baudelaire's city with the devastated peasant landscape of Soviet collectivisation (Jameson), Michel Foucault's disciplinary society and apparatus of continuous power with abject suffering, pain and physical agony in Kolyma's tales.

Contrary to the standard narrative of Stalinism as imposing only a linear temporal course of history, in the Platonovian version we discover the spatial dimensions of how historical change is experienced from the bottom up, how it generates affective spaces that almost seem anti-temporal, as an annihilation of temporal movement. One can here identify non-linear constellations and anti-historical spatialities, as with life in the camps in accounts by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, where he talks about life as part of a herd, devoid of any sense of time or movement: "the greyish methodicalness of weeks" means that the inmate is willing to forgive those who framed him: you forgive since "you forget: the only life given to you on earth is broken. And you are ready to forgive; you have already forgiven the blockheads. And your thoughts are occupied with grabbing, not a middle piece, but an end piece of bread from the prison tray..."²⁰ Recall also Shalamov's description of the camps as 'world-like', reinforcing the spatial dimension - an apocalyptic timelessness, surprisingly evoked in scenes from films like *Wall-E* (2008), where the lone robot exists in the midst of the desolate and arid dump that the earth has become.

Marxist Stalin?

Already Stalin himself (or Stalinism proper and not just the experience of socialism, or the Stalinist "aesthetic") is being re-interpreted today. The recent work of Stephen Kotkin, based on extensive archival evidence from the late 1920s, does not present Stalin as a demonic, paranoid monster, but attempts to preserve Stalin's 'Marxist motivations' for collectivisation.

Kotkin points out: "That is why, finally, scholars who dismiss

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20 Solzhenitsyn 2007, p. 280.

Stalin's Marxist motivations for collectivisation are as wrong as those who either hype the absence of a 'plan' or render collectivisation 'necessary'".²¹ Kotkin further states: "Stalin had connected the ideological dots, reaching the full logic of a class-based outlook".²² Behind all the public statements and posturing as a communist, Stalin and other top leaders were, in their most private moments and behind closed doors, well... communists! They sincerely believed in the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism.

Kotkin gives several reasons (the 'dilemmas') why Stalin pushed for collectivisation in the late 1920s when most comrades were not sure if that would be the right step: the dilemma regarding low rate of industrial growth, "insufficient (harvest) to support the kind of grain exports necessary to finance imports of machines, including for agriculture"²³; the problem of kulaks hoarding foodgrains much needed for workers in cities and so on. "All these were profound problems, but the *core* dilemma of the NEP was ideological: seven years into the NEP, socialism (non-capitalism) was not in sight. NEP amounted to grudgingly tolerated capitalism in a country that had had an avowedly anticapitalist or socialist revolution".²⁴ Stalin's Marxist credentials are majorly reinforced by Kotkin, although in an ideologically symptomatic fashion.

Is then Kotkin trying to propose what Žižek argues: that Stalinism is a project of liberation gone wrong? Not at all. In fact, Kotkin's analysis is the opposite: it is not that Stalinism was a project of liberation gone wrong, but that the project of liberation *itself* is wrong. The very attempt at transcending capitalism is *the problem*, in Kotkin's rendering, which amounts to re-normalizing capitalism, keeping us within the capitalist imaginary.

Therefore, even someone like the communism-flogger Anne Applebaum gives a favourable review of this book, even though it runs counter to her obsession with demonising Stalin. Kotkin, she tells us, "builds the case for a different interpretation of Stalin... reveals that he was no madman, but a very smart and rational ideologue". There are scores of such favourable reviews of this work by Kotkin.

Re-interpretations of Stalin that foreground his Marxist motivations then effectively treat Marxism as an empty utopian promise. This is as bad as the postcolonial, non-Western interpretation of Stalin.

At the same time, the treatment of Stalin as a Marxist, even in the manner of Kotkin, has the advantage of blocking the usual alibi that Stalin represents for Marxists. Many (anti-Stalinist) Marxists treat

21 Kotkin 2014, p. 676.

22 Ibid., p. 676.

23 Ibid., p. 672.

24 Ibid., p. 672.

Stalin as someone who, through evil manipulations and machination, planted himself inside and hijacked the entire machinery of revolution. One blames the problem on 'the cult of personality', or on determinist Marxism, in contrast to the 'humanist Marxism' which we were called upon to embrace and which was rightly critiqued by Louis Althusser. But if Stalin is treated as Marxist and truly committed to the cause of the socialist Revolution, and yet found to have ushered in a disaster, then no alibi is possible any more. One is forced to either abandon Marxism or 'expand' it to address core questions of socialist transformation and the role of violence within it.

Kotkin's interpretation for all its deep ideological problems forces us to revisit Marxism and open it up to address the question of the day after the revolution, after the capture of power. How does one really do away with capitalism in the realm of distribution, production, consumption and, as in the Russian case, in agriculture when the socialist revolution is largely limited to urban centres and factory workers? Kotkin's finding is that there were no real alternatives (neither Bukharin's nor Rykov and Sokolnikov's) to intensifying the revolution apart from the path of collectivisation chosen by Stalin.²⁵

It is in this sense that Lenin, as Slavoj Žižek points out, leads to 'Stalin', where the latter stands for the real problems of sustaining the revolution.²⁶ Thus, those who define their Marxism excessively in terms of an avowed anti-Stalinism (and hence completely deny 'Lenin leading to Stalin') tend to work with a Marxism sanitized of any drive towards revolutionary change, for it never delves into the core problems of continued revolutionary transformation. This type of Marxism then finds itself happily engaging in the kind of amorphous 'anti-capitalism' (like a pop counter-cultural movement) or social democratic unionism which is more than fully integrated within capitalism today.

II Stalinism as a 'system'?

My suggestion is that, in order to counteract the above reinterpretation which undermines the Marxist project, we must understand Stalinism in terms of the movement of radical subjectivity. We tend to think of Stalinism as a 'system', even when we reject the equating of Stalinism with Nazism as both instances of totalitarianism. The basic picture of a system, one which lords over a grey, anonymous and destitute

25 Kotkin 2014, pp. 727-730.

26 That is why Stalinism should be seen as the clarification of the full implications of what Lenin and the Revolution of the 1917 really meant. Žižek points out: "one cannot separate the unique constellation which enabled the revolutionary takeover in October 1917 from its later "Stalinist" turn: the very constellation that rendered the revolution possible (peasants' dissatisfaction, a well-organized revolutionary elite, etc.) led to the "Stalinist" turn in its aftermath — therein resides the proper Leninist tragedy" (Žižek, n.d.).

mass of enslaved humanity, elides many layers of not just the kind of (utopian) immanence and the 'total eclipse of the hierarchical order' noted above, but also, as we will now see, different forms of revolutionary subjectivity. *Stalinism can at best be viewed as parasitic upon revolutionary subjectivity.*²⁷

Hence it is apt to begin by turning to Alain Badiou who has tried to understand 'the century' (the 20th century) dominated by revolutionary violence and terror in terms of revolutionary subjectivity - the passion for the real.²⁸

Badiou's inside/outside

Badiou draws a distinction between 'living from the inside' and 'viewing from the outside'. He writes, "for today's well tempered moralism, which is nothing but the endorsement of aseptic crimes - backing virtuous wars or decorous profits - the short century, the century of revolutionary communism assembled under the name communism, was barbarous because its passion for the real placed it beyond good and evil. For example, in a stark opposition between politics and morality. But from the inside, the century was lived as epic and heroic".²⁹

Badiou refers to the *Iliad* which "consists of an uninterrupted succession of massacres", but "in its movement as a poem this is not presented as barbarous, but as epic and heroic"³⁰. Then he talks of "a certain indifference to the objective signs of cruelty".³¹ Here, Badiou opens the possibility of approaching Stalinism in terms of radical forms of subjectivity, the passion for the real which it displaced. From the outside, it felt like a totalitarian system, but lived from the inside it is full of passion, heroically pushing limits and given boundaries between good and evil, politics and morality.

To problematize this form of subjectivity, Badiou cannot but highlight how violence is used as an anti-dialectical synthesis. He here positively invokes Gilles Deleuze's term disjunctive synthesis. "Violence takes place at the point of disjunction; it substitutes itself for a missing conjunction like a dialectical link forced into being at the very point of the

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27 Here of course one can recall the thesis in say someone like Antonio Negri that capital is parasitic on labour from the outside and the counter viewpoint that they are instead dialectically interconnected. Perhaps we can with respect to Stalinism too develop parallel concepts of formal and real subsumption with regard to labour or radial subjectivity. Ideology or rather the kind of relationship implied in say 'objective guilt' (Vyshinsky) might have to be incorporated from the very beginning.

28 Badiou 2007.

29 Ibid., p. 33.

30 Ibid., p. 33.

31 Ibid., p. 33.

anti-dialectical".³²

And here the 'dialectical link forced into being' reminds us of the **thesis of political imposition**³³ - that in a context where no real revolution of the social relations is taking place, we have the violence of an imposition which tries to pose the victory of the Revolution as immanently produced - the outward symbols of Communism and Revolution profusely speaking of what has precisely neither been achieved nor is going to be achieved.³⁴ The supposed political victory is more like a symptom of the failure of the Revolution.

So while Badiou engages and identifies with 'the century' as lived from the inside, it looks like there is no escaping the invocation of the outside - the anti-dialectical synthesis, the political imposition and so on. He tries to explain it, or rather explain it *away*: for he tries to rationalise it by referring to what he calls 'the paradigm of war' as a key and overdetermining characteristic of 'the century'. The 'paradigm of war' invokes what looks like the zeitgeist of the age. Such an explanation, however, does not allow us to unpack the system and see how radical subjectivity was deployed even in favour of this anti-dialectical synthesis.

Therefore, we want to develop an understanding of this radical subjectivity from the inside which is not completely subsumed within synthesis - this would allow us to view Stalinism as internally riven rather than totalitarian.

What is this radical subjectivity?

To see that Stalinism was riven by resistance and radical subjectivity we can of course point to the uprisings and resistances against it. There are accounts of the resistance in Vorkuta and Norilsk in 1953 or in Kengir, 1954, as it has come to us in Solzhenitsyn's account.³⁵ And this history of resistance to Stalinist dictatorship constitutes a key form of radical subjectivity. But this form does not have a moment internal to Stalinism and hence it presents Stalinism as a 'system'. However, even this former kind of resistance often 'spoke Bolshevik' and identified with the regime, showing us that the system was already internally split.

This meant, for example in the Vorkuta mass strike, "there was an underlying level of cooperation between local Gulag administrators and prisoners".³⁶ "While it is true that prisoners and camp administration

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32 Ibid., p. 32.

33 This thesis explains the repression and dictatorship under Stalin in terms of the structural logic of state or bureaucratic capitalism. See discussion below, pp...

34 Althusser (1979) is one source for this thesis. See discussion in last section.

35 Solzhenitsyn 2007.

36 Barenberg 2010, p. 35.

alike adopted a posture of opposition to each other, there was in fact a high degree of cooperation between the striking prisoners, the camp administration, and mine officials throughout the strike".³⁷ But, "in the end, it is difficult to determine the degree to which prisoner demands and speeches should be considered demonstrations of loyalty to the system or as attempts to instrumentally use Bolshevik language as a tactic" - or as 'an identification game'.³⁸

'Speak Bolshevik'

The radical subjectivity we wish to pursue here is of those who were not just instrumentally speaking Bolshevik but were 'genuine Bolsheviks', who would 'live it from the inside'. They are those who would say 'Yes' twice, one declaring their commitment to the Revolution, and the other 'accepting' their own erasure, as depicted in Brecht's *The Measure Taken*. These are radicals who agreed to the violence and the antidialectical synthesis as necessary for the Revolution. These are victims who 'spoke Bolshevik' till the end, committed communists often finding themselves sent to the gulag.

Solzhenitsyn gives this touching account of a mother, a committed party member who was arrested: "A letter from her fifteen year-old daughter came to Yelizaveta Tsvetkova in the Kazan Prison for long-term prisoners: Mama! Tell me, write to me - are you guilty or not? I hope you weren't guilty, because then I won't join the Komsomol, and I won't forgive them because of you. But if you are guilty - I won't write you anymore and will hate you." And the mother was stricken by remorse in her damp gravelike cell with its dim little lamp: How could her daughter live without the Komsomol? How could she be permitted to hate Soviet power? Better that she should hate me. And she wrote: "I am guilty.... Enter the Komsomol!"³⁹

The mother would rather accept herself as a traitor and be locked up than to see her daughter hate the Party and the Komsomol. More than this, Tsvetkova also gave testimony against her husband - anything to aid the Party!

How dogged this commitment was is confirmed by Solzhenitsyn when he writes, quite baffled: "Even today any orthodox Communist will affirm that Tsvetkova acted correctly. Even today they cannot be convinced that this is precisely the 'perversion of small forces', that the mother perverted her daughter and harmed her soul".⁴⁰

That is not just pragmatic adjustment nor pure fear of the

37 Ibid., p. 28

38 Ibid., p. 27.

39 Solzhenitsyn 2007, p. 243.

40 Ibid., p. 243.

dictatorship. "No it was not for show and not out of hypocrisy that they argued in the cells in defense of all the government's actions. They needed ideological arguments in order to hold on to a sense of their own rightness - otherwise insanity was not far off".⁴¹

Tsvetkova is a victim, for she is surely suffering and deeply pained. But '*being a victim*' is also an active stance, a radical subjective position in the interests of the revolution. She identifies with the Party, an instance of what Badiou called sharing the 'I'/We' relation.⁴² She believes in the revolution and wants to treat the Party as 'the inseparable'. For her, the injustice committed by the party is an injustice necessary to end all injustices.

Here is the passion for the real, where there is not just violence to the other but the ability or willingness to eliminate oneself: "what we have here is not the usual ethics of self-obliteration for the sake of the cause: one must, so to speak, effectuate another turn of the screw and *obliterate the obliteration itself*, i.e., renounce the obliteration *qua* pathetic gesture of self-sacrifice—this supplementary renunciation is what Lacan called "destitution subjective".⁴³ It is treating oneself not as a sacrifice or as martyr but as a *vanishing mediator*, as Žižek points out in his discussion of *The Measure Taken*.⁴⁴ If we think of her as a pure victim, then we can only think of the party-state as a hierarchical 'system' and end up with the totalitarian thesis.

The 'victimhood' lies not in her losing her personal liberty, in her suffering and the pain (the deprivation of what Badiou calls 'animal rights'), or even the estrangement with her daughter, but in her - as she will perhaps only later realise - inability to effect revolutionary change (in spite of all the suffering). The failure of the communist revolution is itself her suffering. Stalinism is to be opposed only as the emblem of this failure.

This means that the violence and the physical suffering is not the problem in itself; the problem is the failure to effect revolutionary transformation - it is only from this perspective, in retrospect, that one knows that the synthesis is indeed anti-dialectical, forced and hence a failure. Tsvetkova could not have been sure, at that time, that the violence against her was indeed anti-dialectical, that is, something which only reinforced the dominant order - that is the reason why she would cooperate with her tormentors. Hence, this synthesis is, to start with, not

41 Ibid., p. 243.

42 Badiou (2007, p. 129): The individual-Party relation is not a fusion, because it is "possible to separate oneself, but the Party only exists so long as one does not do so. The Party is the inseparable. . . . That the Party is the inseparable ultimately means that it is nothing other than a sharing, without it being known beforehand what it is that is shared."

43 Žižek 1992, p. 177.

44 Žižek 1992, p. 178.

a top-down phenomenon but one which involves the subjectivity of those like Tsvetkova. It is true that this subjectivity meant being a victim too.

This convergence of victimhood and subjectivity is what gives us the term 'vanishing mediator'. We here encounter another version of the Platonovian collapse of hierarchies and the horizon of depth which places the victim and the system in contiguity, in a plane of absolute immanence.

Solzhenitsyn's frustration

This convergence can perhaps explain why many citizens did not show interest in resisting repression by the Stalinist regime. No wonder Solzhenitsyn the humanist was completely frustrated: "Instead, not one sound comes from your parched lips, and that passing crowd naively believes that you and your executioners are friends out for a stroll".⁴⁵ He is deeply vexed: why did people not resist all this. No it is not me. "Its a mistake! They are already dragging you along by the collar, and you still keep on exclaiming to yourself: Its a mistake! They'll set things straight and let me out!".⁴⁶

"Sometimes arrests even seem to be a game - there is so much superfluous imagination, so much well-fed energy, invested in them. After all, the victim would not resist anyway".⁴⁷ And then we are told of how, in some cases, those to be arrested "would show up obediently at the designated hour and minute at the iron gates of State Security".⁴⁸

What we see again and again is not really the 'outer' willingness to believe in what is going on, to believe in the claims of the Soviet state, but to live the revolution from the inside. As Nikolai Adamovich Vilenchik said, after serving seventeen years: "We believed in the Party - and we were *not mistaken!*". To which Solzhenitsyn asks: "Is this loyalty or pigheadedness?".⁴⁹

Personal autonomy?

What we notice is a strong current of *individual* commitment which mattered, particularly given the textbook understanding of totalitarianism as erasing all individuality. The individual is not totally smothered - instead, there is a gap which is assumed in the daughter's letter, for example: that *she may or may not* join the Komsomol. The mother's response too assumes and recognises this gap - the daughter *must be given good reasons* to join the Komsomol and to love the party

45 Solzhenitsyn, 2007, p. 12.

46 Ibid., pp. 10-11.

47 Ibid., p. 8.

48 Ibid., p. 8.

49 Ibid., p. 243.

and the revolution. But of course this gap does not mean that the mother could have refused to be arrested or oppose the Soviet regime. It is as though the gap of individual autonomy would be recognised only to be simultaneously sacrificed to prove the Party right, to feed into the party's dictatorship. So Žižek is right in arguing that Bukharin had to pay the price for refusing "to renounce the minimum of subjective autonomy", refusing to give it up.⁵⁰ Although Bukharin was not guilty according to objective facts, he was guilty since he retained this minimum of personal autonomy.

So while it may seem that personal freedom and liberty are at stake, something else has taken place. For the Stalinists were not really heeding the call of the passion for the real, but merely the call of 'Duty'.⁵¹ They were imposing the diktats of the dominant order. And yet the citizens had to be seen as *choosing the revolution* - the traitors must be shown as having chosen to be traitors, hence they must confess. It is this interplay of subjective autonomy and its simultaneous repression, which is overlooked by typical theories such as Hannah Arendt's model of mass atomisation.⁵²

Total dissolution

Arendt's notion of 'the banality of evil' presupposes a private domain of quiet, family life. The functionaries of the killer machine are not violent mob leaders or 'professional criminals'. Arendt shows how Heinrich Himmler mobilised job holders and family men for the task of killing. This was the family man "who in the midst of the ruins of his world worried of nothing so much as his private security, was ready to sacrifice everything - belief, honour, dignity - on the slightest provocation".⁵³

Arendt's totalitarianism presupposes that realm of private life, a substrate which she is unable to find in Stalinism. But she does not thereby see this distinctive feature of Stalinism and conceptualise accordingly.

She does not want to read much into the fact that, under Stalinism, no realm of the private is permitted. There is no hinge, no central pillar reinforcing certain sectors of social life which must be controlled. All the realms of the private and public life, *everything, is to be transformed, destroyed, dissolved*. There is no partial solution: the whole must

50 Žižek 2001, p. 108.

51 Žižek 2001, p. 112.

52 She writes: "totalitarian movements are mass organisations of atomised, isolated individuals". She then refers to "the completely isolated human being who without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives a sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party" (Arendt 1968, p. 23).

53 Ibid., p. 36.

collapse. Class enemy here is clearly not the same as the 'Jewish plot' which is particularised and racialised. The class enemy could include anyone, even the topmost functionaries (excluding Stalin himself).

Stalinism therefore stands by constantly undercutting its own ground, itself in constant turmoil.

That is why under the high Stalinism of the late 1930s (autumn 1937) it looks like the Soviet ruling class is out to eat itself: 'The Party Commits Suicide'. Žižek could therefore say: "the irrationality of Nazism was 'condensed' in anti-Semitism, in its belief in the Jewish Plot; while Stalinist 'irrationality' pervaded the entire social body" as though leading to the *dissolution of society* itself.⁵⁴ Arendt emphasises on how totalitarianism keeps the entire society in motion ('the perpetual motion-mania of totalitarian movements'⁵⁵), but she does not realise the distinctiveness of Stalinism where the motion is not just about mobilising the population towards a project or world-vision, but one approaching society's dissolution and a self-cannabilistic regime.

The ultimate difference between 'racism' and 'communism' is that the racist mobilisation allows that domain of the household, of the pure race, to subsist as a private realm - the social logic is not taken to the extreme as under communism. The total dissolution of earlier forms of sociability and associations (from trade unions, political parties, to family and community) cannot always be treated as what allows totalitarian mass atomisation as Arendt imagines, since under the stamp of total transformation, this dissolution might very well be the path to a Platonovian absolute immanence, returning the world to primordial chaos in order to force open the doors of the future.

High Stalinism does not produce stable forms of social stratification and bifurcation of private and public - that is why the gulag as a source of economic production must be detached and kept hidden away from society, so that it has the stability and discipline needed of production. Gulag is extra-societal. Total transformation and total control collide, producing the dissolution of society: what is not dissolved, what is not public, is the 'private' realm of forced labour and the Gulag.. This produces a bizarre combination of the passion for the real and the sacrifice and suffering of humans - not anymore the humans as vanishing mediator who would challenge and resist the call of Historical Necessity but the suffering and forced labour of those in say Kolyma tales which would be used to reinforce this 'call' from the big Other which is nothing but the failure of the revolution.

So it is not the banality of evil, but *the epic heroism* of 'evil', of the passion for the real, that characterizes Stalinism. Clearly, this means that

54 Žižek 2001, p. 128.

55 Arendt 1968, p. 3.

the political is not restricted to a sacralised domain of 'human action', as Arendt would imagine. In an interesting essay, Ranciere suggests that Arendt's approach contributes to what in Agamben becomes "the radical suspension of politics in the exception of bare life ('life beyond oppression' with the loss of 'the right to have rights' being Arendt's equivalent of 'bare life').⁵⁶

It is precisely such an exception to politics in understanding Stalinism that we are critiquing. Stalinism undergoing total transformation and dissolution seemed to have politicised everything. Did the bare life of the *Kolyma tales* qualify for such an exception or did it also undergo a process of political subjectivation? I think it did, but only as a private realm and even here as the 'absent basis' for the public domain which was highly politicised and internally riven by the actions of committed radicals and workers.

Private suffering, public jouissance

We need a lineage, a genealogy of revolutionary struggle at the level of the concept of revolutionary subjectivity, that cuts through the idea of Soviet totalitarianism - this means taking cognisance of the vanishing mediators and their radical agency that wants to be inseparable from the Party. We need *to trace a continuous history of the revolutionary struggle, and how it was inflected, deflected - or even deformed - during Stalinism, but which also contributed to Stalinism in some ways.*

Badiou's imperative for the 20th century - that we must try opening up the accursed century of totalitarian terror, of utopian and criminal ideologies and examine what this century, from within its own unfolding, said that it was - must be taken into the heart of Stalinism.

We must distinguish between those who, as Žižek says, enjoyed the *jouissance* of being the tool of History and the call of Duty, versus those who believed that they were the agents of changing this History - it is the latter that must be traced. Radical energy leads not to totalitarianism but to its undermining, and this fact must be arraigned against those who speak in the name of Historical Necessity (Stalinism as Thatcher's TINA).

The line should be drawn between those who are agents of change, who wanted to participate in historical change (hence *the victims of Stalinist terror are often those who struggle for a public life of communist revolutionary politics*), and those who wanted them to be absorbed in 'private life' - for what else was the camp meant but to exile individuals to economic production in the 'private', secluded zone of the camp. Production again becomes private, just as formerly it was hidden away in capitalist society, where the economy is supposed to be autonomous of politics. Thus liberal political-economic dichotomy is maintained with a new twist under Stalinism. Suppressing public collective agency,

56 Ranciere 2004, p. 301.

the Stalinist apparatchik pushes for the realm of private suffering. The privatising of suffering, the suffering which is the nub of the passion for the real, now is no longer a mediator but a blockage, the end of dialectics.

III

Class struggle and the passion for the real

Let us look at the matter from the standpoint of Stalin's failure to see the continuation of the class struggle under socialism.⁵⁷ By 1936 Stalin had declared that "the exploitation of man by man had been abolished forever" in the USSR, that 'only insignificant remnants of the eliminated exploiting classes remained', and capitalism had been 'abolished'.⁵⁸ Bettelheim showed that this is derived from the flawed understanding that "the Soviet working class is no longer a proletariat but an entirely new class, since 'it owns the means of production in common with the whole people'".⁵⁹

What was wrongly assumed was that, since juridically capitalist property is done away with, appropriation is automatically *social* appropriation. Further, it was not recognised that, notwithstanding the illegalization of capitalism, the real process of appropriation in which the producers and non-producers are inserted internally generates a new class division, undermining the supposed non-capitalist character of the mode of production.⁶⁰ Certain tendencies within the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1970s did come to this formulation, recognising that the fight is not against individual class enemies, but against a new bourgeoisie which emerges from within the 'socialist' mode of production.⁶¹

This meant that the real process of appropriation internally generated capitalist relations even as capitalist exploitation was officially prohibited. For Althusser, the theoretical problem at hand is to be traced to **the very manner in** which Marx planned his exposition in *Capital*/Volume 1. Section 1, Book 1 presents surplus value as an arithmetical category: "and in this arithmetical presentation of surplus value, labour power figures purely and simply as a commodity".⁶² However, this "(arithmetical) presentation of surplus value may be taken for a

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Illegalising capitalism and a juridical relationship of state ownership are taken as having already led to a 'socialist' economic base. "The deduction is that given this base there is no longer any place for antagonistic classes..." (Bettelheim 1979, p. 86).

58 Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. 1973, p. 343.

59 Ibid., pp. 86-87.

60 Ibid., pp. 86-87.

61 Chun Chiao 1975.

62 Althusser 1979, p. 233.

complete theory of exploitation, causing us to neglect the conditions of labour and of reproduction".⁶³ This gives us a very **"restrictive conception** of exploitation (as a purely calculable quantity) and of labour power (as a simple commodity)".⁶⁴ What gets overlooked is the question of the conditions of labour and of reproduction.

Exploitation is viewed in isolation from the wider social relations and processes. What is overlooked is that "this *local* exploitation only exists as a simple part of a *generalized* system of exploitation which steadily expands from the great urban industrial enterprises to agricultural capitalist enterprises, then to the complex forms of the other sectors (urban and rural artisan)....".⁶⁵ This would blind us to the fact the wider conditions of production and reproduction of labour in socialist countries can be worse than those found in capitalist countries. Such a structural logic in fact anticipates the existence of labour camps and the Gulag.

But Althusser also introduces another useful term which is the Capitalist International or the Imperialist International.⁶⁶ This simply means that you could be detached from the surplus value extraction at the local (firm) level and in formal juridical terms, and yet be participating in the Capitalist International through the drive towards industrialisation, 'catching up' with the capitalist west (to achieve in a decade or so what had taken them two hundred years), creating imperialist relations with other (satellite) countries, and so on. This means that the development of productive forces is given overriding priority over the revolutionisation of the relations of production, thereby diluting the class struggle.

Empty subjectivism?

But what is upshot for my argument here?

We have to ask whether the passion for the real, the radical subjectivity as lived from the inside, is invested with this very un-Marxist process of working with 'a restrictive conception of exploitation' and carrying forth a subjective, voluntarist gesture (hence an empty radicalism) which does not take account of precisely the conditions of labour, and is unaware of, or is parasitic upon, the reproduction of

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Ibid., p. 233.

64 Ibid., pp. 233-34.

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What is easily overlooked is that "this *local* exploitation only exists as a simple part of a *generalized* system of exploitation which steadily expands from the great urban industrial enterprises to agricultural capitalist enterprises, then to the complex forms of the other sectors (urban and rural artisanat: 'one-family agricultural' units, white-collar workers and officials, etc.), not only in *one* capitalist country, but in the *ensemble* of capitalist countries, and eventually in *all the rest of the world* (by means of *direct* colonial exploitation based on military occupation: colonialism; then *indirect* colonial exploitation, without military occupation: neo-colonialism)" In 'Introduction to Capital', Althusser 2006, p. 64.

66 Ibid. p. 64.

capitalist relations under state socialist ownership. In which case, we must revise or revisit Badiou's approach from this perspective.

But if that is the case, if, that is, a revolutionary voluntarist logic is imposed, then we are back to viewing Stalinism only as a system. We cannot account for the revolutionary subjectivity, the fact that the real problem with Stalinism is not the kind of human rights suppression that liberals talk about, or the loss of 'negative liberty' that Isaiah Berlin refers to, but precisely the suppression of those who were not beholden by their sense of Duty to Historical Necessity (and who might have then worked with a restrictive notion of exploitation) but who wanted genuine historical change, a change which would also include the transformation/elimination of wider (oppressive/exploitative) conditions of production and reproduction of labour, including the Capitalist International, labour camps and the Gulag.

My question is: could we say that those like Tsvetkova who were 'loyal' to the Revolution but were also its victims, then participated in the exploitative stance of the Capitalist International, the reenactment of primitive accumulation in the interests of capital, a 'capital without capitalism'? For if that is the case, the upshot will be a theoretical rejection of precisely such a revolutionary subjectivity by arguing that it is not emanating from the internal contradictions of capitalism, but is an abstract reified subjectivity, always on the verge of becoming a Stalinism. This unresolved tension in our reading of Stalinism where the passion for the real might have contributed to building capital without capitalism totally reverberates today. Thus Alex Callinicos could critique Badiou for "failing historically to locate the communist project among the contradictions and struggles generated by capitalism as it exists today".⁶⁷ He thinks that Badiou transforms the communist project "into a subjectivist abstraction... 'ontologizing politics' by casting into philosophical stone the highly subjectivist form of leftist politics".⁶⁸

But Callinicos's call for grounding subjectivity in the internal contradictions of capitalism has an unexpected yet necessary underside to it, one which paralyses the communist left into inaction. For while the class struggle is emphasized, it now gets posed in terms of a 'democratic struggle' which refuses to pose the problem of the very political form which capitalist exploitation takes. Here one can detect a secret attachment to capitalo-parliamentarism, the dominant political form of the capitalist state order today.

This is where we have to notice one deep rooted tendency within the left: that the argument about 'the lack of embedded-ness in internal contradictions' has become a pretext to browbeat any real revolutionary

67 Callinicos 2013, p. 341.

68 Ibid., p. 341.

struggle today. On the one hand, there is supposed to be a rich repertoire of struggles: 'livelihood struggle' or 'a indigenous resistance to globalisation' or 'community against capital' or 'prefigurative politics'. On the other hand is a desolate, violent reified, abstract, dictatorial left voluntarism/subjectivism. This is the deadlock one needs to break today but as we can see this has so much to do with how we understand Stalinism.

I earlier tried to engage with the question of what David Graeber calls 'prefigurative politics' and the questions of horizontalism in the context of the Occupy movement to see if there could be 'internal horizontalist moments' in the course of posing the maximalist or verticalist question of state power.⁶⁹ From within some tendencies in the Occupy Movement one could see an embedded and deep process which, slowly, with a radical 'minority' in the shape of Occupy Oakland at the helm, developed the contours of a particular form of subjectivity - it looked like what could be called a spontaneous emergence of a durable form, akin to a Party. It was no longer the question of Party versus 'spontaneous consciousness' but, the immanent emergence of the party-form!

Fanon's *tabula rasa*

Let us here turn to Frantz Fanon and how he imagined precisely the kind of revolutionary subjectivity which a whole swathe of radicals and post-colonials would refuse to acknowledge.

Now we know that Fanon rejected Negritude since it essentialised the identity of the colonised. Postcolonials interpreted this as proof of Fanon's rejection of essentialisation and proposed hybridity and interstitial disjunctions in the postcolony. It is true that Fanon highlighted the 'double inscription' and 'double consciousness', from which it follows that 'national liberation' turns out to be a purely formal affair. But for him, the continuation of the colonial encounter did not to lead to the postcolony, but to the recognition of a social logic of colonialism wherein everything from Negritude to hybridity and the 'disjunctive social time' of the diasporic subject proposed by Bhabha would be *possible* - as, of course, internal moments of the colonial relation.⁷⁰

No amount of disjunction, multiple temporality, untranslatability, heterogeneity or the so-called 'paranoid threat from the hybrid' can really be disruptive, since it is already anticipated by the social logic of colonialism/capitalism.⁷¹ These elements, amounting to a glorification of

69 Giri 2013.

70 Bhabha, 1994, p. 311.

71 Social logic means that now for example colonialism is a social relation. Who is dominant and who is the dominated is not purely decided by race, religion or culture - there will be a native elite who is pro-colonial as we see in the colonial project in India or in fact in most countries. The fight

the culture of the colonized, either in essentialist or in non-essentialised terms, only feed the colonial relation.

Here we can say that Fanon, in a Marxist vein, is trying to relate racism with the economic structure. But let us note that he so intently focuses on 'action'. He declares that he would help "my patient to become *conscious* of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at a hallucinatory whitening, but also to act in the direction of a change in the social structure".⁷² Fanon therefore directs his call for action towards the real source of the conflict, that is, towards the social structures.⁷³

But there is something more. In the beginning of *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon says: The black is nothing: "the black is not a man".⁷⁴ He "is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity".⁷⁵

It is precisely here, in this declivity and barrenness, that the radical political subject emerges: to complete the above sentence, it is "an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born".⁷⁶ An authentic upheaval is born in an utterly naked declivity! In fact, Fanon early on in his *The Wretched of the Earth* forcefully proposes that "we have decided to describe the kind of tabula rasa which from the outset defines any decolonization".⁷⁷ The condition of the emergence of the radical subject in its fullness is precisely its nothingness, its nonbeing, a tabula rasa. This is the meaning of 'the black man is not a man'.

What we see here is also that the emphasis on socio-economic contradiction does not at all block, for Fanon, the emergence of a revolutionary subjectivity, the authentic upheaval emanating from a situation of utter declivity. The radical subject as vanishing mediator, what is supposed to be mere voluntarism, and the emphasis on class struggle does converge. Somewhere here we must then place the earlier point about the Stalinist problem of revolutionary political logic imposed from above and the lack of emphasis on socio-economic relations and class struggle - so crucial to our understanding of Stalinism.

If not the Platonovian apocalyptic destruction, then we can recall here the 'zero-level of human existence' as bearing affinities with Fanon's

against the native colonial elite was something proclaimed in India by the revolutionary Bhagat Singh, hanged to death by the British. Singh, who could have been the alternative to the mainstream of the 'freedom movement' counted Gandhi to be not really anti-colonial.

72 Fanon 1986, p. 74.

73 Ibid., p. 75.

74 Fanon 2004, Ibid., p. 1.

75 Ibid., p. 2.

76 Ibid., p. 2.

77 Ibid., p. 1.

tabula rasa and utter declivity. Here we are back to where we started from: absolute immanence, reminiscent of the Platonovian universe as also Brechtian 'vanishing mediator'. But more than that it feels like we have traversed here an entire historico-theoretical lineage of a particular kind of revolutionary subjectivity, from the Platonovian Stalinist universe to that of the scene of decolonisation imagined by Fanon. I hope now we have made serious beginnings to revisit Stalinism without succumbing to the thesis of totalitarianism and instead seeing a continuous thread of revolutionary subjectivity which cuts through Stalinism, and through the works of those like Fanon luminously shines on us today.

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