



WHY COMMUNISM FAILED: THE PHILOSOPHICAL LESSONS

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Communism is a philosophy that masqueraded as science and functioned as an ideology. At the same time, Communism was a form of political organization that placed the state as an absolute over the individual, while advocating elimination of states and fulfillment of all human beings.

Communism as theory and communism as practice each called for the other. By "Communism," we have to mean both. Historically, and Communism demands that we speak of it historically, Communism had its birth in theory in the mid-nineteenth century with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Its decisive moment was the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, on 7 November 1917. The Soviet Union, which evolved from the revolution on 20 December 1922, was the dedicated practitioner and elaborator of Communism for almost seventy years and had obliged the many countries under its control to share that form of thought and politics.

Communism is now dead. In just a year or two of change initiated by one person of great insight as well as power, Mikhail Gorbachev, the world's largest country, the Soviet Union, gave up its hold on Communism as truth and as desirable political structure. The Soviet Union also gave up its hold on its satellite countries, who then promptly abandoned Communism. Finally,

the Soviet Union peacefully dissolved itself on 26 December 1991.

The world was astonished by this overthrow of Communism from within. The repudiation of theory and the radical revision of polity and society were sudden, unexpected, pervasive, and, with the unhappy exception of Romania, nonviolent. Most remarkable from the point of view of history is that this Revolution Against Communism was not imposed by the anti-Communist countries. Communism died not because of international intervention in the form of war, polemics, or economic strangulation, but by decisions made internally. A truth was discovered by its practitioners: Communism doesn't work.

It is not entirely finished, as the inescapable example of unrepentant China reminds us. A billion people—one-sixth of humanity—still live under Communism. But China's attachment to Communism can now be seen as reactionary. China has fallen back upon stubborn adherence to an outmoded doctrine and an unsuccessful structure that are no longer conceivable as the leading edge of historical movement. China stands in isolation, deprived of any pretensions to the internationalism of Communism.

I predict that China will soon let go of Marxism-Leninism as a European doctrine in order to name its *ism* after a Chinese tradition, probably Confucianism. Then it will not be so concerned to toe the line of Communist orthodoxy. Moral conduct, so powerful in Chinese culture, will modify the state and its ideology. And capitalistic conduct, exemplified so successfully in the reunited province of Hong Kong, will spread its attractions throughout Chinese society. When I visited Hong Kong in 1995, I observed that many people were concerned about the transformation in Hong Kong society once the approaching reunion occurred, but in mainland China, I observed no awareness of how Chinese society could be transformed by the reunion with Hong Kong.



Communism remains in other pockets of the world, notably Cuba, but now it appears anomalous and ineffectual rather than promising and expansive. Dr. Castro, once dreaded by the United States as the leader of Communist subversion throughout Latin America, found it hard to play any role in the region once massive Soviet funding ended. After Castro, Cuba will likely turn itself into a liberal and capitalist country, given a helping hand by Cuban refugees in Florida.

The Marxist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, which the United States tried so hard to topple by intervention, was toppled by the Nicaraguans in open elections in 1990. Communism will likely make its reappearance in Latin America, Africa, and other places attracted by sudden change, for every political theory is tried afresh by visionary leaders. Thinkers and activists will always be found to assert that Communism could have been right after all.

But we have learned the lesson that Communism is not right at all. Rarely in world history has such a clear-cut demonstration occurred. While at the mid-point of the twentieth century, Communism looked like it might well prevail to govern humanity in the twenty-first century, we who enter that century know that Communism has no future.

Some among us may gloat, "I told you so!" Others may say, "Good riddance!" Still others: "Let's get on with the world; nothing is worth mourning about this." But in getting on with the world without Communism, let us take care to learn the lessons of its demise. Communism had no shortage of informed critics while it was alive. The case against Communism was in turn often answered by expert apologists. The intellectual debate on Communism usually became polemical. It turned into the expression of each party's politics, and Communist thinking said this must happen. Philosophers now have the opportunity to assess the failure of Communism without getting caught up in polemics. Non-Communists, anti-Communists, and ex-Communists can join in dialogue without ulterior political

purposes in order to better understand. We owe the world this service. We had better perform it now, while we can, before the next *ism* comes along to infatuate half of humanity and lead it to further folly.

Here, then, as contribution to this dialogue, is my *post-mortem* analysis.

1. Communism failed because it took itself at the intellectual level to be science, the science of Dialectical Materialism, rather than a philosophy. Hence, it refused to see itself as a theory about the truth, but insisted that it was the whole truth and nothing but the truth. While the discovery of the truth was historically determined and had to wait for Marx to articulate it, that truth, according to Marx, was the genuine science of history. Marxist science was not *a* science among others, subject to intellectual presuppositions and cultural values, as philosophers have learned to understand the sciences, but it was nothing less than the absolute truth brought down to earth.

History, Marx and Engels had learned from Hegel, has inevitable outcomes. Nothing can stop it. The very effort to divert it from its course fuels its advance. Hence, Marxist science is infallible. Anything brought forward as argument or action in opposition to Communism is dialectically subsumed. Marxism guarantees itself to be correct.

Philosophers are accustomed to hearing theories advocated as if they were the truth, and we are skilled in presenting our philosophy as if the truth. In such give-and-take of theory, we become aware of pluralism in envisioning the truth. Opposed philosophies may present truths, in the plural. But when we are told that only one vision gives access to the whole truth, we must remain skeptical. We have heard this before. Communism was but one claim among others to knowledge that is certain. Its claim, rather than infallible, was doctrinaire and dogmatic.



Marxist science, because it insisted on its exclusive correctness, could not detect its own errors. Such a self-validating theory became self-destructive. Communism defeated itself by its blind attachment to its vision. It could not learn from its mistakes or from the insights of others. Discovery was inhibited by dogma. The system, intellectual and political, received guidance not from scientists but from casuists. Marxism, purportedly the true science, was the ideology of a class of closed-minded rulers.

The dialectical method in Marxist philosophy was notably flexible. It was meant to overcome and incorporate. It had an answer to everything that came its way. When I was a student in Paris in the early 1960s, I was impressed by the dialectical skill of French Communist intellectuals as they made answer to any objection. They brilliantly turned around every objection into their answer. Beautiful discursive performance.

But in another sense, the dialectical method was too inflexible. Marxism was unable to encounter ideas or events outside of dialectical opposition. It consumed without understanding. While Marxism appeared dynamic and ever on the move, at bottom it was static and out of step. It got itself into a fix because of the fixity of its thinking.

The truth is that history does not inevitably follow a necessary pattern predictable with certainty by science. Too many patterns attract our action and understanding for any one of them to long hold sway in our shaping of the world. Chance and freedom repeatedly puncture patterns. While human beings often do respond to one another in dialectical opposition and greet ideas dialectically, this is not our primary way of interaction and thought. Dialectic is rich in resources and power, but human beings are richer.

The Marxist insights about dialectical movement in history, in action, and in thought, became distortions of reality because of unswerving insistence on absolute science. The enormous distance between where the world must be, according to Com-

munism, and where the world was during the political ascendancy of Communism might have been sufficient to dismiss Communism as impractical utopianism. Marxists long had claimed, "We are getting there, we *will* get there, for Communism cannot fail." But if they had opened their eyes, they would have seen that Communism was not getting anywhere.

Much of the incorrect vision of twentieth-century Communism was due to a fixation upon the Dickensian realities of mid-nineteenth-century capitalism. Marx's greatest contribution to world thought was probably the critique, such as in *Das Kapital* (1867), of that brutal and dehumanizing early form of capitalism. He saw that system as self-protective to the extent that it could not be peaceably corrected from within. Marx then opposed the self-substantiating ideology of capitalism by the self-substantiating science of Dialectical Materialism.

But correctives of capitalism have been justified in theory and have been successfully put into practice. Capitalism, it turns out, is not the closed and deceptive system it earlier had appeared. Monopoly power, for instance, toward which capitalist practice always drives, and which would end competition by a tyranny of the wealthiest, has been checked by laws designed to keep open the process whereby competition for power and wealth is never-ending. The operation of law, the exercise of rights, including human rights, the advancement of individual and popular interests by education and a free press—all of which Marx saw as mere instruments of the bourgeois ruling-class—brought a human face to capitalism in the late twentieth century. Treating people with dignity and fairness, it turns out, is good business.

Capitalism has much further to go in its internal reform, and we would do well to keep Marx's critique in mind. The error of the Marxists was to stick with Marx's understanding of capitalism. They failed to understand their changing opponent. Ironically, they lacked historical consciousness. Even today, after the wholesale abandonment of Marxism, those people who lived



under Communism and are drawn to the attractions of capitalism largely fail to understand what capitalism involves. They are in for unpleasant experience as they move from one ism to another. Today, for instance, Russians are suffering from the expectation of immediate abundance of goods that they think will come to them without sacrifice, hard work, cutthroat competition, risk and initiative, and prolonged impoverishment. Blind trust in capitalism has to be shaken off just like blind trust in Communism.

Marxism, in short, was guilty of bad thinking. Had it not become the state doctrine of the Soviet Union, a super-power, something which Marx did not anticipate, it might have been shown up by philosophers throughout the world as too pretentious in its absolutism and too limited in its historical context. Humanity had the bad luck that this philosophy was officially put in power on an unprecedented large scale. The next time the absolute comes to town, let us be more outspokenly critical of its unreasonableness. Hopefully, we can kill it theoretically before it kills us.

2. Since Communism reserved all the truth for itself, it relegated all other philosophies, sciences, and theories to the status of ideology, that is, a set of doctrines instrumental to a party, class, or state. Political movements and organizations usually do have such an ideology. Good for them! This means that they care enough about principles to articulate them. They have a platform, a program, a position, a philosophy. Such principles can then be debated, even if polemically.

That most political groups adopt a philosophy as their ideology does not mean that most philosophies are ideology. Philosophy, I freely assert, may be conducted without ideological grounding. The issues at stake philosophically need not be issues at stake politically. Philosophic positions presented by philosophers may even count against the political position attributed to their class, culture, or state. In other words, philosophy enjoys

human freedom. Such freedom of thought is amply evident in the pages of *Persona y Derecho*.

The Marxists would have said that this very assertion of intellectual independence from political and economic commitment is itself a value linked to a kind of liberal structure in society. Philosophy's alleged freedom, then, is an ideology. I have two answers to that critique.

The first is, so what? Let us get on with the activity of philosophy as if it were a domain of human freedom, since we can accomplish so much of value by such thinking. Let us enjoy our freedom, even if, ultimately, we are not really free. The Marxist reduction of all philosophy to ideology no more inhibits the freedom of philosophical pursuits than does the Determinist's denial of freewill end human insistence on taking responsibility for our will. To act as if we are free, is, pragmatically speaking, to be free. The Marxist "proof" by the science of Dialectical Materialism that all philosophers are at heart ideologues, mere mouthpieces for socioeconomic and political forces, has not stopped all philosophers from exercising their intellect independently of such forces. A philosopher can always say to supporters of a ruling ideology, "*¡Merda!* You are wrong for these reasons..."

In its critique of ideology, Marxism erred in dismissing philosophy. I can't forgive this. Perforce, it is philosophically untenable.

My second response to the Marxist accusation that my philosophy is but ideology, is to proclaim, "*¡Bueno!*" A social structure that enhances the freedom of philosophy is, other things being equal, highly valuable. This, perforce, is philosophically desirable. In effect, that society or social force which does not insist on reduction of all intellectual work to ideological services has much in its favor, for it allows truth to be sought for its own sake. The truth may set us free. A society in which philosophical inquiry is free is one which will more easily discover the error of



its ways as society. The errors of a societally favored philosophy will also come to be understood sooner. This is something that Marxism failed to understand. Marxism was a philosophy, pretending to be science, that ruled out philosophy. Hence, it closed itself to correction on this and other points.

The two grounds of failure that I have so far sketched—Marxism as (1) absolute science which (2) overrules alternative intellectual positions—are two sides of the same debased coin. Absolutism is the refusal to recognize alternatives. The Communist dialectic made genuine dialogue impossible. All answers other than its own had to be wrong or incomplete. Only Marxism supposedly escaped ideology, as the true voice of the science of history.

3. Yet the most evident manifestation of Marxism in the twentieth century was as ideology: the official doctrine of Communist states and revolutionary movements. Marxism furnished the intellectual justifications for political practice. Its principles were consulted in elaborating the party line. Marxism provided the authoritative scripture for preaching and for practice.

This was not necessarily a mistake. Nor does it mean that Marxism had to be an ideology. It could have remained a philosophy without successful political attachment, as it had been during the second half of the nineteenth century. It may take its place as one among other philosophies, chastened by the errors it committed by being so extensively tried in the field.

I hope that Marxism is kept alive as philosophy, undergoing further intellectual critique and reformulation. The philosophical pluralism now flourishing in the United States is a fitting climate for keeping Communism continuing there as a mode of thinking. I teach the classic texts of Marxism at The Pennsylvania State University. Marxism is too valuable as example of a fallacious philosophy for it to be forgotten.

The irony which failed to strike the Marxists is that their beloved Communism, absolved from ideological function and absolute in its knowledge, served as irresistible apology for the program of totalitarian states, such as the Soviet Union, promoted with heavy-handed propaganda, and masking in fancy intellectual terms actions motivated by greed, pride, fear, and ignorance. Many sins were committed in the name of Communism. Many excesses, I will concede, are attributable to the figures in power, who would have covered their dastardly deeds with the terms borrowed from whatever ideology was at hand. Hitler and Stalin were interchangeable in this respect. They had the knack of turning theory to the end of mass murder.

Yet the theory also shares in the responsibility. Stalin published a theoretical work on *The Foundations of Leninism* in 1924, which he then followed in practice for decades of his tyranny. Communism was flawed in leaving itself open intellectually to adoption as an ideology which is ruthless, aggressive, and unjust. While Communism may get credit for liberating some oppressed societies and for rapidly bringing some economically backward countries to a high level of productivity, it stands accused of having oppressed many peoples within its own borders and beyond. Rapid industrialization was paid for at the cost of millions of lives crushed. Mao Zedong's insistence on such nutty ideas as having workers manufacture steel in back yards, while the crops went unharvested, may have led to the starvation of 30 million people.

The inevitable judgment of history upon Communism will be that it was not worth it. As a practice, Communism brought about a net loss of values. In sum, Marxism as theory opened itself too easily to service as ideology for tyranny.

Those features of Marxism that attracted such sinister political exploitation were its delusion of absolute knowledge, its rejection of freedom of the intellect with a concomitant pluralism in



philosophy, its conceptual rigidity about capitalism and historical process, and its inclination toward authoritarianism.

4. Communism cultivated the cult of personality. It linked its absolutism of knowledge with the authoritarianism of interpreters. Another painful irony was enacted on the stage of the world as what was conceived to be the historical power of a mass-movement become inseparable from the power of forceful individuals. While Marx's theory of history was an alternative to the theories of history based on the actions of great men, Marxism became attached to Marx as great man. Marx served as prophet and author of the scripture that contained revealed truth. St. Marx replaced St. Mark as gospel.

This failing is inherent, for when an absolute doctrine is embodied in historical process, an interpreter and realizer is needed to point out the truth and announce the next steps for action. Whereas Marx consulted history, Marxists consulted Marx.

As with all philosophical theories, the absolute engenders interpretation. Because history moved on in its supposedly inevitable ways, new stages were reached that called for Post-Marx interpretation. Marxism periodically needed insights that went beyond Marx yet stayed within Marxism. Hence, everything in Marxism had to be stretched without being corrected. The best response for Marxism would have been to renounce the authority of Marx, the inevitability of history, and the absolutism of Dialectical Materialism. Many new insights could have been connected to the germinal insights of Marx. Instead, Communism opted to retain the absolute while revising it, to bow to Marx as the supreme authority while adding other prophets.

The holy additions were made by hyphenation. At the earliest stage of Communist thought, we had Marx and Engels. They may have been regarded as two peas in the same pod, or Engels could have been thought a disciple of the master, though we know that

Engels moved in his own direction of thinking, as in his material science of nature. Engels, who outlived his collaborator by twelve years, was the first in line in explaining Marx's line. Much of what makes up Marx comes to us as having been shaped by Engels.

The gap between Marx's *theory* that the Communist revolution would first take place in an advanced industrialized society, like the United States or the United Kingdom, and the *fact* that the first successful Communist revolution occurred in the agrarian Russian Empire, was bridged in the hyphenation of Marxism-Leninism. Lenin, in his book, *State and Revolution* (1917), and in his revolutionary control of the state, elaborated upon that stage he found in Marx in which the apparatus of the state remained in the hands of the revolutionists under the name of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

Marx and Lenin were to be joined to make a trinity by Stalin. Their heads, massive and intimidating, were aligned as the visual representation of the relentless unfolding of history. Stalin's image and hyphenated name were later dropped in the Soviet Union. De-Stalinization was comparable to the erasure of Roman emperors by their successors.

In China, Mao Zedong joined the name and image of Marx, reflecting the Chinese care for the authenticity of transmittal within a tradition. During my studies and travels in China in 1995, I saw only two public images of Mao: one the large portrait above Tiananmen Square, Beijing, marking the balcony of the imperial gate from which Mao declared the People's Republic on 1 October 1949; the other a worn poster in the corridor of a primary school in a provincial town.

In Vietnam, Marx was linked to Ho Chi Minh. In other Communist countries as well, a strong liberator and leader, such as Castro in Cuba and Tito in Yugoslavia, acted as if a living Marx. When I studied in Yugoslavia in 1986, six years after Tito's death, people throughout the country still proudly recited



the virtues of the federation as having six republics, five languages, four religions, three mountain ranges, two alphabets, and one Tito. But in 1991, Tito's federation was torn apart by the bloody Serbian nationalism of Slobodan Milosevic. The murder of Yugoslavia is not yet completed.

The cult of personality was an inherent attraction for Communism. The overthrow of aristocracy, the suppression of religion, and the heroic elevation of a revolutionary leader conjoined with the pressing need to appeal to an authority on new situations about which Marx had nothing to say. Marx could be found to say what the current autocrat had to say.

To Gorbachev's credit, he made no attempt to hyphenate his name to those of Marx and Lenin. While Gorbachev was a man of great personal appeal and striking fresh ideas, he did not adopt the easiest way of promoting his personality and gaining orthodoxy for his ideas, by making the direct link with Marx. The unmistakable message was that Gorbachev had come not to praise Marx but to bury him. In turning aside from the tradition of personality, Gorbachev asserted the power of his personality. But it was not enough to receive a noticeable percentage of the popular vote when he later ran as candidate in free elections for President of Russia.

At the General Assembly of the International Association of Philosophical Societies, held in conjunction with the 18th World Congress of Philosophy, in Brighton, England, 1988, a delegation of some 75 philosophers from the Soviet Union invited the delegates to hold the next quinquennial congress in Moscow. The clincher that led to unanimous acceptance of the invitation was a telegram from Gorbachev as head of state, offering to place the full resources of the state at our disposal for a successful meeting. An offer we could not refuse.

In 1993, when the congress took place in Moscow, Gorbachev was no longer head of state but a private citizen, and the very state that had invited us, the Soviet Union, no longer existed. As a

courtesy to him, Gorbachev was asked to say a few words of welcome. He spoke of his efforts at *glasnost* and *perestroika* as philosophic in spirit, since they called for an opening up of thought and a reconception of structure. Hence, our presence as philosophers was intended not as a propaganda event but as participation in that freshness of thinking needed in Russia. Gorbachev's words –extemporaneous, expansive, passionate– were the most valuable contribution to the congress. They were followed that week by many lengthy formal papers in Russian in which the phrase "Marxist-Leninism" had been excised from the otherwise rigid thinking and imperious wording.

5. Communism's most unforgivable and yet fatal error was to overrule the value of the individual by insensitive and impersonal forces: the masses, the class interest, the stage of history, the process of revolution, the goals of the party, the dictatorship of the autocrat. Persons don't count, according to Communism, because they do not really exist. Authentic human beings will only be produced when all the world has gone Communist, all the states, those instruments of oppression, have withered away, and every individual has been socialized to live in harmony with all others. The Golden Age of the social person lies in the future. The only way to get to that future is through upheavals by the militant masses. The not-yet social person is but a cog in the machinery that obeys iron laws which eventually will manufacture real persons who do not suffer oppression or inflict it.

The people were virtual prisoners under Communism. They had no access to the outside world. What was done to them was hidden. The internationalism of Communism was isolationist, its solidarity was xenophobic.

In 1965, I traversed Bulgaria in the middle of the night on the Orient Express on my way from Western Europe to teach in Turkey. Bulgarian troops armed with automatic weapons got on



board at the border and stayed in the corridor of each car while we crossed their country. They pulled down and fastened the window shades in every compartment as well as in the corridors so that no one could see out – or see in. I pretended to be asleep, allowing my head to slump against the window until I could see a little behind its screen. I was surprised to see nothing, though we were going through Sofia. No lights at night. Except, finally, for a big red star atop a building. That is all I have ever seen of Bulgaria. And that was all that Bulgaria got to see of me.

In 1985, I walked along both sides of the Berlin Wall. On the Western side, I could study and photograph it from viewing platforms and come right up to touch it and write on it. For miles, it was covered with touching images and words, the overflowing of freedom. On the Eastern side, I could not get very close to the Wall. I was under observation by armed guards. Nothing was painted or written on it. I dared not take a picture. Young people strolling on the nearby streets were stopped by patrols to ascertain their business. Furtively examining the bleak Wall, I longed to be again on the other side. Four years later, the Wall was torn down by East German troops and the populace, without a gunshot.

For the sake of the future humanity, present-day human beings were regarded by Communism as dispensable. We are not ends in ourselves but merely means in history. Hence, as Communism aims at universal liberation, it demanded complete obedience and self-sacrifice. While it paraded the vision of a world at peace, it called for revolution everywhere. While it denounced the oppression of people by capitalism, it prepared to oppress the capitalists and to order around the rest of the people for the sake of a new socialization.

What drove Marxism to these sad ironies is its postulation of a necessary and formidable resistance to its humanizing aims. The liberal state, with all its talk of rights, dignity, and freedom of individuals, was the implacable enemy of that force in history which would bring about genuine fulfillment of persons in

society. The liberal notions, far from being a step in the right direction, were obstacles because they are the ideological trappings of the state whose power remains in the greedy hands of the bourgeois class. That ruling class certainly would not allow the proletarian masses to come to power by exercise of their supposed rights, such as fair and open elections. In addition to ownership of the means of production, the bourgeois owned the legislature, the courts, the police, the press, and even the ballot box. Since these liberal institutions are mechanisms in the hands of the oppressors, Marx, as in his "Critique of the Gotha Program" (1875), scorned such alleged protectors of human dignity which really only protect the interests of the ruling class.

We must give Marx credit for his revealing analysis of class interest as systematically underlying major features of society, including liberal institutions. Surely, several liberal states have suffered from corrupt lawmakers, corrupt judiciary, corrupt police, and corrupt press. We must constantly guard against these corruptions. Liberal institutions should never be taken for granted. Corruption is always waiting around the corner, because human beings are corruptible, no matter what their class interests. Communism itself created a corrupted class of rulers.

The error of the Marxists was to stick to Marx's dismissal of liberalism as deceit. Progress has been made since Marx's time in the genuine exercise of rights by the masses within liberal states so that substantial social change occurs without violent revolution. Once public commitment has been made to noble principles, such as the Jeffersonian "all Men are created equal," and people become accustomed to their articulation, the institutions tend to catch up, albeit gradually, to respecting those principles. In my more than 60 years, I have witnessed enormous changes within the United States to rectify unjust procedures and structures that harmed people on account of gender, race, color, age, origin, disability, or wealth. Granted that more remains for us to do, but to renounce such efforts as hopeless and turn instead



to overthrowing the system would be counter-productive and downright foolish.

Ideas change reality as people are guided by them in their action. Marx was mistaken in seeing ideas as only the product of material conditions. The commitment to human rights that began to flourish in the late twentieth century holds great promise for realization of those rights in the new millennium. The human rights movement, to which *Persona y Derecho* has been a steady contributor, may be the best thing going in the world for the sake of persons and peoples.

Communism initially opposed human rights, as doctrine and as institution, because it thought it knew better. Communism freely trampled on liberalism in order one day to liberate. Scorning rights as the window-dressing and ideology of those would exercise power brutally against people, Communism brutally exercised its power against people, all in the name of its ideology as a necessary path through history to the realm of human fulfillment. Several of the errors of Communism—misjudgment of evolution within capitalism, inflexible theory of historical process, ignorance of the power of ideas over institutions, and self-deception concerning its own ideological functions—combined to contribute to the monstrous record of Communism in denial of personhood, imprisonment in mental hospitals, forceable deportation of peoples, subversion of freely elected governments, slave labor, and mass murder.

How could such dehumanization, oppression, and violation occur on such a huge scale, given the passionate rejection of injustice that pervaded the life and writings of the founder, Karl Marx? The paradoxical and poisonous answer of Marxism had to be that people really do not matter, because, finally, people matter. The humane outcome demanded inhumane process. Killing was for the sake of peace. Slave labor contributed to liberation. Oppression of peoples will lead to solidarity. Tyranny is the servant of freedom.

This is worse than nonsense; it is stupid. It is a blank check for inflicting the worst imaginable sufferings on human beings. The bank against which the check is drawn, The Best Imaginable World for Human Beings, has no office and no assets. Any crime may be committed for such an ultimate good, because somehow they are not crimes, and the good, though guaranteed, is always yet to come. The double doctrine of Marxism was "Uplift people!", yet "Crush people!". With its absolute commitment to a final uplifting of all people, Communism had no inhibition to its systematic crushing of any people. It did not hold itself responsible to such liberal notions as human rights. Was it love of humanity that led Communism to dirty its hands? Perhaps among high leaders and aloof theoreticians. I suspect that Communism was largely practiced with a disdain for humanity. The cloak of necessity and final outcome concealed the vicious enjoyment taken in inflicting suffering upon people at will.

Because Marxism saw humanity as infinitely malleable, to be reshaped by socioeconomic conditions, and without an inherent core, such as dignity, human beings were pushed about like so much living matter. Means not ends. The ends, fulfilled human beings in society, required the violation of human beings along the way. The doctrine of using people merely as means is a mean doctrine, vile and self-contradictory. The noble end of humanity for which Communists worked was at the same time worked against by them in treating the humanity that had to kneel before them. Any existentialist could see that, though, sad to say, Jean-Paul Sartre, the Stalinist, did not. The goal was invisible, even if thought to be inevitable. The presence was visible in its piteous suffering. Communism did not lift up those it faced, though it told them that they were being liberated. Communism made them kneel for the sake of uplifting others: the future. On that sacred altar, the tyrant could sacrifice individuals and masses without limit.



Human rights, inherent dignity of all persons, freedom of speech are values not limited to an ideology that serves capitalism. Communism in its last throes began to discover human rights. But if people, living people, you and me and everyone else on earth right now, are ends in themselves and not just means, they then can no longer be shoved around as mere matter for the future humanity. When Communism hesitated in the violation of persons, it lost its coercive power. Then people chose against it. Supposedly, those who lived for decades under Communism would have chosen it when given the opportunity. The striking fact was that those who had endured Communism were glad to get rid of it the moment they could. Without coercion, commitment disappeared. The spark of free choice triumphed over prolonged socialization. Communism was not beloved.

Communism was rejected by the masses not just because it does not work, but also because the working of Communism involved monstrous inhumanity. The system was as threatening as it was unsatisfactory. It imposed unwarranted suffering, while its promises remained unrealizable. The record of Communism in its treatment of human beings stinks in the nostrils. Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973) and Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1986) are great monuments of humanity that stand against Communism. History shall judge Communism as having been a crime against humanity.

6. Marxism failed to foresee or check the corruption that comes with the victory of the Communist party in any state. Corruption is far from over once the remnants of the bourgeois class are brainwashed or liquidated. Attachment to a noble vision of the future is no guarantee against giving in to the temptations that surround those newly arrived to power. The revolution that overthrows corrupt rulers opens the door to the corruption of the revolutionists as rulers. Absolute power is a license for absolute

corruption. Just as the science of Dialectical Materialism was absolute, so were its interpreters. The authorities thereby were authoritarian. What they did had to be right. Whatever they did to people was justified.

This self-justifying wielding of power is self-deceptive; it conceals the personal and class interests from those acting allegedly on behalf of humanity's fulfillment. *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, as recounted by his personal physician, Dr. Li Zhisui (1994), is a disgusting story of untrammelled vice. Communism, the movement that aimed at overcoming class opposition, indeed, at the very elimination of classes, reinforced the privileges, immunities, and arbitrary whims of its class of rulers, who then oppressed the masses.

The Communist ruling class was not held in check by care for human dignity. It was not moderated by religious tradition. It was not criticized by philosophic freedom. Granted that its goals were of the highest, the eventual good of all, yet the Communist party gave priority to itself, making unassailable its control over every aspect of society. Along the way, Communists, who were only human, enjoyed their greater share of material goods. Greed was conjoined with the pleasure to be had in making others subject to one's will.

Every form of government is open to the corruption of those who come to power. The liberal state must continue to struggle with this problem. It has built-in corrective devices, including periodic elections, term limitations, investigative journalism, division of governmental powers, an independent judiciary, recall and impeachment of elected officials. The Communist state (always a contradiction in terms) facilitated corruption in government and corruption by government. It had no correctives other than show trials and the firing squad. Communism, despite its virtuous aims, seemed inevitably to become government by vice.



7. Communism erred in thinking that people could be sufficiently socialized over the decades to make Communism itself their highest priority, the love of their life, for which they would make any sacrifice. Instead, as we saw in moving ways in just a few years, beginning in 1989, people willingly dumped Communism when they had a chance, in favor of individual interests, family ties, religious community, ethnic identity, or national tradition. The resurgence of nationalism in the Soviet Union and in its former satellites in Eastern and Central Europe was astonishing.

Communism, from its 1848 Manifesto, was to be international, pursuing its liberating course in history across boundaries: "*Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!*" The Soviet Union was designed to respect many nationalities within its borders while uniting them under an all-powerful central state. But several of the Socialist Republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics declared independence once the Union could in principle be dissolved. In the reduction of the Soviet Union to its successor state, Russia, about a quarter of the territory and half the population were lost. The Ukraine became Europe's second largest country, and Kazakhstan became the fourth largest country in Asia.

The people of Poland or Hungary or East Germany felt no solidarity with the people of the Soviet Union, though supposedly they shared in a world movement. Instead, they regarded the Soviet Union as a foreign state that interfered in their legitimate aspirations as peoples. Their solidarity was for the nation, and this was stronger than attachment to Communism. Even within the Russian Federation, some nationalities sought sovereignty rather than remain. The bloody conflict in Chechnya illustrated both the irrepressible urge to be free of Russia and the massive repressive force of the central state.

Destiny seemed to call more for national independence than the union of nationalities under the coordinated movement into

the supposedly necessary stage of history. The people who were to be molded under Communism for the revolutionary march of history chose against such history, they stepped out of the march, and they asserted their identity based on their historical and national heritage. The tables were turned when Marxist revolutionary history was overthrown by the history of the peoples oppressed by Marxism. More power to them!

8. Communism erred in its suppression of religion. By stamping out the "opium of the masses," the communists lost their adherence and respect. Communism as the opium of the bureaucrats had nothing to offer in place of this powerful dimension to human community. The popular witticism that atheistic Communism itself is a religion is quite inaccurate. Communism failed to draw upon the spiritual experience of humanity. It lacked all sense of piety. While religious doctrines often get in the way of radical reform, religious traditions often distract people from pressing social activity, and religious institutions often oppress people, the sacral side of life has more to it than traditional religion.

Reverence for life and the bond of fellowship may be experienced by atheists as well as those of all faiths. Such spiritual qualities, if freed of superstition and dogma, would have humanized Communism, perhaps converting its arrogant authoritarianism and its brutal disregard for human worth into compassionate service to human decency. Lenin and Stalin should have learned from Tolstoy and Berdyaev.

9. If Communism erred in denying the spirituality of humanity, it also was mistaken in judging the material drives that make us who we are. These inner forces could be thoroughly socialized, thought the Communists, so that we would operate as willing comrades in centralized production and distribution. Our wills would be shaped by the will of the Communists. Where



there was a command, there was to be a will. But Communism lost the battle of the wills. Individuals retained their autonomy despite the process of socialization. They did not put their will into the collective economic enterprise. They did not experience that kind of enterprise as their own. They knew that the means of production and the keys of distribution always rested in the hands of others: the ruling class of Communists.

The centralized command economy was a coercive economy. It thereby condemned itself to production of inferior goods, to corruption and inequity in distribution, and to disaffection of the working classes. Another irony: Communism, which arose in protest against the alienation of the workers under capitalism, in turn inflicted a hopeless alienation upon its workers.

When given the option of moving toward a free-market economy, those who had lived under Communism jumped at the chance. The economic incentive was a large component in that quest for freedom which led millions of Germans in the Communist state of the German Democratic Republic to rush over in 1989 to the capitalist state of the German Federal Republic. The next year, without a shot, Germany was reunified.

A command economy can only be efficient in the short run. The lack of incentive, initiative, and imagination means that long-term progress is inhibited. Stagnation sets in. A closed market has nowhere to go once it has produced what was its goal. An open market reinvigorates itself. It discovers new goals thanks to its very process. While competition wastes much, in the long run it leads to newer and better products that are more easily accessible and at lower cost. The Communists stuck themselves with a second-rate economy. And they made everything else turn on the socioeconomic basis. Marxism disabled itself from the start.

10. As scholars cooperate in the study of Communism's fall due to these, and other mistakes, we cannot help but observe that the errors are interconnected. They lead to one another or work

together to intensify their bad consequences. Ordinarily, if a major fault occurs in a social theory and its social system, practitioners can try to correct it. Sometimes, we are willing to live with a fault if the rest is worth it. At other times, a few faults when corrected mean significant change in the original although the original is saved.

But Communism could not be saved. It had so many faults linked together that they could only be corrected by abandoning Communism. Communism was not simply a system with some errors; it was an erroneous system. It could not be salvaged other than by closing one's eyes to the truth, silencing opposition, and insisting that everything was going according to the plan of history. These efforts delayed the fall of Communism while assuring that it fell, for they were part of its fatal failings. Communism fell due to the blindness of its thinking that precluded corrigibility, a blindness coupled with disrespect for the intrinsic worth of human beings.

11. I will consider a few charges that my line of criticism is in error. The first charge is that we should recognize that what brought Communism down was capitalism. But Communism did not have an all-out struggle with capitalism in which one side was defeated by the other, although theory said this showdown would occur, and a few times the Communists and non-Communists were close to a Third World War. The rivalry had been worldwide, long-standing, and rough-and-tumble, yet no decisive struggle took place. The Cold War had reached a truce when Communism of its own choice decided to quit.

Communism fell from within. It could not offer what it claimed with certainty it would offer. Yes, capitalism seemed more attractive. But even if capitalism had not existed, it would have been dreamed of by those living under Communism. While the centralized state distorted for its subjects how capitalism was



practiced in the world, this did not persuade those subjects of the merits of Communism.

Capitalism did not win; Communism lost. The credit for overcoming Communism, must be given, in the final irony, to the Communists. One day in the late 1980s, Communist leaders awoke to see that Communism does not work – it is wrong. Gorbachev, that world-historical individual, told this truth and thereby killed Communism.

Capitalism should not get the credit for the collapse of Communism. To give such credit might increase the arrogance, complacency, corruption, and insensitivity that can plague capitalist systems. If capitalists crow, "We are right! We had to be right! We will always be right!", then they will have fallen for the closed-mindedness to which Communism fell victim from its outset. Progress in the world in terms of humane cooperation requires that we ever be open to correcting our thinking and our ways of interacting. Humanity reforms by learning from its errors.

12. The next charge is that I have left out the role of the Third World in getting Communism to soften its hard line. Third World nations, it seems, demonstrated that the world did not have to be divided into one way or the other, as Either/Or. A third alternative existed. Several non-aligned countries practiced forms of socialism, not to be mistaken for Communism. As a group, they called for peaceful co-existence rather than a showdown between Communism and capitalism.

I don't think the Third World had a decisive role in the fall of Communism. This third alternative was more likely viewed by the two super-blocs as a secondary party on the sidelines of geopolitics. Insofar as the Third World countries were not committed to Communism, they were regarded by the capitalist world as non-threatening. Insofar as these countries were not committed

to capitalism, they were regarded by the Communist world as future candidates for Marxist revolution.

13. Another objection is that my case for the weakness of Communism is really an account of the practices of political entities that were not true embodiments of Marxist theory, though they said they were. Similarly, countries today may falsely claim that they practice the classical capitalist theory, of say, Adam Smith. The biggest failing of the so-called Communists, then, was that they were not really Communists! Communism remains to be tried in practice. We ought not to dismiss a theory because of the improper or incomplete realization of it. My failing is to have mistaken the performance for the philosophy.

If that has been my fault, then I may nonetheless have done some good by exposing the errors of a way of thought and conduct that too long and with such regrettable results held sway over a good part of the world. Let us learn from the mistakes of this "not-quite Communism." What matters is not its name or origin but its principles and practices.

Yet the principles and practices analyzed here are arguably those of Marxism as philosophy, even when they came forward after Marx. Ideas have consequences. A theory points to a practice, and extensions to the theory also follow from it. A philosophy must take responsibility for those mistakes that are the plausible applications which spring from it. What has been done in the world in accordance with a theory is grounds for judging that theory. How it pays off in life is the pragmatic meaning of a theory.

Marxist theory itself insisted that it was a science of what necessarily had to be done in the world. It called for enactment. "The point," said Marx, in his "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845), was "to change the world." His theory pointed the way to its practice. The errors in the conduct in the world are also errors in the thinking.



14. Still another objection to my analysis of Communism's errors is that great political empires and their related systems of thought collapse because of things that have nothing to do with ideas. Thus, it may be argued that something like the failure of bureaucrats in the Soviet Union to get soap delivered to the miners of Siberia was the beginning of the end. While the centralized state owned the soap factories, the railroads, the mines, and everything else, it was not able to accomplish this apparently simple task upon command. Why, then, serve in its mines, its factories, or anything else the state controlled? An immense territory and an overextended bureaucracy contributed to an inefficiency in detail. Although the world's largest state controlled everything within its borders, no one was really in control. So who needed such a state?

History turns on such small matters. But even they speak to the failing of the closed system trying to be a dictatorship of the proletariat.

Another cause for the collapse of Communism may be attributable to a second-rate actor who got to play the part of President of the United States. President Reagan, an outspoken anti-Communist, spoke of the Armageddon in which the forces of righteousness would face the Evil Empire of Communism. He supported the Strategic Defense Initiative, known popularly as Star Wars. It supposedly would protect the United States against a nuclear missile attack, but at the same time it could be the incentive to attack the Soviet bloc. "Star Wars" and "Evil Empire" came from Hollywood movies, but so did the President of the United States.

In his own country, many experts and much of the public, including me, thought Reagan's plan excessive, but they did not doubt his will to go ahead with it. Leaders of the Soviet Union shared that view. The only way they could defend against an American Star Wars program was to counter with a similar program of their own. This had ever been the strategy of the Cold

War. But this time, the Communists couldn't do it. While Star Wars would have been a tremendous drain on the American economy, that society could probably afford it, whereas the Soviet Union could not possibly afford it. Communism could no longer struggle against capitalism. Its leaders decided, then, to give up the fight by giving up Communism.

Ronald Reagan had given the greatest performance of his career.

Just as with the fall of the Roman Empire, historians will offer many plausible reasons for the Fall of Communism. Multiple causes operate in great historical events. To insist on only one is to be blind to others. Let us not be blind to the philosophical failings of Communism that contributed to its self-defeat¹.

1. I am grateful for the comments of Mona Abousenna, William Gerber, Ruth M. Lucier, and Louis P. Pojman.