

Communism: Between Ideological Gift and the Gift in Everyday Life

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This attempt to interpret Communist society through the total social fact of the gift takes up Mauss's strategy, which attempted to explain social reproduction without written laws or state institutions. It was a culture of chronic revolution ('revolution' in the etymological sense), where the rules of the game changed with each party congress, institutions were in a state of permanent reform, science discovered new truths every five years, and yesterday's heroes became the traitors of today. The very concept of living in a transitory society¹ renders every social form temporary and unreal – starting with the proclaimed disappearance of the State, the family, and private property.

To understand how such chaos could last for decades, I will put forward the hypothesis that, under Communism, with the systematic destruction of contractual relations, the foundation of the social bond slipped towards premodern gift-exchange, as it were, the gift in the age of its technical reproducibility. In this article I shall therefore try to reconstruct the Communist imaginary and interpret the strange post-Communist depression in this perspective.

Gift, sacrifice, transgression

Let us start with some theoretical considerations. The gift is the reverse of the prohibition: one can only give because some resources are rare. If they are not rare through natural occurrence, culture rarefies them by submitting their use to certain constraints. The more prohibitions are imposed, the more plentiful the resources to distribute become, and the stronger the social cohesion.

For example, going on a journey is not necessarily a gift, unless someone pays for your ticket. However, if the authorities have previously criminalized every departure from the country, obtaining an 'exit visa'² becomes a precious service rendered by several individuals who are going to take the risk of standing surety for your return (putting their career and sometimes even their life in jeopardy). It is thus that a simple trip abroad is transformed into a nexus of human relations, binding individuals to one another through friendship, hope, moral obligation, and so on.

In pre-modern societies prohibitions were transcendent, being imposed by gods, ancestors, or tradition. What characterizes modernity is the fact that prohibitions lose their transcendent foundations; this is the culture of immanent prohibitions. Communist modernity is undoubtedly the most radical: everything is possible in theory and if things go against our wishes, it is because either for the time being the scientists have not yet

discovered the solution (for example, they have not yet succeeded in resuscitating Lenin and 'restoring him to the masses') or that a 'specific, very immanent enemy is preventing us from attaining the goal' (if there is a shortage of bicycles, it is because we have to build intercontinental missiles to fight imperialism). The model reaches its logical limit when it is the same authority which imposes the ban and lifts it. It is clearly on this short-circuit of modern immanence that Communism relies.³

The second consideration concerns the transgressive aspect of the gift. The latter is interpreted by all cultures as going beyond the rules of everyday life, utilitarian calculation, and cold and formal norms. It is undoubtedly for this reason that it exerts such fascination! In effect, in Communism, all generous or sacrificial⁴ activity manifests itself in the form of transgression: starting with the revolutionary sacrificing their life for freedom, via the Party instructor who gets a bullet in the back in the process of 'de-koulakizing', and ending with the official who bends the rules to find a flat for a close connection. With the final victory of the system, people found themselves in a quasi-postmodern situation in which rule and transgression mirror and mutually legitimate each other.

The régime presents itself as more humane than nature, for it implies a permanent surpassing of its own rules (unofficially perceived as arbitrary). There are laws, but the Party Secretary will bend them to come to the aid of simple folk; there is a bureaucratic apparatus, but it will be held up to ridicule to glorify some utopian ethical voluntarism. This structural self-surpassing of Communism lay at the origin of the paradox asserted by François Furet: new waves of believers would join without profiting from the experience and disillusion of the preceding generation; it was in effect, the effect of some constant overbidding, of the permanent transgressive self-surpassing of the system.

Did people believe in Communism? Let us reformulate the question in less psychological terms: were the symbolic investments made in the system perceived as valid? Did the ideological sacrifices yield social capital? The answer becomes simpler if we move from the imaginary to the symbolic.⁵ Exactly as anthropologists studying the gift itself have done . . .

Revolutionary messianism

In the 1920s Communism in Russia was conceived much more as a metaphysical upheaval than a social change. The potlatch in the sacrifice of the old world before the wondering gaze of progressive humanity apparently knew no limits. It was the heroic act of the breach⁶ with the past legitimized social positions (under Stalinism the voluntary aspect of breaking the family ties was replaced by the ritual highlighting of modest worker or peasant origins). We should note that the revolutionary logic had already been conceived by Dostoevsky in *The Possessed*: the murder of God aimed at by Kirilov turns out to be a suicide.

But there was also another inherited sacrificial logic, that of Nicolai Fiodorov.⁷ In the second half of the nineteenth century this odd thinker preached the union of all forces of humanity, all its scientific and technical potential to carry out a *supra-moralist* task: the general resurrection (which he calls 'patrifaction' – re-making of the fathers) of all the dead and, through that, the total repayment of the debt of the living. Once life had been given to the fathers by the grateful sons, procreation would no longer be necessary, for

humanity would have carried out its principal duty and time could stop. And, since the inhabitants of the earth would become too numerous, people would have to 'step out into the cosmos' – an idea which was to accompany the entire history of Communism.⁸ This utopia, as much pious as it was radical, produced numerous hybrids with Marxism-Leninism, such as the 'bio-cosmists', some futuristic groups and so on. Later, in his anti-utopia, *Tchevengur*, the writer Andrei Platonov (another convinced Fiodorovian) was to present the defeat of Communism through the death of a little girl who had nothing to do with the old society: despite all the sacrifices, Communism did not succeed in overcoming death, it had only brought about more death in the world.

We must mention the poet Alexei Gastev, founder of the Central Labour Institute which advocated meticulous regulation of all worker activity. His *chronocrate*, illustrating and schematizing good work practice, was to be found in Lenin's office. The members of the 'League of Time' (1923–26) devised to combat the irrational loss of time in social life⁹ walked about the streets of Moscow with *chronocrates*, on which they made a note of every loss of this precious resource in the new society. It outlined the utopia of a society rendered coherent, effective, and collectivist by the anonymous force of 'science': once the voluntary leap (the sacrifice of the past) had been made into the sphere of technical reason everything should operate in quasi-automatic fashion.

However, the period was not entirely clear on this point. In his work, *The Great Beginning*, Lenin was to make a somewhat curious mixture of praise of 'taylorism' and moral calls for voluntary work which would make it possible to increase wheat production thirteen-fold. Over the years, it was to be this second vision which was to win the day on the ideological front. How was this counter-natural combination of taylorism and (what was later to be called) 'stakhanovism' possible at the origins of the Soviet world? In any case, if we have to look for something that unites them: it lies in sacrificial euphoria – in the rupture for the former, in self-surpassing for the latter. We should note that, for Lenin, the *subotniks* (days of free labour) referred to in the text¹⁰ were an opportunity to purge the Party of all those who were not ready to submit to the exceptional Communist discipline and labour heroically without recompense, in other words, of all those who were not ready for the double sacrifice demanded by the new moral order. After 25 October 1917, new Party members could only be admitted to the CP after a six-month trial period of 'revolutionary work'.

Susan Buck-Morss¹¹ emphasizes the gulf between the real state of industry and the utopia of industrialization. In contrast with societies that were already industrialized, Soviet taylorism had no pragmatic meaning; it was much more a case of a dream of machines than of optimizing their use. The disciplinary-scientific practices of the Bolshevik enthusiasts should therefore be seen more as anticipation, as incantatory gestures, of contemporary 'rain dances'.

The formation of collective bodies

During the Stalinist period, taylorism completely disappeared from official discourse to give way to stakhanovism. The way in which miner Alexei Stakhanov worked (exceeding the norms by 1400 per cent in 1934, that is, 102 tonnes of coal in a single day's work) runs counter to logic. In effect, it could be said that the transition from the taylorist *utopia* to

the *ideology* of stakhanovism (in the sense Mannheim gives this opposition) implies a degree of negation of the avant-garde, whether conceived in the Leninist sense as the Communist Party or as the whole body of specialists in a given sphere. Nobody was any longer located above the sacrificial exchange between the individual and the people incarnated by the Guide himself; neither the engineers, nor science, nor the interpreters of Marxism, nor even the old Bolshevik guard had the right to any privileged position outside the sacrificial flow. There was no guarantee anymore for social positions: money had lost its meaning, knowledge changed permanently in the course of historical progress, ideological integrity was becoming the object of suspicion and unrealizable demands. There were no longer rights, everything had to be given, everything received. The gift thus became a 'total ideological fact' (to paraphrase Mauss); beyond it, nothing but violence remained.

We should note that the modern 'revolt of the masses' was directed to a great extent against the élites exploited by the Communist leaders as the scapegoats of modernization. The system could be seen as a dictatorship of the proletariat not only over the 'bourgeoisie', but much more over the intelligentsia¹² which had not been annihilated and could not be in an industrial society (with the notorious exception of Cambodia). The difference in wages between an engineer and a worker in the period of real socialism never corresponded to their role in the production process. Consequently, in the 1930s the system began to grant the intelligentsia certain 'privileges' to give them a greater sense of responsibility, which made it still more hated, thus better adapted to the role of scapegoat. Moreover, criticism of 'bureaucrats' was a live issue from Mayakovski through Ilf and Petrov to the *Literaturna gazeta* of perestroika. The bureaucrat was actually the person who ensured certain rules were respected, who knew certain laws, who had a particular qualification, in short, he was an 'intelligent'.

The ideological sacrifice of intelligentsia can be illustrated by a well-known speech by Stalin held before shock-workers in agriculture.¹³ The mass movement, having 'spontaneously' come to life after the exploit of Andrei Stakhanov is presented as a wave of such a force that it breaks through the artificial barriers that the wicked engineers try to put up in front of it. The specialists and their science are left behind by the events: it is not reason, but revolutionary enthusiasm that makes history. The ideological machia vellism consists in redirecting aggression and hatred provoked by savage exploitation towards the intelligentsia. In effect, the witch-hunt against old engineers was the symbolic event inaugurating forceful industrialization in the beginning of the 1930s. Repressions against artists and writers will accompany all phases of the communist rule.

To legitimate the bureaucratic hierarchies in the absence of public political life, private property, traditions, and so on, Stalinism developed a sophisticated mechanism for the formalization, management, and conversion of the ideological capital¹⁴ accumulated by the gifts and sacrifices supposedly made for the system. This was the essential function of the lavish ideological apparatus, silently backed by the secret services. It produced a complex statutory meritocracy based both on public credits ('hero of the Great Patriotic War')¹⁵ and on private beliefs ('denounced her husband') or on a certain bureaucratic uniformity that made mobility of officials possible across the vast territory of the USSR (participation or *subotnik* was to be as accepted in Belorussia as in Tadjikistan). This machinery perfected in the course of the 1930s was to be exported to 'brother' countries to create a remarkable uniformity over a good portion of the globe.

The romanticism of the 1960s

The Stalinist world was painted in black and white: there were generous friends and enemies, concerned for their own interest, who refused the sacrificial exchange ('enemy' was synonymous with 'egoist'). The Khrushchev period was to enrich this ideological world with a refinement: besides the great division into friends and enemies, in the very heart of 'our' camp a new division was going to appear between the sincere and spontaneous idealists and the soulless bureaucrats, survivors of the Stalinist glacier. However, they were not distinguished by their strategy ('the edification of Communism') but their tactics:¹⁶ the former were imbued with the true Communist spirit while the latter maintained its outward form; the former acted of their own free will, while the latter followed directives; the former were poets, researchers, lovers, romantics, the latter were little bosses, vice-directors, people without imagination who had never been young.

This was the start of a timid individualization of man at the heart of the collective body. The gift was still the norm in social relations, but people began to have a choice in the way they made it: sincerely or under constraint, acting with the heart or reason. It was undoubtedly because of this that the preferred literary subject was to become 'the struggle of good with the greater good' (the old boss thinks about accomplishing the factory plan, but the young one is additionally concerned for the workers' problems . . .).

But where was this spontaneous generosity to come from in a period when the class struggle was in the process of losing its momentum? Its origin must be sought in human nature. 'The builder of socialism', we read in the *Programme of the Soviet CP of 1961*,¹⁷ matures through 'the highest awareness of moral duty'; the literary critic Vladimir Lakchine wrote that 'the Party card is the sign of an overdeveloped sense of duty': it does not bestow rights, but duties. In this context mention should be made of Professor Efrosimson's article of 1971,¹⁸ asserting that 'in man's nature, there is something that constantly pushes him towards just and good acts, towards exploits'. In other words, man's immortal soul has been replaced by some gene of altruism.¹⁹

The period was distinguished by the somewhat kitsch 'quarrel' between poets and physicists – the former motivated by the true disinterestedness of the heart, the latter by that of the mind. However, in this generous world there was no place for a calculating pragmatist. Money lost the ideological meaning which Stalinism – much more matter of fact – extracted from it: the fifties saw a progressive lowering of prices, although in the sixties no one even mentioned money any longer (moreover, prices were rising). In 1966, the film critic El. Bauman wrote that if someone looked at the films of the sixties they would be unable to make out whether money existed at that time, or what purpose it served. Moreover, in 1960 Khrushchev finally announced an exact date for the advent of Communism: 1980.

At that time the sacralized utopian formula was well drummed into every school-child's head: while the preliminary phase of socialism consists of receiving in proportion to what one has given society ('from each according to his abilities, to each according to his labour'), at the higher stage of Communism the forced tie between work and reward was to be broken once and for all ('from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'). There we have the perfect utopia, where gift and counter-gift are no longer bound by a causal relationship: on the one hand, you have the pleasure of giving what you want to society; on the other, of receiving everything that you desire. This liberation from each other of the two dimensions of the human being, fatally linked until then – that

which asserts itself through giving and that which indulges in receiving – was to be ascribed to the hitherto unprecedented development of the forces of production.

Stalinism is fundamentally pragmatic, its propaganda functions with messages comprehensible to the village migrant settled in the town: having something to eat, defeating enemies, disciplining the young. The Khrushchevian turning-point put forward new characters: the poet in love, the music-hall singer, the cosmonaut, the ballerina.²⁰ They all carried the altruistic gene; they all embodied the utopian split between the perfectly disinterested gift and totally unexpected rewards.

In the so-called period of stagnation (the Brejnev era) the altruistic gene was gradually to be replaced by the nation, the repository of gifts and treasury of the cultural and natural heritage. Writers like Rasputin and Raditchkov, Shukshine and Cosic, criticized in the sixties, were made official to a greater or lesser degree.²¹ It was a period of transition from worker to peasant, town to village, from industry to a socialist variant of ecology. It was no longer a question of individualist and romantic generosity, but of the debt owed to a 'patrimony'. Some of these intellectuals were first-generation migrants who expressed their nostalgia for the village.²²

Each country was to have its specific dynamic – Albania was to be the first to establish hard-line national socialist Communism (early 1960s), followed by Romania (late 1960s, Ceaușescu's discourse at the time of the invasion of Czechoslovakia). In Bulgaria, it was to be around the time of the celebrations of the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state (1981); Milošević's Yugoslavia was to take the same road at the end of the eighties. It was a case of a definite consolidation of revolutionary authority inherited by second- and third-generation Communist leaders, which necessitated the development of firmer rules of transmission. The unobserved change, instead of destroying the bureaucratic machine administering the ideological capital which sustained the meritocratic system, added to it a monumental nineteenth-century patriotism. The latter colluded strangely with the post-national values of the twenty-first century of the Western emissaries after 1989.

The final double disappointment

One of the most striking aspects of modernity is the establishment of a universal scenario of desire, where the relationship with the Self is increasingly mediated through the gaze of the Other. From the outset, Soviet Communism was consolidated by the wonder of the egoistical and decadent Western world,²³ through the unprecedented sacrificial energy released in a society which, otherwise, displays most characteristics of modernity. It is for this reason that each of Communism's breaks with its own principles or practices, instead of repelling, fascinates anew. It was undoubtedly in this way that perestroika – Communism's final sacrifice of itself²⁴ – became the last erotic resource of a system which was already beginning to stiffen, stabilize, and fade in the universal scenario of desire. In a few years, this resource was exhausted in its turn and, to the great disappointment of the global television-viewer, the former Communist countries finally abandoned the messianic, sacrificial, and provocative phantasmagoria, to become unexciting corners of the world, concerned with their little local interests.

Still stranger was the disappointment within the countries in question, a disappointment based on the vague idea of moral degradation. Since 1989, the theme of

corruption²⁵ had become the central vector of all political debate. Had there been any less under Communism? Certainly not. Quite simply, it functioned on the level of the gift²⁶ by combining the remnants of the patriarchal society with a bureaucratic hyper-modernity. The very word, 'corruption', was imported after 1989; before, people spoke of string-pulling, privileges, human relationships (the untranslatable *blat*, in Russian), all these words designating services in kind which depended on the status of the specific social actor.

Imagine that X admitted Y's niece into the party cell of which he was secretary, or appointed her librarian in the town hall where he was boss. Let us say that Y could repay it by sending him soldiers as free labour for building his house. However, rendering this service is not absolutely necessary for the system to function (only similar social positions will have comparable resources available to make an adequate counter-gift). The purpose of the exchange is that Y incurs a debt in relation to X, he becomes 'his man', his client, and this essentially political alliance may or may not be expressed by a concrete service. What is more important, at the social level, is that Y should not engage in any activity against him, will support him should that become necessary; and it is not hard to see how this type of alliance was critically important in a system in which politics prevailed totally over economics. We should, moreover, note that it was this personal and 'moral' interdependence which resulted in dissidents, with the exception of some intellectuals, most often being marginals, excluded from the circulation of goods and services (and this made it all the easier for Brezhnev to declare them mentally unstable and put them away in psychiatric hospitals). Acting against the system – creating a 'problem' – meant being disloyal to one's patron and, consequently, not honouring one's debts.

Clearly, this type of exchange contradicted the ethical norms officially paraded by the system. Nevertheless, transgression of the latter was clearly perceived as a moral act, for it was a question of a gift (people do something for a concrete human being, people act in concert against arbitrary human regulations²⁷ . . .). The abrupt monetarization of corruption was thus accompanied by an irrational feeling of demoralization. One *only pays* for the service now, without having to be follower, friend, or ally. The exchange of gifts in kind consolidated social status; money is everywhere and nowhere, it transcends all social relations and renders the person who possesses it free in relation to others; its introduction thus challenges the status system as such, the entire world is threatened, the entire world experiences the sense of loss.

The corruption in the logic of the gift presupposes the moral attachment of the social actor to a given space; he (or she) has his place, he cannot disengage himself from relationships with others – their status has no validity elsewhere. By contrast, money can be transferred from one end of the world to the other by a mere telephone call, and its power appears to be abstracted from all human control so that it produces a delayed shock which had already been experienced two centuries before. It is difficult to compare the statutory corruption under Communism with the monetarized corruption which succeeded it; but although the second produced greater moral anguish, it was also because of the feeling unsophisticated people experienced of losing their social place in a system of exchange that had become at once anonymous and deterritorialized.

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Notes

1. In the East, this state of mind has continued until our own day in the ideology of 'transition'.
2. Or quite simply obtaining one's passport from the police.
3. For example, in the 1940s children of 'ex-persons' (the upper middle classes) were banned from studying in the popular democracies. If, at a slightly later date, they were nevertheless authorized to enrol in certain faculties, it was a favour bestowed upon them in exchange for their loyalty.
4. In this article, I define sacrifice as an extreme form of gift, which cannot be returned as it implies the loss of life.
5. I define the symbolic, in the Lacanian tradition, as the sphere of the practices of exchange, the imaginary as that of its representations.
6. E. Laclau (1994) stresses the necessary discontinuity which is the basis of all identity. The political rupture is thus presented as the most radical and the most powerful resource for identity.
7. See I. Ditchev, 1997a, pp. 73–99.
8. Ironically, Fiodorov was the natural son of Prince Gagarin. Note that the autodidact, Tsiolkovskii, Fiodorov's spiritual pupil, who became the father of Soviet cosmic science. See I. Ditchvev, 1992.
9. The literary critic Platon Kerjntsev had conceived it after a meeting where 7,000 workers had waited two hours for a speaker. What struck Kerjntsev's imagination was the report of an American journalist who had calculated that so many workers could have produced one or two aeroplanes in the wasted time. Gastev and Meyerhold were numbered among the members of the 'League of Time'; Lenin and Trotsky were honorary members.
10. After his death, they were called 'Leninist Saturdays' in his honour.
11. S. Buck-Morss, 2000, p. 105.
12. The word comes from Russian and is not the same as to 'intellectuals': it is a case of a concept of a group, a social status (*raznotchinski*, those who had no status in feudal society, a sort of socio-cultural third estate), tied above all to a sacrificial ethic – they acted and spoke in the name of the silent people. The category was also broader, it did not only include writers and thinkers but also teachers, doctors and so on. To the end of better bureaucratic administration, the Soviet regime distinguished between the artistic-creative intelligentsia (artists, writers . . .) and the scientific-technical intelligentsia (researchers, engineers . . .).
13. Stalin, 1949.

14. I follow here Bourdieu (1994).
15. It seems pointless to me to recall that the revolutionary, military or (anti-fascist) resistance exploits were the principal resource of the Communist phantasmagoria. In this text I am attempting to explore the less evident aspects of the relationship between the logic of the gift and of sacrifice, and the Communist system.
16. As well as their age: it was clearly also a case of conflict between the generations.
17. *Pravda* (30 July 1961).
18. In the periodical, *Novii mir*, quoted by P. Veil and A. Genis, 1998.
19. See P. Veil and A. Genis, 1998, as well as the following paragraph.
20. The émigré postmodern artists, Komar and Malamaide, were to express the absurdity of the period by the image of a cosmonaut in a space suit dancing with a ballerina.
21. Their supposed fight against internationalism lay at the origin of the symbolic capital that they were to bring to fruition in the years to come (some were to become unswerving nationalists after the turning-point in 1989).
22. See the screenplays of films by Shukshine in the USSR or Mishev in Bulgaria.
23. For F. Furet the most profound reason for fascination among totalitarian régimes is the 'self-hatred' of the bourgeois, all-powerful in the economic sphere but who had lost his moral coherence and his legitimacy in the political sphere (Furet, 1995, p. 31). For A. Caille (1994), the political was the domain of the gift par excellence ('the total social fact' which makes man's moral integrity possible).
24. See Ditchev (1997b).
25. See Krastev (2000).
26. It was clearly a case of a real gift as much as a type of social relation which implied a certain 'interest in disinterestedness' (Bourdieu, 1994) and not the utopia of the absolutely pure gift invented by modernity (Dufourcq, 1994).
27. In fact, the system is legitimated by its own negation!