



Socialism: A life-cycle

AV RÉGIS DEBRAY

The ecosystem of socialism, seen through the material forms in which its principles were transmitted—books, newspapers, manifestos—and the parties, movements, schools and men who were its bearers. From Babeuf to Marx to Mao, the passage of printed ideas, and their inundation by images in the age of the spectacle.

IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO GRASP the nature of conscious collective life in any epoch without an understanding of the material forms and processes through which its ideas were transmitted—the communication networks that enable thought to have a social existence. Indeed, the successive stages of development of these means and relations of transmission—whose ensemble we might term the mediasphere—suggest a new periodization for the history of ideas. [1] First, what we may call the logosphere: that long period stretching from the invention of writing (and of clay tablets, papyrus, parchment scrolls) to the coming of the printing press. The age of the *logos*, but also that of theology, in which writing is, first and foremost, the inscription of the word of God, the ‘sacred carving’ of the hieroglyph. God dictates, man transcribes—in the Bible or the Koran—and dictates in his turn. Reading is done aloud, in company; man’s task is not to invent but to transmit received truths.

A second period, the graphosphere, runs from 1448 to around 1968: from the Gutenberg Revolution to the rise of tv. The age of reason and of the book, of the newspaper and political party. The poet or artist emerges as guarantor of truth, invention flourishes amid an abundance of written references; the image is subordinate to the text. The third, still expanding today, is the era of the videosphere: the age of the image, in which the book is knocked off its pedestal and the visible triumphs over the great invisibles—God, History, Progress—of the previous epochs.

This mediological periodization allows us to situate the life-cycle of socialism, that great fallen oak of political endeavour, within the last 150 years of the graphosphere; and to explore its ecosystem, so to speak, through



its processes of propagation. Socialism will not be treated here in terms of the intrinsic value of any of its branches. Rather, the aim will be to grasp the common mediological basis that underlies all its doctrinal ramifications—from Fourier to Marx, Owen to Mao, Babeuf to Blum—by approaching it as an ensemble composed of men (militants, leaders, theoreticians), tools of transmission (books, schools, newspapers), and institutions (factions, parties, associations). The ecosystem takes the form of a particular sociotope, a milieu for the reproduction of certain kinds of life and thought. The professional typographer occupies a special niche within it, the key link between proletarian theory and the working-class condition; herein lay the best technical means of intellectualizing the proletariat and proletarianizing the intellectual, the double movement that constituted the workers' parties. For a printer is quintessentially a 'worker intellectual or an intellectual worker', the very ideal of that human type who would become the pivot of socialism: 'the conscious proletarian'.

The life-cycle of this ecosystem begins, in France at least, soon after the July Revolution. Organized Saint-Simonism was born one winter evening in 1831, when the carpenter Gauny met the bookseller Thierry in Paris. Propaganda work for the Saint-Simonian 'family' was planned for every *arrondissement*, and local directors were charged with the workers' education. Hence a new series of encounters between hatters, drapers, cabinet-makers, tilers, and the clerks, printers, engravers and type-founders responsible for running their evening classes and, most importantly, producing their newspapers: *Le Globe*, then *LaRuche populaire*, *L'Union*, and more. The cycle comes to an end in the aftermath of May 1968, Year One of the videosphere. But the life-span of socialism may best be understood within a vaster arc of time: the age of the graphosphere. Dawning with the early-modern era—the 'coming of the book'—the graphosphere itself comprises three successive chapters: reformation, republic, revolution.

Genetic helix

The inventor of the word 'socialism' was the genial typographer, encyclopaedist and 1848-er, Pierre Leroux. Born in 1797, a bartender's son, Leroux attended the *Ecole Polytechnique*, then joined a printshop where he perfected a new process, the pianotype. He founded the *Globe* newspaper in 1824 and, with George Sand, the *Revue Indépendante* in 1841. Moving to Boussac, he set up his own publishing house and attracted a small community of disciples and readers. He was elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1848, and formally honoured by the Commune upon his death in 1871. The combination—book, newspaper, school—that would be the genetic helix of the workers' movement is prefigured in Leroux. Socialism was born with a printers' docket around its neck.

Book, newspaper, school: a reminder of the practical culture that preceded the political programmes. Socialism was a craft formation before it became a



mentality. Its take-off came with a specific historical moment—1864, the First International founded in London; 1866, the Education League founded in Paris; 1867, the rotary press invented by Marinoni, permitting a tenfold rise in impressions—but also with a particular form of consciousness. ‘The 19th-century working class harbours three aspirations,’ wrote the foreman Pierre Bruno in his memoirs, published on the eve of the Commune. ‘The first is to combat ignorance, the second, to combat poverty, and the third, to help one another.’ [2] The first and most important was the fight against ignorance, rallying cry of the forces of reason. Working-class socialism, too, was a creature of reason—ruling spirit of the age of the graphosphere.

Typographers, intellectuals and teachers were the three supports of the socialist movement, each corresponding to one leg of the mediological tripod. What was on offer at any workers’ lodge or *maison du peuple*? A library, newspapers, evening classes and lectures. Today, there are still platforms, books and newspapers. But the central axis of transmission has moved elsewhere, taking with it the apparatus of celebration, prestige and values that formerly conferred such an aura upon the books, teachers or peripatetic lecturers at workers’ educational associations and *universités populaires*.

A powerful oral culture also played a large part in the workers’ movement, of course: harangues at rallies, congress speeches, conferences; Jaurès at Pré-Saint-Gervais, Lenin on Red Square, Blum at Tours or the Place de la Nation in 1936—all spoke without benefit of microphones, shouting themselves hoarse, to the brink of exhaustion, before tens of thousands of listeners. But if the spokesmen of socialism relied as much on their public pulpits as on their presses, their rhetoric was nevertheless stamped by a bookish culture and a long familiarity with the written word. Even their extemporizations have the feel of the reader or the scholar. Many were great parliamentarians, orators and tribunes in the classical republican tradition; but their addresses were formally founded upon the written word, the real basis of law both in their own eyes and in those of the rank and file.

Powers of the invisible

‘Since 1789, ideas alone have constituted the strength and salvation of the proletariat. It owes to them its every victory’, wrote Blanqui (one of those who passed the ideas of 1789 on to the Paris Commune). Abstract concepts were the abc of a militant’s apprenticeship. The notions of proletariat and bourgeoisie, like those of labour power, surplus value, relations of production, etc., that underlie them, are not apprehensible by the senses. Secondly, whether project or myth, the idea of the Revolution as ‘what should be’ is the denial and transcendence of the immediate, the overcoming of the present. Both as logical discourse and as moral undertaking, the socialist utopia demanded an inner break with the ‘stream of everyday life’, an act of faith that mobilized the powers of conceptual analysis to break the accepted social imagery down into elemental abstracts, like ‘exploitation’.



Writing collectivizes individual memory; reading individualizes collective memory. The back-and-forth between them fosters the sense for history by unearthing potentials within the present, creating backdrops and foregrounds; it is fundamental for the idea of socialism. When it is cold outside and the night is long, memory means that we are not alone. Alphabetical memory, as Hegel would put it. Contrasting ‘the inestimable educational value’ of learning to read and write with alphabetical characters, as opposed to hieroglyphics, he described how the very process of alphabetical writing helps to turn the mind’s attention from immediate ideas and sense impressions to ‘the more formal structure of the word and its abstract components’, in a way that ‘gives stability and independence to the interior realm of mental life’. [3]

All the revolutionary men of action I have met, from Che Guevara to Pham Van Dong by way of Castro (not the autocrat, but the one-time rebel), to say nothing of the walking encyclopaedias known as Trotskyists, were compulsive readers, as devoted to books as they were unreceptive to images. A Hegelian would explain this by saying that reading leads to critical detachment, and—given that there is ‘no science that is not hidden’, nor future without ‘rehearsal’ of the past—to utopian anticipation. Abstraction encourages action, as remembrance leads to innovation. The greatest modernizers inaugurate their career with a backward leap, and a renaissance proceeds through a return to the past, a recycling, and hence a revolution. Columbus discovered America in a library, through the perusal of arcane texts and cosmographies. The Ancien Régime in France was overthrown by admirers not of Montgolfier or Washington, but of Lycurgus and Cato. Chateaubriand and Hugo revolutionized literature by dint of Gothic ruins, Nietzsche vaulted over Jules Verne with the aid of the pre-Socratics, and Freud revisited Aeschylus.

The misfortune of revolutionaries is to have inherited a little more than most people. The written word is vital for these transmitters of collective memory, since their analytical tools are forged from its traditions. A legacy of ideas is not automatically transmissible; there are better or worse historical environments for conveying abstractions, just as there are better and worse conductors of electricity. The revolutionary act *par excellence* starts from a sense of nostalgia, the return to a forgotten text, a lost ideal. Behind the ‘re’ of reformation, republic or revolution—of rehearsing, recommencing, rereading—there is a hand flicking through the pages of a book, from the end back to the beginning. Whereas the finger that presses a button, fast-forwarding a tape or disc, will never pose a danger to the establishment.

Parchment batons

If news bulletins are the medium for history as spectacle, the archive is the medium for history as practice. The story of communism—as revolutionary



utopia, not bureaucratic dictatorship—has been a tale of archivists and old papers. Communism was the bookish invention of Gracchus Babeuf, a specialist in feudal law, who extracted its central ideas from Rousseau, Mably and antique parchments. It flourished in the great storehouses of the written word. For Michelet: ‘My history of the French Revolution was born in the archives. I am writing it in this central depot’—the official records office. Men wove between texts, texts wove between men. Myths beget acts which beget myths, and the movement of narratives spurs the movement of peoples. Histories of Rome had their effects on the deputies of 1789, Lamartine’s History of the Girondins and Louis Blanc’s History of the French Revolution on the 1848-ers, Hugo’s Les Misérables on the Commune and his Ninety-Three on the birth of the Third Republic.

The baton was passed round the world, hand to hand: from the Society of Equals, founded by the medievalist Babeuf, to the Society of New Citizens, founded by the young librarian, Mao Zedong. Buonarroti (1761–1837), a year younger than Babeuf (1760–97), dodged the Directory’s police and survived his friend by forty years. In 1837 Buonarroti’s account of the history they had lived, Babeuf’s Conspiracy for Equality, was published in Brussels, where Marx would take refuge after his expulsion from Paris in 1845, and would find his first apostle in the young Philippe Gigot, paleographer and archivist. Exile in Brussels functioned as a turn-table after the 1815 Restoration. Here Buonarroti met up with the former Convention delegates, Barère and Vadier, who would organize the *carbonari*, seedbed for the secret societies that sprang up under the July Monarchy, and from which would emerge the League of the Just; which would in turn be refashioned into the Communist League in 1847 by Marx and Engels, along with delegates from Blanqui, ‘the head and the heart of the proletarian party in France’. Thirty-nine years in jail and four death sentences: it was via Blanqui (1805–81), ‘the prisoner’, that the passage was made from Jacobinism to socialism, from 1793 to the Paris Commune; Blanqui who handed the torch to Vaillant, who would pass it to Jaurès, whose byline on his column in La Dépêche de Toulouse was ‘The Reader’, and who was succeeded by Blum, literary critic for La Revue Blanche.

An Olympic marathon: the glow of a letter—more firefly than flame—passing from runner to runner, as if the revolutionary was a forwarding agent, and the heart of the message lay precisely in its transmission: a telegraph flashing from peak to peak, via such human semaphores. Not forgetting the whispering in the valleys, some two hundred years of stories handed down from grandmothers to toddlers. ‘My childhood was full of stories about the long march of the poor, across the ages’, recalls the old French Communist Gérard Belloin.

Tales prompted by a crust of bread on the floor, a drop of soup left in a bowl. They were told by the grandmothers, who had heard them told when they were young themselves. Like underground streams whose course cannot be mapped



because their waters seem to disappear completely, then come up further on, the chronicle of peasant suffering knew little of its sources. But it too had run on underground, carried by anonymous voices, each generation confiding its trials to the next. At times it grew more insistent or seemed to fade, but it never went away. It constantly mixed up the past and the present, for isn't speaking of the troubles of the past a way of drawing attention to those of today? Did that happen long ago? Oh yes, my child, a very long time ago. But how can you be sure? For a child, how far back is long ago? [4]

The workers' press and the socialist library were crucibles for anarchists, Proudhonists, Leninists and reformists alike. Saint-Simon was a copyist, proof-corrector and bookseller; Proudhon, a typographer. So was Pablo Iglesias (1850–1925), founder of the Spanish Socialist Party. It was a Spanish journalist and typographer, José Mesa, who, exiled in Paris, passed on the heritage of the First International to Jules Guesde, recruiting sergeant of French socialism. Anarchists and socialists were the warring siblings of one family; pamphlets, articles, newspapers, literary supplements, filled their lives. Both followed Luther's order, to spare neither hardship nor money to set up 'good libraries and bookshops' everywhere. The sons of Marx and of Bakunin shared the same gospel: to read and to get others reading. Everywhere they went, they left a library. Hobsbawm could measure the precise degree of socialism's penetration in Europe between 1890 and 1905 by comparing the number of annual publications. [5]

The cult of the book had its preacherly moments. Hugo to the illiterate worker:

Have you forgotten that your liberator
Is the book? The book is there on the heights;
It gleams; because it shines and illuminates,
It destroys the scaffold, war and famine;
It speaks: No more slaves and no more pariahs. [6]

But it had its triumphal version too, gaily insurrectional in Jules Vallès's bulletin to his editor, warning of 'galleys within the fortnight, and "pass for press" in two months'. 'I breathe deep, I swell out. "Pass for press", it's as good as the order to fire! On the barricades, it's a gun-barrel poked out between the slats.' And Hugo himself had written: 'Nothing so much resembles the mouth of a cannon as an open bottle of ink.' [7]

Eastern clandestinity

After 1945, this alphabetical heroism migrated to the Third World, equipped with hurricane lamp, exercise books and biros. Emancipation through literacy, the dark shadows of superstition gradually buried under millions of white pages—this Eluardesque symbolism of Europe's 19th century found a haven, in the mid-20th, in the struggle against the 'imperialist West'. The first action of any anti-colonial revolution was to launch a mass literacy campaign. [8] The Little Red Book was the talisman of Mao's China.



The process was frozen in the post-war period in Eastern Europe's huge conservatory of obsolete forms—a museum of the word, in which the living sources of the past lay fossilized. Yet, studious and scholarly, 'actually existing socialism' had a typographic soul. A glance at unesco indicators for number of books per head, quantity of public libraries, average household spending on books, etc., shows that during the Cold War, Communist countries—where the economy was struggling and audiovisual culture had barely arrived—held all the records for printed paper. To journey through those old-world provinces, where Western Europe's 19th century still lived on, was to witness a universal cult of books and an idolization of writers—Soviet stars were more likely to be novelists or poets than actors or musicians. With the atrophy of the image came a hypertrophy of the text, its aura enhanced by censorship.

Party-States had such respect for the power of words that they kept them under perpetual surveillance, yet this repression made a live grenade of every samizdat, in line with the 'best' Tsarist traditions. Everything was repeated, but upside-down. Under the Stalinist state, the Russian intelligentsia resumed its time-honoured typographical combat, its old mole's labours. For what else is told in the long history of the Russian underground, from Herzen's *Kolokol* (1855) to Lenin's *Iskra* (1900), but stories of clandestine presses, illicit news-sheets, books sewn into greatcoats? In Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Verkhovensky lures Shatov into a trap by sending him to retrieve a printing press buried in a schoolyard.

Between the various opposition groups, as between dissidents and the state, the battle-lines were drawn in print, above all through the journal. Russian populists (direct ancestors of Marxist study groups and parties) placed even greater emphasis on the importance of the press than did the secret societies and *carbonari* in the West. Lenin defined himself as a publicist, [9] in the mould of Chernyshevsky or Herzen, who moved to London for the sake of the cyrillic characters unavailable in Russia. In contrast to the Brezhnev era—better organized and hence less bloodthirsty than the Tsarist autocracy—written propaganda preceded, and alternated with, the propaganda of deeds. In 1880s Russia, the profession closest to 'editor' was 'terrorist'. The Tsarist police's litany was: 'Where's the printing press? The first link in the courier chain? The dispatch office?' The mastermind of a conspiracy was inevitably a bookseller or a printer. The most vexing problem was always how to move things (subversive literature or bombs), deep in travellers' bags. [10]

The fall of Communism in the East thus witnessed the extinction of the last literate societies in Europe—the triumph of showbiz extravagance over cheap editions and a dwindling readership for the classics, as the old European culture of printing segued into the 'mass culture' imported from America.



The totalitarian hijacking of the Enlightenment, set against the new global imagery, could even make the defeat of Diderot at the hand of Disneyland look like emancipation. In a remarkable historical irony, the political victory of humanism spelled the cultural defeat of the humanities. Prosperous times for television and advertising in Eastern Europe; lean times for bookshops and publishers.

Alma mater

If the history of the school has always been charged with political significance, political history has in turn carried scholastic implications. The 'battle for education' always featured high on the left's agenda; socialism, as the pedagogy of a world-view, knew that its own survival was at stake here. Any militant enrolling in a school of socialist thought must first have absorbed the habits of the schoolroom. The socialist's code of honour was modelled on that of the good schoolboy: he who can put up with the boredom of the classroom will triumph over the class enemy.

The early workers' movements arose before the advent of mass education; silk workers' uprisings, weavers' strikes and mutual insurance companies did not wait for universal schooling in order to exist. But trade unionism and 'workers' power' are self-limiting in their ideas, and philanthropy alone would have spawned no more than adult-learning centres. It was the educational project of socialism that lifted its vision beyond that of unions and guilds. Its parties were created on the strength of the conviction that class is an instinct, but socialism is a raising of consciousness. The job of the school was thus not incubation but production. This accounts for the intensive focus on educational questions. 'For every school that opens, a prison is closed'. The mystique of the emancipated and emancipatory school was a tribute rendered by the working-class parties to the bourgeois state.

Numerous teachers (Guesde and Jaurès among them) once hurried back and forth between blackboard and rostrum. The First International (1864) and the Workers' Educational League (1867) pooled their staff, premises and periodicals. One of the first acts of the Paris Commune was to appoint a Commission of Education, headed by Edouard Vaillant. Louise Michel, deported to New Caledonia with the Commune's suppression, immediately opened a school there for the Kanaks (had she enjoyed access to pulp and typeface, she would no doubt have launched the island's first newspaper). From its inception in 1920, the French Communist Party recruited its star cadres from the ranks of schoolteachers and professors. The best-established branch of the International between the wars was the education workers' section headed by Georges Cogniot, a practising Latinist.

Mill workers had provided a focus for the communist imaginary during the first industrial revolution; miners and steel workers took over that role during the second. But it is the primary schoolteacher, with his spartan or



sententious modesty, who reveals the extent to which organized socialism's roots lie in the pre-industrial culture of the Enlightenment. Former Communist Gérard Belloin, a child of the field and the page, a self-educated man enlightened by the Resistance, provides an arresting sample of militant ecology in his memoirs: 'When in small groups we'd spent the night slipping tracts under doors or into letterboxes, we felt as uplifted on the way home as a schoolmaster at the end of the lesson.' Belloin went forth, not to earn party points but out of pure devotion. In those days (we are in the 1950s, by the banks of the Loire):

one would not dream of casting aspersions on the teacher's social standing, or doubting the degree of personal effort this had cost him. According to the commonly accepted scale of values that substituted for an explanation of social class, it was quite the opposite. Repositories of knowledge, they were just about the only people locally acknowledged as such, along with doctors, priests, tax inspectors, notaries and chemists . . . We were imbued with the hallowed popular respect for learning, books and intellectuals. [11]

The ritual nature of this respect informed both the best—Belloin and his ilk—and the worst, who were to encircle and then crush them. A germ of Stalinism lay in the frankness of encyclopaedism, stupidity inside intelligence. A fatal distinction prevailed between the leaders and the led. Intellectual authority became the grounds for political domination. Knowledge became nationalized, because doctrines, like temples or countries, need frontiers, and armed clerics to guard them. The most philistine despot found himself wreathed in the laurels of knowledge. Academism, museomania and the general smell of mothballs impregnating Soviet societies became endemic when the 'tradition'-form was held up as the norm of the future: the archive's posthumous revenge on invention. The didacticism, ponderousness and rigidity of Soviet discourse, its moralistic gloom, are what ensue when a school turns upon thinking, and subdues it with an iron fist. The handbook becomes the curriculum, and the result is crude simplification, stereotypes and cant.

Socialist culture is paradoxically attached to an elitist curriculum reflecting 'bourgeois', not to say 'aristocratic' values, whose decline considerably hastened that of socialism. Socialism was marked during the first half of the 20th century by an educational universe that despised technical knowledge, commerce, industry and even maths, but taught Latin and Greek as living languages. For today's reader, to scour the archives of the French workers' movement prior to its 'Bolshevization' by the Communists, and standardization by the Socialists, is like moving from Hello! magazine to the Metaphysics and Ethics Review. Jaurès and Blum possessed the same cultural baggage as Marx and Trotsky, as did their opponents Barrès and Maurras. There are deeper affinities between Jaurès and Barrès than between Jaurès and any current Socialist leader. This is because Jaurès's holiday reading was De natura rerum in the original; Blum liked to relax with a



translation of Lucretius; today's socialist elephant will pick up a seasonal blockbuster and a newspaper written in français. If he chose Lucretius over the latest opinion polls, he would soon lose his leadership. The biotope makes the animal, rather than the other way around.

Holy morning paper

Book, school, newspaper: for the party militant, the greatest emphasis lay on the third. The first, short-lived, working-class publications in France appeared between 1830 and 1840. Indeed it was L'Atelier, Buchez's paper, that in 1840 coined the expression 'working class'. The intervening period was crucial, for it was then that 'creating a school' mutated into 'creating a party'. For the Church, a daily paper is a plus; for the party, it is a must. L'Humanité was strategic for the pcf in a way La Croix would never be for the clergy. Churches came and went long before the invention of printing, but no workers' parties existed before the appearance of popular broadsheets around 1860. Socialist ideology lasted for the duration of the form called party, and the party-form lasted as long as the party dailies—roughly a hundred years. Le Peuple, for example, the Belgian Socialists' organ, expired with dignity in 1979, at the age of 94. It had fought for universal suffrage, the emancipation of women and human rights with Jaurès, Vandervelde and Huysmans. After that it merely survived, a different entity under the same name.

'The paper is not only a collective propagandist and agitator, but also a collective organizer' (Lenin). Its dissemination unites, creating a network of exchanges and liaisons. Jaurès, Trotsky and Lenin performed the same tasks (writing, typesetting, printing, posting) as Vallès did at Le Cri du peuple, Elisée Reclus at Le Révolté, Jean Grave at Temps nouveaux. Whether the reference was Marx, Bakunin or Fourier, printed words were sown in order to harvest activists. Lenin established his party with Iskra, Guesde with L'Egalité and Jaurès with La Petite République. Cabet propagated his Icarian dream with the tools and methods employed by Marx and Engels.

The political news-sheet carried serious implications, attesting to the active mediation of an idea of Man in the midst of men; the long-shot in the short term. Mainstream newspapers, product of a media conglomerate, are conceived as black boxes: events come in and information comes out. A class or party newspaper plays a different role: transforming a conception of the world into small change, a philosophical system into everyday slogans. Events are centralized by, and under, the idea; individual energies by the leadership. In contrast to the paper-as-mirror, the paper-as-guide fulfils the role assigned by Kant to the schema: intermediary and interpreter between the pure concept and the appearance of things. In the tradition of the socialist press, the author of the doctrine is his own intermediary; this is what distinguishes him from his contemporary, the belle-lettriste. 'For "intellectuals", the other profession that they should always practise



alongside their own is surely that of printer,' wrote Andler, in his *Life of Lucien Herr*. 'A time will certainly come when writers and scientists know how to operate a linotype. If they wish to publish a book, they will be able to rent a rotary press, just as one hires a motor car to drive oneself.' [12]

Herr himself was a pioneer in this regard. Librarian at the *Ecole Normale*, prompter to Jaurès and Blum, he was for several years the anonymous editor of the foreign news page at *L'Humanité* (a name he coined). Aragon, Nizan or D'Astier did as much in their way. Until very recently, a knowledge of print and management of a press were indispensable to the work of intellectuals who never delegated such chores to others, preferring to be their own leader-writers, copy-writers, proofreaders, designers and managers. Running the paper and running the party often overlapped; it was unthinkable for the leader to be illiterate. While the political journal served as the internal organ for the intellectuals' power struggles, the newspaper was intended for laymen and amateurs. It formed a bridge between 'the theory of the vanguard' and the 'spontaneous movement of the class', in Lenin's idiom, or between 'metaphysics' and 'the world', in Jaurès's. It reunited the thinker and the worker, providing for socialism that day-to-day hyphen between the intellectual and the people that the school supplied for republicans.

So long as print remained the central meeting-ground for this type of interchange, the profession of politics and that of the intellectual—from the great writer to the typographer—had a common base. In its absence, the pen and the lathe have turned their backs on each other. The specialization of politicians—as vote-chasing technicians—has matched that of the printing sector, journalism and publishing. From the 17th century until the 20th, presses were meeting places, points of contact between people from different professions and classes, where cross-pollination was almost unavoidable. Writers and parliamentarians no longer share a common set of tools. A relationship that once was practical and professional has decayed into cocktail-party irrelevance.

The party

Much has been written on the decline of the political party, and thus of the socialist project. But one factor that has been largely ignored is the transition from the written (flexible, decentralized, affordable) to the audio-visual (industrial, expensive); the diminishing stature of print and the modification of printing techniques. Photocomposition destroyed the last cultural bases of the workers' movement; both the bookmakers' craft and its traditional caste of pundits and commentators were rendered technologically redundant. Print lost its lead, the critical intellectual his milieu, socialist politics its reference; all three were thrown into crisis. If 'the first freedom of the press is that it is not an industry', it should be added that, from 1881 to 1970, the press was *also an industry*. Now it is an industry first and foremost. It is hard to conceive that, in 1904, Herr, Blum and Lévy-Bruhl—a librarian, a lawyer and



an academic—could have launched a daily paper such as L'Humanité, with a first edition of 138,000 copies, on a single subscription drive of 850,000 francs. Media companies have changed their nature along with their size. The concentration of titles, the determining weight of advertising budgets and the size of investment needed have pushed the price of a newspaper directorship well beyond the wallet and technical capacities of a handful of penniless intellectuals.

The separation of the print producer from his means of production in the journalistic sphere coincides with that of theory from practice in the political domain. Although there are electoral machines—still called 'parties', out of inertia—that issue internal bulletins to their indifferent representatives, the arc that once linked action and the future, parties and intellectuals, has been broken. The parties have ceased to be issuers of alternative ideas, while writers and thinkers must throw in their lot with the broadcasting networks that have acquired an industrial and commercial life of their own, as foreign to intellectual creation as to utopian ideology. The shift from graphosphere to videosphere has dissolved the connection between the party's technical base and its doctrinal logic. The distinction between left and right in politics relied upon a means of dissidence production: a craft-based network of newspapers, reviews, research institutes, book clubs, conferences, societies and so on. No class struggle without social classes; but no factional struggle without a clash of opinions, no politics without polemics; and no battle of ideas, when money has become the only sinew in the war of airwaves. In its stead comes the struggle of images and personalities, the battles of the scoop and the soundbite. No need for parties here.

The proceedings of socialist congresses were formerly published in full, six months later—those of the 1879 Congress of Marseille, which united the French workers' movement, took up 800 pages—in a volume that would become the Bible until the next sitting. The political world has never seen as many forums, conferences, conventions as there are today, but you would search the bookshops in vain for their bound record. Participants 'talk' ideas as one talks clothes. The (printed) motions are mere pretexts for tactical alliances between telegenic champions. In mediological terms, it would be only a slight exaggeration to say that because the debates are not published, there is no call for ideas; television—the new test of performance—has no need for them. Hence the new 'anti-ideological' ideology and the substitution of individual proposals for party programmes, personal positions for theoretical ones.

Quantitatively, of course, books, schools and newspapers are doing better than ever. There have never been so many volumes, students, authors and publishers. But mediaspheres are not a matter of statistics. Indeed, there may well be an inverse relation between the eclipse of form and the proliferation of content; between the scale of output and its status. Mass education first



diluted, then obliterated, the symbolism of the university or school. Education is now a public service, like the subway or electricity provider, dealing with customers rather than disciples. There are many more public libraries under the videosphere than under the graphosphere, but what used to be ‘the workshop of the human spirit’ (Abbé Grégoire) is becoming a place of transit, of access to information. Never have so many books appeared—35,000 new titles a year in France—or in so many copies. But the readership is shrinking, and the aura of the book, or what remains of it, has been transferred to the face of the author, since that is what appears on tv. The printed word can still, exceptionally, kill. But can it still give birth to anything? And if so, to what?

Time, speed and environment

The first element of a reply: temporality. Metaphors for diffusion, whether of heat or liquids, tend to imply a fairly slow process. In 1850 or 1880, an idea that at first went unremarked was not lost forever. The chemistry had time to work. A message could survive on the shelf, awaiting a later encounter. The best example of this delayed-action mechanism is the propagation of Marx’s œuvre. It took twenty or thirty years for his published works to take effect, and the lag separating production from transmission proved crucial to the doctrine’s ultimate influence. The first French edition of Capital Volume I took twenty-five years to sell out. In the famous letter to ‘Citizen Maurice Lechâtre’ of 1872 that prefaces the book, Marx wrote: ‘I approve your idea of publishing the translation of *Das Kapital* by instalments. In that form, the work will be more accessible to the working class, and this consideration outweighs all others for me.’ It took some time for the said working class to gain ‘access’ to the knowledge of its own exploitation. Between 1872 and 1875, Lechâtre took delivery of 44 sections of 40 pages each. The first instalment was boldly brought out in 10,000 copies, and priced at ten centimes. Sales peaked the first day: 234 copies were sold. Then disaster struck. There was no money for advertising, nor support from any political organization. It was not until 25 years later, with help from Jules Guesde’s Parti Ouvrier, that the remaining booklets were sold. [13] In fact, it was not until 1890—seven years after Marx’s death—that Capital began to be taken seriously among a handful of militant and scientific groups. Until then, it had only been read in condensed form (Delville’s abridgement of 1883 numbered 253 pages), or presented in seminars such as Lafargue’s.

The Communist Manifesto, published in London in German, caused hardly a ripple. By the time of the Commune, in 1871, it was regarded as a ‘bibliographical curiosity’. Only in 1872 did it appear in French, 24 years after it was written, courtesy of Marx’s daughter Laura Lafargue; by 1885, it was just beginning to enjoy a modest success. The Poverty of Philosophy was self-published in Paris, in June 1847. Six months later, 96 copies had been bought. The publisher dispatched free samples to the author’s friends, asking only for the 15 sous it cost him for packing and postage: every one of them



was returned to him. Alfred Sudre's *Histoire du Communisme* (1848) had not a word on Marx or Engels in its 532 pages. The first edition of *Capital* merited two reviews in French, both in obscure high-brow magazines. One was by Maurice Bloch, in the *Journal des Economistes*; the other was by Roberty in *Philosophie Positive*, and reproached the author for 'doing nothing but criticize, without offering concrete proposals for the future'. An article on his work in an English journal was still a rare enough event that in the winter of 1881 Marx would show it to his wife on her deathbed, 'to illuminate her final moments', as he wrote. Looking back from a world in which the life and status of the author sustain whole schools of theoretical research in the human sciences, the question is how a practically unknown writer of difficult books, none of which caused a stir, could subsequently have 'informed' the entire world for a hundred years.

A second element: the environment. Mammals were unable to spread across the planet during the 140 million years of the Mesozoic era; only the abrupt extinction of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous allowed them to venture out from their highly specialized niches and multiply over dry land. Until the geophysical upheaval of the continental masses provoked an auspicious climate change (and so of flora and fauna), competition with flying reptiles and 50-ton brachiosaurs was unthinkable, such was the disproportion of the means of survival between the species.

Cultural biotopes are no less delicately balanced, and in the jungle of social ideas the survival of the fittest presupposes a certain proportion in the means of struggle. Marx benefited from the unusually temperate conditions of the pre-industrial graphosphere: a smaller world population and restricted literacy in the West meant fewer books on the market and thus an easier battle for recognition, all weapons being more or less equal. In the days of Marx, Hugo or Michelet, the circulation of a 'difficult' book compared to a best-seller stood at an approximate ratio of one to ten, or more commonly one to five. Today, it is one to a thousand. Around 1848, the young Marx was publishing around a thousand copies of each pamphlet or periodical (800 copies of *The Poverty of Philosophy*; 1,000 of the *Franco-German Yearbook*, in which 'On The Jewish Question' and 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' appeared). But first-rank writers did not go beyond three or four thousand. Despite the huge growth of the reading public, that figure is still the average for works on political theory, economic history or sociology; the author of a piece of critical research that goes against the grain can feel blessed with two thousand readers. But the massive media launch-pads at the disposal of those who dominate the sales also serve to pulverize the small, scholarly productions, more complex and thus more vulnerable, and which have no time to carve a niche for themselves due to the drastic reduction in the average life-expectancy of books—three months for a successful publication; the rest might be in bookshop windows for three



weeks. Publishers' figures have been inflated, but the mortality rate has risen too.

The Marxist critique of capitalism would not have been able to spread, it seems, had industrial capitalism already annexed the sphere of symbolic goods. Marx profited from the backwardness of cultural circuits in relation to those of market production. A hundred years later, he would have missed his chance. All things being equal on other fronts, within the logic of image and markets (literary talkshows, weekly top-tens), *Das Kapital* would have remained what it was when it first appeared: a scholarly extravagance for book-lovers, not the source of a mass political current. Marx and Engels were writing at the juncture of two technological eras, that of the 'mechanical machine', alleviating muscular effort, and the 'energetic machine', harnessing natural forces. State socialism developed at a second juncture: the moving machine and the information machine, car and television. In the same way, the century of Communist waxing and waning also pivoted around two eras: two kinds of memory, literal and analogical. 'Scientific socialism' would not survive the shift from electro-mechanical transmission (rotary printing press, telegraph) to electronic broadcasting. The single party did not fit well with the telephone; it survived the wireless, but the transistor radio was the limit. The cathode tube and the silicon chip spelt wholesale crisis. Cross-border radio transmissions swept away the relics, and the live-broadcast satellite presided over the funeral.

A crisis of cultural reproduction such as socialism's tends to cast the laws governing other cultures in a similar light. We should beware of emulating the American Trotskyist who, recording the extinction of Trotskyism in the United States in the post-war era, postulated the death of all ideologies on the planet. To confuse culture with one culture, the end of an era with the end of time, is the traditional mistake of the traditionalist. Every fall is the herald of a renaissance, and the gods who fled through the front door will come back, sooner or later, through the window.

Prison, exile, phone

An ecology of socialism must also take into account the extra-cultural, not to say anti-cultural factors that once ensured the community's cohesion. Like a Muslim or a Christian, a militant is never really isolated; he is always a member of the collective. Political engagement proceeds through a transfer of the group's image onto the individual, and the intensity of the militant's sense of belonging is the measure of his capacities for initiative. Ethology has taught us that a society of primates is close-knit in proportion to the hostility of its environment; in this respect revolutionaries, like all believers, are a bit more primate than most. [14] They have a visceral need for banishment and prison. Such were the historical conditions for the creation of milieux of stubbornly refractory thinking. Promoted to officialdom, the 'workers' movement' fell apart, for its brain ceased to function the moment it traded its



envious oppressed status for the fatal position of oppressor. Hence the immense spiritual superiority of the East European dissidents over the ruling bureaucrats, as the former regained all the resources of the old secessionist intelligentsia, prison and exile foremost among them. The lesson to be drawn from the century-long expansion and contraction of socialism: as long as there was repression, there was hope.

To explain: socialism was an attempt to establish a counter-medium of dissemination within a hostile milieu. Could the idea have become an 'ideology' if micro-circuits of solidarity had not established a mini-milieu for themselves, within this formless space? Cheap, sustainable information networks, alternative communities and counter-cultures that owed their capacity for resistance to the forces that besieged them from without. To jump the spark from written myth to social action, the electricians of workers' emancipation had to disconnect the main cables and rig up makeshift wiring of their own. Methods of underground organizing served as a protective casing, to shield proletarian telegraphy from bourgeois jamming and interference. The romance of clandestinity was essentially a communicative pragmatism. Tracking the footpaths of the revolution over the past two centuries would take one by the sheltering walls and shadowy corners that Rabelais evoked as inevitable sites for 'murmur and plot'.

But with all eyes and ears occupied every evening by the same news bulletin in four versions, the walls of the cell or sect are first perforated, then blown away by the airwaves. Hitherto, they had more or less succeeded in maintaining a difference of pressure or temperature from the outside world. The homogenization of symbolic flows tends to dissolve non-conformist nuclei into a common hegemonic gas. Television, now the principal interface of all social groups, erodes the boundaries between inside and out, and levels access to information. As a grass-roots militant, why should I bother to attend party meetings when the tv news will give me the essence of eight hours' debate, and when my neighbour across the hall will find out as much as I could about my party, without wasting his time? As for the journalist, he knows as much and often more than the party leader, since he speaks to everyone and they to him. The ideological hold of television overrides the hold of the party, because its mode of organizing the populace engulfs and homogenizes all specialist groups.

By contrast, the two privileged evolutionary niches of the revolutionary socialist were prison and exile. Prison, to concentrate; exile, to campaign. Reading and writing are luxury pursuits by definition, since they imply leisure time. Where could one enjoy more time to oneself than in the police jails of the 19th century? Prison was the dissident's second university, his seat of higher learning and greatest moral awareness. 'When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight,' said Samuel Johnson, 'it concentrates his mind wonderfully'. And Proudhon: 'All that I am I owe to despair.' Bureaucrat,



beware the intellectuals that emerge from prison: they have matured and have muscles. Against capitalism in the West and communism in the East, the laboratories of social protest were the detention centres and prison camps of dictators. Right and left, revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries (Joseph de Maistre or Solzhenitsyn, Dostoevsky or Maurras) have benefited in turn from these mediological privileges. The Orthodox religion emerged from the Soviet penal colonies in far better shape than it had entered them.

The honours list of European prisons from 1840 to 1930 provides a rollcall of Marxist laureates. It ends in the East with the Stalinist labour camp (and Victor Serge). In the West, the prisoners of capital form the links of an anti-capitalist chain, from Babeuf to Proudhon to Gramsci, Blanqui to Bebel to Guesde. It was deportation to Siberia that allowed Lenin to finish his first major work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, begun in a St Petersburg prison. Liebknecht, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Blum (who wrote his greatest work in prison): nearly all who left their mark on socialist thought spent time behind bars. Exile brought us 'Marx-and-Engels' banished in their youth. For half a century, most of the Russian intelligentsia was forced into clandestinity—and so into organizing—by the Tsarist regime. French socialism was born in England; Italian, Chinese and Vietnamese communism were born in France. Chased out of everywhere, the old socialism grew adept at border-crossing and emerged as a pure product of European culture. The level of a civilization, said Lucien Herr, can be measured by its degree of cosmopolitanism. To be uprooted awakens reason by suggesting comparison—always a good start.

Stalin and Mao are absent from the roll-call of exile: Stalin rarely left Russia, or Mao China (except to go to Moscow, where he shut himself away to avoid seeing the outside world). The despots of social-feudalism had sedentary souls. As a rule, the great paranoiacs only speak their mother tongue. Riveted to their soil, they lack all curiosity about the other, all impulse to challenge it or fuse with it. Autocrats fear to travel, shrinking from disorientation and unsavoury encounters.

Yet the mediasphere seems to have stripped the diasporas of their former productivity. Dispersion used to favour intellectual creativity by stimulating written exchange. Bodies met less frequently but minds were in closer contact. Consider the debt owed by socialist writing to the epistolary art: Marx and Engels worked out half their theories in letters, and virtually all their political activity had to pass through a pillarbox; the First International was conceived by Marx as a central correspondence bureau of the working class. Nowadays the militants socialize more and know less of each other's ideas. More conversation means less controversy. The telephone destroyed the art of correspondence, and in the process diminished the moral stature of attempts at rational systematization; email has not restored it. Rarely do we pick up the phone to impart a complex sequence of principles and themes: we



use it to chat. The general discourse has become indexed to the trappings of intimacy and private life. The cellphone, internet, laptop and plane are good for internationalization, but they render solidarity less organic—lethal for internationalism. They enlarge the sphere of individual relations but privatize them at the same time; they particularize even as they globalize. The cellphone is a permanent one-to-one. It drives the universal from our heads.

The crisis for socialism, then, is that even if it can resume its founding principles it cannot return to its founding cultural logic, its circuits of thought-production and dissemination. The collapse of the graphosphere has forced it to pack up its weapons and join the videosphere, whose thought-networks are fatal for its culture. A practical example: to find out what is going on one has to watch tv, and so stay at home. A bourgeois house arrest, for beneath 'a man's home is his castle' there always lurks, 'every man for himself'. The demobilization of the citizen begins with the physical immobilization of the spectator.

What further implications for social thought might we draw from the 'three estates' of logosphere, graphosphere, videosphere—the word, the press, the screen? It would be possible to tabulate a series of norms and functions inherent in any social collectivity, and map out the particular modes and forms that have answered to them in each successive age (see opposite). Thus, the symbolic authority for the logosphere is the invisible; for the graphosphere, the printed word; for the videosphere, the visible. Status of the individual: subject; citizen; consumer. Maxim for personal authority: 'God told me'; 'I read it'; 'I saw it on tv'.



	Logosphere (Writing)	Graphosphere (Print)	Videosphere (Audiovisual)
<i>Group ideal; political tendency</i>	The One (City, Empire, Kingdom); absolutism	All (Nation, People, State); nationalism and totalitarianism	Each (population, society, world); individualism and anomie
<i>Figure of time; vector</i>	Circle (the Eternal, repetition); past-oriented	Line (history, Progress); future-oriented	Point (current events); self-oriented: cult of the present
<i>Canonical generation</i>	Elder	Adult	Youth
<i>Spiritual class</i>	Church (prophets, clerics)	Intelligentsia (professors, doctors)	Media (broadcasters, producers)
<i>Legitimizing reference</i>	The divine (because it's sacred)	The ideal (because it's true)	The effective (because it works)
<i>Driving force</i>	Faith (fanaticism)	Law (dogmatism)	Opinion (relativism)
<i>Status of the individual</i>	Subject (to be commanded)	Citizen (to be persuaded)	Consumer (to be seduced)
<i>Identifying myth</i>	The saint	The hero	The celebrity
<i>Maxim for personal authority</i>	'God told me'	'I read it'	'I saw it on TV'
<i>Basis of symbolic authority</i>	The invisible	The legible	The visible
<i>Subjective centre of gravity</i>	The soul	The consciousness	The body

Yet although these three regimes succeed each other in historical time, each asserting its own predominant forms and modes, it should go without saying that any one of us contains all the ages at once. Inside each of us there lies a calligraphic East, a printed Europe, a widescreen America; and the continents negotiate within us without losing their respective place. Each one of us is, simultaneously, God, Reason and Emotion; theocrat, ideocrat, videocrat; saint, hero and star. We dream of ourselves as standing outside time; we think about our century; we wonder what to do with our evening.

NOTER:

[1] See Cours de médiologie générale, Paris 1991; this essay is drawn from the 'Neuvième leçon: Vie et mort d'un écosystème: le socialisme'.

[2] Cited in Georges Duveau, La pensée ouvrière sur l'éducation pendant la Seconde République et le Second Empire, Paris 1947.

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, Encyclopaedia, § 459. Passage analysed in Jacques Derrida, De la grammatologie, Paris 1967, pp. 36–45.

[4] Gérard Belloin, Nos rêves, camarades, Paris 1979.

[5] Eric Hobsbawm, 'La diffusion del marxismo (1890–1905)', Studi storici, vol. 15, no. 2 (1974), pp. 241–69.

[6] Victor Hugo, 'A qui la faute?', L'Année terrible (1872).

[7] Jules Vallès, L'Insurgé, Lausanne 1968, pp. 48–9; Victor Hugo, Œuvres complètes, Paris 1968, vol. vii, p. 678.



[8] To participate, in 1961, in the Cuban national campaign that brought a million illiterate peasants into contact with writing was like a physical encounter with the progressive imaginary of the book.

[9] 'We theoreticians, or, as I would rather say, publicists of Social Democracy': V. I. Lenin, 'Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution' (1905), Collected Works, Moscow 1965, vol. 9, pp. 15–140.

[10] Let us note in passing how foreign the manners of 'actually existing socialism' were to Pol Pot's Cambodia, how remote the urban mystique of literacy and learning from that savage cult of rural ignorance. The Khmer Rouge decreed: no books, no schools. They ransacked the presses and libraries of Phnom Penh, closed the university, padlocked the high schools. The only medium allowed was the radio. A party without a paper! Pol Pot's back-to-the-jungle system was consistent: slaughter of the educated, a term encompassing anyone who had got beyond primary school; wholesale xenophobia; rejection of urban civilization, and gerontophobia as a political axiom (no one over 23 could belong to the Organization).

[11] Belloin, Nos rêves, camarades.

[12] Charles Andler, La Vie de Lucien Herr, Paris 1977.

[13] See Maurice Dommanget, L'Introduction du marxisme en France, Lausanne 1969.

[14] Primate: placental mammal with full dentition and prehensile hands.

Opprinnelig publisert i New Left Review nr 46, juli/august 2007.

Orientalist Painters of the 19th Century. Socialism: A Life Cycle by Regis Debray. contact. Stencil Commentary. Following (8). Previous / Next image () Thumbnails. Design. UN AIDS Foundation: AIDS by the Numbers. Socialism: a life-cycle. I. mpossible to grasp the nature of conscious collective life in any epoch without an understanding of the material forms and processes through which its ideas were transmittedâ€”the communication networks that enable thought to have a social existence.Â This mediological periodization allows us to situate the life-cycle of socialism, that great fallen oak of political endeavour, within the last 150 years of the graphosphere; and to explore its ecosystem, so to speak, through its processes of propagation. Socialism will not be treated here in terms of the intrinsic value of any of its branches. Social life cycle assessment (SLCA) aims at assessing the social impacts of a product throughout its life cycle. This paper provides an overview of the methodological developments on SLCA following the sequence of the SLCA framework. Different methods and approaches in each life cycle phase are discussed.