The Triumph of Capital

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INTRODUCTION

> "Actually, as Winston well knew, it was only four years since Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia. But that was merely a piece of furtive knowledge which he happened to possess because his memory was not satisfactorily under control."
>
> —George Orwell, *1984*

Although Orwell's intent in writing *1984* was to shatter illusions held by stalinists and liberals about the Soviet Union, his book quickly became a metaphor for all modern bureaucratic societies, including the U.S.—and, with recent events in mind, perhaps especially the U.S.

Winston Smith, Orwell's hapless protagonist, you may remember, worked at the Ministry of Truth in the sector responsible for the alteration of official history to suit whatever happened to be the immediate propaganda needs of the ruling Party. Smith would send previous, but now offensive, versions of events down the "memory hole" and leave new histories in place as the only available accounts. What remained was mush for the toothless masses—soothing half-truths and out-right lies—to affirm the validity of what was now presented for consumption. Yesterday disappeared as if it had never occurred.

George Bradford's article below serves to retain memory and to make us confront the contents of the politics and culture which shaped the raging battles of the 20th Century. Events and their consequences—the Russian revolution, the attempts to extend it world-wide, stalinism, the Cold War, and the eventual collapse of the U.S. empire's rival—are too important to those who desired a defeat of both leviathans to let the telling be left to the official liars whose accounts serve as self-justification for the victor in the inter-imperial contest.

Also, the questions engendered by the Russian Revolution—the nature of its economy, the role of Stalin and Trotsky, the authenticity of its revolution, the Party—have been the touchstone for three generations of revolutionaries. Bradford examines not only each of these themes in a manner which provides a trenchant history of the immense sweep of events, he reiterates many core Fifth Estate themes which suggests a perspective counter to the failed ones of the left.

Bradford has provided us with a clear yet demanding look at the modern world. With the false opposition of marxist ideology and its socialist manifestation seemingly swept from the world stage, the empire of capital now reigns triumphant.

The following examines the socialist wreckage and poses what is necessary to challenge the continuing dark age of state society with its unending wars, its increasing privation, and its relentless destruction of nature.

Indeed, for the forces of social transformation and renewal, this may be a small moment of respite before the torrent of chaos and destruction descends upon us. Our dreams of a truly new world (dis)order in which empires are destroyed and human community is restored must be sharply focused if we are not to be swept along with the impending madness. Bradford's article moves toward sanity.

E.B. Maple

1.

> "Governments come and go, but business stays."
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> —Anatoly Skopenko, president of the Ukrainian Renaissance Bank, to a global investment scout for the Asia Bank in New York, *New York Times*, 31 August 1991.

> "The U.S. and the U.S.S.R., I understood, were the two portions of the Empire as divided by the Emperor Diocletian for purely administrative purposes; at heart it was a single entity, with a single value system."
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> —Philip K. Dick, *Radio Free Albemuth*

When the Wall came down in Berlin, the people immediately went shopping. In this apparently mundane act of acquiring what has a price, they entered, in a manner whose symbolism was as material as its materiality was symbolic, that world which is called "free." They were now free to go in search of products unobtainable in the society calling itself Marxist, ironically recalling Marx himself (wise enough once upon a time to deny being a marxist), who wrote, quoting himself in the first line of the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*: "The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities'..."

Now this immense accumulation presented itself as the key to their desires. It wasn't only dictatorship, secret police and thought control they had overthrown, but everything that had kept them from everything beyond the Wall. Even the Wall itself succumbed to market forces, was chipped away and sold as souvenirs of a moment rapidly fading into the vacuum vortex of mediatized history.

Simply put, capitalism had triumphed. Prices, of course, rose. "With the better packaging and the greater variety of the new goods from the West there are also higher costs," reported *The Toronto Globe and Mail* (7/3/90). Only with time will the feckless shoppers discover what the real costs actually are. They are exchanging a dictatorship of paupers for intensified pauperization under the dictatorship of money. Their socialism failed, and now they are being re-educated to the first lessons of capital, foremost being that Money Talks, Bullshit Walks. And unfortunately for them, they are at the bullshit end of the spectrum in question. What was always potent in Marx—his critique of the commodity, the market, and alienation—now weighs like a nightmare on the brain and backs of the living not because it represents the dead weight of the past but because it reveals the dead weight of the present.

"The exchangeability of all products, activities, and relations with a third, objective entity which can be reexchanged for everything without distinction—that is, the development of exchange values (and of money relations) is identical with universal venality, corruption," wrote Marx in his notebooks (*Grundrisse*). "Universal prostitution appears as a necessary phase in the development of the social character of personal talents, capacities, abilities, activities. More politely expressed: the universal relation of utility and use..." The former inmates of the East Bloc lost their chains, but the world they won was that universal prostitution described by their official prophet—a world we inmates of the West Bloc know too well. "We're going to McDonaldize them," commented a McDonald's executive to *The New York Times* (1/28/90) in a summary of the company's "cultural conquest" of the Soviet Union and its opening of a restaurant in Moscow.

Capitalism triumphed. The "Free World" triumphed. The former East Bloc is now free—free to be McDonaldized.

In the same passage of the *Grundrisse*, Marx observed that in societies with "underdeveloped" systems of exchange (feudalism, traditional or vernacular societies, and one might now tentatively add bureaucratic collectivist societies of the East), individuals enter into relations with one another "imprisoned" within certain rigidly defined roles (and here he revealed his own imprisonment within the bourgeois ideology of progress to the degree that he saw all such relations as rigidly defined, despite the validity of the contrast he was trying to elaborate). The roles

to which Marx referred might include lord and vassal, or those specifically defined by clan relations, but perhaps could also suggest those of party bureaucrat and worker in the bureaucratic party states of the East.

Under developed capitalism, however ("and this semblance seduces the democrats," he says, as if referring to the contemporary victory of "democracy" over "communism"), "the ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc., are in fact exploded, ripped up… and individuals seem independent (this is an independence which is at bottom merely an illusion, and it is more correctly called indifference) free to collide with one another and to engage in exchange within this freedom; but they appear thus only for someone who abstracts from the conditions, the conditions of existence within which these individuals enter into contact…" Put again more simply in the ABC's of capitalism, there is no such thing as a free lunch; the freedom promised by capital also has its hidden costs. The "free relations" are themselves determined by a more complex kind of dictatorship than the state-collectivist dictatorships could ever muster.

"A particular individual may by chance get on top of these relations," continued Marx—and one is reminded of the myriad former functionaries of the communist bureaucracy now becoming budding capitalists—"but the mass of those under their rule cannot, since their mere existence expresses subordination, the necessary subordination of the mass of individuals." In other words, McDonaldization demands low-paid shit-workers if there are to be high-paid investors. Everybody can't be rich. Capitalism needs a colony, and someone has to be that colony.

Thus, when researcher David Lempert asked a Soviet economist what kind of economic rights and protection against exploitation there would be for people lacking capital after the transition to a "free market" he was told, "They will have the right to work. They will work for people who have capital." In Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), a "Free Economic Zone" was created to make the city, in the words of one elected city-council member, "just like Mexico." A law student "put it to me even more bluntly," Lempert goes on. "We're not interested in the ideas of democracy," the student told him. "We need to eat. Help us with our English so we can work for joint ventures." ("Soviet Sellout," *Mother Jones*, September/October 1991)

The market economy even has its Stakhanovite heroes. (Stakhanov was the legendary self-sacrificing worker of socialist production.) Drowsy from working long late-night hours at a kiosk used as an all-night convenience store in view of the Kremlin, an entrepreneur displays high-priced vodka, chewing gum, used clothes, and other desired items. (The kiosks cannot close at night or they would be looted, and are "protected" from small "mafias" by bigger ones. One can almost hear the Godfather whisper, "It's only business…") The kiosk owner dreams of a large walk-in store (his very own Seven-Eleven?) and tells a Westerner, "We must grow by stages, with setbacks and progress until maybe, in 15 or 20 years, we reach your knees," thus revealing that not only the entrepreneurial spirit, but the envy and sense of inferiority bred by colonialism, are making headway in the former powerful empire. (*New York Times*, 1/24/92)

"It's inevitable," whispered a newspaper editor to Lempert. "We're going to be a colony." And an old Siberian exclaimed, "Sell the forests. Sell the minerals… Let the West take what they want. Let them come in and give us what we need to start over." Of course, the West has every intention of giving them what they need… to be just like Mexico.

2.

> "The theater, like the plague…releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theater, but of life."
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> —Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*

An empire in disarray, the monuments lurching in history's whirlwind and falling. The statues of notorious executioners being sledgehammered by a giddy crowd. Unarmed people facing down tanks, and the tanks withdrawing. Perhaps the empire is actually falling; for now there is only the whirlwind, dangerous, intoxicating.

And the miraculous comes so

close

to the ruined, dirty houses—

something not known to

anyone at all,

but wild in our breast for

centuries.

—Anna Akhmatova, 1921

The people triumphed over the dictators in the streets of the East Bloc cities, if only for a time. Their great refusal crippled the gulag state momentarily, even if it did not break its back.

How and why events unfolded in the way they did will remain a speculative question. A combination of elements seems to have brought about what no single one could. There was a rebellion from below, a "counterrevolution" from the outside, a palace coup from above, and a generalized economic crisis. All of the aspects are woven together; none is entirely distinct from the others. All make the situation more a multiplicity of unique incommensurable situations—geographically, culturally, and politically—which may explain why no single force or sector in East Bloc societies can yet respond coherently to the changes.

The popular revolution that coincided with national bankruptcy had been simmering for decades, in fact, for generations. Contrary to the fantasies of right-wing academics (some of them former leftists) in the West, even soviet totalitarianism could not achieve the nightmare of a total, irresistible monolith. (The "authoritarian-totalitarian" contrast so fashionable among reactionary U.S. academic and diplomatic circles under reaganism was thus thoroughly discredited without any comment from its purveyors.)

As historian Geoffrey Hosking points out, the ancient forms of mutual aid of the traditional community (the mir) and the cooperatives formed by peasants who moved to the cities (the arteli), were the deep roots of the new forms of association in the latest upheavals, showing the "extraordinary capacity to improvise humane and functioning grassroots institutions in extremely adverse circumstances." He argues that local labor groups, intellectuals, and marginals who created counter-culture opposition have their roots in the 19th century; "the traditions of the peasantry and the intelligentsia… underlie such habits of community as have survived at all into the modern Soviet Union." (See *The Awakening of the Soviet Union*, 1991; reviewed by Peter Reddaway in "Me End of the Empire," *The New York Review of Books*, 11/7/91).

Even the infrastructure and economic problems were at least in part a consequence of work resistance and work refusal, rather than simply of the failure of "socialism" or bureaucracy. (Within the military-industrial and space industry complexes, where such refusal would have brought about much harsher reprisals and repression, the machine functioned quite efficiently. The inefficiency of the civilian sector became a low grade kind of sabotage or class war and a part of the unspoken social contract, an inevitable feedback.)

In the society as a whole, the population slowly and inexorably applied the brakes; when this was combined with a certain lack of will on the part of the ruling elites, power tended to erode. Even repression probably ceased to work as effectively. This itself could be attributed to an aspect of caste or class struggle as well, probably aggravated by the war in Afghanistan and the concomitant growth in counter-culture movements against the war and for nuclear disarmament, ecological justice, free expression, democracy, and cultural autonomy (including nationalist independence movements). Many Westerners commented on the resemblance of 1980s movements in the U.S.S.R. to 1960s movements in the U.S. The breakdown of authority was partly, at least, both a consequence and a cause of the Soviet Union's "Afghanistan Syndrome."

Consequently, there emerged a kind of cautious refusal at one end of the power spectrum and a tenuous lack of will at the other that tended to reinforce one another. A lack of resolve at one end emboldened those at the other. No one could have known where it was leading, though the vast majority of people being persuaded by the dissidents

(people, say, who might simply want to know what really happened to Uncle Vanya after he was disappeared by the "workers' state") carried out their own personal and collective acts of refusals with few clear goals, and even less with the idea of establishing Western-style corporate capital. They were more inclined to some kind of "socialism with a human face." Their gesture was not a "yes" to any programmatic change, but rather a broad "no" to what power and universal servility had done to life. (See "They just Said 'No,'" in the Winter 1990–91 FE.) They were tired of the cops and the bosses, sick of lies. Once granted a moment of indecision from the rulers, they were never going back.

This, more than an abiding loyalty to the Napoleonic Yeltsin, explains much of the crowd (as small as it was) in front of the Russian parliament building in August 1991. The coup plotters were as interested in going ahead with privatization as Yeltsin and his gang—but with their own power structure and privileges intact. They wanted to preserve the established ensemble of the military-industrial-police apparatus and were certain that the impending All Union Treaty spelled their doom, as well as signaling further imperial fragmentation. But it was too late; the refusal had already spread even to their ranks. People were not following orders. Those who stood in front of the tanks must have included die-hard Yeltsin loyalists, but most must have been choosing to land a blow against the old guard and for fragmentation.

Many ignored both Yeltsin and the coup organizers. For the most part, workers did not strike, and only a few blocks from the confrontation, people were going about their daily routine. (Some families took turns standing in food lines and at the barricades.) In some sense, too, this must have reflected an unwillingness to be drawn into the schemes of politicians. Hatred and contempt for politicians of all stripes is the attitude most shared by the population.

Of course there was also significant support for the coup—a reaction, certainly from "law and order" traditionalists, among them probably the Russian nationalists who wave placards with Stalin's picture at demonstrations, but also from those who are seeing their living conditions being shredded as former communist bureaucrats and others enrich themselves at the rest of society's expense. And because all the agents of repression, in power and out, hate a "power vacuum" more than anything else, they are actively recruiting, each for its own millennium. This includes everyone from reorganized Communist Party groups and other leftist parties, to nationalist parties and religious groups, fascists, criminal mafias, even the Hare Krishnas. One looks almost in vain for evidence of those forces who played such a large role in the humanization of the society and the social changes that followed—the peace and ecological groups, for example—but not only are they blocked out of the Western press for all the usual reasons, the whirlwind seems to have kept them mostly at the margins. (See "The Anarchist Spectre in Eastern Europe," in the Winter 1990–91 FE.)

Nevertheless, the changes reflected just as much a palace coup among the elites; seeing the increased difficulty in proceeding in the old way, a faction of the stalinist bureaucracy chose to ride the crest of change rather than to resist it. For them, it was preferable to face the unknown of transition to an economy more integrated into global capital with them still in command than to share the fate of some of their cronies in Poland, East Germany, and Romania. What has followed has been an environment of generalized piracy, with the little mafias only reflections of the big ones, and the sale of ostensibly public property to joint ventures and the creation of new business concerns with communist bureaucrats at the helm and the cash register.

"Democracy" is the code word, signaling the freedom to McDonaldize. "Democracy" is the high card they play in a high stakes game to keep their power and privilege. Like Yeltsin, with the right-wing Western think-tank technocrats who advise him, they mouth the rhetoric of "free market democracy" effectively enough to pass as stolid Rotarian Republicans (with about the same amount of genuine concern and respect for individual rights and social well-being). In one well-known estimation, only a rapid, 500-day transition to capitalism as gentle as Stalin's collectivization of the peasants—a bitter "shock treatment," as it has been called in the press—will work to bring the former empire into line with the rest of the world… that is, with the Third World, and the world of the brutalized inner cities of the U.S. Yeltsin and others, down to the entrepreneur in the kiosk, call for sacrifice on the part of the people to bring about this Latin-Americanization. Some will get rich; some will get cholera. That, after all, is what made America great.

The conflict between Yeltsin and Gorbachev, or between them and the hapless military conspirators of August 1991, is not one of totalitarian socialism versus democracy. Yeltsin was a party thug from the beginning and remains

a thug; he expects to maintain a military-industrial-police apparatus of his own (to use, if necessary, against his rivals in Tatarstan and Ukraine, or to smash strikes). What nation state doesn't? This is clear from the nature of the counter-coup that he carried out from his office in the parliament, banning parties and closing newspapers, and beginning to create special presidential powers for himself, in the manner of his rival, Gorbachev.

In October, Yeltsin asked for extraordinary powers to enact drastic economic "reforms" and to limit political activity, as well as to rule by decrees and to ban any election in the Russian federation until the end of 1992. He also created an executive secretariat authorized to veto all administrative decisions and override the Russian Parliament, and appointed various cronies to its staff. In an act of vanity and petulance, he even privatized Gorbachev's apartment in Moscow right after the latter's resignation in December and immediately moved into the former president's office before it could be cleaned out. (Abraham Brumberg, "The Road to Minsk," *The New York Review of Books*, 1/30/92).

The coup and counter-coup were mostly a struggle between elite factions. As historian James Petras commented, "The real conflict was and is between a dying patronage machine controlled by party bureaucrats and a rising class of professionals intent on turning the state into a vehicle for privatizing national resources, promoting privileges and incentives for private business owners, especially foreign ones—particularly by selling off vast amounts of energy resources."

For the vast majority, this will mean "decades of sacrifice for the market"—not much of a prospect. "The problem with the marketeers," Petras continues, "is that there are no risk-taking capitalists who make long-term investments capable of reorganizing the economy and replacing the disintegrating bureaucratic apparatus. And foreign investors will not make large-scale, long-term investments under a ruling elite that lacks decisive control over the society, except in a few strategic sectors. The result is likely to be economic cannibalism, with each firm manager grabbing a piece of the action—leaving the economy in chaos." ("Decades of Sacrifice for Free Market?" *The Guardian*, 9/11/91)

The nationalist politicians in the various republics are no better. In Uzbekistan, for example, the Communist Party apparatus, firmly entrenched, announced plans to follow the "Chinese model" for "economic reform." Georgia is now in a lull in what appears to be a civil war after electing a nationalist-fascist to power and then overthrowing him. Baltic, Ukrainian, Russian and other nationalists are threatening one another in various regions where different nationalities have long mixed and coexisted in relative peace. anti-Semitism and Great Russian Chauvinism are on the rise. According to the Helsinki Watch, the society is increasingly militarized, "a dozen areas of the country are now under states of emergency" and more than a thousand people have been killed in sectarian violence. The spectre of Yugoslavia—a Yugoslavia with nukes, as U.S. Secretary of State Baker declared ominously—hovers over the entire society. Even Yeltsin is now losing ground, as fascism grows and the military turns restive.

As social chaos and resistance threaten the smooth transition to colony status, many would welcome a military coup—particularly the Russian nationalists and some of the managerial bureaucrats who want privatization with the iron fist that the August junta promised. As one writer argued in *Pravda* in early January, if social unrest cannot be contained by the newly formed leftist parties claiming to speak for the workers, two scenarios are likely: "an absolutely destructive spontaneous upsurge of the lower layers or fascist methods of rule by the upper layers. The elements of both already exist."

A "centrist" military coup would not only be welcomed by elements within formerly soviet society, but by the Western powers as well, the bankers as much as the military establishment and the politicians. After all, like other military strongmen such as Pinochet and Saddam Hussein, these are people with whom they can do business. And business is the priority. No elite faction, East or West, entertains the idea of a return to the days prior to the unraveling of the stalinist state, notwithstanding the fantasies of the unfortunates who wave placards with photos of Stalin and Lenin. The reconstructed stalinists need the West to get their noses barely above the quicksand; not even a "spontaneous upsurge of the lower layers" could put their industrial machine back together.

But for its own sake the West needs to get them on their feet, if only on the level of Mexico or Brazil (where spontaneous upsurges are dealt with forthrightly and exploitation goes on unhindered). just as some stability was essential during the Cold War, when the rival blocs played out their exterminist standoff, rockets at the ready, stability is of the utmost importance now, when events in the former East Bloc could threaten not only the relative social peace but the very existence of the West Bloc.

Of course, one of the things that has kept such a coup from already occurring is the possibility that it, like so many other attempts at authoritarian response (or perhaps, of any coherent, global response), could be sucked down the black hole of the post-imperial whirlwind. Would the army split along national lines, or its mostly Russian officer corps bog down (a mega-Afghanistan?) in an attempt to quell unrest and nationalist aspirations in the republics?

The so-called Commonwealth of Independent States is a formidable object lesson in miscalculated intentions and unforeseen consequences. Already the republics are wrangling over who controls what section of the military, which led one admiral to warn, "This is a mine that will slowly explode." Civil war? A Yugoslavia with nukes? During negotiations, the commander of strategic forces in Ukraine, Major General Vladimir Bashkirov, reminded stalinist-turned-nationalist Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuck with a smirk, "In my division I have more buttons than the President, so you better be careful of me." (New York Times, 1/10/92)

"The theater like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure," wrote Antonin Artaud. In the post-imperial theater of cruelty, as in the imperial one, no cure appears to be forthcoming.

3.

> "Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, our historians have not yet won even this trivial insight. They take every epoch at its word and believe that everything it says and imagines about itself is true."
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> —Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*

Things are rarely what they seem. An epoch inherits a language that in turn becomes a mystique, a falsification. Thus the Christians, turning their backs on the crumbling Roman colossus, used the anti-imperial message of their prophet to found new imperial cities of god.

So too in the age of the world-historic struggle between capitalism and communism. Appearances masked reality; the revolution against capitalism only gave it new expression. The communists were not communists and the free world never free.

The political typology served the interests of hierarchs and hirelings in both camps. The stalinist aristocrat's actual role as functionary in a new statified, hybrid form of capital was concealed behind a revolutionary rubric that garnered him enormous sacrifices of a quasi-religious character, from both within the regime and supporters outside. For their part, the old ruling classes of the West had a godless external enemy to scapegoat wherever imperial pillage and military adventures were questioned. It was an elegant if gruesome system, and it survived for most of the century.

Their essential convergence does not mean that the interests of the two blocs weren't diametrically opposed. There was an ongoing effort by the West (punctuated by alliance and economic exchange) to undermine and overthrow its rivals in the self-proclaimed socialist world. This is partly because all empires struggle ruthlessly for dominance. But the private capitalist powers had even greater reasons to oppose the formal property relations of the state capitalist regimes. The West longed to reopen those same countries to interimperial exploitation and to eliminate the revolutionary mystique that inspired colonial nationalists to impede private capital's smooth accumulation of value at bargain rates.

But the ultimate collapse of the soviet regime was partly the result of the 75-year war against a state which, despite its failed promise to usher in a toilers' paradise, did physically liquidate the traditional hierarchies, sending the same shiver of dread through the rulers of the West that news of the French guillotine had caused among English and Russian wealthy classes at the end of the eighteenth century. The oppressors, like millions of the world's oppressed, took the communists at their word. In fact, any challenge to established power was automatically labeled communist and dealt with by the same iron fist.

The Cold War intensified and "rationalized" what was already essentially a war of aggression by the West against any stripe of rebel threatening to carry out the kinds of nationalizations of Western-controlled resources

that the Bolsheviks had in the 1920s, as well as against the only regimes willing to ally with such nationalist upstarts. This permanent, institutionalized campaign turned the Western restorationist project into a veritable culture. Paranoia, brutality, conformism, and regimentation assured obedience to the empire and social peace at home, while the greatest arms race in history (linked to continuous military bloodbaths in the so-called peripheries) was generated to assure domination of the post-World-War neocolonies, to maintain the military-industrial basis of the economy, and to force both a socially and economically costly defense posture on the state capitalist adversary. This arms race played a decisive role in finally doing in the stalinist regime.

President Reagan was once asked if the U.S. strategy of "spending Russia into a depression" might backfire on the already troubled U.S. economy. He replied, "Yes, but they will bust first." (M. Kaku, "No Milk and Honey in the Soviet Future;" *The Guardian*, 9/11/91) That is essentially what occurred; the U.S. economy also started down the tubes in the process, just a few steps behind its adversary. From 1949 to 1989, the total military budget of the U.S. in 1982 dollars was $8.2 trillion—as one commentator noted, "more money than it would cost to replace all of the human-made machines and structures in the entire country." (Morris Gleicher, "America in Decline," *Detroit Metro Times*, July 24–30, 1991) Not that American capital could really do without its military budget without unraveling the whole economic system itself; as someone once remarked, the U.S. doesn't have a war machine, it is a war machine.

Yet despite the differences between the two rival blocs, the Soviet Union was ultimately only a poorer version of private capital, indeed the only kind of capitalist development generally available to poorer nations lagging behind in the race for industrial growth. And because it was a poorer version, a kind of weak link in a way perhaps that tsarist Russia was in 1917, and because the new social-economic configuration could neither retreat to its former colonial position nor rise to become a competitive empire, it fell victim to the fabulously expensive arms race and to a deepening international recession that tended to make all weak national capitals teeter on the edge of bankruptcy. When its Eastern European client states began to fall under the sway of the vampires at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the writing was on the wall.

Economic stagnation and a weak ruble, low productivity and social unrest flowing from the stalemate in Afghanistan, ecological degradation and other grievances all combined to bring about the changes that would consign the U.S.S.R. to the "dustbin of history." But it was, to be precise, neither a revolution nor a counterrevolution. Only a minuscule amount of property has so far been privatized to individuals, and more or less the same caste remains in power, with an infusion (usually a healthy development for any power structure) of critics and reformers from outside. Had the U.S.S.R. been a client rather than a rival of the U.S.—say, a Saddam Hussein or a Marcos or a junta-run state like the Salvadoran—major loans would have been expedited and the CIA sent in to crush the troublemakers. That didn't happen, of course, and the rest is television.

And so the Fall of Communism/Triumph of Capitalism is the official imperial history as conceived, produced, and directed by the victors. And the victors are not the common people of the two blocs whose living conditions decline as international capital reorganizes around a still more exploitative "social contract," but rather the class and caste hierarchs who administer and who benefit from international capital accumulation, East and West. The narrow definition of capitalism that served the managers of both blocs must be rejected for a broader one if this epoch is ever to be understood.

Ideology East and West has reasons to deny it, but the truth is that to focus on juridical property relations and the terms by which hierarchically organized societies name themselves is to commit a grave, formalistic error. modern state socialism was only a manifestation of the capitalism it claimed to supersede. Capitalism and socialism must be understood in an anthropological and historical sense that sees through the veils of ideological mystification. By doing so, we understand not only the difference between the blocs but their fundamental identity. What was capitalist about Soviet socialism?

Cornelius Castoriadis argued in 1977 that the social regime in the Soviet Union would better be described as "total bureaucratic capitalism" in contrast with private "fragmented bureaucratic capitalism" in the West (though "total" does not imply that there is no opposition or antagonism within the regime). It was (and remains) "an asymmetrical and antagonistically divided society—or in traditional terms, a 'class society'… subject to the domination of a particular social group, the bureaucracy."

This domination, Castoriadis continues, was "concretized in an economic exploitation, political oppression, and mental enslavement of the population" for the bureaucracy's benefit. Exploitation—the extraction of value

from nature and human labor for reinvestment in the enterprise and for the enrichment of the ruling group, flows from antagonistic relations of production "based on [a] division between managers and operatives" separate from formal or legal property relations. Whether the factory manager holds the deed to the place or runs it on behalf of an abstraction called the State (in reality a country club to which he and his cronies belong) is irrelevant. The result is the same for him and for those who work under him.

Subject "to a 'wage' relation as any other working class," the operatives "have control of neither the means nor the product of their labor, nor of their own activity as workers. They 'sell' their time, their vital forces, and their life to the bureaucracy, which disposes of them according to its interests." The bureaucracy uses the same basic methods as the private capitalist West to increase the amount of value it extracts and reduce the workers' share as well as whatever shreds of autonomy that might exist in the workplace through management techniques and the technicization of work.

That the system is called socialism means nothing. Rather, the content of the society—hierarchy, domination, alienation, and production—and not its formal integuments, is key. It is equally important to speak of the content of capitalism in a cultural mode, not only narrowly in terms of the work relation. Most importantly and most broadly, and as Castoriadis argues,

"The Russian regime is part of the socio-historical universe of capitalism because the magma of social imaginary significations [or ideology] that animate its institutions and are realized through it is the very thing that is brought about in history by capitalism. The core of this magma can be described as the unlimited expansion of 'rational' mastery. It is, of course, a question of a mastery that is mostly illusory, and of an abstract pseudo-'rationality.' This imaginary signification constitutes the central juncture of ideas that become effective forces and processes dominating the functioning and development of capitalism: the unlimited expansion of the productive forces; the obsessive preoccupation with 'development,' pseudo-rational 'technical progress,' production and the 'economy'; 'rationalization' and control of all activities; the increasingly elaborate division of labor, universal quantification, calculation and 'planning'; organization as an end in itself, etc. Its correlatives are the institutional forms of the enterprise, the bureaucratic-hierarchical Apparatus, the modern State and Party, etc. Many of these elements—institutional significations and forms—are created in the course of historical periods that antedate capitalism. [And here Lewis Mumford's description of the anticipations of modern capital in the ancient slave state megamachines comes to mind.—G.B.] But it is the bourgeoisie that, during its transformation into a capitalist bourgeoisie, changes their function and reunites them to the signification of the unlimited expansion of 'rational' mastery (explicitly formulated since Descartes, and always central to Marx, so that his thinking always remains anchored in the capitalist universe)…" ("The Social Regime in Russia," *Telos* 38, Winter 1978–79)

Clearly, capitalism is not the unidimensional phenomenon that both left and right would have it be. It emerged from its "classical" origins not only as the growing power of the bourgeoisie to universally impose trade and exchange through contractual labor, but was also inextricably linked to the cult of reductive rationality and efficiency, the rise of science and technology, the growth of the centralized state, and the materialization and quantification of culture.

Capitalism is therefore accordingly an "immense accumulation of commodities" but also and more importantly, what lies behind it: the social relations that make accumulation possible. To paraphrase Jacques Camatte, capital is not a mode of production as Marx put it but a mode of being (*The Wandering of Humanity*, 1975; see also Fredy Perlman, *The Reproduction of Daily Life*, 1972.). This mode of being, shared by socialism and capitalism, stands in sharp contrast to all forms of communities, in contrast to all vernacular, subsistence societies that preceded it, in which the fundamental motives were not economic and instrumental but communal, cultural, and spiritual (though, again, it was anticipated in those early class societies where relations between kin—or for that matter, between enemies—became relations between strangers based on economic exchange).

Capitalism began by replacing subsistence economies (in fact, noneconomic societies) with the market. Economic relation and trade, "at best a subordinate feature of life," in the words of Karl Polanyi, became central. "The mechanism which the motive of gain set in motion was comparable in effectiveness only to the most violent outburst of religious fervor in history," he argues. "Within a generation the whole human world was subjected to its undiluted influence" (*The Great Transformation*, 1957).

Markets, the state and eventually industrialism all grew together as interlocking aspects of the same social system. Though markets existed before the rise of capitalism, as Polanyi reveals, such markets were "essentially… neighborhood markets" that "nowhere showed any sign of reducing the prevailing economic system [i.e., autonomy and subsistence] to their pattern." In fact, "Internal trade in Western Europe was actually created by the intervention of the state." The same was true with industrialism, which had to be imposed on the common people, whose response to enclosures and the factory system was civil war, the burning of factories and destruction of machines. The central authorities had to send in tens of thousands of troops to impose the industrial capitalist order. (See E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963.)

Another key ingredient of this new social system was the violence and theft carried out in the original accumulation—the despoliation of the traditional commons in Europe, the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans, and the conquest of America, Australia, and Asia. The massive, brutal plunder that paid for the industrialization of Europe and North America exemplifies the necessity for capital always to have a super-exploited colony and sacrifice zone. It is the exploitation of labor and the looting of nature that bring accumulation or profit, which in turn serves to reproduce social power. The creation of wealth required the creation of scarcity—a process going on today, for example, at the frontiers of capitalist development/colonization in those small subsistence cultures now under attack, be it from market expansion through the invasion of such cultures by commodities or from state capitalist megatechnical projects that displace whole cultures altogether. (See "Technological Invasion," in FE #306, the July 1981.)

For tribal and village peoples, the traditional household economies characterized by the absence of commodities and institutional outputs (and identified as "poverty" and underdevelopment" by development bureaucrats) is actually abundance; while the wealth brought by capitalist investment, industrial development, and bureaucratic institutionalization leads the vast majority to destitution and misery. "More commodities and more cash mean less life," writes ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, "in nature (through ecological destruction) and in society (through denial of basic needs)." The contemporary world starvation crisis is the result, but its roots lie in the original enclosure movement, the slave trade, and the early colonial expansions of modern capital's emergence. (See Vandana Shiva, Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development, 1989; Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, 1973, and *Shadow Work*, 1981; Sylvia Wynter, "Ethno or Socio-Poetics," in *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics*, edited by M. Benamou and J. Rothenberg, 1976.)

The state has always played a central role in capitalist development, but particularly after the mid-nineteenth century, by which time, according to James Petras, all cases of the early states of national capitalist development "involved large-scale state investments in most if not all the essential areas of the economy for varying periods of time." This is partly because by that time world capital had achieved a different scale and character from the original capitalist accumulations in Europe. No country could construct a solid national capital without a statist strategy.

In the colonial world of weaker nations and old empires left behind by advanced capitalist countries, a feeble, vacillating native bourgeoisie (what Petras calls a "lumpen bourgeoisie") served as middlemen for international capital, administering their nations as permanent sacrifice zones for the colonial powers. In such nations it was the thin middle class (petty bourgeois) layer that produced the Jacobin elites capable of leading national independence wars to create a nationalized capital under the aegis of the post-revolutionary state. Sometimes these countries developed mixed economies (Mexico in the first decades after the revolution) and sometimes they developed bureaucratic, nationalized property forms (U.S.S.R., China). These nationalist independence struggles took socialist forms: a one-party state, state ownership and planning in key industrial sectors, and socialist (populist) rhetoric and ideology. While Petras considers only so-called radical nationalist states, who used "socialist forms" to accomplish capitalist ends, "namely, the realization of profit within a class society," the description also fits the socialist bloc, where a class society realizes profit (by extracting surplus value) for the state and for the projects and the privileges of the ruling bureaucratic caste or class. ("State Capitalism in the Third World," in Petras, *Critical Perspectives on Imperialism and Social Class in the Third World*, 1978)

Thus we see the educated middle class (and in a certain sense, declasse) leaders of (usually marxist) cadre parties using marxist discourse to carry the capitalist project of industrial development, commodity production, and the accumulation of value to those places that it had not previously been able to fully penetrate. Using socialist ideology, these leaders laid the foundations for capitalism, expropriating not only the old classes but the traditional

commons, and creating internal colonies (in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, in gulag slave labor camps, and by super-exploitation of the workers for the "socialist fatherland"), to play the role that external colonies and slavery had played for the first wave of private capitalist nations.

The marxists were firm believers in the "magma" (to use Castoriadis' term) of capitalist ideology. Rejecting secondary qualities of capital (private property forms characteristic of other times and other countries), they embraced the ideology of development, industry, production, technology, and "rational mastery." To them capitalism was revolutionary and progressive because it shattered the traditional bonds that their sense of colonial inferiority (and let us be fair: their outrage at capitalist injustices) led them to reject as "backward." But socialism was even better because it could deliver what bourgeois society had only promised. The project to liberate the "means of production" from the private capitalist fetters and thus to expand productive forces made marxism, as Jacques Camatte has noted, "the authentic consciousness of the capitalist mode of production." Bourgeois and marxist cadre shared the same false consciousness. "Historical materialism is a glorification of the wandering in which humanity has been engaged for more than a century: growth of the productive forces as the condition sine-qua-non for liberation." (Camatte, *The Wandering of Humanity*, Detroit, 1975)

Gianni Collu, Camatte's collaborator, puts it another way that merits mention. All the critiques of different kinds of capitalism tend to obscure what is most important: "the transition of value to a situation of its complete autonomy." He continues:

> "This transition is a movement from value as an abstract quantity arising out of the production of goods to value as an objectified thing in itself, for the sake of which all goods are produced, and in respect to which all human activities are judged. The traditional 'left' (old and new) does not argue against such a system of value but only against the failure of capitalism to overcome the petty squabbles within production and within social relations. They see, in common with the bourgeoisie, that these squabbles prevent the smooth movement of society towards its total domination by value, toward a society in which all things can be evaluated in terms of numbers, where quantity demolishes quality. Since the left questions not the production of value but the way in which value is produced, it shares with the bourgeoisie the same project: making the production of value more and more efficient." ("Transition," 1969, translated and reprinted in *Ideas for Setting Your Mind in a Condition of Dis-ease,* Falling Sky Books, no date)

In the East Bloc an old joke explained that you could prove that the East was socialist rather than capitalist because Lenin's picture was on the money. (Even that is now changing. What image will now grace the bank notes the tsar? A banker? An historic building being dissolved by acid rain? Some animal they are driving into extinction?)

Socialism turned out to be a variant on capitalist development, though not a permanent one: the "classic" colonial form may now be restored. In 1917 an old form of capital fell to a new form; in 1991 the new form then fell to yet another. The first transformation soon became a tragedy, the second now turns tragic farce. It doesn't matter who or what is on the money. It's all capital.

4.

> "Wheel of the epoch, keep on turning…"
>
> —Andrei Voznesensky

Despite its status as an old empire and military power, Russia under the tsars was one of those peripheral nations lagging behind in capital development. The tsars began to develop state capitalism in the relative absence of the social classes and culture necessary to foment the process. By importing capital into a nation still mired in an archaic, bureaucratic despotism, where capital was incapable of catching up with the advanced European states, they unleashed the forces that would ultimately unravel their own power.

Yet the social content of the empire was not so easily superseded, even if structures and specific social classes could be substituted. As Karl Wittfogel remarked in his classic Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study in Total

Power, "nine months after the fall of the semi-managerial apparatus state of Tsardom, the Bolshevik revolution paved the way for the rise of the total managerial apparatus state of the U.S.S.R."

In Russia, the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks led almost immediately to a state capitalist regime. Lenin, sharing Marx's fetish for the "progressive" development of industrial technology and production, and fearing that the empire might revert to the "Asiatic despotism" of the tsars, consciously set out to create capitalist foundations on the backs of the revolutionary population he claimed to represent. Otherwise, he feared, there would be a restoration of the general, bureaucratic state slavery characteristic of the Asiatic despotism that Marx and others had described at different times as a mode of production distinct from slavery and feudalism. (In such a society, production was dispersed, local, and self-sustaining, but political authority was centralized and bureaucratic. Ancient China and Egypt were given as examples of this kind of society.)

In reply to critics within the Bolshevik Party (as well as from outside it) who argued that not socialism but state capitalism was being established, Lenin wrote in 1918, "If we introduced state capitalism in approximately six months' time, we would achieve a great success and a sure guarantee that within a year socialism will have gained a permanently firm hold and will have become invincible in our country." "Soviet power" had nothing to fear from state capitalism, he argued, as it would be "immeasurably superior to the present system of economy." The "sum total of the necessary conditions of socialism" was in fact "large-scale capitalist technique based on the last word of modern science…"

Lenin went even further, calling for piece work production and the application of Taylorism (time study and the rationalization of labor), and he urged the study of "the state capitalism of the Germans to spare no effort copying it." The new state should shrink from nothing in achieving its goals, neither from "the dictatorship of individual persons" nor the employment of "barbarous methods to fight barbarism." Getting the trains running on time so that merchants could make their appointments was to him "a thousand times more valuable than twenty communist resolutions," he said, making him not only the peer of Mussolini but of his free market heirs in today's former workers' state. "Socialism," he wrote that same year, "is nothing but state capitalist monopoly made to benefit the whole people." (Quoted in Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*, Solidarity/Black & Red, Detroit 1972)

Hierarchic leadership, dictatorial command and one-man management (often in the person of a former owner or manager) was absolutely essential to realize the state capitalist revolution envisioned by Lenin. As Brinton observes, "Within a year of the capture of state power by the Bolsheviks, the relations of production (shaken for a while at the height of the mass movement) had reverted to the classical authoritarian pattern seen in all class societies. The workers as workers had been divested of any meaningful decisional authority in matters that concerned them most."

Trotsky played a central role in this counterrevolution, not only turning the army into a traditional authoritarian and hierarchic structure (for example, restoring the death penalty for disobedience under fire and abolishing the elective choice of officers). He also called for the militarization of the economy and labor, demanding that military deserters and "deserters from labor" be marshalled into punitive battalions and concentration camps. "The working masses cannot be wandering all over Russia," he told a trade union congress. "They must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded, just like soldiers." (See Robert V. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia*, New York, 1969.)

In answer to a Menshevik Party opponent who argued, "You cannot build a planned economy in the way the Pharaohs built their pyramids" (an astonishingly prescient phrase, even if it reflected mostly the idea that coercion would be inefficient), Trotsky replied that even chattel slavery had been productive, and that compulsory serf labor was for its time a "progressive phenomenon" (Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879–1921*, New York 1965). In *Terrorism and Communism*, written from his military train, he argued that not only was compulsory labor necessary, but that it represented "the inevitable method of organization and disciplining of labor-power during the transition from capitalism to Socialism." Compulsion by the state would also "still play, for a considerable period, an extremely prominent part" in this process (Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, Ann Arbor, 1963). Here was not only one of the irrational consequences of "rational mastery" but the essence of how the state communist systems came to be universally known: as Daniels puts it, an "industrial society organized on military lines."

Daniels points out that the "dilemmas" faced by the communists in 1921 were already anticipated in passing by Engels, who wrote concerning the peasant wars of the Middle Ages that the worst thing for a revolutionary was to

win power in an age when his class is not ready. In such conditions, "He is compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whom conditions are ripe for domination." "In the interests of the movement itself," he continued, "Such a figure "is compelled to defend the interest of an alien class, and to feed his own class with phrases and promises, with the assertion that the interests of that alien class are their own interests."

"As a capsule analysis of Soviet Russia," comments Daniels, "this would be hard to improve upon. What is the alien class whose interests are defended? This is a complex question, but perhaps the most apt answer is that suggested in many Communist writings of the period—the 'technical intelligentsia.'"

Of course, this explicit critique of Marx was made by his anarchist contemporaries, particularly Bakunin, who had predicted that Marx's authoritarian socialism would in fact bring about a new stage of capitalist development. The statist system of Marx and Engels, Bakunin argued, "basing itself on the alleged sovereignty of the so-called will of the people… incorporates the two necessary conditions for the progress of capitalism: state centralization and the actual submission of the sovereign people to the intellectual governing minority, who, while claiming to represent the people, unfailingly exploits them." Elsewhere Bakunin writes, "The State has always been the patrimony of some privileged class: a priestly class, an aristocratic class, a bourgeois class. And finally, when all the other classes have exhausted themselves, the State then becomes the patrimony of the bureaucratic class and then falls—or if you will, rises—to the position of a machine."

Commenting on these passages, John Clark writes:

> "Bakunin, having accepted Marx's critique of bourgeois ideology as the theoretical construct which both legitimates and Veils the power relations of capitalist society, [was] extending this critique to Marxism as the emerging ideology of a developing social class, a new class whose power is rooted in the growth of centralized planning and specialized technique. On the one hand, this techno-bureaucratic class absorbs and expands the functions of previous bureaucracies, and utilizes statist ideology, which presents political domination as necessary for social order, to legitimate its existence. But, on the other hand, it incorporates the new hierarchical system of relations developing out of high technology, and legitimates the resulting domination through the ideology of productivity and economic growth. The result is a highly integrated system of planning and control, which can bypass the long process of synthetic rationalization which is necessary to achieve such a level of order and stability in societies where techno-bureaucratic functions continue to be distributed among competing systems of power and authority. Bakunin's originality consisted in his recognition, at a very early stage, of both the political-bureaucratic aspects and the scientific-technical side of such a structure, and in his perception of the nature of its legitimating underpinnings" ("Marx, Bakunin and the Problem of Social Transformation," *Telos* 42, Winter 1979–80; also chapters two and three in John Clark, *The Anarchist Moment: Reflections on Culture, Nature, and Power*, Montreal, 1986).

So, for what it is worth now, the anarchists were right about marxism a century and a half before the rest of the world witnessed the collapse of the communist mystique and the lowering of the hammer and sickle from the towers of the Kremlin. Swept into concentration camps and gunned down by the secret police in tsarist-turned-communist dungeons during the early days of the regime, anarchists and other revolutionaries paid for their opposition to bolshevik tyranny with their lives.

From 1917 to 1922 the bolshevik leadership worked tirelessly to consolidate power and create vertical command structures, setting up the police and military hierarchies, control commissions and bureaucracies, and crushing all opposition, both outside and inside the ruling party. "How can strict unity of will be ensured?" asked Lenin in April 1918. "By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one… Today the Revolution demands, in the interests of socialism, that the masses unquestioningly obey the single will [emphasis in original] of the leaders of the labor process."

In answer to critics of bureaucratization, Trotsky replied in December 1920 that Russia in fact "suffered not from the excess but from the lack of an efficient bureaucracy," according to Deutscher. (This led Stalin to dub Trotsky the "patriarch of the bureaucrats.") By 1921 and the massacre of the Kronstadt rebels, the party was firmly in control… of a chaotic enterprise lurching toward a dictatorship the likes of which not even the party leaders could

foresee. (Thus to say that Lenin was entirely single-minded in his authoritarian purpose and consciously foresaw the dictatorship he forged would be to miss the tragic element in historical events—to insist that Dr. Frankenstein understood the consequences of his activity and felt no horror when his monster no longer responded to his directions. That does not absolve the Bolsheviks and their heirs of their crimes—the world has paid a great price.)

Even inside the party there was a growing awareness that the revolution had been defeated. The "technical intelligentsia," in the words of one opposition group, had been brought to power, and the bureaucracy and the New Economic Policy functionaries had become a new bourgeoisie. The New Economic Policy had allowed capitalist market relations to reemerge in the countryside after the Bolsheviks had effectively destroyed all self-organized peasant communes and rural militias in the interests of maintaining central power under their command. Lenin labeled opposition to those policies "the most serious crime against the party."

At the same time that the bureaucracy was being consolidated under their own rule, even the party leaders warned against it. One detects a nagging awareness of the discrepancy between their intentions and the consequences, their alleged ends and means—a recognition that was the crux of the anarchists' critique of authoritarian socialism during the mid-nineteenth century debates and later. The Bolsheviks admitted that they had created the apparatus from "such materials as we had at hand," as Trotsky said, referring to the hundreds of thousands of tsarist officials hired by the new state to manage and to quell the workers and peasants who balked at the harness prepared for them by their communist liberators. "We took over the old apparatus, and this was our misfortune," confessed Lenin in 1922.

Anti-bureaucratic moves from above—such as expanding the central committee with workers and rank-and-file party members—had the opposite effect of bringing more apparatchiks loyal to the Secretariat (led by Stalin) into positions of power. As Daniels observes, "By a process of natural selection the key jobs in the party apparatus were filled with the kind of people who performed well in a hierarchical, disciplined organization…'apparatus men'—who carried out orders effectively and were resolute in combating opposition activities." This is the group that ushered Stalin into power. "It was not as an individual but as the representative, almost the embodiment, of the secretarial machinery that Stalin accumulated power and prepared the ground for his absolute rule."

By 1923 Lenin believed that the bureaucratic state he founded was reverting to the Asiatic despotism he had feared. By then, however, it was far too late for him to do anything about it, even had he been able to transform his authoritarian mode of thinking to see through the process. His party, under his leadership, had wrecked all manifestations of independent revolutionary and communal activity, suppressing and murdering thousands of people in the process.

In an excessively generous essay on Lenin's "moral dilemmas," Isaac Deutscher writes that by 1922, the bolshevik leader was saying "that often he had the uncanny sensation which a driver has when he suddenly becomes aware that his vehicle is not moving in the direction in which he steers it." "Powerful forces," Lenin declared, "diverted the Soviet Union from its 'proper road'" (Deutscher, *Ironies of History*, Berkeley, 1966). Lenin's party was, of course, itself one of the powerful forces; but it, too, was compelled by the ideology of an epoch, the epoch of the rise of statified bureaucratic capital.

Lenin was nevertheless wrong to think that the nation state he founded had sunk back into simple tsardom—wrong, in Wittfogel's estimation, "because it underrated the economic mentality of the men of the new apparatus." They were "not satisfied with ruling over a world of peasants and craftsmen. They knew the potential of modern industry… The nationalized industrial apparatus of the new semi-managerial order provided them with new weapons of organization, propaganda, and coercion, which enabled them to liquidate the small peasant producers as an economic category. The completed collectivization transformed the peasants into agricultural workers who toil for a single master: the new apparatus state… We can truly say that the October revolution, whatever its expressed aims, gave birth to an industry-based system of general (state) slavery."

The society created by marxism-leninism was a new hybrid of capitalism and the despotism of the ancient slave states—a kind of state capitalism, though certainly not the only kind, since private Western capitalism has also evolved into state capitalism. Nor can it be described as an inevitable stage of development in a world-historical progression; it was simply a consequence of the conditions that global capital had previously established, and thus an alternative in the development of capital. And yet it was also something more, what Lewis Mumford called "the

first attempt to modernize the oppressive megamachine," that would later be followed by the Nazi state and the Allied Powers during the Second World War.

The dictatorship consolidated its power, Mumford argued, by "utilizing the bureaucratic apparatus and the psychological conditioning of the antiquated megamachine"—submission to power and a quasi-religious loyalty to the state and the leader, as well as the suppression of all rival institutions and mass murders of dissidents and independent thinkers. Stalin became a kind of divine king whose "solemn pronouncements on every subject from the mechanism of genetic inheritance to the origins of language were fatuously hailed as the voice of omniscience… [a tendency which] later became magnified even to the point of gross caricature—if that were possible—in the pronouncements of Mao Tse-tung."

Mumford's characterization of the new megamachine also hints at the "sinister defects of the ancient megamachine" that contributed to its failure: "its reliance upon physical coercion and terrorism, its systematic enslavement of the entire working population, including members of the dictatorial party, its suppression of free personal intercourse, free travel, free access to the existing store of knowledge, free association, and finally its imposition of human sacrifice to appease the wrath and sustain the life of its terrible, blood-drinking God, Stalin himself. The result of this system was to transform the entire country into a prison, part concentration camp, part extermination laboratory, from which the only hope of escape was death… The fact that Stalin, like Lenin before him, was treated at death to the ancient Egyptian process of mummification and was put on view for public worship, makes the parallel almost too neat to seem anything but contrived… But so it actually was." (The Pentagon of Power, New York, 1970)

5.

> "So he had been asleep! Oh, dear what a wonderful dream that was! And why had he wakened?… The cheerless dawn shed its dull, unpleasant light through his window… Oh, how disgusting reality was! How could it ever be compared with a dream?"
>
> —Nicolai Gogol, "Nevsky Avenue" (1835)

> "After the thesis, capitalism, and the antithesis, socialism, here is the product of the thesis: the society of plastic."
>
> —B. Charbonneau, quoted in Jacques Ellul's *The Technological System*

One can only speculate as to why the Soviet Union collapsed as a political entity now rather than during the crises of the 1930s or the Second World War. Perhaps it was due to an insurmountable tension between the ossified tsarist megamachine inherited by the Bolsheviks and perfected by Stalin, and the modernized megamachine constructed after the war. The old megamachine served as the foundation for a new, more cosmopolitan system and was eventually outgrown by it in a way perhaps analogous to the way in which slavery in the southern U.S. paid for and eventually succumbed to the forces of industrial capitalism in the north. As capital developed in complexity, it burst its own limitations, bringing the political system down with it.

Certainly by the end of the 1980s the regime had become weaker and much more brittle. The hollowness of official ideology and the pervasive corruption left only a thin layer of support among its political retainers and massive discontent among the rest of the population. Rising expectations generated by the commodity/spectacle system of the West, and the failures of state socialism to fulfill its promises, both helped to bring the regime to an impasse between two worlds, two different configurations of capital—just like the one Russian tsardom had faced.

In marxist terms, the experience of soviet socialism meant that generations of brutality, dictatorship, and exploitation were the way the nation had "progressed" from a medieval empire to a state practicing the "capitalist mode of production." The socialist "dictatorship of the proletariat" provided the internal colonies, the primary enclosures, and the superexploitation of certain sectors and populations, as well as the subsequent investments for the early stages of capitalist development.

In his essay on state capitalism in the Third World, Petras argues that the historical experience of state capitalist regimes suggests "that whatever the initial dynamic and innovation, over the long term stagnation, privatization, and external dependence are recurring phenomena. Insertion into the world capitalist market on unequal terms and increasing indebtedness leads to a crisis that proceeds toward the dissolution of statism as a mode of expansion." What is important is that capital continue to expand; the socialist state may have to "wither away" if need be to facilitate the process.

This "police-as-capitalist" road "worked wonders in procuring preliminary capital," as Fredy Perlman put it, but not so well in managing it (*The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, Detroit 1985). The commissars were as inept as their tsarist predecessors had been, and stayed afloat only as long as they were able to effectively conquer new sources of preliminary capital accumulation. (The Chinese communists, though perhaps marginally better administrators, are probably in the same situation as the soviets, caught between the old style megamachine and the modern, more flexible fragmented form characteristic of international private capital. As they appropriate the products, techniques, and development strategies of Western capital and enter into joint ventures with it, they are bound to face similar internal contradictions. Only recently, according to an Associated Press report in January, Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping warned that the Communist Party will lose control if it fails to embrace a market economy. "If capitalism has something good," he was reported as saying, "then socialism should bring it over and use it.")

This phenomenon was anticipated indirectly by Marx, though in a way quite unlike the actual outcome. In the *Grundrisse* he describes capital as permanently revolutionary: "Just as capital has the tendency on one side to create ever more surplus labor, so it has the complementary tendency to create more points of exchange… i.e., at bottom, to propagate production based on capital, or the mode of production corresponding to it. The tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome."

The Soviet Union appeared as the result of the overcoming of such barriers in a manner never considered by Marx (though clearly anticipated by Bakunin). Its unraveling was equally the result of this "constant tearing down," as Marx put it, of "all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural forces. Rather than a simplistic fixation on bourgeois private property relations, Marx's description of expanding capital suggests a broader definition of the phenomenon (a dialectical view, if you will), that studies capital's dynamic movement and evolution—a view necessary to understand the modern world.

The desire for industrial growth and the expansion of needs, for the exploitation and valorization of nature for exchange is shared by bourgeois and commissar alike; it is the ideology of the modern world, East and West, left and right, and is explicitly questioned by only a few marginal dissidents and indigenous peoples. When Nikita Kruschev pounded his shoe on the table at the United Nations in 1960 and promised to "bury" the West, he wasn't referring to a different life beyond the commodity system but better delivery—a kind of sputnik of consumption/production that was bound to fail given the relative power of the rival economies and other historical factors.

"The Industrial Revolution was merely the beginning of a revolution as extreme and radical as ever inflamed the minds of sectarians," Polanyi comments, "but the new creed was utterly materialistic and believed that all human problems could be resolved given an unlimited amount of material commodities." Apart from differences in the distribution of goods and services produced to meet expanding needs (including the expanding needs of production), neither Marx nor the systems bearing his name ultimately questioned this impulse. Thus the Soviet Union did not bury the West but rather the chimera of industrial socialism. The increasingly commoditized mass society created by state socialist forms tended to erode these very forms and what little legitimacy they could summon.

In a world dominated by more powerful Western economies, a techno-bureaucracy already conditioned by greed, cynicism, hierarchic thinking, and a pragmatic instrumentalism—in other words, the very prerequisites for leadership roles in corporate capitalism—began to be won over, along with disaffected sections of the population as a whole, to the religion of economic gain. This was a way to jettison the unwieldy and hated symbols of the old regime while maintaining privilege and power, at least for the time being. (Nobody wanted to end up like Ceaucescu, after all.) They reached an understanding with IBM, Mitsubishi and McDonaldization just as the tsarist factory managers, government bureaucrats and military officers had been recruited by Bolshevism.

Whether or not this caste will be able to evolve into anything other than a neocolonial "lumpen bourgeoisie" that enriches itself by siphoning off value from a new enlarged sacrifice zone to the private capitalist economies

remains to be seen, but no other scenario is apparent. Capital must constantly find new colonies and sacrifice zones for super-exploitation. In the former Soviet Union, the sacrifice zone will be the Siberian forests and oil, as well as the "enclosure" of those basic social supports that state socialism (despite its horrible crimes and like some ancient megamachine civilizations), tended to provide. The people of the new "commonwealth" are going to get the worst of both worlds—a system that combines the most effective forms of accumulation and repression of both Stalin and Thatcher.

Everyone has probably heard a version of the story of the Russian emigre who, when taken to one of the computerized mega-supermarkets in a U.S. suburb, wept. Would he have wept in front of the Detroit jail, where hungry, homeless people line up nightly in hopes of sleeping inside if it is not too full? For every mega-market there are innumerable starving people. Many of the people straining to pull down the commissar state and its monuments were nevertheless moved by the rhythm of the chief commissar's pounding shoe. (Kruschev even loved Disneyland.) But capital never could (and capitalists never intended to) enrich everyone. The entire world can't be like the handful of small, relatively humane capitalist societies like Sweden. Someone has to pay the hidden costs. The people who in desperation welcomed the idea of markets are now being reminded that property was, is, and always will be theft.

In 1918 the bolshevik Karl Radek warned that the revolution would "rise like a phoenix" if it were smashed by its bourgeois foes; if, however, the revolution itself "lost its socialist character and thereby disappointed the working masses, the blow would have ten times more terrible consequences for the future of the Russian and the international revolution" (quoted in Brinton). He could not have known how prophetic his words were. In a few generations soviet socialism led to conditions in which people would rebel in order to bring about market capitalism, which could end up reducing them to the kind of beggary and hunger that had caused tsarist Russia to explode.

The international counter-revolutionary role of the soviet state is too well-documented to be reiterated here. In the Eastern Bloc itself, however, the brutal form of capital constructed by the marxist-leninist party state ended up creating the necessary conditions to fully integrate its population into global capital, and a more fully modernized megamachine. Like Moses, the party state could not follow its people into the promised land of the commodity. The state was superfluous, an impediment to the smooth circulation and accumulation of value.

As Mumford observed, contrasting the old and new megamachines, "whereas the earlier modes of achieving productivity and conformity were largely external… those now applied to consumption are becoming internalized, and therefore harder to throw off." When the Berlin Wall came down it was partly because it no longer meaningfully held anyone or anything in or out. The boundaries had already been abolished, and the behemoth imploded.

Though Lenin argued somewhere that socialism was "electrification plus workers' councils," he made electrification his priority. And it was electrification and all that it implies—a mass energy grid, mining, technocratic planning, toxic chemicals, alienated and compartmentalized labor, hierarchy and vertical command, and societal addiction to a mass energy life—that triumphed in the end.

just as state socialism was a vehicle for capitalism's emergence, it is necessary to understand capitalism as the vehicle for a mass, megatechnic civilization, the nuclear-cybernetic-petrochemical megamachine that is everywhere proving itself quite adaptable to private corporate capital, bureaucratic state agencies, and even workers' councils (and perhaps working best in the long run in some combination of the three). The quasi-religious ideology of the epoch, that of mass technological development, is questioned by virtually no one. And no one (with very few exceptions) is managing to halt it anywhere, even temporarily.

It makes no sense to think about capital simply in terms of markets and property forms, as some naifs would have it. It is a culture and a mode of being. This culture corresponds to the violence and separation that destroyed a myriad of traditional societies, their commons, and their organic, inspirited cosmos. Through conquest and plunder, this planetary multiverse was reduced to the quantitative in social reproduction (commodity society) and consciousness (rationalist-reductionist science), establishing an economic-instrumental civilization on the human past. Whether it calls itself capitalist, socialist, democratic, or fascist, its project is essentially the same: the establishment of a megatechnic work pyramid to expand empires (big mafias and small), through the reduction of nature and human communities to an archipelago of sacrifice zones or gulags from which value is extracted for the maintenance and expanded power of the hierarchy.

"The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist," wrote Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. What, then, does a global treadmill give you? The bureaucrat, the development consultant, the laboratory scientist, the technician, the worker, the consumer, the agricultural drudge, the starving castoff. A village turned into a factory, a forest turned into a traffic jam, a hearth into a television. A mountain turned into a toxic slag heap.

Capitalism created a technological system that in turn gave a new content to capitalism. As Jacques Ellul has written, "It is not machines that are shipped to all the countries on earth, it is, in reality, the ensemble of the technological world—both a necessity, if machines are to be usable, and a consequence of the accumulation of machines. It is a style of life, a set of symbols, an ideology" (*The Technological System*, New York, 1980)

"The capitalist system has been swallowed up by the technological system," writes Ellul. But he misses the point: technology and capital are both surpassing their limitations, in runaway fashion, but neither has been swallowed by the other. Capital has in fact always been a hybrid, in its early stages most particularly a hybrid of mercantile industrialism and chattel slavery.

Modern techno-capitalism is no less a syncretic hybrid, never abolishing the irrationalities and brutalities of prior hierarchic/class societies, but rather contemporizing and layering them within its structure. No form of misery has been left behind: all coexist in interpenetrating, contradictory, but functioning agglomerations—from the abject slavery of Latin American fincas to the electronic sweatshops of Southeast Asia to the military laboratories in semi-feudal theocratic Muslim states to the planning committees of private capitalist utilities in the U.S. It is all capital, with men in suits and uniforms at the helm, unleashing a planetary catastrophe in their insane pursuit of power and imperial glory.

Everywhere they are burning the Amazon; everywhere they are machine-gunning campesinos, everywhere they are raining bombs down on Basra; everywhere they are setting up new gulags; everywhere they are causing Bhopals; everywhere they are deadening the spirit. And people are fighting, but they are mostly fighting each other, shedding blood from behind flags to prop up their own little mafias of men in suits and uniforms. The whole world is a "Yugoslavia with nukes." Our species is not finding its way out of the labyrinth.

6.

> "Every time history repeats itself the price goes up." popular sign, quoted by Joseph Tainter in *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge and New York, 1988)

> "Make yourself a plan, One that dazzles you! Now make yourself a second plan, Neither one will do."
>
> —Bertolt Brecht

> "I want to be the yellow sail sailing to the land we're headed for."
>
> —Sergei Esenin (1920)

As I write the concluding section of this essay in mid-February, Russia and Ukraine continue to wrangle over control of the military. The "prison house of nations" that was the Russian empire and then the Soviet Union crumbles, but nationalism and sectarian violence are growing. Forgetting that all nation states are prisons by definition, people grasp at straws, blaming their neighbors for the misfortunes of post-imperial chaos.

People can now be seen selling their personal belongings on street corners to get money for food. (They're "learning the ropes" of entrepreneurial capitalism, comments one Western consultant.) Did they overthrow stalinist tyranny to become another Mexico or Brazil? At least not yet. They haven't stopped resisting.

Will the former soviet empire decline slowly like Byzantium, without nuclear civil war or other horrors? No one can say. Conditions look grim. Yet mutual aid, solidarity, and resistance were able to reemerge after stalinism had done decades of damage; they are not likely to disappear now.

An anthropological critique starting from the long view of the soviet system as a kind of megamachine empire leads to a comparison with others. Even the (so far) partial collapse of the soviet system has implications for the

societies of the West. Certainly, this has been understood by the rulers. U.S. Secretary of State James Baker commented in December, "Held together by a single rope, a fall toward fascism or anarchy in the former Soviet Union will pull the West down, too." (*The New York Times,* 12/13/92) A "fall toward anarchy" might indeed be all that can stop the imposition of fascism, and if it affects the U.S., let all the rulers hang by that same rope. We might forever recall 1991 as the year of the Fall of Communism and 1992 as the year of the Fall of Capitalism.

Could the Soviet Union be a bellwether anticipating the failure of development and the bankruptcy of industrialism internationally? What can we learn from the decomposition of a contemporary civilization that might be relevant to us?

Wittfogel speaks of a "law of diminishing administrative returns" that seems as appropriate to the state socialist bloc as it was to the forms of "Asiatic despotism" he compared. This is a tendency in such despotic empires for equivalent, "and even increased, administrative endeavors [to] cost more than they yield… The downward movement is completed when additional outlay yields no additional reward whatsoever. We have then reached the absolute administrative frustration point."

In his recent study *The Collapse of Complex Societies,* Joseph Tainter attempts to expand this insight into a comparative critique of collapse of ancient civilizations and other complex societies in history. There are problematic aspects to Tainter's perspective; for example, it seems excessively deterministic and economistic, yet his examination of collapse nags provocatively at anyone thinking about megatechnic civilization. "Sociopolitical organizations," he argues, "constantly encounter problems that require increased investment merely to preserve the status quo." (Note his economistic language here.)

Nevertheless, one can agree with Tainter that in megamachines, at least, the necessary investment goes to "increasing size of bureaucracies, cumulative organizational solutions, increasing costs of internal control and external defense. All of these must be done by levying greater costs on the support population, often to no increased advantage." As the costs increase, "the marginal return begins to decline… Ever greater increments of investment yield ever smaller increments of return… At this point, a complex society reaches the phase where it becomes increasingly vulnerable to collapse…"

It's hard not to recall the breakdown of soviet bureaucratic despotism in the light of this passage. In the top-heavy totalitarian regime, where according to the catechism every cook would manage the state, the state interfered in the kitchen of every cook. The maintenance of managerial rule became more and more costly, organizationally and financially, to the point where it was no longer tenable. A kind of entropy principle was at work: the more loops of inputs and outputs, the more unwieldy the machine, the more energy sacrificed simply to maintain it. As returns diminish, a society that works as a machine breaks down.

Tainter sees collapse as a way for a society to provide some semblance of continuity, if at a lower level: a kind of "Chapter 11" bankruptcy proceeding. A civilization is compelled to cut its losses and scale down. "Societies collapse when stress requires some organizational change." In a situation of declining marginal returns, in which the payoff for increased outputs would be too low, "collapse is an economical alternative… [and] may be the most appropriate response." In the case of the Soviet Union, the party state was gangrenous and could be cut away, leaving a section of the hierarchy in place. The decline of many of the services provided by the state would also represent a savings for the center (or rather for the balkanized centers now consolidating in the aftermath of breakdown).

While the breakdown of the Soviet Union is not a collapse of the sort described by Tainter, fleeting aspects of collapse are evident. Things fall apart, chaos looms, there are shortages of food and other supplies for the maintenance of civil society. According to one report, "Cuts in services, stoppages at factories, delays in deliveries, and salary freezes have been mounting… There has also been a rise in lawlessness, from running red lights to hijacking, and a breakdown in the old rules of social behavior, from pushing ahead of old people in milk lines to going door-to-door begging for money." (*The New York Times*, 12/13/91)

One would not expect the bourgeois "newspaper of record" to notice the examples of autonomous self-activity and mutualism of groups that must be occurring in parts of the Soviet Union, but there is still enough troubling evidence that the society is adrift. One would hope that in the breakdown of tyranny, elements of communal solidarity would emerge among the former inmates, but so far the picture does look more like the opening shots of a Hobbesian war-of-all-against-all.

This, of course, is the familiar "script," as Tainter puts it, of any collapse, at least in the popular consciousness—social chaos, a grim struggle over meager resources just to survive, the strong preying on the weak—but this dramatic picture "does contain many elements that are verifiable in past collapses." It is a grim reminder, if the historical record teaches anything, that breakdown is more an outcome of entropy than of the kind of coherence we might seek. And entropy is neither gentle nor pretty.

In the modern world, of course, no nation state can utterly collapse like ancient empires did. The world is now filled with clusters of rival megamachines, and a power vacuum in any area will be filled by the expansion of another. In past examples of this kind of configuration such as the Mycenaeans and the Maya, all the rival civilizations had to suffer mutual collapse. Thus, if socialism in one country was impossible, the same can be said about collapse. A collapse of civilization as we know it today would have to be global and relatively simultaneous.

As unlikely as this prospect may appear, nevertheless, as Tainter concludes, even if global industrialism has not reached the point of diminishing returns, "that point will inevitably arrive… However much we like to think of ourselves as something special in world history, in fact industrial societies are subject to the same principles that caused earlier societies to collapse." Will the horrors of modern capitalism be equaled or surpassed by its aftermath? Events in the East Bloc only suggest some scenarios. Let us not underestimate the capacity of common people to discover alternatives in time (even if at a great price), and to find a way through the crisis. They have not yet had their say.

But one thing must be clear by now: a world made fit for life once more can never come from the failed mystique, revolutionary or otherwise, of more growth and further modernization; and it can come even less from impotent survivalist gestures in the face of breakdown. In the first case, saving industrialism from its own inertia by "democratizing" the treadmill is not only a socialism of fools and a surrender to reconstituted hierarchies, it is ultimately a losing venture. As for digging bunkers at the margins (if they could be found), it is a destiny not worth living—existing on a denuded star when the cosmos of meaning has turned to dust.

Maintaining human decency in the face of whatever comes, affirming a kind of moral and ethical coherence, preserving memory, defending human personhood and all the interconnectedness of the phenomenal world—these thin reeds are all we have. By articulating a coherent refusal of capital and the new megamachine it generated, those who question the grid, the state, and the world they require may make a small opening for others to follow, encouraging practical responses as well as the communal solidarity that represents our only hope for survival.

One way or another, global capitalism will eventually follow its communist rival into collapse, and growth will "grind to a halt," as Ivan Illich predicted fifteen years before Tainter in words that also subtly bring to mind the soviet crisis. This breakdown will be "the result of synergy in the failure of the multiple systems that fed its expansion," he wrote. "Almost overnight people will lose confidence not only in the major institutions but also in the miracle-prescriptions of the would-be crisis managers." The ability of the hierarchy to define and determine "will suddenly be extinguished because it will be recognized as an illusion…"

Again, Illich was talking about both blocs. He argued that such a moment should be "welcomed as a crisis of revolutionary liberation because our present institutions abridge basic human freedom for the sake of providing people [in fact, only some people-G.B.] with more institutional outputs." (*Tools for Conviviality*, New York, 1973) In spite of the dangers, such a devolution may be our only hope of breaking free of the megamachine complex. By shrugging off the onerous burden of treadmill culture, we may consciously choose the "appropriate response" of collapse, and find ways to let it be a disaster for capital but an adventure for ourselves.

This means, without exception and without any hesitation on our part, the abolition of all empires, of a world of sacrifice zones, drudgery, penury and the toxic cornucopia of commodity society. It means the renewal of subsistence cultures, which still hang on in villages, among tribal peoples struggling to survive, and even among people finding practical responses in the fissures and cracks of civilization. It means making a life that is slower, quieter, and more contemplative. It means revivifying an esthetic not of the assembly line but of the forest, and restoring a life that can hear what the natural world is telling us, what we once knew long ago and have forgotten as the urban labyrinth grew up around us and enclosed us.

Megatechnic capital may, of course, find a way to entirely suffocate what is humane in us before it reaches its inevitable limits and implodes under its own inertia. There are laboratories and think tanks working around the clock to do just that, even if they have called this eclipse our ultimate "liberation."

So far, though, we are still alive, and some of us still know who we are. Life's adventure cannot be found at control panels or desks, or in digging the foundations for the work pyramid, or building higher storeys in its edifice. Nor is it to be found consuming the laboratory chow of McDonaldization at the petrochemical banquet table, or running on its treadmill to nowhere. It is with the fabric of the living world, the universe itself. We are living an aberration, a nightmarish turn from our true journey. Let all the empires crumble. It is time we rejoined the dance.

—George Bradford

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George Bradford (David Watson)
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