The Totalitarian Schism: Alternative Modernities of the Twentieth Century

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The idea of alternative modernities is often taken to be synonymous with the more familiar “multiple modernities”; but it seems advisable to define and delimit a more specific meaning. An alternative modernity would then be a pattern or constellation structured in opposition to a pre-existing one and implying a claim to broader historical—in key cases global—meaning and validity. In the contemporary world, awakening from the delusion of a final stage without alternatives, China looms larger than any other possible candidate for this category. Admittedly, the ideological claims and the explicit global ambitions of the Chinese regime are nowhere near Soviet precedents of the Cold War period, but observers have noted a growing tendency to contrast Chinese successes with western decline, as well as an emphasis on the Chinese road as a model for developing countries. Interpretations by western critics and commentators vary widely. Those who perceive the present global great power rivalry—with China and the U.S. in key roles—as a continuation or repetition of the Cold War tend to portray China as a surviving Communist state, having escaped the much-celebrated “collapse” of 1989-91. At the other extreme, analysts more attentive to changes in China and to complications on the other side can try to explain the Sino-American contest in terms of a struggle between “powers of political capitalism” (Aresu 2020). The different ways of linking political and economic structures are not denied, nor are the correspondingly divergent strategies, but the argument focuses on a common characteristic: capitalist models of development are linked to state strengthening, national security policies and imperial visions of international order. A third approach stresses the resurgence of Chinese nationalism, with its civilizational memories and pretensions. In this perspective, the road from Mao Zedong to Xi...
Jinping represents the final absorption of Communism by nationalism, all the more definitive because national identity is now explicitly and emphatically conceived in civilizational terms.

The following discussion will not aim at resolving these controversies about contemporary China; rather, the focus will be on earlier developments whose legacy remains crucial to the understanding of Chinese problems and perspectives, and in a way that warns against premature conclusions. The Chinese acceptance, adaptation and ongoing transformation of the Soviet model is a key aspect of the process that is now widely seen as a rise to superpower status, and our views on achievements as well as future prospects will depend on the weight and significance attributed to this trans-national and more specifically cross-imperial factor. Obviously, present approaches to the Soviet experience are bound to reflect concerns with its Chinese sequel, but it is equally true that unsettled questions about the interpretation of Soviet history will complicate matters regarding China. Problems of that kind, particularly relevant to broader historical contextualization, are the main subject of this paper.

If the rivalry of interpretations is still active enough to justify reconsideration of basic issues in the earlier history of Communism, there is also a strong case for further extending the frame of reference. The formation and consolidation of the regime that grew out of the Russian revolution was in multiple ways connected to the trajectory of another political force, characteristic of the same historical epoch and in turn decisively affected by its confrontation and ultimate conflict with Communism. Fascism will be defined here in a specific and narrow sense, avoiding the all too common conflation with a broader spectrum of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes; the concept should be restricted to regimes that rose to power on the basis of mass movements engaged in para-military mobilization and appealed to a distinctive version of the revolutionary imaginary. On this view, Fascism had a much more limited lifespan and spread less widely than Communism; in Europe (which is the geopolitical context to be discussed here), Fascist regimes emerged only in Italy and Germany, although strong Fascist movements developed in some other European countries, notably Austria, Hungary and Romania.

Relations between Communism and Fascism evolved through several stages. At the beginning, the most striking aspect was the inability of Communist leaders and theorists to grasp the character and the potentialities of the emerging Fascist phenomenon. A movement with a multi-class basis, even if certain social groups were over-represented, and a strong though not highly elaborate ideology was mistaken for a mere instrument of the ruling class and therefore aligned with the bloc of supposedly interchangeable political actors on which the established order could rely to defend itself against revolutionary challeng-
es. This misconception led to disastrously counterproductive political tactics, most fatally in Germany. After the Nazi seizure of power, the threat to both Soviet and international Communism became more obvious, and the new course of building popular fronts against Fascism became a major factor in upgrading the image of the Soviet Union and reviving the fortunes of the movement which it controlled. Anti-Fascism was, in the second half of the 1930s, a decisive legitimizing strategy for Communists in power, aspiring to it or seeking alliance with those better placed to claim it; this is rightly emphasized in Furet’s widely read book on Communism (Furet 1995), but at such length that it prevents the author from doing adequate justice to a more complex story.

If the discrediting of capitalism by the Great Depression was, as generally agreed, the main reason why Stalin’s all-out leap to a command economy at the end of the 1920s could be mistaken for a more rational venture than it was, it seems clear that fear of Fascism and faith in Communist resistance to it had a similarly effective de-sensitizing impact in regard to the great purge of the late 1930s (the notion that the Moscow trials had eliminated a potential fifth column was astonishingly widespread). But on the Communist side, clearer awareness of the magnitude of the Fascist threat was not matched by better understanding of its nature, and this was to prove fateful for later developments. Stalin’s shift to a quasi-alliance with Hitler in 1939 came as a shock to many supporters and sympathizers of Communism; it provoked over-interpretations of the kind exemplified by Franz Borkenau’s analysis of the German-Soviet pact as the logical and final outcome of ideological convergence (Borkenau 1940). That claim was quickly refuted, and as a result, Borkenau’s otherwise very interesting book—one of the most distinctive early attempts to theorize totalitarianism—has been forgotten. The pact was, for both sides, a tactical manoeuvre without any long-term coordination of strategies; each side knew that the other was ready to break it; but Stalin obviously thought of it as a somewhat more lasting arrangement than Hitler did, and this would hardly have been possible if the latter’s visions of conquest, extermination and empire-building in the east had been properly understood. That said, there are good reasons to reject present attempts to portray the German-Soviet pact as the one and only trigger of World War II. It was one episode in a much more complex chain of events. At the time, nobody had taken Hitler’s measure, everybody was prepared to consider short-term opportunistic solutions, and the whole dynamic of great power politics had taken a turn that accelerated the descent into war.

The pact was, in any case, consigned to oblivion when Hitler launched the invasion of the Soviet Union. That was also the beginning of a new chapter in the history of relations between Communism and Fascism. The victorious war
against Nazi Germany was so significant for the legitimacy and authority of the Stalinist regime that many historians have seen it as a divide between two phases of Soviet history; by the same token, this watershed makes it difficult to speculate about the long-term impact that the great purge might have had if the war had not intervened. In short, the legitimizing effect of conflict with Fascism was repeated on a much more massive scale. Moreover, Soviet propaganda offensives during the early stages of the Cold War tried to project this success into the global arena; adversaries were portrayed as Fascists or accused of complicity with Fascist forces, and the new polarization of world politics was presented as a continuation of the triumphant struggle against Nazism. On the other side of the conflict, a different kind of continuity was constructed by assimilating the Soviet regime to the defeated Fascist adversary, thus establishing an effective ideological framework for the strategy of containment.

If the successive phases of confrontation (and in the end adversarial conflation) with Fascism were an essential aspect of Communism’s trajectory, the record should also be considered from the Fascist angle. Attempts to interpret the Fascist phenomenon as a reaction to the Russian revolution have in recent years gained some currency, especially in connection with Ernst Nolte’s work and the German Historikerstreit which it provoked. The most convincing critique of Nolte’s thesis was formulated by Gerd Koenen (2003), who insists on the multiple sources and causes of the trends crystallizing into Fascism in the early 1920s. They include the radicalization of nationalism before 1914, the explosion of violence in World War I and its aftermath, and the reaction to traumatic outcomes of the war (outright and unexpected defeat in Germany, nominal victory perceived as a defeat in Italy). But the fact of simultaneous mobilization of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary forces in Central Europe after the war remains important, and there is no doubt that counterrevolutionaries saw Bolshevism and its international ambitions as a major threat to be confronted. In the context of Nazi strategy and ideology, by far the most dynamic of the counterrevolutionary forces, the enmity to Bolshevism and to its imperial mutation then fused with two key themes: the antisemitic crusade and the vision of territorial conquest in the east. These goals were then integrated into an ideological framework that drew on ideas widely diffused in the West and closely linked to the phase of imperial expansion and aggravated great power competition that had begun in the late nineteenth century. Racism and social Darwinism were strongly present in European thought of the early twentieth century (the latter term is arguably a misnomer, because ideological constructs of competition and survival of the fittest came to the fore in social thought before the formulation of Darwinian evolutionary theory); in Nazi ideology, they were radicalized and synthesized in an unprecedent-
ed way. The result was a more comprehensive project defined as an emphatic negation of the revolutionary tradition that centred on the ideas of freedom, equality and fraternity. Official Nazi declarations about the ideas of 1914 replacing those of 1789 should be taken seriously, though with the proviso that the reference to 1914 presupposed a far-reaching redefinition of Germany’s geopolitical aims and challenges. Karl Löwith’s comment on 1933 as a continuation of 1914 by other means is on the right track, but calls for more emphasis on the interrelated changes of means and ends. The renewed offensive was aimed at a whole spectrum of forces that could be construed as heirs and users of the ideological armoury derived from the French revolution. Attempts to show that Hitler’s strategy was primarily directed against the liberal powers, rather than Soviet Russia (Simms 2019), are unconvincing. This was not an either-or question; both sides were targeted, but the adversary in the east was a more direct concern and singled out for more total conquest; the battle with the Anglo-American bloc was envisaged as a more prolonged contest with possible but necessarily asymmetric compromises. If the first phase of the war unleashed in 1939 did not quite correspond to these guidelines, that was due to a geopolitical conjuncture.

The ideological basis constructed in polar contrast to the modern revolutionary tradition and through a selective fusion of its particularist countercurrents was a key component of the Nazi regime. It took some time for historians—much longer than in the Soviet case—to recognize its importance; an early landmark was Eberhard Jäckel’s work on Hitler’s ideology (1969), emphasizing antisemitism and racial imperialism; in recent scholarship, the writings of the French historian Johann Chapoutot (especially 2014) constitute a major advance. The ideological frame of reference served to define a vision of modernity, opposed to mainstream liberal as well as leftist versions of the belief in progress, and this extreme alternative was embedded in a totalizing conception of history. One of the aspects underlined in Chapoutot’s work is a detailed and consistent racist interpretation of classical antiquity, closely linked to political views.

Retrieving the concept of totalitarianism

The dictatorships of a new type that emerged after World War I were, as briefly noted above, entangled in a shared and eventful history. If we want to move on to a more theoretical grasp of their significance for the modern world, the first task is to find a starting-point for the comparative analysis of their contrasts and affinities. As I will try to show, that purpose can be fulfilled by a concept often dismissed because of its chequered record. The notion of totalitarianism
or totalitarian domination was invented to describe power structures of an unprecedented kind, and the multiple meanings associated with it in the interwar years reflected different understandings of a complex and enigmatic phenomenon. Later usage, especially during the Cold War, shifted towards more uniform definitions and more unilateral emphasis on supposedly common features of Fascism (primarily in its radical Nazi version) and Communism. This can be corrected in a way that makes the concept more sensitive to differences. The following argument to that effect will draw on the French tradition of thought on this subject, notably the works of Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and Marcel Gauchet. This line of interpretation is much less widely known than the Anglo-American approaches, but has in my opinion opened up more interesting perspectives. In particular, Gauchet’s book on totalitarianisms (2010; the plural in the title is significant) deserves to be regarded as one of the two most fundamental texts on its topic; the other is Hannah Arendt’s work on “the origins and elements of totalitarian domination”, to quote the German title (Arendt 1986), an acknowledged classic, but reflecting an earlier phase of research and debate.

To foreshadow and situate a more sustained analysis, a working definition of the totalitarian phenomenon should be outlined. At the institutional level, it involves an effort to unify economic, political and ideological power. This is not to imply that it negates a functional or evolutionary law of differentiation, and thus runs counter to “normal” modernity. Rather, the reference is to a historical background. The formative and culminating phases of modernity were characterized by a differentiating development of institutional spheres (life orders, as Max Weber called them) with their specific structures and orientations; this separation is reversed when a totalizing project is imposed across the social field. To relativize and subordinate the autonomy of different orders, a radical rearticulation of sociocultural meaning is needed. The core signification of the totalitarian turn is, as Claude Lefort emphasized, a fusion of power, law and truth; a power centre with uncontestable claims to authority becomes an ultimate arbiter of normative and cognitive issues. A further implication of this is an imagined identity of society with its transformative potential (of instituted and instituting society, to use Castoriadis’s terms), embodied in a more or less personified figure of eminent unity. All these aspects are constitutive elements of a project implemented by a regime, not to be mistaken for defining features of a whole society. Totalitarianism is not a total order.

The abovementioned pattern took shape in different ways, depending on background and circumstances of each case; the affinities were strong enough to justify the use of a covering concept, but the variations went so far that the term to be used here can only refer to family resemblances, and the divergent
ambitions were bound to result in all-out conflict. In view of this historical record, the title alluding to a totalitarian schism should be understood in a double sense: it indicates a departure from previously dominant versions of modernity, as well as an antagonism between rival types of totalitarian regimes.

Following Marcel Gauchet, the emergence of totalitarian regimes in Europe must be understood in relation to multiple contexts. A genealogical reconstruction must begin with a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century crisis of liberalism. Popular sovereignty, gradually instituted through the extension of the suffrage, proved conducive to new kinds of social conflict; the nation-state, accompanied by varying versions of nationalism, reaffirmed the political dimension of history in ways uncongenial to liberal visions of order, and the rivalry of empires aggravated this trend; together with intellectual developments, including critical reflection on science, the experience of the last decades before World War I undermined liberal belief in progress. Totalitarian projects did not prevail in the countries where liberalism and its intrinsic problems were most developed, but perceptions of the crisis reached beyond the heartland and lent support to radical ideological innovations, left and right. Among them, Lenin’s revision of Marxism, masked as a defence of orthodoxy, deserves particular mention. The idea of an organized vanguard in possession of superior knowledge, formulated in What is to be Done?, did not mark the “invention of totalitarianism” (Courtois 2017); a multi-causal and many-stranded process is not reducible to a single act or event of invention. But the Leninist moment was of singular importance, both because of its direct influence and as an indirect model for adversaries. Prior to World War I, radicalisms of both kinds were marginal phenomena, but as Gauchet emphasizes, the war and its aftermath opened up new possibilities of political action beyond the limits of pre-war patterns. The organizing capacity of states at war and the experience of mass mobilization foreshadowed measures for more transformative purposes; regime collapses at the end of the war empowered forces committed to such projects. More specifically, totalitarian power structures took shape in countries that had suffered defeat (Russia and Germany) or failed to reap the fruits of nominal victory (Italy). The three cases exemplify a further and final point of Gauchet’s contextualizing survey: the connection between totalitarianism and empire, although its specific character varies widely. Russia was a compact territorial empire, combining strong traditional with incipiently modern features; Italy was a recently unified nation-state aspiring, with little success, to imperial possessions, but with strongly connoted and politically usable cultural memories of the Roman empire. Germany was a particularly complex case, and perhaps the clearest example of mutually formative connections between nationalism and empire. Its establishment as a nation-state
was even more recent than Italy’s, but had a longer prehistory and a stronger nationalist background. At the same time, the inclusion of several previously separate states gave the new polity an imperial dimension, reinforced by traditions of the erstwhile Holy Roman Empire, as well as by the acquisition of colonies during the culminating phase of European imperialism. Last but not least, Germany had in 1917-18 been well on its way to imperial conquest in Eastern Europe, and a more successful renewal of that effort became a defining aim of the Nazi regime.

As Gauchet sees it, there are several reasons why the imperial context is eminently compatible—not identical or inevitably associated—with totalitarian ambitions. The idea of empire implies a power representing and guaranteeing a higher unity; that affinity also involves a claim to ultimate sacral integration (“union de tous avec tout” in Gauchet’s terms), characteristic of traditional empires and implicitly claimed by the secular religions of totalitarian regimes. Finally, imperial power is typically linked to a personification of supreme rulership. Modern assimilations of its legacy can thus facilitate a reversal of the democratic trend towards a disincarnation of power.

These observations on empire and totalitarianism are convincing, as far as they go; two further aspects may be noted. First, the affinities with imperial visions and traditions were only one side of the connection between European totalitarianisms and the global imperialist constellation; the other side is the experiential and ideological entanglement with colonial expansion. This was duly stressed in Hannah Arendt’s analysis of totalitarian domination, but much less so in the broader reception of her work. As with other themes explored by Arendt, the argument is most obviously relevant to Nazi Germany. The racial and Social Darwinist notions taken to extremes by the Nazis owed much of their strength to colonial practices and ways of justifying them. The colonial reference of Italian Fascism took another turn. In the early and independent stage of the regime, racial ideology did not play a prominent role; the main emphasis was on making the Italians fit for a global competition that involved overseas conquest, and Roman ancestry was invoked for that purpose, but to complete the bid for revival, an alternative image of human excellence was needed. Official ideologists, including Mussolini, were quite explicit about overcoming the mirage of *homo economicus* and proclaiming the primacy of Fascist man, focused on political and military matters.

In the Russian case, there was also a connection to the imperialist world situation, but of a very different kind, and it did not enter into Arendt’s interpretive framework. It can be clarified through a brief comment on Lenin’s theory of imperialism, formulated and published during World War I. From the intellectual point of view, this was a threadbare construction, now widely
(but not unanimously) dismissed as such, but its political impact was massive. Lenin claimed to provide a definitive account of a global condition; compared to the obviously exaggerated but tentative vision of globalization in the Communist Manifesto, this was a much more emphatic closure of inquiry and debate. Moreover, the global constellation explained as the outcome of capitalist development was at the same time declared to be the latter’s final stage. The tension between theory and history in Marx’s unfinished analysis of capitalism was thus resolved by fiat: a mixture of spuriously theoretical and selectively empirical arguments was supposed to show that the capitalist order had run its course. The conjunction of globality and finality served to define the perspective of world revolution in clearer terms than before, and to lay the groundwork for a later attempt to subordinate the worldwide revolutionary process to a centrally elaborated strategy. From this point of view, Lenin’s pamphlet on imperialism was an upgrading of the vanguardist model he had developed in What is to be Done?. Georg Lukács’s study of the unity of Lenin’s thought (Lukács 2009, first published in 1924), undoubtedly the most significant Western or Central European interpretation of Lenin in the first years after the October Revolution, stressed the actuality of the revolution as a central and unifying theme. What Lukács had in mind was a worldwide revolution (the actuality of a Russian one had been a widely shared assumption for some time, without any particular connection to Lenin); this perspective depended on Lenin’s theory of imperialism as a completion of capitalist development. The later shift to “socialism in one country”, foreshadowed but never made fully explicit by Lenin, implied a certain retreat from the global scenario of revolution, but not an outright rejection. The reference to a worldwide vision of radical change remained a legitimizing factor for the state supposed to embody the global alternative, and it served to maintain the claim to foreknowledge of history on an even more dogmatic note than before.

To grasp the implications of these points, we need to consider another specifically Russian factor, one not given its due in Gauchet’s genealogy of totalitarianism. The Soviet version of totalitarianism was unique in that it crystallized in the aftermath of a revolutionary sequence, marked by multiple and successive failures; the success finally achieved was of a kind that could not be acknowledged on its own terms and had to be misrepresented as a logical outcome of fictitious past triumphs. The political forces brought to power by the February revolution of 1917 could neither carry out the military mobilization expected to follow from political change, nor find the necessary international support for a campaign to end the war. These setbacks paved the way for the Bolshevik surge, which was in turn followed by several failures. The world revolution, initially envisaged as a necessary condition for the Bolshe-
viks staying in power and expected to triumph first in Central Europe, did not materialize; the promise to pull out of the world war was kept at the price of capitulation to Germany and its allies, resulting in a dependence from which the Bolsheviks were rescued by the American intervention that brought the war to an end. At the same time, the takeover completed by the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly was followed by a civil war whose impact on society was more destructive than the world war had been. The result of that conflict was that the Bolsheviks stayed in power, but with their original premises for taking it no longer relevant. Even before this situation became clear, the failure to keep—or more precisely the intention to break—the promise of “all power to the Soviets” had been increasingly evident; from the immediate aftermath of the October insurrection, the exclusive and superior authority of the party was gradually consolidated. But the developments that left the party with uncontested power in unforeseen circumstances were also conducive to new uses of its organizational and imaginative potential. Its condition and performance in 1917 had been far from an exact replica of the model imagined in What is to be Done?; new challenges and opportunities during and after the civil war enabled a reactivation of the earlier vision in a more authoritarian shape. The result was a reinvention of the Russian empire, dominated by the new institution of the party-state and based—very importantly—on restructured relations between the nationalities of the realm. Because of the party’s traditional affiliations, the new order had to be legitimized as “socialism in one country”, but the most decisive step taken by the regime and officially described as a “second revolution”, the crash industrialization accompanied by a collectivization of agriculture and initiated at the end of the 1920s, was first and foremost a necessary way to rebuild a great power.

**Totalitarian modernities**

So far, I have—in partial agreement with Gauchet—outlined the different paths to totalitarian power and their specific historical backgrounds. It remains to discuss the interaction of totalitarian projects with the components of modernity, and thus to clarify the case for considering the resultant patterns as alternative modernities. For Gauchet, this issue is essentially a matter of connections to democracy and responses to its problems. In this regard, the totalitarian regimes have a common denominator: “Their originality, compared to the tyrannical or despotic formations of the past, is to situate themselves on the terrain of democracy” (Gauchet 210: 328). The three cases in question can all be explained as reactions to failures of democratic regimes,
unable to achieve crucial aims or cope with decisive challenges. It is true that none of the totalitarian episodes occurred in the context of long-established democratic traditions, but they were accompanied and justified by a generalized critique of shortcomings supposedly inherent in representative democracy. The advocates and strategists of totalitarian solutions claimed a more authentic unity of leadership and people than could be realized through representative government. Three institutional expressions of this imagined political bond were common to the examples analyzed in Gauchet’s work: a party, a doctrine enforced by state power, and a leader who personified the authority and the mission of the regime. Taken together, these innovations lead to a structural but unacknowledged alignment with sacral paradigms of an encompassing unity, grounded in meta-social visions of order and/or progress and integrating society around a centre of meaning and power. Gauchet therefore describes totalitarian ideologies as secular religions. They do not admit to this affiliation (a secular religion may be defined as an attempt to re-create the religio-political nexus within the political sphere and without explicit recourse to religion), but they differ in the degree to which they de-legitimize religion in the traditional sense. In that regard, the Communist efforts to develop and impose a “scientific world-view” went much further than other official doctrines in the same category.

These points add up to a strong emphasis on the unity of totalitarian projects. But Gauchet wants to avoid the conflation of different totalitarianisms that was characteristic of Cold War discourse and did much to discredit the concept. He qualifies his list of common features by a distinction between opposed versions, “an ultra-revolutionary and an ultra-nationalist version”, and refers to them as “essentially divergent and radically hostile undertakings” (Gauchet 2010: 330; he pays due attention to differences between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism, but regards them as less significant than the differences between the Soviet model and the other two regimes, and notes that the Italian one ended up much closer to German principles and practices than it was at the outset). The totalitarian phenomenon is thus to be analyzed in light of a fundamental duality, an antagonism that culminated in the most massive military conflict of all times. But we may still ask whether the reference to nation and revolution—certainly plausible as a starting-point—is a sufficient interpretive key. Some additional points can be extracted from the prefix “ultra”, and Gauchet’s own detailed discussion helps to envisage a more complex framework; but it is not clearly formulated in the book quoted here, and before moving towards that aim, we need to reconsider the initial approach.

Gauchet’s emphasis on the close but paradoxical connection between totalitarianism and democracy reflects his more general focus on the rise of
democracy as “the modern revolution”; it also rests on the undoubted fact that totalitarian regimes are primarily political formations. But to clarify their broader implications, and to get a better grasp of the differences between them, we must briefly consider interrelations with other aspects of modernity, as well as the question of distinctive overall patterns resulting therefrom. This expanded horizon is not very visible in Gauchet’s work. He notes that there are other “revolutions of autonomy” beside the democratic one, notably the development of modern capitalism and modern science, but these historical forces do not enter into his analysis in any systematic way. The references to capitalism are particularly inconclusive. In earlier writings, Gauchet seemed inclined to close the debate on capitalism by describing it as an economy conducive to innovation and therefore incontestable on its own ground in the modern world. There are echoes of this position in the four-volume treatise on democracy, but at the end of the volume on totalitarianisms, the question reappears in a more meaning-laden though surprisingly muted version. Gauchet discusses the crisis of liberalism and lists the disruptive symptoms to which totalitarian projects react with a promise of reintegration; the first is the “structural economic alienation of historical society”, caused by the dynamism of the commercial sphere. The totalitarian response aims at “putting the economy back into its place within the whole” (Gauchet 2010: 663-64). Although this point is made without any explicit mention of capitalism, the connection to Marxian thought on that subject is obvious. “Economic alienation” is another word for the reification that Marx saw as resulting from the generalized fetishism of commodities; the most elaborate development of that argument is to be found in Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, probably the most seminal work on Marxist theory written in the twentieth century. But this source also illustrates the limits of Gauchet’s claim about a link to totalitarianism. The vision of social reintegration as an alternative to reification was undoubtedly one of the factors contributing to the broader appeal of totalitarian projects, and more specifically to its attractiveness for intellectuals (starkly exemplified by Lukács’s case). However, this line of explanation is much less applicable to the genesis and the self-defining ideological themes of totalitarian regimes. None of them owed its origin to a rejection of “economic alienation", as defined by Gauchet, or justified its practices primarily in such terms. Their relationship to capitalism—a varying and changing mixture of rejection and dependence—must be analyzed from a different point of view, and the discussion should start with the Soviet experience; it lasted longer than the other versions of totalitarian rule, reveals a more complex story of distancing and learning from capitalism, and is therefore best suited to putting the less developed cases into perspective.
Three orientations, all highlighted by Lenin’s attempts to rationalize the Bolshevik seizure of power, defined the original context of Soviet attitudes to capitalism. In the first place, the revolutionary dictatorship was committed to the long-term Marxian vision of surpassing and re-prioritizing the civilization-al achievements of capitalism; that meant giving even freer rein to the development of the productive forces, while at the same time subordinating it to the satisfaction of human needs. This perspective was essential to the framing ideology of the regime, but of no use for determining short-term goals and strategies. Lenin’s response to problems on that level, outlined in his polemic with Kautsky, was that there was no reason why a party with a socialist programme could not take power and use it to create the preconditions for socialism. There is hardly a better example of Lenin’s extraordinary ability to deviate from classical Marxism while imagining an orthodox continuity. The idea of political power taking charge of the development previously expected from the dynamic of capitalism has no basis in Marxian theory; in practice, it was bound to imply more or less explicit and extensive borrowing of technological and organizational models as well as aspects of a developmental imaginary from the more advanced capitalist economies. That prospect was complicated by the third orienting assumption. The close connection between capitalism and war, dogmatized in Lenin’s theory of imperialism, had multiple meanings. If major wars between capitalist and therefore imperialist powers were systemically necessary, there was always a danger of the Soviet state being drawn into such conflicts or becoming a prime target for imperialist powers in pursuit of enlarged terrain. On the other hand, the massively increased involvement of states in economic life during World War I, stressed by Gauchet as one of the epoch-making experiences paving the way for totalitarianism, had for Lenin a specific and localized meaning. As he wrote after the Bolshevik takeover, the dialectic of world history had created two preconditions for socialism in separate places: proletarian power in Russia and a state-controlled war economy in imperial Germany. The latter appeared as a model for the planned economy envisaged but not yet concretely defined by the Bolsheviks.

There is no doubt that Lenin had an exaggerated view of the German war economy. But it was the perception that counted, rather than the complicated and still controversial historical truth. The Bolshevik understanding of the wartime German experience prefigured basic features of the later economic regime, often summed up in the concept of the command economy (although the term “mobilized economy”, suggested by Jacques Sapir, may be more adequate). This does not mean that a ready-made model was applied throughout the subsequent decades of Soviet history. The militarizing logic inspired by the German example was reinforced by later geopolitical as well as internal devel-
opments. Recent scholarship has emphasized the general militarization of social life that accompanied Stalin's industrializing and collectivizing offensive at the end of the 1920s, and this accentuation of “socialism in one country” went hand in hand with stronger claims to self-sufficiency. In practice, this did not exclude drawing on Western experience and expertise during the crucial phase of industrialization in the 1930s; and although the socio-economic transformation of the Soviet Union involved an unprecedented level of centralization and coercion, the fundamentals of the growth from “farm to factory” (Allen 2009) were a re-enactment of the breakthrough already achieved elsewhere along capitalist lines. But the industrial build-up also consolidated the Soviet Union as a great power, and by the same token enhanced the imperative of military competition. The reorientation attempted by Khrushchev—a downgrading of the Leninist linkage of capitalism and war, combined with visions of outperforming the West in economic growth and efforts to reactivate the promise of a Communist future—proved ineffective. At the end of the day, it remained the case that the Soviet regime did better in military competition than in other fields of rivalry, but at an all-round cost that was ultimately unsustainable.

In short, it is not unjustified to describe the Soviet version of totalitarianism as an anti-capitalist project, but major qualifications are in order. The case of Nazi Germany is very different. It is a commonplace that the National Socialist movement came to power through an alliance with established elites, including those of big industry; but it is also true that once in power, Hitler continued to redefine the terms of this alliance. To grasp the meaning of these changes, we must consider the institutional and ideological context. There was no radical rejection of capitalism; the Social Darwinist component of the Nazi world-view allowed for an emphatic acceptance of competition and entrepreneurship, duly underlined by Hitler on many occasions. A certain anti-capitalist appeal was channelled into the distinction between productive and parasitic capital, but this was defined in racial terms and used to justify the “Aryanization” of property, rather than any structural change. On the other hand, the preservation of a capitalist economic order was conditioned by a political framework that subordinated everything to a short-term project of conquest and racial imperialism. This type of totalitarian regime is best described as trans-capitalist rather than anti-capitalist. And its overall logic—if it can be called that—was inseparable from an ideological core: the ultra-mythical anti-semitism that served to find a common denominator for the Bolshevik arch-enemy and the more remote American threat, to contain the mobilization of anti-capitalist sentiments within manipulable limits, and to separate selective uses of the socialist tradition from its Marxist mainstream. In addition to all that, it defined the historical mission of the settlers’ empire to be...
built in Eastern Europe. The rapidly self-destructive mixture of realistic adaptation and ideological extremism marks National Socialism as the most enigmatic of totalitarian phenomena.

Italian Fascism in its original version—before the alliance with Germany led to closer alignment with Nazi practices—was the least anti-capitalist of the three totalitarianisms; its framework for economic policies can be described as a case of what later came to be called “varieties of capitalism”. In the later 1920s and during the Great Depression, Mussolini insisted on corporatist procedures, bringing employers and workers together under the aegis of the state, as an alternative to liberal capitalism; this was a key aspect of the image constructed to give the Italian example an international relevance, and had considerable appeal in the circumstances of worldwide crisis.

As can be seen from the above remarks, a comparison of varying totalitarian responses to capitalism and its problems is bound to raise the question of state involvement; the subordination of capitalist initiative to racial imperialism does not dictate the same role for the state as the construction of a dependent but self-supposedly superior alternative to capitalist institutions. But other variables also affect the position of the state within totalitarian configurations of power, and to clarify their part in the problem, we must take another look at the democratic background to totalitarian projects. Modern democracy is not simply a principle of legitimation from below, instead of the traditional legitimation from above; it is also a form of statehood, and as such, it is inseparable from the nation-state. This is duly noted in Gauchet’s analysis of the democratic transformation, but taking that point a bit further, the following reflections will focus on some variations of totalitarian statehood, related to possibilities inherent in political modernity.

Among the three cases in point, Italian Fascism was the one that set out with the most emphatically statist conception and presentation of its historical mission (Gauchet 2010); this led to the formal incorporation of key party institutions into the state. The Fascist state was to encompass the people by force of an idea, rather than representing it; this vision could draw on modern notions of a state inspired by authoritarian but inclusive ethical principles and overcoming its separation from society on that basis. Giovanni Gentile’s version of Hegelianism fit that purpose; in fact, Gentile is the only original philosopher who had a significant influence on totalitarian ideology (he even wrote a key official text together with Mussolini; by contrast, the two most prominent thinkers allied with National Socialism, Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, had delusions about their ability to educate the movement, rather than any real influence on its beliefs or politics). The invocation of the Roman empire added a heroizing twist to the statist doctrine. But in practice, the imperial
ambitions based on these premises could not go beyond a resumption of Italy’s very modest part in the scramble for overseas colonies. The alliance with Hitler, expected to improve in this, confined the Italian regime to an even more subaltern position. In this case, the imperial venture offered neither a real arena nor an imaginary magnifier for the outsize claims of the state and its leader.

An imperial arena was from the outset available to the architects of the Soviet model, and as events were to show, the temporary loss of territory was seen as reversible. This broad field of action lent plausibility to the adapted party doctrine of socialism in one country. On the other hand, the ideological legacy codified under the label of Marxism-Leninism included the idea of a withering away of the state. This promise was, from the very beginning, honoured in the breach rather than the observance; the Bolshevik takeover initiated a process of sustained and uncompromising state-building. There is, however, a case for considering the ways of rationalizing this contradiction; they drew on the possibilities provided by imperial scale and ideological transfiguration. Stalin’s statement about strengthening the state in order to prepare its withering away is commonly regarded as an extreme example of transparent sophistry, but there is a bit more to it than meets the eye. The history of the Soviet state includes institutional and ideological changes, meant to support its claim to democratic legitimacy and defuse the conflict between ongoing practices and long-term promises.

The first steps taken to consolidate power after the October revolution did not entail final decisions on the mode of government; a turning-point was reached when the new regime decided to close down the Constituent Assembly at the beginning of 1918. This was officially done in the name of a higher form of democracy, represented by the power of the soviets, which was at the same time portrayed as a guarantee that state power would ultimately fade out. In practice, the soviets served as relays for the exercise and extension of party-state power. The next major move was the adoption of a new constitution in 1936. This innovation, on the eve of Stalin’s great purge, was widely misunderstood, by those who saw it as a victory of state-builders over revolutionaries (and were in some cases inclined to accept the purge as part of the same process) as well as by critics who dismissed it as a change of façade without any effect on the realities of power. In fact, the constitution was more adapted to pre-existing power structures (and their revolutionary logic) than the reactions focusing on the credibility of its democratic principles would suggest. It codified the “leading role of the party”, thus instituting a power centre entitled to curtail civic rights in the name of a superior mission. Nevertheless, the constitutionalization of the party-state was a significant development. It reflected the erosion of legitimacy based on the soviets, due to their instrumentalization; the new
framework brought the formal pattern of government closer to more standard versions of modern democracy; and this adjustment was in tune with a foreign policy that prioritized an improvement of relations with the Western powers.

A more ideological but not politically insignificant redefinition was proclaimed as part of Khrushchev’s reform programme after 1956. The state that had long retained a reference to the substantively empty but rhetorically pregnant notion of a “dictatorship of the proletariat” became “a state of the whole people”. This apparent concession to mainstream understanding of popular sovereignty must be understood in light of the historical context. Experience had shown that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was easily turned into a smokescreen for dictatorship in the more traditional sense; the new definition of the state was linked to a broader effort to close the book on that option, and thus to shift from an autocratic to an oligarchic form of the party-state. But in retrospect, the whole record of variation in the articulation of Soviet statehood underlines an important contrast with other types of totalitarianism. Gauchet rightly stresses the common pretension to outdo democracy on its own ground, through a more authentic unity with the people; but the Soviet effort to create and maintain a semblance of representative government is distinctive (in the other two cases, this aspect had shrunk to stage-managed plebiscites, in the Italian model mixed with corporatism), all the more so since it was multiplied on the different levels of a formally federal state. This obviously inauthentic masquerade puzzled some observers; but apart from providing channels of command and communication, it seems a plausible guess that the pseudo-representative mode of government was a way of emphasizing superiority over rivals. The institutions widely seen as the most valued defining feature of Western modernity could be reduced to a subordinate and imitative role.

Nazi Germany, the most short-lived of the three totalitarian regimes, poses the most difficult problems when the question of statehood and state-party relations is raised. Here it may be useful to briefly recall a pioneering analysis of National Socialism, problematic in many respects but still worth reading because of its sensitivity to issues that have proved enduringly challenging to later scholarship. Franz Neumann’s Behemoth (written during World War II and first published in 1942) contrasted Germany with both Italy and the Soviet Union; the former was ruled by a state party, the latter by a party-state. As Neumann saw it, the Soviet purges were primarily meant to strengthen the party’s hold on the state; in view of what is now known about their impact on the highest party organs, the matter seems more complicated, and Neumann underestimated the role of the leader, institutionalized as the last and final classic of party doctrine and invested with an absolute authority to narrate and rewrite party history.
The power structure of Nazi Germany was less reducible to a clear-cut formula. Neumann argued that in the first phase after Hitler’s coming to power in 1933, there had been a brief push to establish a total state, but that the party had revolted against this, and the upshot was a division of the regime into four power blocs, each of which could—in Neumann’s terms—be described as totalitarian: the party, the state bureaucracy, the army and the economy dominated by monopolies. A leader was needed to impose some kind of unity on these separate and often competing socio-political forces, but in Neumann’s opinion, Hitler’s decisions were in them main reducible to compromises between the power blocs.

This analysis has the merit of tackling the problematic that has figured in later scholarship under the label of “polycracy”, although Neumann’s particular model of four power blocs is not in current use. The emergence of autonomous power centres—or, in the German case, the maintenance of pre-existing ones in a new context—is a key theme for studies of totalitarian projects in practice. Polycracy is, in a sense, the inevitable obverse of the totalitarian drive for unity, but it is not the last word on its effects. The role of the leader must be understood in relation to the problem of fragmented power, but Neumann’s view of that issue now seems very unconvincing. Not only have debates among historians—often very confrontational—shown that Hitler’s place and role in the power structure was much more central than Neumann’s idea of mediation between institutional forces suggests. More fundamentally, no functionalist explanations will do justice to the Hitler phenomenon. There has hardly been a regime more dependent on a single person than the National Socialist dictatorship was on Hitler. By contrast, Stalin’s role in the Soviet system was defined in more trans-personal terms: he was the embodiment of a doctrine and an organization, and he filled a space already staked out by the cult of a dead leader.

The *Führer* as an individual was elevated to the level of an institution. This phenomenon has proved difficult to grasp in terms of standard sociological concepts, as shown for example by the frequent references to charismatic power, accompanied by reflections on what should be added to do justice to the singularity of the case. To emphasize the centrality of the leader is not to return to the position of “intentionalist” historians who exaggerated Hitler’s involvement in all domains and every significant decision. The institutional status enabled a distance from routine affairs and specific decisions, now left to subordinate instances; and as Ian Kershaw has shown, conformity was ensured by the idea of “working towards the Führer”, backed up by the general and widely shared orientations of National Socialist ideology.

The invocation of ideological factors calls for further comment. If it is now well established that conquest and empire-building in Eastern Europe were...
key elements of Hitler’s ideology, it is no less clear that this part was much less important for his popular appeal than the promises (followed by apparent successes in the 1930s) to restore Germany to great power status and overcome the economic crisis. But the measures that made him appear as a national saviour were from his own point of view (and that of his closest circle) preparatory steps towards a war of conquest. Following a surprise victory on the western front, the main operation of that war was launched with the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. There is no doubt that this escalation was welcomed by diverse allies and supporters of the regime, for a variety of reasons; most importantly, it appealed to those members of the military establishment who were intent on repeating in a more definitive way the conquests of 1917-18, reversed when Germany lost World War I, and it could be seen as a way to secure space for further accumulation of economic power. Wider expectations of various material advantages were another background factor. But precisely this diffuse and differently motivated support enabled Hitler to wage the war in a way corresponding to the most extreme conclusions of National Socialist ideology: as an ideological war of annihilation, including—not least—the elimination of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe.

This character of the war on the eastern front has far-reaching implications for the historical perspective on National Socialism, and they are best discussed in light of a concluding return to Gauchet’s work. As he (2010) notes, the war fought in order to build a racial empire may be seen as another version of the “second revolution” that had been excluded and preventively condemned in 1934. It was not to be allowed within Germany; a frontal attack on the entrenched elites with which Hitler had allied himself was not to be contemplated; but a racial empire based on a vastly enlarged territory would, in a very different way, give birth to a new society. It would, in the first place, demonstrate the superior importance of the race, rather than the nation. This point qualifies Gauchet’s overemphasis on the nation as the framework for Fascist and Nazi totalitarianism. He stresses the particularism of these two projects and quotes—among other things—Hitler’s statements to the effect that National Socialism was not for export. But hubristic expansion, combined with ultimate aspirations to world hegemony, made export unnecessary; the imperative of expansion brought the race into its own; and the racial perspective, drawing on a mixture of nominal scientism and mythicized history, gives a universalistic twist to the particularistic starting-point. All these conceptual shifts bring us closer to Hannah Arendt’s line of argument. She understood racial ideology, especially in its Nazi version, as a step beyond nationalism and the vision of a racial empire as an alternative to the nation-state; the latter was an inadequate basis for the totalitarian pursuit of power.
The racial empire was meant to transcend the tension between national and imperial trends, interconnected but not easily reconciled within the existing Western patterns of modernity. It was to become a training ground for new elites, prefigured—as many historians have argued—by the SS. As a Lebensraum for agricultural settlers, it would satisfy the archaizing demands of Nazi ideology, but as a contender for world hegemony, it would self-evidently need a dynamic economy and an advanced technology. This was, in brief, a project of alternative modernity, in all probability doomed to failure, but capable of unleashing destructive processes of unequalled magnitude. It pulverized the pre-war European order and changed the course of world history. Not the least of its consequences was an enhanced legitimacy acquired by the adversary who did most to defeat it. The Stalinist transformation of the Russian empire had already—through its own second revolution—redefined the original revolutionary connection, and victory in World War II added a strong national affiliation. This is a further reason to relativize Gauchet’s dichotomy of national or revolutionary backgrounds to totalitarian projects, and it has international implications. Successful fusions of Communism and nationalism belong to the post-1945 period. But that story is too complicated to be discussed within the limits of this paper.

References


