

The Prince and the Revolutionary

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Abstract:

According to Saint-Just, the revolutionary sees what nobody else can see. According to Descartes, the Prince sees what the commoner does not. Although Stalin was not acquainted with either of these conceptions, he acted as if he had drawn his own conclusion : only the revolutionary may be a Prince in the modern world. Thus Stalin gave a new meaning to Lenin's famous conception of the omnipotence of Marxist theory. While Lenin conflated what Lacan defines as S_1 and S_2 , Stalin modified Marxism-Leninism in a radical way. He rediscovered the distinction between S_1 and S_2 . On the other hand, he propounded his own definition of S_1 ; the subject who embodies S_1 is like Saint-Just's revolutionary and Descartes' Prince : he knows what none other knows. The theoretical and practical consequences of such a move are incalculable. Some of them were terrifying. But it cannot be denied that they corrected some fundamental defects of Lenin's political choices.

Keywords:

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I shall not differ from the common consensus that the Stalinist regime was a tyranny. That assessment being granted, I intend to raise the following question : Did Stalin consciously and freely choose tyranny ? Did that choice contradict the revolutionary convictions that he publicly professed or was it, to a certain extent, coherent with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of revolution ?

Since the Russian revolutionaries often claimed to be inspired by the French Revolution and the *Comité de Salut public*, I feel justified in returning to one of the main figures in Robespierre's circle. Saint-Just wrote in 1794 : *Ceux qui font des révolutions ressemblent au premier navigateur instruit par son audace*, «Those who make revolutions resemble a first navigator, who has audacity alone as a guide. »¹ This sentence is strangely reminiscent of Descartes' letter to Princess Elisabeth from September 1646. Asked by the Princess to comment on Machiavelli's *Prince*, Descartes discusses one of the most important similes of the text. A Prince, according to Machiavelli, is situated on a higher place than a commoner. Because he is removed from the plane, he doesn't see its layout in detail; thus the commoner is better qualified for studying the effective state of things. Descartes refutes that claim. Precisely because the Prince is in a higher situation, he sees farther than the commoner. He sees what the commoner does not. Consequently, no commoner may

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Saint-Just 2004a, p. 695.

express a relevant judgment on the Prince's choices.²

In Saint-Just's analogy, the explorer discovers what no one has seen before. There is no previous map of the political regions that he enters. This ignorance is particularly true of those who do not participate in the exploration. They cannot see what the revolutionaries see. Of course, the latter do not occupy a higher position than the former. Nevertheless their political perceptions are radically different. Moreover, there is no previous theoretical or practical science of revolution that could be common to the revolutionaries and their non-revolutionary counterparts. Consequently no one but revolutionaries themselves may express a judgment on their choices. The parallel with Descartes is striking, but Saint-Just's analogy entails yet another consequence.

Revolutionary reality is compared to an undiscovered part of the earth. To suppose that it is possible to draw up a map of a revolution before its occurrence would be self-contradictory. Saint-Just would have rejected Lenin's *The State and Revolution* as a masterpiece in science fiction. Indeed, the whole program of Marxism-Leninism is rejected in advance. Such is the paradox of what is commonly called "the revolutionary tradition." It supposes that several revolutions in history share a set of features and that this set defines an ideal type of revolution, the most prominent source of such features being the French Revolution. But, as one of the main participants of that historical sequence, Saint-Just would have unflinchingly opposed such a conception.

In his view, every revolution is a type in itself. Let us pursue his analogy between a revolution and an exploration. Christopher Columbus' discovery of America has nothing in common with La Pérouse's expedition around the world. La Pérouse could not learn anything useful from Columbus' accounts. Incidentally, the reader should be reminded that La Pérouse's attempt began in 1785 and aroused a keen interest. Its fateful end in 1788 was still unknown in 1794. It is quite possible that Saint-just had just this example in mind.

According to Saint-Just, the revolutionary subject, *le révolutionnaire*, is defined by his knowledge with respect to the non-revolutionary. With respect to himself, however, the revolutionary subject is defined by his "non-knowledge." He does not know what he will discover. No one has preceded him; no one, except himself and his companions, is in a position to know what he has discovered; no one, except himself and his companions, can verify or falsify his declarations about his discoveries. Saint-Just does not fully discuss the question of the possible mendacity of the revolutionary, but the parallel with Descartes is easy to draw. Descartes argued that God could not lie, because the proposition "God is a liar" is self-contradictory. Obviously,

² Regnault 1967 remains unsurpassed.

Saint-Just must rely on an analogous assumption; a lying revolutionary would be a contradiction in itself, *Un homme révolutionnaire ... est l'irréconciliable ennemi de tout mensonge*, "a revolutionary person is irreconcilably averse to any kind of lie."³

Consider now the Cartesian Prince. He shares many features with Saint-Just's revolutionary. He does not know beforehand what he will see from his exalted position; hence Descartes' skepticism with respect to Machiavelli's attempt. There is no *art des princes*, because each decision that a prince makes is incomparable to every other decision, be it made by the same prince in a different situation or by another prince in an analogous situation. No one except the Prince himself and possibly his counselors, is able to know what the Prince sees. If by chance he expresses himself about his decision, his reasons or the situation on which he must decide, no one can verify or falsify his declarations. The commoner must accept what the Prince chooses to tell him; indeed it is his civic duty to believe the Prince.

Here however a difference with Saint-Just comes to light; Descartes does not explicitly exclude the possibility of a lying Prince. At least, there is no contradiction between the definition of a Prince and his decision to lie. Yet, there is a contradiction between the definition of the political subject of a Prince and the subject's decision to doubt his Prince or rather to act as if he doubted his Prince.

I do not suppose that Stalin was acquainted with Descartes' or Saint-Just's writings. It is however fruitful to summarize his actions in the following terms : Stalin conflates the systemic non-knowledge that surrounds the Prince and the systemic non-knowledge that surrounds the revolutionary. Stalin's line of reasoning may be reconstructed as follows : since industrial capitalism, as theorized by Marx, allows only impersonal power, there is no place for a personal power in the modern world, except among those who fight against industrial capitalism. But such fighters are called revolutionaries. Conclusion : according to Stalin, only the revolutionary may hold a personal power. When translated in Machiavelli's and Descartes' vocabulary, this conclusion becomes : only the revolutionary may be a Prince in the modern world. In other words, the revolutionary is the Prince who decides on the revolution.

Since unicity belongs to the definition of the Prince, there is only one revolutionary in a given revolutionary situation. A revolutionary party should be a device that at, each level of decision, produces the required unicity of the corresponding revolutionary Prince. Such is the organization of a communist party; it is called "democratic centralism." For example, Lenin is *the* revolutionary in October 1917, since he

³ Saint-Just 2004b, p. 747.

alone decides that the circumstances call for a revolutionary action. One distinctive feature of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine concerns the connection between revolution and the State. Whereas the classical doctrine teaches that a revolution stops as soon as a new type of State is established, Lenin holds that the revolution does not stop with the conquest of the State; on the contrary, it continues in the form of the State. Marx's expression "dictatorship of the proletariat" is used by Lenin in order to summarize the theorem : *the revolutionary State is the continuation of the revolution by other means*. Consequently, Stalin acts as if he treated the two following statements as equivalent : the revolutionary is the Prince who decides on the revolution/ in a revolutionary State, the Prince is the revolutionary who decides on the State.

The non-knowledge of the non-revolutionaries and the non-knowledge of the subjects of the Prince are the same. No citizen of a revolutionary State is to be considered a revolutionary, since in such a State there is only one revolutionary, who is, as such, the Prince. Whenever a citizen is considered as a revolutionary or considers himself as such, he is a traitor and a conspirator. In her memoirs, Bukharin's widow quotes one of Stalin's most striking remarks; Bukharin was complaining about the attacks he was sustaining in the Central Committee and alluded indignantly to what he had done for the Revolution; Stalin replied with indifference that nobody had done more for the Revolution than Trotsky.⁴ He did not imply that Trotsky deserved any special consideration for this reason. On the contrary, he implied that neither Trotsky nor Bukharin had grasped what was at stake : since there is only one true revolutionary in a given revolution, treason begins when anyone else believes himself to have done something *by himself* for the Revolution.

Socialism in one country became Stalin's motto. It must be completed : *Socialism in one country* entails *Revolution in one person*. The cult of personality is identical with the cult of Revolution. The embalming of Lenin's body simply acknowledges his political status; by deciding on the Revolution in 1917, he had proved himself to be *the* revolutionary in a crucial circumstance. The only adequate way to honor that moment was to honor the individual who triggered it; by initiating such a cult, Stalin transformed Lenin into a revolutionary Prince. At the same time, he asserted himself as the one true successor of Lenin. As such, he became both a revolutionary and a Prince. More precisely, he became *the* revolutionary and *the* Prince.

Stalinists considered their own non-knowledge as a legitimation

4 Larina-Boukharina 1989, p. 319.

of Stalin's leadership. Such is their definition. For example, the German Soviet pact came as an unjustifiable surprise for those who, in Western Europe, had considered the USSR to be the last refuge against Nazism. Some members of the European Communist parties broke their allegiance; many sympathizers were shocked. But a true Stalinist would conclude on the contrary that his own inability to understand Stalin's decision was the ultimate proof of Stalin's superior knowledge. The line of reasoning was not : "Stalin is right although we do not understand," but "We do not understand, therefore Stalin is right." Indeed, the Stalinists had unwittingly rediscovered Descartes' implicit doctrine : the revolutionary, who is a Prince - or alternately the Prince, who is a revolutionary - may lie. This possibility involves no contradiction. But those who fight for the revolution must follow the revolutionary (or alternately the Prince) and they may not doubt him; that would be self-contradictory, since their obedience and absolute confidence are the sole features that authenticate their own participation in the revolution.

It is easy to criticize such a position. It is easy to show its terrifying consequences. It is less easy to demonstrate that it is absolutely foreign to the revolutionary ideal. For the revolution, by definition, combines a dimension of knowledge with a dimension of non-knowledge. Saint-Just's declaration is impossible to disprove. If the revolution is defined by the struggle between the old and the new, the new, for its part, may be defined by its being unknown. Hence the definition of a revolution as a struggle between the known and the unknown.

Lacan distinguishes between S_1 and S_2 . S_1 is the *signifiant-maître*; as indicated by its index, it is structurally first. Each utterance of S_1 functions as if it were unprecedented. S_2 on the other hand, is knowledge, *le savoir*; as indicated by its index, it is structurally second. S_1 functions as the *signifiant-maître* as long as it is excepted from knowledge; by uttering that *signifiant*, the subject asserts that it is the name of everyone's ignorance, including his own. Among the verbal tenses, it is disconnected from all past tenses. S_2 , by contrast, is crucially connected with a past tense : it is still already known. In a revolution, S_1 is materialized by the very word *revolution*. Its strength lies precisely in the structural impossibility to describe the reality with which it is associated. A Marxist revolution, however, tries to do the impossible : to close the gap between S_1 and S_2 . It connects a bundle of features to the notion of revolution : the overthrow of the former ruling class, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the appropriation of all means of production, etc. In Stalin's version of such a revolution, he concentrates in his own person S_1 and S_2 . He blends them together. He knows what was already known, in its entirety. He also knows what cannot be known by anyone but himself : what the revolution should do in order to continue. Since S_1 and S_2 are blended in his person only, the cult of personality is both opportune and legitimate.

Incidentally, S_2 is but another designation for the whole of culture;

the essential difference between Stalin and Mao becomes clear then. They treat the alterity between S_1 and S_2 in an opposite way. In order to preserve the strength of the notion of revolution, Stalin unites it with culture and the past. Hence his well-known doctrine of language : no revolution changes linguistic structure. In other words, there is always a part of S_2 that shall be maintained, provided that it is blended with S_1 . Mao on the contrary thinks that the power of S_1 is guaranteed if and only if all former instances of S_2 are destroyed. He rejects Stalin's doctrine about language; if language were not affected by the revolution, it would imply that language is real, while revolution is imaginary. From Mao's point of view, a revolution is real if, and only if, it treats the whole of culture as an enemy. Hence the cultural revolution. There is no way to blend S_1 and S_2 .

As opposed as they are in the way they deal with the alterity between S_1 and S_2 , Stalin and Mao agree on the point of the alterity itself. The intuition of such an alterity underlies also Saint-Just's saying; the navigator is the master of his ship, who leads the expedition and determines its discoveries; in fact the very word *discovery* materializes S_1 . Saint-Just is concerned with the discovery as such, *before* it is integrated to S_2 . The notion of audacity tries to capture the moment when S_1 and S_2 collide. At that point, the revolutionary has to leave aside every notion that predates the revolution itself.

During the French Revolution itself, it is easy to recognize the moments in which the most rational and the most courageous among the revolutionaries despaired. Most of them were competent and cultured, but no historical precedent in history, no scientific discovery, and no philosophical argument could help them. The same can be said about Lenin. Whoever has read his works cannot but admire his intelligence, his encyclopedic culture and his ability to invent new political concepts. Nonetheless, his own writings show a growing uncertainty about the situation that he himself had created. Right or wrong, the NEP was not only a turning point; it implied a severe self-criticism, bordering on a renegation. At least, it proved that Lenin had been confronted by his own lack of knowledge in the field of political economy, where, as a Marxist, he was the most sure of himself ; he was indeed discovering a new political country. He was encountering the very difficulty that Saint-Just had announced.

But if Saint-Just is right, then Stalin has a point. He makes use of a real ambiguity. The temptation to conflate Descartes' definition of the Prince and Saint-Just's definition of the true revolutionary can be resisted, but it cannot be denied. In a more modern manner of speaking, the revolutionary subject repeatedly runs up against the contradiction between his knowledge of what a revolution should be and his conviction that the revolution, at some point, supersedes any kind of knowledge. Stalin used a real contradiction in order to promote his own interests. He

seems to have done so in full self-awareness.

By conflating revolution and sovereignty for himself, he conflated revolution and servitude for others. But he also revealed a flaw in what is commonly called Marxism-Leninism. As opposed to *The Manifesto*, Marx's later writings seem to imply that he has built a scientific theory of revolutions, as certain and as extensive as Darwin's theory of the origin of species. Lenin at least thought so, witness his celebrated formulation "The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true. »⁵ Thus Marxism-Leninism is based on the following axiomatic statement : *there is no place for any non-knowledge in revolutionary actions*. A Lacanian would translate : thanks to Marx, S_1 and S_2 are one.

Stalin soon discovered the instability of this axiom. If Lenin was right, then the revolutionary knew, while the counter-revolutionary did not; non-knowledge and counter-revolution go together. But, Stalin silently adds, Lenin was wrong : all subjects are equally deprived of knowledge in a revolution; consequently, revolution is a time when Leninism can be used as a tool in order to dominate each and every individual. Once Stalin had established himself as the sole revolutionary of his time and as the sole subject who was supposed to know, all others had only two possibilities : to accept to be imbued by Stalin's knowledge or to confess themselves to be counter-revolutionaries.

One should be grateful to Stalin to have dared to be logical. By his secret thoughts and his public conduct, he exposed the consequences of Lenin's political mistake : to have chosen economics against politics, to have preferred *Capital* to *The Communist Manifesto*, to have misunderstood Marx's negative use of economics as a political machinery directed against the modern forms of servitude. Lenin thought he could convert a negative political doctrine into an affirmative doctrine of economic management. He failed on both counts : after October 1917, almost all his decisions had exactly the consequences he wanted to avoid. In fact, Stalin literally had to invent a political doctrine, starting from scratch. Neither Marx nor Lenin nor the "learned" members of the small revolutionary elite could help him. Obviously the task would have been demanding for anyone. Stalin chose the easy way in preferring the absolute solitude of S_1 , which leads to absolute opportunism. No party, no family, no allies except circumstantial ones, but also no predetermined theory of social forms, no accepted criteria for rationality, no ethical rules. There is no denying the catastrophic consequences of his choices, but after five or six years of delusional policies, it was not clear whether there was any other possibility, except, of course, an immediate and unconditional surrender.

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5 Lenin 1977, p. 21.

I do not hesitate to qualify Lenin's policy as delusional : in October 1917, he made a decision, without any clear notion of what his decision implied; moreover, his doctrine precluded the possibility of learning anything new from an event. According to him, audacity is taught by the right doctrine; it cannot add anything to that doctrine. In other words, it cannot teach anything new. Lenin's conviction is the exact opposite of Saint-Just's saying. It is delusional because it denies the alterity between S_1 and S_2 . In his own devious way, Stalin sided with Saint-Just; at least, he understood intuitively that a revolution has something to do with the real, rather than with the imaginary mixture of past events and past assessments that is called "reality." Lenin and all true Marxist-Leninists treated the revolution as a reality. More generally, they seem to have had no sense of the real difference between the real and reality. Stalin is but the symptom of what happens when the real comes back in a world that denies it : it destroys all reality. The wages of denial is death.

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