

The Appeal of the Empire of Lies

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JENNIFER ROBACK MORSE

I am the adoptive mother of a child who spent his formative years in a Romanian orphanage. I spend most of my days dealing with the damage that was done to him. The harm done to many children like him in the eastern bloc set a new standard for wounded childhoods, but that harm is only a small part of the human tragedy of the Communist Evil Empire. Nicolae Ceausescu would have been a monster in any other century, but in the twentieth century, by communist standards, he was merely a petty thug. My boy is simply one victim of one institution of an insignificant communist country.

So it was with special interest that I picked up a copy of Francois Furet's magisterial book *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). In that book, Furet attempts to answer a question that surely must haunt any friend of liberty—indeed, any honest person. What made the communist idea appeal to so many people? Why did so many willingly overlook the evidence that the Soviet Union and its satellites were not the workers' paradises promised by Marxist analysis? The appeal of the communist idea continues to be so great that many people still refuse to see the great harm that it did. Leftists throughout American academia continue to make excuses for the criminal empire established by Lenin, nourished by Stalin, and still fed in places such as China, North Korea, and Cuba.

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Furet places the rise of the communist idea within the European revolutionary intellectual tradition. He also offers a psychological analysis of the rhetorical strategies pioneered by Lenin and perfected by Stalin. Because those strategies continue to serve as the mainstay of the radical left in the United States, it is well worth the trouble to identify them accurately and analyze them carefully.

The Historical Analysis

World War I

Almost everyone understands that World War I played a major part in the Bolshevik takeover of the Russian Empire. The Romanoff dynasty had exhausted the blood, treasure, and patience of the people of an empire that spanned eleven time zones. By 1917, the demoralized Russians were desperate for peace, and for the most part they acquiesced in the Bolshevik Revolution. Those who did resist were too weak to succeed.

Furet convincingly shows that the Great War laid the groundwork for the communist idea not only in Russia itself but throughout the Europe. The disillusionment occasioned by the conflict gave the Bolsheviks greater legitimacy than they could have achieved any other way.

The war had been a disaster, even for the victors. It had engaged entire populations, not simply the military classes, as in prior times. Therefore, its psychological effects were widespread. As Furet puts it,

Since 1918, France had been living in the shadow of war. In every household, a photograph of a deceased father, brother or husband stood enshrined on the mantle; every village had its war monument in the main square, engraved with a long list of the fallen—a moving sight even today. No one knew that this formidable military victory would be the last of the century, but all were aware of its price, which they continued to pay from their stock of memories. (228)

The war left the people vulnerable on several levels. First, life in the trenches transformed the mental universe of the men trapped there. The appalling hardships of life in those trenches undermined the habits of mind necessary to democracy and even to civilization itself, for the soldiers in such situations are “reduced to life in a herd” and have “lost the power to reflect. . . . Their willpower, too, is dying. They are surrendering to discipline, which leads them this way and that, surrendering to chance, which gives them life or death. They feel they are in the hands of fate. This is the very opposite of civilization” (56; see also 49, 163, 228, 271).

After the war, the survivors were easy prey to two opposite appeals. Nihilism and senseless savagery seemed to be the truth of their experience in the trenches. At the same time, they had an eerie familiarity with violence. Fighting that appeared to have

some point became oddly comforting. Some were eager for peace, whereas others were habituated to violence and somehow untroubled by it (183).

In either case, the vast majority of people were suspicious of the leaders and the institutions that had led them into the war. The Great War undermined the West's faith in its institutions of constitutional democracy and in the market economy, which many liberals had thought would prevent war. The traumatized population fell easily under the sway of ideologues, both communists and fascists, who attacked democracy and capitalism (75, 184, 170).

The settlement of the war also set the stage for the revolutionary mentality because the treaties themselves were revolutionary. Although this claim seems startling, a glance at the maps of Europe before and after the Great War will quickly demonstrate its truth. Of the four continental empires with which the war began—the Ottoman, the German, the Russian, and the Austro-Hungarian—three were completely scattered or dismantled. Only defeated Germany remained intact. The small national states had no realistic chance of continued independence. As Furet observes, the “small, multi-ethnic states . . . merely reproduced the shortcomings of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Those little states were as divided within their frontiers as they had been within the old, and were separated from one another by even greater hostility than they had experienced under German or Hungarian domination” (59). The stage was set for continual instability and upheaval and the discontent born of unrealistic expectations.

In all these ways, the Great War left Europe vulnerable to the appeal of the communist idea. The war inculcated the revolutionary mentality and the normality of violence, while creating a longing for peace; it discredited the institutions of the old Europe—the parliaments and stock exchanges that had led to or at least had been unable to prevent the war. Fighting in the war contributed to a sense of powerlessness and nihilism, a feeling that no one could prevent disaster, but, in any event, nothing mattered very much.

Enter the Bolsheviks. By removing Russia from the war via a separate peace with Germany, the Bolsheviks did what no other government had been willing to do. The Soviets became, in Furet's words, “one of the pillars of the conscience of Europe.” Their attacks on the bourgeois institutions of capitalism and democracy fell on fertile ground. After all that Europe had suffered, hardly anyone had the will to oppose the Russian Revolution, which was, after all, just another episode of violence. The West's rather feeble attempts to suppress the Bolshevik takeover of the Kerensky government were discredited even before they began (74).

World War II

If the trauma of World War I enabled Lenin to establish the Communist regime, the alliances of World War II allowed Stalin to solidify it. The war gave Stalin the

opportunity to improve his image in the West even as he tightened his grip on the Soviet people.

After the collapse of the Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, Hitler became even more useful to Stalin as an enemy than he had been as an ally. Fascism became the indispensable foil for Stalin, both at home and abroad. Nothing binds a nation to a tyrannical regime so much as the threat of invasion. At the same time, Hitler's attacks on democracy and on the fragile world order created by the Allies at Versailles made him an obvious villain in the West. Stalin seized the opportunity to position himself as the defender of freedom against the fascist threat.

Of course, Stalin himself was no friend of democracy, but he perfected one of Lenin's favorite tactics: define away the middle of the political spectrum. In a calculated way, Stalin defined the issue as a choice between fascism and freedom, identifying himself as the defender of freedom. Anyone who criticized the Soviet Union or Stalin himself in any way was shoved into the fascist category.

Furet argues convincingly that the strategy of defining away the middle of the political spectrum actually contributed to Hitler's victory. By posing the question as "communism or fascism?" the left presupposed the victory of the Nazis. Indeed, the left's definition of the issues pushed the bourgeois parties from the right side of the center into the arms of Hitler and Mussolini.

Furet also shows that fascism and communism sprang from similar ideological roots and appealed to many of the same people. Both are revolutionary ideologies that seek to unite the society under a common banner. Fascism is founded on the particular, the nation or the race, whereas communism appeals to the "proletariat," supposedly found universally. Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, "and they alone, set in motion the destruction of the civil order by the absolute submission of individuals to the ideology and the terror of the state" (181). The totalitarian, with his unlimited will to power, differs from the garden-variety dictator who, though not subject to law, does not aspire to control the entire society by controlling or absorbing everyone in it (158).

The French Revolution

Even more revealing than Furet's analysis of the twentieth-century wars is his analysis of the French Revolution. It is, after all, almost a commonplace among American libertarians that communism has thrived on the wars of the past century. Furet demonstrates that among Europeans the Bolshevik Revolution occupied a place in the revolutionary tradition established by the French in 1789. Furet's analysis of the French Revolution will be especially important and enlightening to American readers, who in general know little about it.

The French Revolution differed greatly from the American Revolution. For the Americans, the primary objective was independence from the mother country for the precise purpose of maintaining their traditional rights as Englishmen. The American

Revolution, or more accurately, the American War of Independence, sought a change of government, but it did not attempt to completely revolutionize the society. The American war had no Reign of Terror, no overthrow of religion in the name of the Goddess Reason, no demands for equality of condition, no economic terror, no Bonaparte to restore domestic order while spreading international terror.

Because these aspects of the French Revolution have no real counterpart in the American Revolution, except in the frenzied imaginations of leftist historians, it is difficult for Americans to appreciate how attached the French are to their revolutionary tradition, warts and all. The Bolsheviks positioned themselves as the descendants of the French revolutionaries, a self-identification that appealed to the vanity of the French and gave protective cover for Bolshevik excesses. The French left saw the Russian Revolution as a revival and continuation of their own revered cause.

Although arguing that the parallels between the French and the Russian Revolutions are inexact, Furet shows convincingly that Lenin's appropriation of the French revolutionary tradition was essential to his success. Above all, Lenin used the revolutionary mentality as cover for his drive for unlimited power. Furet writes:

Revolution was viewed as not only a special mode of bringing about change, or as a shortcut to the future, but as a social condition and a state of mind in which the unmasking of juridical abstractions at the service of the powerful is achieved by the dictatorship of the true people, who are above all laws since all laws originate with them. This is why the enemies of revolution were so numerous and powerful and all but impossible to diminish. . . . The French revolutionaries of 1793 had also wished to remain true to the promises of democratic egalitarianism, to descend from political issues to social issues, and to institute a society in which individuals with their selfish interests would give way to regenerated citizens, the only legitimate participants in the social contract. This goal was the revolutionaries' sole claim to power, but what a claim! It was eminent, self-sufficient and superior to any constitution. Lenin would garner the heritage of that claim, attracting the same enemies. He would find himself, like the French in 1793, in a revolutionary situation par excellence, possessed by the passion to eternally pursue human emancipation. (70–71)

By harnessing the Russian Revolution to the French, Lenin identified himself as the carrier of the dreams of the French Revolution, dreams that continued to fire the imaginations of European intellectuals.

American Parallels

This analysis of the European situation has a direct parallel in the American context. Although leftists and their sympathizers were on the fringes of the American political scene during the years since the Bolshevik revolution, they never made serious inroads

until the 1960s. On the basis of Marxist analysis, one might have expected that the Great Depression would have produced a revolutionized mass proletariat. Although FDR's New Deal was a significant innovation in American policy, it was far from a workers' revolt or an all-out attack on American institutions and traditions.

It is common to attribute the radicalization of the 1960s to the Vietnam War, but Furet's analysis suggests another, deeper reason for the lasting success of the left since the 1960s. The student rebellion over the Vietnam War was coterminous with another struggle, the civil rights movement, a struggle that provided a far more fertile field for the left. The civil rights movement owes its success to its resonance with the deepest traditions of American thought: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; all men created equal; equal protection under the law. Most Americans were properly ashamed of the chronic mistreatment of black citizens. Many were more than willing to remedy the situation.

That state of affairs gave the left the kind of opening it needed, one that the Vietnam War did not give, one that even the Great Depression had not given. The left has used the civil rights movement and its memories to create a legal apparatus for intervening in every employment relationship, every school district, every lending contract, and every housing rental agreement in the country. The revolutionary mentality, as described by Furet in the passage quoted earlier, has a close counterpart in this area. The civil rights bureaucracy established a permanent mechanism for monitoring decisions and activities that previous generations of Americans had considered quintessentially private.

The civil rights establishment has become a wholly owned and operated franchise of the radical left. This cabal has exploited both the sentiment and the language of the original, race-related issues to create a dizzying array of protected classes: women, the elderly, the disabled, ethnic groups including noncitizen immigrants, and now gays, lesbians, and transgendered persons. These groups vary in economic status (the elderly are the wealthiest demographic group in the United States) and history (what exactly do Americans descended from slaves have in common with Iranian Americans?). As Richard Epstein has pointed out, the only thing these groups have in common is that they are covered by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I would add that these groups also share the characteristic of having been swept into the political orbit of the left.

Bolshevik Tactics

The logic of decision theory tells us that defining the issue is the all-important ingredient for ultimately winning a debate. The Communists in Russia were masters of such positioning, just as their leftist successors are. The tactic of excluding the middle of the political spectrum continues to work wonders for bad ideas. To the general public, the left poses an issue as follows: "my preferred policy or the triumph of Absolute Evil—which do you prefer?"

Closely related to this tactic is the absolute refusal to debate actual ideas. Instead, the left smears its opponents with epithets. The strategy of winning by name-calling is as old as Lenin's calling his opponents "deviationists" and as current as the civil rights establishment's calling Clarence Thomas an Uncle Tom. "If you oppose my preferred policy, you must be a racist or at least mean-spirited."

Finally, and probably most important, the left has attracted and cultivated people who are willing to lie to obtain power for themselves or to hasten the triumph of the ideas they cherish. Furet documents in sickening detail the willingness of Soviet leaders to lie to achieve their objectives. Crucial to the success of those lies, however, was the willingness of their followers around the world to shift policies on a moment's notice under orders from the Comintern. Furet demonstrates that there was no shortage of such compliant followers.

The left continues to display an astonishing tolerance for useful lies. In a letter to the editor of *Commentary* (January 2000), a reader complains about the "recent attack on Rigoberta Menchu in which her accusers focused on minor discrepancies in her biography to dismiss the very real history of the military's mass murder of indigenous peoples in Guatemala." The point is that if mass murder took place, it ought to be possible to produce real evidence of real victims rather than fabrications.

Effectively combatting an opponent who is willing to lie requires a special response. In a normal political or intellectual debate, arguments about facts play a crucial role. People present different sets of information, and interpretations of the same information are a central part of the debate. But if your opponent is a chronic liar, that strategy cannot work. All your time is consumed in showing that his "facts" are fabrications. No sooner have you refuted one set of lies than he cooks up a new set of absurdities, requiring a new body of research. One skilled liar can pin down half a dozen researchers committed to the truth. It becomes necessary, as a matter of self-defense, to attack the person's character, showing him to be untrustworthy in any matter. Doing so is difficult because personal attacks are usually considered bad manners, and right-wingers tend to put greater store in both manners and truth than their left-wing opponents. But, in some cases, it may be the only possible strategy.

The power of the communist idea is so great that it can captivate people to the extent that they are willing to sacrifice every other value to it. The idea contains the seeds of the will to power. The sense of moral rectitude created by the idea gives a thin veneer of respectability to the person who is obsessed by power and the drive to obtain it. In this sense, the communist idea is the most powerful ideological tool yet devised for the accumulation, use, and abuse of power.

The Psychological Appeal of the Communist Idea

For all of Furet's historical analysis and his description of Leninist tactics, we are still left with the Big Question. What is so appealing about the communist idea that people were willing to lie to support it? Why were they willing to sacrifice every other

value to it? Why were and are people willing to turn their backs on the millions of victims rather than reexamine their commitment to Marxist-Leninist doctrine?

Here Furet is not nearly so helpful. We have to read between the lines to grasp any answers. We find them embedded in the assumptions that he makes about the worldview of the European intellectuals. Two ideas are so deeply imbedded that they go unquestioned, even by an observer as astute as Furet. Although he refers to these two ideas repeatedly, he does so only in passing, as though they are so well known and well established that they require neither proof nor explanation.

The first is that European intellectuals were united by a hatred of bourgeois society. Furet repeats the oft-heard complaint that bourgeois society—the free market and the democratic polity—produces an emptiness of soul. The second idea, even more deeply embedded, is that God is dead. The modern problem is to find meaning in a world deprived of God.

For an American, the most difficult idea to grasp is Furet's claim that Europe was united by a hatred of the bourgeoisie. In Europe, the right held the bourgeoisie responsible for the revolutionary excesses. The bourgeoisie stood between the right and the achievement of its ideal of restoring the ancien regime in whatever the particular form that appealed locally.

Prior to World War II, the European right did not embrace capitalism as the American right does. Americans tend to emphasize the “creative” part of Joseph Schumpeter's famous description of capitalism as a system of “creative destruction.” The European right, on the other hand, seized on the “destruction” part.

The institutions of bourgeois democracy received no better treatment from the European right. Monarchists, whether surreptitious or open, have no particular love for elections or political parties, or even for parliaments and constitutions. At the same time, the left viewed those institutions as mere legalistic fictions: constitutions and elections simply present the appearance of giving power to the people, while actually providing cover for the machinations of the powerful. The constitutional and institutional structure that traditionally resonated in the American mind found few defenders in Europe between the wars.

Furet claims that Europe is more than just skeptical of bourgeois institutions. He states repeatedly and without proof that bourgeois life is empty, devoid of meaning. We might be tempted to dismiss the claim as the ravings of another anticapitalist lunatic, but Furet is no such thing. That an observer as astute as Furet seemingly accepts such a view gives one pause. We American libertarians and conservatives must admit that we have heard the complaint many times before in various forms, and we have had only minor success in countering it. The complaint may have some substance, but not the substance it is routinely taken to have. It would seem unfair to accuse the market of debasing people's tastes, of supposing that in the absence of capitalism everyone would be reading Shakespeare and listening to Beethoven. On the other hand, we who are tutored in free-market economics know perfectly well that the

market gives people what they demand. If our tastes are twisted or banal, the market will cater to them just the same.

But free institutions—the market economy or constitutional democracy—cannot by themselves create people’s desires. In that sense, the market is an incomplete system. It satisfies people’s demands, but it does not create all of those demands. (Ironically, one of the left’s favorite criticisms is that the market does create its own demand, as though no consumer demands exist independent of the market mechanism.) Thus, the advocates of free markets are at a rhetorical disadvantage compared with the advocates of socialism or communism. We cannot properly claim to be promoting a completely self-contained system. The left, on the other hand, most assuredly does claim to be promoting a complete system. Advocates of capitalism leave plenty of room in their intellectual system for the reality that people bring their wants with them when they come into the marketplace. Those wants and desires can be and usually are created by something or someone independently of the capitalist purveyors of goods and services, and of the intellectual advocates of the free-market system.

Perhaps this openness of the market system to wants arising outside of it is the very thing that people so often mistake for the “emptiness of bourgeois life.” The market and its advocates do not claim to provide meaning to life. Indeed, these advocates do not even claim extraordinary insight into what a meaningful life would be. Their appropriate modesty becomes their undoing, for the critics of capitalism are all too willing to propose a complete intellectual system that does attempt to provide meaning and purpose to life, whereas advocates of capitalism insist that every person must bring his own meaning to the market place and the polling place.

Which brings us to the second of Furet’s barely spoken assumptions: God is dead. The modern problem is to find meaning in life without God. We who are committed to the free society must admit that we have not been particularly successful at countering the emotional appeal of collectivist ideologies. I am coming to believe that our failure is related to our inability to satisfy people’s need to find a meaning in their lives, a purpose for living, and an ordering principle around which to center their lives. I realize that this subject is likely to provoke controversy among American libertarians, but the stakes are so high that we cannot afford to ignore the topic, in spite of the disagreements that it might raise among us.

Several observations are suggestive. First, many of us have used libertarianism itself as an ordering principle for our lives. Many of us find our meaning and purpose in fighting collectivism and statism. In this important but limited sense, libertarianism takes its place among the other “isms” of the century, functioning as a surrogate religion for some people.

Second, many of the most determined and astute critics of the communist idea have been religious people. In modern American political life, people of orthodox religious faiths are among the most committed opponents of the left on issues across

the spectrum. On economic issues such as limiting economic regulation and reducing taxation, religious conservatives are reliable opponents of the left and allies of libertarians. On some social issues, too, people of religious faith firmly oppose collectivist inroads. The left would love to control every school board in the country and to replace parental care of children with a network of government-funded day-care centers, schools, and health clinics. Nonreligious libertarians have a tendency to focus on the fiscal aspects of such programs, whereas religious people are instinctively alert to the threat of expanded control of the individual that such programs pose.

Michael Novak has defended democratic capitalism in a series of books stretching over decades. He has frequently argued that a free society needs three sets of institutions in order to survive and prosper: free political institutions, free economic institutions, and reasonable cultural institutions. Advocates of a free society have done a good job explaining the need for constitutionally limited government with broad popular participation and a free market with well-defined and defended private property rights. But we have barely begun to describe the social and cultural institutions necessary to support freedom over the long term.

Probably our reluctance stems from the very modesty and respect for our fellow citizens that serves us so well in our defense of limited government and free markets. We tend to be unwilling to make pronouncements about what people ought to believe, think, wear, eat, and use to entertain themselves. Such decisions, which seem to be the very essence of culture, are among the most private and individual ones a person can make. As libertarians, we are troubled by the idea that we can or should prescribe answers to such questions.

Unfortunately, our opponents have no such scruples. The left shamelessly promotes ideas and policies that can only result in people's being radically separated and alienated from each other. At the same time, the left actively promotes the idea that people can find the meaning of life as left-wing political activists.

Elsewhere in political space, advocates of corporate capitalism promote products, lifestyles, and attitudes of extreme individuation and immediate gratification. Why ask a friend or relative to do something for you when you can buy a product to do it for you and save yourself the trouble of messy relationships? At the same time, the not so subtle message of many advertising campaigns is that a person can find the meaning of life by consuming the latest product.

Every thoughtful advocate of the free society knows that no one can find the meaning in life from consumption, no matter how noble and worthy the purposes served by the products. The products exist to serve humans and their purposes, not to give them a purpose. Likewise, we all know that no sane person can find meaning in a life obsessed by politics. But to recognize such truths only leaves space for people to find genuine meaning in life; it does nothing to provide that meaning.

Conclusion

St. Augustine once famously said, “You have made us for yourself, Oh God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” If Augustine is even remotely correct, then it is little wonder that our defense of the free market so often fails to persuade those who are committed to socialism as a source of meaning and purpose for their lives. How can material prosperity, good though it is, possibly compete with the transcendent meaning of life?

Whatever our personal views about religion, most libertarians are hard-headed empiricists. We take evidence seriously. The evidence suggests to us that we have not been successful in persuading a large number of our fellow citizens to abandon their commitment to the communist idea.

Perhaps we must try a new approach. Perhaps we need to be more alert to and articulate about the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. It is no accident that the assaults on the very notions of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty have come from the left. Stripping the world of those transcendental values creates a spiritual vacuum into which the left can rush. Perhaps we can no longer afford to leave the cultural issues to chance.

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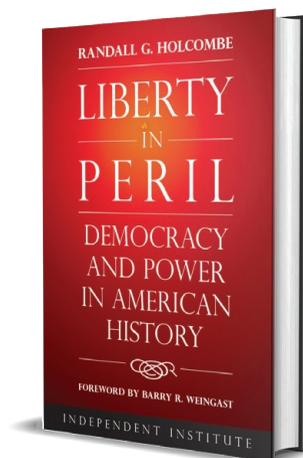
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