On Stalinism

It is clearly not possible, in the time that each of us is devoting to this theme, to attempt a very complete characterisation of a historical subject as complicated as Stalinism, for although Stalinism is often spoken of as if it were a topic that is easy to delimit, easy to define, for which one could provide precise or at least reasonably accurate dates, it seems, at least to me, that anyone who is truly interested in the topic knows, if he or she has dealt with it at all, that things are not like that, that a delimitation of the concept of Stalinism – what it is or was – is not easy, and that it is not easy to give dates either.

This was already brought out on the first day of this series. One of the people who was present intervened to remind us, for example, of despotic deeds, let us say ‘Stalinist’ deeds, or of those that are usually described as Stalinist, under Lenin’s rule. And others could also be recalled – a member of the panel even reminded us of some others: the problems with Makhno’s movement were brought up, if I am not mistaken, by Solé Barberà, and some people out there brought up, I believe, events such as Kronstadt, and to a certain extent the Tenth Congress of the Bolshevik party, that is, the prohibition of the organisation of factions and tendencies.

It is worth remarking that all of this – the three examples that emerged the other day, which I am repeating now – occurred in a fairly short span of months: all of those things took place from 1920 to the spring of 1921. But apart from that, it is not at all difficult to search further. Anyone who wants to look even further back than these first years of the Soviet government will come across, in the earlier generation of the Marxist classics, Engels’s celebrated phrase, according to which there is nothing more authoritarian than a revolution. This is not only his phrase, but also something that is historically well documented in all of the revolutions that we know of.

It is true that when faced with the tangle of events that occurred under the direct rule of Lenin and the group of old Bolsheviks, and which reproduced that kind of historical synthesis which Engels’s phrase (about every revolution being an exceedingly authoritarian event) is meant to represent, one can make the following argument: all the same, had Lenin and the old Bolsheviks

remained in power, those phenomena would only have occurred during the revolutionary period; they would not have been eternalised, as they were under the government of Stalin and his team, practically up until our own time. And that is true. Still, yesterday’s mention of all these deeds of a despotic, and in some cases even cruel, nature should at least teach us, before we label them ‘Stalinism’ (as with a certain common sense they can be so called), not to paint a naïve picture, counterposing, on the one hand, something perverse, which would be Stalinism, and, on the other, something very pure and innocent, which would be historical Leninism.

Having said this, one must in any case immediately add that there is no lack of highly visible differences between historical Leninism and historical Stalinism, between real Leninism (that which actually existed) and likewise real Stalinism. In order to limit myself in this brief review to things that we all more or less surely have in mind, I would group the most visible differences around the following:

To begin with, the amount of accumulated power in the Stalinist system. At the moment in which the Stalinist system can be regarded as having really taken shape, that is, at the end of the 1930s, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, the Stalinist system was, viewed from a social point of view, a highly state-controlled economy, which was at the same time indissolubly joined to a state apparatus that was highly centralised in its own right. And on top of that, this highly centralised state apparatus was in practice joined to the executive authorities of the sole political party. The concentration of power that arose from this, when the economy was functioning, was, of course, something far beyond what Lenin knew during his lifetime. In the Leninist era understood in a strict sense, such a measure of power had never been concentrated in the hands of the central authority.

This would be the first distinguishing feature among those that are most visible, those that are noticeable at first glance: the different degree of concentration of power.

The second distinguishing feature that I would like to underscore, without detracting from others that could be mentioned (what I am doing is abbreviating, so as to be able to bring together the largest possible number of details), is, I would say, this: although the Cheka was without doubt founded under Lenin, although there already were under Lenin, under classical Leninism, phenomena as painful as, for example, Kronstadt, and many others, the terror during Stalin’s era was nevertheless different, in that its chief tendency was to be terror against the Bolshevik old guard, against the Party itself. In saying this, I do not mean to forget the millions of ordinary Soviet citizens who suffered that terror and who lived and died in the forced labour camps of the Stalinist era.