

THE END OF THE BIPOLAR WORLD AND THE CRISIS OF MARXISM

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I.- INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the consequences that the fall of communism has brought about -or could bring about- on the theoretical reflexion in the realm of social sciences. The attempt to relate both elements is not, of course, gratuitous, and comes from a conviction that is not foreign to the concerns and aims of this seminar. I'm referring to the fact that the so called paradigmatic crisis nthe issues and discussions of the patterns on which the development of social sciences is sustainedn are at the same time *antecedents* and *consequences* in respect to the changes occurring in the social environment in which we live.

Because it is not possible to imagine, honestly, that such an important alteration as the one we have witness will not have any deep repercussions on the work of those involved directly with social sciences; but it is not possible too to leave aside a relation of an inverse sign, which to my thinking is decisive in this circumstance: the end of soviet socialism has not come as the result of a military confrontation or because of external causes directly linked to politics or economics, but has been a sort of "collapse", a gigantic implosion that can't be separated from the intellectual roots that supported the sistem. The fall of communism is, in a conclusive way, a product of modifications in the way of thinking and conceiving social ideas, a result of the prior and much more wider crisis that both Marxism and socialism in general were going through.

It is true that the links between what is essentially political and ideological on one side, and the epistemological paradigms that lay the foundations of the various social theories, on the other, are not direct or automatical. Naturally, there is not a simple relationship of cause and effect between such obviously complex levels and, less still, a conexion that might be understood mechanically. But without doubt the relationship exists and it is necessary to make a sistematic effort to clear it out: we cannot proceed, in the epistemological level, as if all amounted to assuming political stances in a given circumstance, but, and this in my opinion is the most important thing, we can't go on working and doing research **as if nothing had happended.**

To accept such a wide task, as the one we just sketched, obliges us to remain in a level one could call exploratory. It won't be possible, in these few pages, to approach a task of

this magnitude in all its dimensions and possibilities; also, for obvious reasons, it won't be possible to exhaust the analysis of this process which is far from having ended, and is still developing in an accelerated way, because the intellect can't embrace that which is developing very fast and is being modified. But reflection is necessary, essential as a matter of fact, and because of that we'll try to go as far as we possibly can.

II.- FROM THE CRISIS OF PARADIGMS TO THE COLLAPSE OF MARXISM

For quite some time now there has been talk, each time with less accuracy in fact, of the existence of a crisis in the various epistemological paradigms that lay the foundations of social sciences. The concept of crisis, which everyday language has driven more and more away from its original meaning, has undoubtedly added confusion to a statement that, in the borderline, runs the risk of practically losing all of its meaning. The so much talked of crisis of paradigms has served for alluding to the fading of the boundaries among various ways of making social science, to make allusion to the lost of rigidity among different ideological options and, finally, to explain the characteristics of a large portion of the present social science, which is defined as syncretic, eclectic or simply lacking in rigour.

But, as I see it, this crisis of paradigms is more a kind of a convenient title than a real generalized crisis of models and perspectives. And I affirm what I said before because I think that the diagnosis, to which we have become so accustomed to, is based on a completely mistaken principle: after having built abstracting them from real researches made at very different times and also on very different subjects some very few paradigmatic models which supposedly encompassed the various existing tendencies, some authors find it strange that many years later there is not a sociology properly made that corresponds to any of them. If we accept as valid the arbitrary classifying system which divides the scientific work in closed paradigms, it is clear then, naturally, that almost all scientific works stay away from the established models; that the paradigms will be in crisis or that, enlarging the terms, sociology or social sciences in general are the ones in crisis.

But that is not true: the crisis lies not in the fact that the social scientists follow an arbitrary pool of ways of making science defined by any thinker devoted to epistemology, because it is in the scientific work's own dynamic to develop flexible lines of work, particularly when there is so much diversity, as there should be, in the study of complex social phenomena. The crisis, as I see it, lies elsewhere, in that which is so hard to categorize which in some way we know as Marxism. And it's not strange that the marxists, and those near to Marxism, are the ones who have make a stronger emphasis on a crisis that in fact many others didn't feel.

In the last decades a large portion of social science has nourish itself from Marxism, and from its crisis other crisis, supposed or real, have emerged with which we have accustom ourselves to live with. There would be no logic, for instance, in talking about a

parallel crisis in the classical positivism which ceased to be valid a long time ago or of a structural-functionalism, that as a global explanatory model lost its attraction a quarter of a century ago. But the crisis in Marxism (with the diversity of names that took in academic grounds: "materialism", critical sociology, etc.) and the derivations to which it gave birth has had larger consequences than the substitution or the loss of strength in some of the many theoretical approximations to which we are used in the development of social sciences. Because Marxism was different: it was more like a cosmology, a *weltanschauung*, as it was the vogue to say at one time, than a pure epistemological paradigm comparable to those of Lévy-Strauss or Max Weber. Marxism aimed at much higher goals and it came to be much more among its partisans, academicians and intellectuals of several generations. It has been its peculiarities, then, the cause for the general commotion we have been witnesses to, a commotion of such magnitude that it will take several years to settle down.

III.- THE FRUSTRATED PROMISES OF AN UTOPIA THAT PRETENDED TO BE SCIENTIFIC

Communism and I intend the word to embrace the initial utopia as well as the concrete societies built from this one had a peculiar attraction that dazzled many great intellectuals of our time: by appealing to reason it elaborated a speech that had the strength of myths; by assuming itself as a philosophy and as a cosmology, it was capable of building an apparently indestructible empire. It had the same totalizing capacity seen in some religions, the force to build an almost closed world that contained from ethical and philosophical precise postures to concrete political organizations, states, behaviour modes, rooted prejudices and habits.

This capacity for integration, for creating a surrounding in which a person could develop **all** its life, made possible for communism to turn into a kind of main character of our century: in its name fights that recalled the holy wars of other times were carried out; its basic notions served as justifications for anti-colonial zeals, desires for economic development and all kinds of rebellions; its intellectual influence, basically the influence of Marx's work, modeled strongly the thinking of historians and sociologists, of scientists and poets, gaining a strong foothold in universities everywhere as a force almost incontestable.

As a doctrine that tended to close around itself it sought to get involved in every field of human activity: nothing was neutral, nothing could be left to random or to free opinion, because it had the implacable will of dogmas. Then, flourished the heresies, the dissidences, the arguments full of hatred that rose from apparently trivial disagreements. It couldn't be otherwise: the only way to maintain the system was to appeal to a demand for discipline and intellectual conformity that, as a natural result, later derived in the deep deadlock that we find surprising today.

Because, in some way, in that all-embracing capacity lay the seed of its weakness too: Marxism resembled, in many ways, an overpowering secular religion yet, unlike all religions, it didn't seek to build a supernatural paradise but dared to make specific and verifiable prophecies, that in some manner could be contrast with the facts visible to all. That conceit, which only a few ephemeral sects have allowed themselves, was fatal in the end: neither the vast propaganda machine organized, nor the secrecy or isolation in which the people living under communism were tried to keep could prevent the affirmations of the so-called "scientific socialism" (haughty name which wasn't enough to conceal the collapse) from being compared with the facts.

It is true that this didn't happen all of a sudden, in a cold way, as when you try to verify the truth of a hypothesis. The passion that was at stake was too much and the field of demonstration was obviously very complex too. But, as the impulse that arose after World War II and the immediately following period of deconolization ended, communism gradually and inexorably stagnated: firstly was its intellectual vitality ndrowned by the necessity of making the exegesis to a message that each time divorced more and more from the changing reality, when it wasn't bound by the need of justifying those who held power; then was its capacity for gathering, the possibility of providing adequate ideas to the new social and political movements that were emerging; finally it expressed in the crisis of the states, in the backwardness of its centralized economies that weren't able to produce nor assimilate the technological advances and which were lagging not only in the political and economic aspects but in the military too. And, when the more lucid leaders tried to carry out the reform, the indispensable up-to-date of a system that was fossilizing without alternatives, they found what other reformers had found before at different times: you can't open gradually a system closed in the political and economic, there's no way of readjusting it gradually, because the accumulated tensions are so strong that a genuine revolution nalmost unstoppable breaks out.

These are the basic lines of the process that has so deeply affected the world in which we're living, that still continues to develop in part before our eyes. But there's something else, something important for the objections that are surely being made to me: the crisis of communism affected not only those regimes which appointed themselves as such but also influenced, in an indirect but not for that less decisive way, the indefinite boundaries which we are accustomed to know as "the left", parties and movements, personalities and intellectuals of all kind, including, incidentally, those devoted to social sciences.

The root of the problem is, in a way, quite simple; engaged, as they were, with texts and certain traditions, with theoretical propositions and procedures which came from a common stem, the supposedly critic intellectuals near to the Marxist tradition found themselves with a diabolical blackmail that in the end chipped off completely the edge of their instruments of analysis: it wasn't easy to separate for good from the "real socialisms", it was hardly possible, because immediately the accusation of being playing along with the enemy and of defending a capitalism thought to be doomed surged. All criticism was limited by the sometimes purely emotional need of defending some aspects of the concrete management carried out by communist regimes, and by the not trespassing of certain intangible barriers known to all. In our continent, for instance,

Castrism was always the touchstone: one could be a Marxist-Leninist and still make the harshest criticism of the Soviet Union, but one couldn't even be a progressive if one dared to say that Castro was a dictatorial or totalitarian leader.

The problem, in fact, was much more deeper than what the former, purely political example, would lead one to understand; it manifested itself in all the fields of social practice and theoretical reflection, and was made worst by some characteristics of Marxism to which we will only refer to at the end of this paper. Because from the moment it was accepted that the first socialist revolution could start in a "backward" country without the need to criticize the work of Marx, from the moment that the theory would be modified each time a change of direction or the approval of a policy was required, the possibilities for a devastating criticism to the present world nor, being more modest, the possibilities of a social science without any commitments to power were almost completely excluded. Ethics, the Philosophy of history, even much of the natural sciences were committed to a similar trap. It would be enough to remember, in order to understand the magnitude of the problem, that few, very few left-oriented intellectuals and critics and transformers by their own definition dared to accept the overwhelming similarities between the regimes of Hitler and Stalin.

That is why the existence of real socialisms exercised a very negative influence, at one time, over the development of thought: the universities and the media, the institutes and research centers, all equally received the print of that half criticism, of that implicit defense of a system that imprisoned free reflection, that submitted those who saw themselves as the critic vanguard of a new thinking to the indirect game of power.

IV.- THE END OF UTOPIAS

However, we are and I could add, luckily in a completely different scenario. There's no reason to be surprised at the existence of those, of a deep conservative mind, that are bent on defending what practically doesn't exist anymore; we shouldn't wonder that many people feel a kind of ideological void, a lack of horizons, an anxiety in the presence of change. Both the professors who have spent a lifetime repeating Marx's old texts and the bureaucrats of the NATO, for example, must be feeling that the world beneath their feet is crumbling, that the certainties which gave meaning to their lives are disappearing. But change is life itself, the visible affirmation of time, and this change will undoubtedly bring a fresh air capable of oxygenating our social sciences.

One of the most visible effect of the end of that bipolar world in which we lived for so many years will be the gradual but sure disappearance of a bipolarity of thought that, I think, favoured us none. To live in a universe that was inevitably divided between "them" and "us", to know that such an intellectual frontier was parallel to a dividing line set by nuclear missiles, put us in a context of confrontation similar to that of an economy of war. To the effect mentioned in the previous point one should add parallel effects, though without question less marked, in all existing currents of thought, in all or almost all

scopes of reflection. Because free thinking is never stimulated when barriers and fields of ownership are established *a priori*, and without real freedom to think criticism runs the risk of being sequestered or completely adulterated.

Another consequence, more subtle but nonetheless meaningful, is that any criticism to the existing world will no longer have the means of assuming the implicit presence of the "other", of a different point of reference, though dimly defined, for reinforcing the argument. I will explain: whenever a social scientist expounded that the facts happened in this or that way, that the fulfillment of certain laws should be accounted for the phenomena he described or explained, there always came someone who took delight in saying that their affirmations were only valid for capitalism and nothing else; outside capitalism, it was implicitly stated, something radically different existed, defined systems (or maybe utopias that reflected imperfectly in those systems) where things worked in a different way. It's true that this instrument was used basically by those that, in the border of real intellectual effort, assumed in a more direct and flat manner the ideological confrontation to which we have been referring to. But not because of that, however, did this attitude cease to influence in the whole of the realm of social thinking, plunging us in a profoundly sterile kind of discussion, infested with phallacies.

But the end of the bipolar world to which we have been referring to doesn't mean we are at the beginning of a new era of uniformity as some simplistic visions have tried to point out. History doesn't end because this or that model of society have prove to lead to oppression and stagnancy. It would be giving too much importance to Marxism as we knew it to confer it the character of last utopia, to state that with it the adventure of human thought is closed. Because, and here I'll give a familiar example, there are different ways of facing a market economy and, much beyond that, there are infinite problems that claim for the human spirit, many ways of conceiving the world that have little to do with the basic controversy in which our century was concerned. To think differently, to believe that with Marxism all possibilities of diferring are ended would be as naive nor as perversen as imagining that after Copernicus or Darwin there was nothing left to discuss, but a sole idea dominating a definite field of thought. Quite the opposite, once you move to a certain point, once history discards certain roads to go into others, new possibilities for discussion and criticism blossom, new roads to thought are open, discarding the exhausted models that had proven barren, allowing richer, freer and profounder approaches to come.

But this necessary digression, this rejection of the implicit historicism in the short-lived thesis of the "end of history", musn't drive us away from the consideration of that which constitutes the starting point of our reflection: with the fall of communism an era is surely ended, a debate closes, a certain way of practical thinking and **a way of conceiving the utopia** is cancelled. To explain myself, I will have to return to what I previously pointed out was a fundamental limitation of leftist thinking.

We said that the existence of concrete regimes that were called socialists, in one way or another, had sequestered in high measure the capacity for critical analysis of those sectors that claimed themselves as "progressive". But this happened because another

factor, in the ideology itself of those who formed the left, added to this limitation with an incontestable weight. In their fight against what was conceived as capitalist exploitation thinkers in the past century looked for various alternative models capable of building a better world for the workers. The first great controversy which socialism had to face at that time signaled, in a definite way, the paths to be taken later. In the face of an anarchism that could never build a feasible economic alternative for the modern world, but that warned against the inevitable oppression by the institution of the state, the majority of socialists favoured a different solution: to assume the rejection of the capitalistic individualism under the defense of the "common", the social or the collective. The results were incalculable. As the movement progressed and its influence expanded the consequences of that mode of looking at the future, of the reading of the possible utopia, outlined themselves more and more strongly. Then surged next explicitly after the *What Is To Be Done?* by Lenin the notions that trusted in an outstanding vanguard for the task of exercising a tutorship over the revolutionary masses, the defense of the ineffable "dictatorship of the proletariat" and the conviction of the superiority of the planned economy. All this, definitely, shaped a way of conceiving the utopia that created a gap between the leaders bearers of the historical conscience and "the masses", a way of thinking that placed the state in the center of the intellectual scene, a statism, almost like a conditioned reflex, that survives in various currents of the non-marxist left.

It would seem exaggerated to some the affirmation that each statist proposal, all ideology that promotes the expansion of the functions of the state, has evident germs of authoritarianism and runs the risk of becoming totalitarian. But it should be granted to us, at least, that it is quite difficult to worship an institution that centralizes power, that defines it by antonomasia, and displays at the same time a critical thinking, free and iconoclast. The search for the extension of the functions of the state, or the criticism to ideologies that intend to diminish its role, has in itself something of a contradiction, something that produces a kind of dissonance. Free spirits usually stay away from the world of the "official", they usually blossom on the side, watching zealously an independence which sometimes carries them, or almost always, to swim against the current of established ideas. Because it's not easy to destroy myths if an expansion of the political power is postulated, it isn't comfortable the position of someone who pretends to discover the fallacies of the discourse while maintaining that the institutions that have produced more fallacious discourses in the course of history should be strengthened.

That is why I maintain perhaps optimistically that the world is now ripe for other possibilities of critical thinking, centered in individual liberties, devoted to the analysis of the various forms of oppression that characterized our time; that I believe in an open future, of maybe new utopias, but where freedom and not the cult to power travels with its permanent influence the roads of criticism.

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