



AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN LEFTIST ACADEMIA THROUGH THE PRISM OF PAUL BERMAN'S *A TALE OF TWO UTOPIAS: THE POLITICAL JOURNEY OF THE GENERATION OF 1968*

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The publication in 1996 of Paul Berman's book *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* happened halfway into the half century that now has passed since the revolutionary events of 1968. It sheds inspiring light on those events enriched with nuances and penumbra of the velvet revolutionary wind of changes that suddenly but peacefully touched the capitals of Central and Eastern Europe in the autumn of 1989. A puff of the wind of changes has gathered tons of political and intellectual material, which has been masterfully used by Berman in his reflections. He succeeds in not only providing a plausible and thought-through interpretation of both periods of excitement and utopia, but also in envisaging their subsequent developments. The perspective he elaborates is valuable and useful for any critical recollection of the half century that has passed and, perhaps, for some uncertain but hopeful glimpses at the decade to come.

In his precise diagnosis of the social and political status of global humanity after the two revolutions up until 1994, Berman, with sparing eloquence, observes: "The world feels this: humble, skeptical, anxious, afraid, shaken." (338). This diagnosis seems to lack any kind of prognosis but still comes close to Andre Glucksmann's "corkscrew" history with no clear outcome or end, and is a far cry from Francis Fukuyama's "kaleidoscopic" history crowned with the famous Last Man (257).

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This spirit of uncertainty is transformed into a need for, and resolution to, further liberation by Martin Matušík, who believes that two sets of aporia challenge the post-Berlin Wall world: “the economic exploitation of scarcity,” and various politics of domination supplementing this exploitation (19). He is convinced that further struggle for liberation has to be backed by postmodernist critical social theory combined with existentialist philosophy and existentialist experience. Matušík’s position has affinity with the mission of the Radical Philosophy Association, whose “efforts are guided by the vision of a society founded on cooperation instead of competition, in which all areas of society are, as far as possible, governed by democratic decision-making” (RPA).¹

A fellow Eastern European, Slavoj Žižek, insists on revolution through reform against the background of a total crisis of democracy, which is no less dangerous than the recent financial crisis but with the peculiar detail that in current democratic governance “the blind are leading the blind.” With its unmatched sense of humor (not alien to and appreciated by Matušík), Žižek urges his readers and followers to assume a leftist mode of thinking and leftist agenda capable of carrying out social and political changes in a reformist but nevertheless radical manner. His Marxist ideas, interwoven with unexpected Lacanian insights, make for a unique amalgam of social and political philosophy calling for an active position in the midst of the current global predicament (Žižek, “The West’s Crisis is One of Democracy as Much as Finance”).

As Žižek stands firmly on the European continent and sticks to the Continental style of thinking, and Matušík has both a European and an American perspective, Richard Rorty is one of the representatives of the non-Marxist American Left. With a few touches, Berman brilliantly portrays Rorty’s stance: “Rorty warns against everything that might serve as a ‘successor to Marxism’ – ‘a large theoretical framework that would enable us to put our society in an excitingly new context.’ He wants a more

1. It is easily seen that The Radical Philosophy Association’s position features an inner contradiction as any “democratic decision-making” implies “competition.”

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'banal' language of political theory." (Berman 296). Marxism for Rorty is a sort of religious dogmatism leading to extravagant extremes with a hint of authoritarianism, which easily places the political zeal of Lenin next to the religious devotion of Savonarola (Berman 46). If this outlook finds fertile soil in a Europe hopelessly immersed in a vague tradition as well as in clumsy and redundant theory, it does not make any sense whatsoever in the New World: "We Americans did not need Marx to show us the need for redistribution, or to tell us that the state was often little more than the executive committee of the rich and powerful" (Rorty 1998: 48). Rorty has no doubts that social justice can be achieved with John Dewey's pragmatic and experimental approach based on the needs of a specific country and not by the world revolution of the proletariat based on the nationalization of private property and the means of production (Rorty 43). Although it is not that clear whether Rorty approves of the changes in the opposite direction from nationalized means of production to the restoration of private property, it appears that he is hardly optimistic about or in favor of either the global movements of 1968 or of the Central and Eastern European autumn of 1989; furthermore, any discourse about the further liberation of the wretched of the world after the velvet revolutions would contradict his principles.

In opposition to Rorty's insistence on a specific consideration of each country's needs and corresponding plan of actions, Yanis Varoufakis argues that democracy is endangered throughout the EU (and perhaps on the global scale too), which serves for him and for Srećko Horvat as an incentive to form "a Pan-European movement for the 'reinstatement of democracy in the EU (DiM25)'" (Sarantis 90). He claims that in order to avoid the transformation of Western democracies into dictatorships, the global financial system has to be restructured in a certain way and the split between politics and economy has to be overcome (Sarantis 93). This will ensure that "the social evils of such profound economic imbalances (e.g., rising inequality, exploitation, de-democratization or even war)" (Sarantis 92) are prevented.

Actually, Varoufakis champions a less pessimistic version of separation than the irrevocable divorce between politics and power advocated by Zygmunt Bauman over the last two

decades. According to Bauman, politics has become local with very limited resources for governance, whereas power is transnational and extraterritorial, embodying and utilizing financial instruments. In these circumstances, the trick is that the ordinary citizens (the always law-abiding as well as those ready to protest at any moment and even resort to civil disobedience) can complain only to the local political authorities. These concerns and complaints, however, cannot be taken into consideration in principle, because the real power to address them (in the best scenario when someone cares at all) is in the hands of anonymous extraterritorial elites.

What remains within the individual's power and capabilities in the current society of consumers is the image of one's own subjectivity seemingly opening unconstrained opportunities in all areas of life. This rosy picture, however, is nothing more than yet another self-deception like Karl Marx's commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism conceals in a converted form social relationships permeating each and every commodity, whereas what Bauman calls "subject fetishism" (Bauman 14–15) conceals also in a converted form "the most closely guarded secret of the society of consumers" (Bauman 1), which turns out to be "the transformation of consumers into commodities" (Bauman 12). Commodification of subjects, citizens, individuals, and human beings in general not only prevents conscientious Europeans from acting meaningfully within Varoufakis's and Horvat's DiM25 but creates a delusory reality prone to the total disorientation of those who live and believe in it.

This is the prophetic premonition that Berman ascribes to the post-1989 Central and Eastern European revolutionaries who are aware that the capital of the victors of the cold war is not so much Washington as Hollywood (252). Marx's concept of "converted forms" being real and at the same self-delusive, that is, false, is transformed by the prominent connoisseur of the American movie industry, Jean Baudrillard, into the term "simulacrum." Simulacrum is hyper-reality, which is an imitation hiding the lack of any original and/or refers to creating according to a special code an artificial reality to substitute for the absent "genuine reality." In the realm of hyperreality, the most essential

characteristic of any reality, the causal relationship, is radically transformed following the ancient sophism of *aequat causa effectum* where cause and effect exchange their places or causality is changed beyond all recognition so that the principle of causality itself becomes irrelevant and evaporates altogether (Baudrillard 31, 38). Furthermore, the entire domains of ontological categories and logical rules are blurred, reaching the point of unconstrained fantastic materialization of the code of simulacrum. A peculiar masquerade is applied in order to inject some plausibility into the void of hyperreality. This could be staging a pseudo-war in order to hide the lack of any potential for and likelihood of a real war (the first Gulf military campaign) or to stress the importance of a certain government's power and the various attempts to usurp it and the tremendous danger of it being usurped, where, actually, there is no power at all (Baudrillard 77). Along the same lines goes the launching of the fashionable term "fake news" with the sole goal of distinguishing between true and false news. It is taken for granted, as a self-evident commonplace, that "fake news" refers to lies and distortions in the news, implying that the area remaining free of fake news is by logical necessity populated by true news. However, if Baudrillard's deciphering key is applied, it will become crystal clear that there is no news at all, neither false nor true, but that what we witness in the media is no more than artefacts delivered by the code of the simulacrum.

An illusionary or, more precisely, schizophrenic sensitivity is spread, according to Fredric Jameson, in the contemporary postmodern capitalist society due to the fascination with the unrestrained personal freedom imitating the "freedom" of markets; with unlimited opportunities for the smart, hard-working, and lucky; and with charms of virtually endless consumption and the magic of creating capital *ex nihilo* on derivatives exchanges. The sense of history has been desperately lost in the entire postmodern culture as even the feeling of time passing by has been abandoned, leaving room only for the luminous monstrosity of the eternity-like present. The postmodern culture is totally determined by the irresistible power of financial capitalism. Cultural phenomena are tailored to the needs of capital in order to transmit its demands and orders of indisputable truth to postmodern individuals while

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at the same time suggesting that every thought and every action performed by them is an outcome of personal deliberation and choice. In a more sober (or perhaps more utopian) manner, Jameson does not rely on the unlikely “global surplus recycling mechanism (GSRM)” of Varoufakis in order to break free from the bonds of the capitalist psychosis and restore the sense of temporality and normal historical reality. For Jameson, it would suffice to succeed in creating a new cultural sphere independent of the interference of capital which would grant postmodern individuals a special liberation and mental stability within the realm of existing capitalist relationships (1–54).

All leftist scenarios of post-1989 development consider and try to predict the relationship between the ruling elites (exercising their authority either overtly or behind the scenes) and the ruled population. Paul Ricoeur views this relationship from the perspective of social imagination and the imaginary. The relationship between the rulers and the ruled is never immediate; it is always mediated by the imagination. Moreover, imagination manages to carry out this mediation through its two “pathological” forms, ideology and utopia. Ideology is summoned to bridge the gap between the potential of the rulers and the demands of those below, whereas utopias “reveal the unstated surplus value attached to authority and unmask pretension inherent in all systems of legitimation” (130, 132). Ideology operates via social integration and utopia via social subversion. They both feature social dysfunction, which in ideology is manifested as distortion and dissimulation, whereas in utopia it tends towards schizophrenia. In a truly Hegelian manner, Ricoeur views the interconnection between these two versions of imagination, pointing out that ideology happens to play the role of subversion and utopia to work for social integration (127–134). In this line of thought, the self-awareness of those below, even if they perceive themselves as citizens and not subjects, is usually inclined to express itself as utopia, as ideology, or as a “healthy” dialectical blend of ideology *cum* utopia.

In the radical left today, the acclaimed champions of the sociopolitical theory beyond any ideology and utopia are no doubt Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. They have created a multivolume study describing in detail, aptly analyzing, and clearly elucidating the global

domination over and subjugation of the population. Their theoretical findings are structured in a coherent and comprehensive system called "Empire." The authors make sure their readers do not take this term as a metaphor but consider it as a concept with a specific cognitive function. Empire is a truly global tendency that does not coincide with any country or group of countries. Empire's rule has no borders, not only in space but in time, because it "suspends history" and is inclined to proclaim the current order forever. It rules not only society and politics, but also tries to control human nature; that is why its total rule is characterized as "biopower" (*Empire* xiv-xv). In the second book of the series, on the development and future transformation and surmounting of the Empire, entitled *Multitude*, they intend "to work out the conceptual basis on which a new project of democracy can stand" (*Multitude* xvii). The possibility for democratic change emerges dialectically out of the imperial power: Empire through its global domination secures conditions for the multitude (the wretched of the world) to communicate, organize, and look beyond the imperial sovereignty, planning and carrying out the postmodern revolution of overthrowing the Empire and restoring democracy. Hardt and Negri allude to the Marxian *doxa* about the proletariat being the only fully progressive and truly universal class capable of emancipating not only itself, but all of humanity, including the bourgeoisie, in a classless society aimed not at profit but at the realization of the human essence. They argue that the multitude, unlike all other "limited class formations," possess the potential to reestablish democracy (*Multitude* xvii-xvii). The fundamental possibility for this radical transformation is due to the notion of "common." It turns out that this notion adopts Hegelian speculative thinking in full as it overcomes the abstract unilateral opposition between private and public, socialist and capitalist. Hardt and Negri understand by common "first of all the common wealth of the material world" in ecological and socioeconomic terms. Moreover, common becomes the economic and political ground of the radically new form of democracy, sublating (*Aufhebung*) private and public, socialism and capitalism, while not annihilating them altogether but keeping their essentiality in a transformed, mutually depen-

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dent, and subordinated form of moments within the integrated totality of the emancipating common (*Commonwealth* viii-ix).

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PANORAMA OF LEFTIST IDEAS

The above leftist positions on the post-1989 social and political developments are reflected on by Domenico Losurdo in his harsh and uncompromising critique expressed in *La sinistra assente. Crisi, società dello spettacolo, guerra* (*Compliant Left. Crises, Society of Spectacle, War*). The political left nowadays, in his opinion, abides in a delusion of being critical and unbiased, while, in fact, it shares the conceit and arrogance of the political and economic elites of the First World. This is true, according to Losurdo, with respect to the moderate left as well as to the radical left since both these currents extended support for the “color revolutions” and the uprisings in Syria and Libya (Losurdo 279–280). The most prominent intellectuals of the left, mentioned above, Hardt and Negri, embarrassed themselves and undermined their critical anti-establishment stance by gullibly supporting the “humanitarian” bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 (279). Hardt and Negri’s stance is not a lamentable inconsistency among the ranks of the radical left but an eloquent example showing the universal essence of this kind of intellectual and political position. More often than not, intellectuals on the left (who, as a rule, belong to academia) undertake actions that contradict their goals, dexterously reducing their own efforts and zeal to sheer nullity (279–280). As an irrefutable illustration of Losurdo’s 2014 assessment, one can observe Žižek’s well-intended appeals for class solidarity with the various immigrants into Germany and Scandinavia from 2015 on, who are designated as “Syrians.” In this case, he displays surprising short-sightedness for a thinker of his rank, omitting the crucial detail that the class predicament of the immigrants (incorrectly referred to as “refugees”) is exploited for the sake of the total annihilation of the remnants of the social state in Europe as well as of the liquidation of the seriously “sick” European civilization as a whole. The same is true of Greek radical-left Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, whose “compromised stance probably does more damage than good to the prospects of the Left for now” (*What Does Europe Want?* 82).

1968
Transnational
Legacies

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The irredeemable sin of the left, based on their delusive (or treacherous) general attitude, is, first of all, the uncritical readiness to follow the Western agenda and “sacred” calendar regularly commemorating the tragedy of Tiananmen Square, but not of Kwangju, where an uprising occurred in a similar manner resulting in an even larger number of victims (280). Worse than that, left-wing academia willingly embrace the incantations and mantras about the *Charter of Human Rights*, showing doubtless signs of dementia and conceit concerning social and economic rights as well as “*la libertà dal bisogno*” (freedom from misery) and “*la libertà dalla paura*” (freedom from fear). Losurdo’s final conclusion is absolutely clear in stating that the political left today is characterized by confusion and dispersion and is not up to its mission in the contemporary world. This state of affairs urgently demands a thorough analysis of the plight of the left and the measures to take to elaborate a truly leftist position (280).

Berman highlights the ideological perplexities of the 1968 revolution in Europe: “They championed Young Marx against Old Marx; Hegel against Engels; Marx against Lenin; Lenin against Stalin; left-wing humanism against scientific leftism” (221). The 1989 upheaval with its slogans of neoliberalism seems to stand on clearer and more stable theoretical grounds. Nevertheless, the results it has produced are evaluated by different thinkers in the diametrically opposed modes of a “velvet” and of a “gangster” revolution (“The 1989 Gangster Revolution, Revisited”). Although we do not agree with either of these terms, the element of organized crime denoted by the last one captures the quintessence of the *deus ex machina* transformations of that period. The dissident leaders of the 1989 revolution in most cases emerged from the ranks of those endowed with governing power in Central and Eastern Europe. Their activities were directed against the “communist” state and against the “communist” legal system but also against any legal system, including the one adopted by the democratic regimes (with a tacit or, in most cases, with the quite articulated consent of the democratic governments).² The innovative trans-

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2. The term ‘gangsters’ is not accurate as it points out to infringement of the law, whereas the devastating transformations in Central and Eastern Europe could be considered immoral but, as a rule, were carried out within

formers dismantling the one-party political system and planned economy, while erecting the radiant edifice of the multi-party democracy and market economy, made achievements of such eminence that they easily surpass Samuel Beckett's and Eugene Ionesco's wildest fantasies:

Yes, life under communist regimes was nothing to be envious about. But, after all, what replaced them was a society still controlled by the same people serving the populace different lies through the Western puppet show known as "parliaments, parties, and platforms." In Eastern Europe, the puppet show as often as not was and is so maladroitly played that it oftentimes looks like a French absurdist rendition of Punch and Judy. ("The 1989 Gangster Revolution, Revisited")³

The mediocre quality of the show in the East is not due so much to the lack of talent and lackadaisical attitude of the director and the cast as to the same well-known wind of changes, which has brought to the center and east of Europe the blessings of the future a decade or so in advance of the rest of the continent and the British Isles. The present of Eastern Europe is the future of the West still lagging behind.⁴ The aim of the revolutionary innovative transformers has not been to rule the state in a new manner but to eradicate the national state and construct participatory communes in its place (Katsiaficas 297) or establish an ensemble of citizen associations strong enough to effectively deal with (Charles Taylor's notion of civil society) and, finally, get rid of the national state altogether. However, these communes and citizen associations cannot be of a grassroots sort but solely

a newly adopted legal system not necessarily approved of by the democratic countries. In this sense, the leaders of these transformations cannot be referred to as "criminals," that is, "gangsters." This is why we suggest the term "innovative transformers."

3. In my opinion, the term *deus ex machina* is more appropriate than "puppet show."

4. Johnny Cash in his 1966 single "The One on the Right is on the Left" providentially foresees the political mish-mash that will emerge first in the east of Europe and then will permeate the Western World:

Well, the one on the right was on the left
And the one in the middle was on the right
And the one on the left was in the middle
And the guy in the rear burned his driver's license

of a top-down nature, thus elegantly synthesizing criminal activities with legal clauses so that the classical mafia enterprises modestly look like *un divertimento dei fanciulli innocenti* (an amusement of innocent infants). Nevertheless, the top representatives of the leftist academia after 1968 and after 1989 seem to have overlooked the critical nature of the outcomes of both revolutionary periods and these academics are not up to the critical stance Losurdo believes is a must for a genuine leftist agenda. Leftist theory and practice thus remains a work-in-progress.

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