

LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

The Fate of Marxism in Eastern Europe

I shall here try to point out some general trends in the evolution of East European Marxist philosophy within the context of the political changes that have occurred since the death of Stalin, making no effort to comment on individual thinkers or works.

Stalinism had one great advantage. It had at its disposal a universal world outlook, claiming to be able to supply a definitive answer to any question in the realm of philosophy, history, the social sciences, political economy, economic planning, and even in many domains of the natural sciences, not to mention political life. That omniscience became omnipotence through the fact that such definitive answers were furnished by a single authority, by means of which any controversy whatever could be resolved at a word. Thanks to the same authority there were no doubts about what is and what is not Marxist in whatever domain. The canonical texts were clearly identified, beginning with Stalin's article "On Dialectical and Historical Materialism"—proclaimed to be the greatest philosophical achievement of mankind, but in reality a simplified résumé of Bukharin's mediocre manual of 1921 and Lenin's book attacking empiriocriticism.

The system was laden with a melancholy grotesqueness. Marxism-Leninism (that is, the political and philosophical doctrines of Stalin), functioning as the ideology of the state, was through administrative and police measures powerful enough to replace with its primitive phraseology not only genuine philosophical and social thought but certain important areas of scientific investigation. At the height of the Stalinist era the extent of its impact on the natural sciences corresponded precisely to Comte's hierarchy of sciences. Such impact was lacking in mathematics, limited in theoretical physics (mainly to attacks on the theory of relativity), somewhat stronger in chemistry, very powerful in the biological and medical sciences, and absolutely overwhelming in the social sciences and humanities. In the last the result was utterly disastrous, especially in Soviet philosophy, which was reduced to a level far below that of degenerate eighteenth-century scholasticism. One might speculate

Professors Kolakowski and Gella have spent much of their mature lives in Poland, Professor Black in the United States; Professor Kolakowski has long experience in the party, Professors Gella and Black have not.

whether or not the complete ruin of Soviet philosophy had been the more easily achieved because of certain peculiarities of the Russian philosophical tradition. In fact Russian philosophy had not passed through the period of scholasticism, with its logical training and analytical habits, or experienced the Renaissance, with its tradition of skeptical thought. With certain exceptions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Russian philosophy was mainly the work of intelligent amateurs, passionately concerned with social and religious problems but not habituated to the tedious labor of conceptual analysis.

The typical features of Lenin's philosophical writings—indifference to arguments and analysis, the narrowing of philosophical concern to what could be made politically relevant and could serve the dogmatic unity of the party, and the lack of any effort to understand the content of the thought of adversaries—all of these developed even further in the accepted style of Soviet philosophical writing. The absence of logical skill, the total incapacity to conduct discussion of material problems, the poverty of language, the monotonous uniformity of style that characterized Soviet philosophical works can be grasped only by reading them. Exceptions were extremely rare, not, of course, because of the innate inabilities of the persons concerned but because of the limitations imposed by the political system. It would be difficult to find a more striking example of a philosophy linked to a class basis; confined to the task of glorifying the ruling class, Soviet philosophy lost not only its remaining ties with genuine philosophical tradition—Russian or Western—but also any contact with the philosophical life of the twentieth century. Unable to deal with the real problems of the contemporary world, imprisoned in servile fear, and condemned to repeat the infantile schemas of Stalin's catechisms, this philosophy did succeed in breaking off the continuity of Marxist thought, to an extent that it seems almost unimaginable to revive it.

The post-Stalinist period has witnessed important changes in the fields of inquiry to which philosophy has been applied, but only slight shifts in the patterns of philosophical thought. After the resistance (which varied in intensity) of Stalinist ideologists was overcome, the scientists were in practice allowed to free themselves from ideological controls, which had such obviously calamitous effects on their ability to contribute to technological, economic, and military progress. The social sciences and humanities did not experience the same degree of benefit from the new improvements. A few disciplines, such as linguistics, which were better rooted in Russian traditions and less involved with politics, were granted the same freedoms that the sciences were now able to enjoy. Others, in certain areas recognized as more or less neutral politically, were given more elbow room. Still others, such as modern history and sociology, profited somewhat from the fact that the official state doctrine was changed in content, in Orwellian fashion, without, however, any change in its

obligatory character. Philosophy, as might have been expected, was left in the worst position of all. The canonical texts were redefined and the emphasis in interpreting them was shifted; for example, philosophers became able to refer to a dozen and a half "categories" as mentioned by Lenin, instead of "four characteristics of the dialectic" as summarized by Stalin.

Significant changes, to be sure, are to be observed among members of the younger generation. They are much more interested in contemporary philosophy and—even though frustrated by the lack of educated teachers and contacts with the rest of the world—are better able to assimilate it. American analytic philosophy turned out to be attractive, and some concern for non-Leninist Russian thought may be observed in the intellectual underground. However, because such novelties found no outlet in institutional form, the public life of Soviet philosophy shows little trace of them, and the *sancta simplicitas* of Leninist and Zhdanovist categories remains there unchallenged. But some of the younger philosophers at least seem well aware of the intellectual sterility (and therefore the lack of creative social implications) of the imposed framework, and one might risk the conjecture that if intellectual freedom should come to Russia, Marxism would turn out to be the least attractive of all existing philosophical trends. Nowhere was cultural Stalinism as successful as in shattering Marxist thought.

The partial collapse of Stalinism placed the rulers of the state in a difficult position. An ideology which was no longer able to claim universality as enforced by unchallengeable authority nevertheless strove to retain its petrified integrity and in this form to continue to impose itself on the international Communist movement, itself torn by centrifugal forces. The task is self-contradictory in the condition of increased political autonomy of the Communist movement. While it keeps its barren rigidity, the ideology is incapable of giving any answers to the real problems of the contemporary world and of exerting any real influence of itself, aside from the compulsion and repression which may enforce its acceptance. However, any increase in flexibility is also dangerous, in that it may reinforce the centrifugal tendencies presently besetting the international Communist movement. If the rulers choose rigidity, they risk revealing the impotence of the ideology and its inability to cope with the genuine problems of our world and indirectly encouraging the deviations of the young—not only in the USSR and Eastern Europe but in the West, where the New Left exhibits a generally hostile or indifferent attitude toward Soviet ideology. If they choose flexibility, they may directly encourage deviation, variety, and pluralism. The dilemma is a fearful one. The spirit of Hegelian dialectics seems to take its revenge; any truly vital energy strives to escape the bounds of Leninist orthodoxy, while any attempt to improve on it by either increasing or decreasing its rigidity brings the peril of internal disintegration.

In other socialist countries—especially Poland, Yugoslavia, and Czecho-

slovakia—more significant changes have occurred. The reasons were mainly three: the Stalinist system in the narrow sense lasted there for only a relatively short time and was unable to implant itself firmly in the consciousness of the intellectuals; although there were enormous wartime losses, especially in Poland, after the defeat of Hitler the older generation of scholars in the social sciences and humanities were only silenced or restricted in their ability to express themselves and not physically exterminated; and finally, the intellectual tradition of such countries was mainly linked with West European cultural developments. The continuity of cultural tradition was thus temporarily weakened but was not broken. Efforts to introduce Leninist-Stalinist orthodoxy into the sciences lacked thoroughness, and it was easy to disengage oneself from such pressures rather rapidly. In the social sciences and humanities, the Marxist method and Marxist conceptual instruments had a positive effect, despite the compulsion used in introducing them and the Stalinist framework in which they were confined. Such studies were incontestably enriched by the assimilation of the Marxist intellectual tradition, even if the means of introducing it were only Stalinist prayer books. Especially in the historical sciences, the Marxist perspective was of strong and fruitful importance, though this fact could not be fully appreciated until the Stalinist schemas, with their puerile language and primitive distinctions, had been discarded. In this context the effect of Marxism had nothing to do with its claim to be an all-inclusive *Weltanschauung* or to furnish a sufficient explanation for historical change, as if nothing else of value had been done for a century in the field of history. What happened was that Marxism, as one set of tools useful in ordering historical reality, was absorbed into the social sciences, losing thereby its pretensions to exclusiveness, as has occurred in many other countries. To be sure, certain politically sensitive topics, such as the history of the last few decades and the history of the socialist and Communist movements, were in a separate category, and here lies and distortions were inescapable.

Analogous observations may be made in relation to sociology, where serious and relatively free research has become possible in several different areas. Again Marxist concepts are used, but not exclusively. A certain eclecticism and a relative freedom are, however, limited in their use to realms which are more or less neutral politically, and are impossible in such fields as the sociology of power or inquiry into the social bases of the political systems of socialist countries. Such areas within history and sociology may seem restricted, but they are of tremendous importance in intellectual life, since they may concern themselves with the essential issues of our contemporary world. Consequently, no general theoretical matters can be examined, since they inevitably entail entrance into prohibited realms. The still unenviable position of large areas of the social sciences and humanities is an index of the degree of corruption that remains in the whole intellectual life, and their limits are

not only vague but subject to arbitrary and sudden change by decision of the ruling apparatus. As a characterization of the intellectual life of Eastern Europe the phrase "restricted freedom" may be less apt than "loosened slavery."

During the same period Marxist philosophy underwent important changes which, depending on the national traditions in question, manifested certain tendencies common to Eastern Europe. As the sphere of freedom was enlarged, revision in philosophy spread in all directions, and the impact of non-Marxist philosophical traditions became apparent. At the beginning some attempts were made to rediscover what was construed as the genuine essentials of Lenin's political philosophy as opposed to Stalinist deformations. Such endeavors had substantial political significance, but in philosophical theory they were unproductive, for there was scarcely anything in Stalinism for which theoretical justification could not be found in Leninist principles. More important were the efforts, which are still continuing, to reinterpret Marxism in a non-Leninist spirit by returning to the humanist inspiration of Marx's work (not necessarily in "the young Marx") or even its Hegelian sources. In these efforts at reinterpretation one can trace either the impact of contemporary existentialist phenomenology or the spirit of Hegelian historicism. There were also people who, trained in Marxism, were working in the philosophy of the sciences, in whose work non-Marxist influences appeared. Attempting to base themselves on the dialectics of Engels, they became infected by the concepts, problems, and general approach of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy. In all such instances, Marxism inevitably lost the neatly outlined silhouette it had had in Leninist or Stalinist guise. Such tendencies are still continuing, despite political threats and penalties stemming from the desperate resistance of Stalinist dogmatists. Marxist philosophical thinking became so enfeebled by the infusion of alien elements that the controversy about which of its variants may claim to be the genuine heir of Marx himself became meaningless. Most of those who value the Marxian inheritance long ago gave up this sort of discussion, though it still occupies the political ideologists of warring factions within the Communist movement.

One feature of the political environment is especially important for understanding the situation of Marxist philosophical life. The fact is that no universal ideology of the state can be elaborated now, not because of any lack of desire for such a device among the ruling apparatus, but because no one can even imagine how it could work effectively, either in the technical or the psychological sense. To be sure, the official ideology is maintained, but it is provided with a justification based less and less on a general theory of historical laws and more and more on national interests and *raison d'état*. The causes of such apparent limitations of ideological claims are to be found in the changes that have occurred in the character of the political ties binding the countries

of Eastern Europe and in the simple fact that the international Communist movement stopped living. The centrifugal forces operating on the constituent parts of this movement and the increasingly artificial character of their supposed unity, even before Stalin's death, made the attempt to create a new universal ideology simply impracticable and perhaps more dangerous than to leave things as they were. That is why the real ideological requirements laid down for philosophers or sociologists are political, not philosophical. The degree of favor shown this or that scholar, expressed in such matters as permission to publish, depends mainly on actual political attitudes and only to a minor extent on the opinions the scholar expresses on abstract philosophical and historical issues. Moreover, philosophical differences do not coincide with political ones except among a few surviving Stalinists who have preserved intact their childish faith in the integrity of the "proletarian world-outlook." Servile protestations or encomiums at the right moment may carry much greater weight in securing one's right to literary or philosophical activity than the actual extent to which one's views may harmonize with accepted Marxist-Leninist patterns. Such conditions continue to prevail in the aftermath of the great cultural pogroms of 1968 in Poland and Czechoslovakia. They do not seem surprising, in the light of the irreversible collapse of the pious dreams of an earlier period about a universal pacification of the earth on the basis of Soviet patterns, vaulted by an all-encompassing ideological superstructure.

The state of Marxism in Eastern Europe may be summarized briefly as follows. Many important conceptual categories drawn from it are employed in the social sciences and humanities but are deprived of the necessary connection with a well-constructed all-explanatory system. In this sense Marxism has been diluted ("watered down" or made "eclectic," in the phrases of a scandalized orthodoxy) in larger complexes of thought, in which the conflux of different traditions is at work. The result is not unlike the situation that prevails in Western intellectual life. The same processes may be observed in the field of philosophy, although they operate more slowly there. Marxist traditions are being mingled with ideas coming from a variety of non-Marxian sources—phenomenology and existential philosophy, neo-Hegelian historicism, the analytical school. The results, irrespective of their philosophical value, can claim no longer to preserve Marxist purity. If one attempts to distinguish what is Marxist and what is not in the contemporary philosophical production, one must define the word "Marxist" in a more or less arbitrary fashion, and widespread assent to such a definition would be both unobtainable and without theoretical importance. Leninist orthodoxy continues to drag out a moribund existence, but the official support it enjoys cannot help it to improve its lamentable level. Although still taught in the schools and disseminated by monopolized propaganda media, it has ceased to play a part in intellectual life.

It might finally be useful to inquire what the least common denominator

is that actually operates in the thinking of the people who were reared in the Marxist tradition and claim to be inspired by it without being bound to Leninist orthodoxy. One could scarcely hope to expound such shared theoretical elements in a commonly accepted set of statements that would have the same meaning in every case. Perhaps it would be closest to the truth to say that people interested mainly in the philosophy of sciences retain the general anti-reductionist tendency, in accordance with the old antimechanistic orientation of Marxism. For example, they would react negatively to the idea that the processes of human consciousness can be exhaustively described in terms of cybernetics. The people interested in Marxian philosophical anthropology seem to share the use of the category of "alienation" as encompassing in a general way the inability of man to master the institutions of his social life, as well as a general tendency to interpret social phenomena by seeking to study changing conflicts of interest and to identify in the conflicts of ideas reflections of certain social conflicts. Such a least common denominator would not include a belief in immutable historical laws, the idea of the inevitability of socialism, or the notion that class differences or class struggle may explain all the phenomena of the "superstructure." Perhaps we may include in this common stock the conviction that human cognitive activity should be always interpreted as an aspect of total historical praxis and that, for this reason, epistemological inquiry cannot be entirely divorced from genetic inquiry. Such a shared theoretical minimum is very general and far from being unequivocal. It may, however, be sufficient to identify, not only by origin but also by content, a certain community of ideas and of thinkers.

Unless a kind of Marxist Teilhard de Chardin should suddenly make his appearance, which is not likely, Marxism conceived as a global system seems to have little chance to survive. That of course does not mean that the thought of Marx will cease to exert the kind of influence proper to great philosophical teachings that continue to offer inspiration as a set of ideas but survive as systems only in handbooks of the history of philosophy. Philosophy as the living will fight against philosophy as a system, as Marx observed in his essay on Epicurus.