CAN THERE BE AN “AFTER SOCIALISM”?

By Alan Charles Kors

There is no “after socialism.” There will not be in our or in our children’s lifetimes an “after socialism.” In the wake of the Holocaust and the ruins of Nazism, anti-Semitism lay low a bit, embarrassed by its worst manifestation, its actual exercise of state dominion. In the wake of the collapse of Communism, socialism’s only real and full experience of power, socialism too lays low for just a moment. Socialism’s causes in the West, however, remain ever with us, the product of the convergence of two extraordinary achievements: liberal free enterprise and political democracy. The former creates wealth that has transformed all human possibility, but it also gives rise to particularly deep envy. The latter allows ambition a route to power by an appeal to the democratic state to seize and redistribute wealth in the name of social equality. As Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises understood perfectly, the bounty of free enterprise leads the unproductive to believe that such wealth is a fact of nature, there for the taking.

Socialism means the abolition of private property, profit, and voluntary exchange. It means the organization of the production and distribution of goods and services—that is, of the fruits of human invention, innovation, thought, risk, talent, and labor—by political planners who allegedly know both what people need and how to satisfy that need. It means the expropriation and allotment of wealth according to those planners’ sense of value. Socialism may be understood by any child. It is taking other people’s stuff. It is also the rash and ignorant slaughter of the goose that lays the golden eggs. That story is folkloric and enduring, however, precisely because it reflects something deep in human nature. Thus, one only could speak realistically of an “after socialism” if one eliminated envy, resentment, force, irrationalism, and political ambition from our affairs. That, however, would be in another world.

It will not be difficult—it already is not difficult—for socialism to change its now quaint name a bit, where necessary, while still forging resentment, ambition, fantasy, and the mania for planning other people’s lives into a powerful political, economic, and ultimately cultural agenda. The full dream and millennial religion of nineteenth-century socialism perhaps no longer moves either masses, masters, or martyrs, but its underlying impulses and values remain potent and active. Politicians and demagogues, “after socialism,” do and will appeal successfully against property, profit, economic liberty, and “the market.” It was “after socialism” that Lionel Jospin and his Socialist Party swept to power in France on the platform of...
creating jobs by reducing the allowable work week at the same rate of pay. It is “after socialism” that “the Third Way” has achieved such prominence, one of the abandoned “ways” being reliance upon the economic liberty of voluntary exchange. It is “after socialism” that we see the most classically liberal society in the world drawn toward the central planning of health care and pharmaceutical distribution. It is “after socialism” that we see more and more control of economic life given to international boards of alleged experts. This occurs in the midst of the supposed triumph of free enterprise occasioned by the catastrophe of centralized economic regimes. To believe that the future will be less susceptible than the present to demagoguery, envy, and the myth of planning would be a foolish act of faith. It is by no means clear to whom the future belongs.

One should heed Mises’s preface to the second English edition (1951) of his magisterial work on socialism, Die Gemeinwirtschaft: Untersuchungen über den Sozialismus (1922). Mises warned us not to confuse “mutual rivalries among the various totalitarian movements”—the struggle between statist anti-Communists (e.g., New Dealers and Western European socialists) and Communists—with the deeper “great ideological conflict of our age”—the struggle between supporters of “a market economy” and supporters of “totalitarian government control.”¹ Mises was wrong, in historical context, to minimize in any way the conflict between New Dealers and Western European socialists, on the one hand, and Bolsheviks, on the other, because the very possibility of human liberty depended upon the defeat of Communism. He was also wrong to argue, in the face of a Communism for which living human beings were nothing but a means toward an end, that it did not matter very much which set of social and economic engineers controlled the apparatus of the planning state. Mises never seemed fully to understand—if to understand at all—the indivisibility of self-ownership in all spheres and of economic liberty. In the long run, however, he was right that freedom still depended ultimately on the outcome of the struggle between private property, private enterprise, voluntary production, and voluntary exchange, on the one hand, and central planning, on the other.

Hayek and Mises were at one in believing that central planning had an economic, social, ideological, cultural, historical, and, ultimately, totalizing logic. In terms of fundamental economic theory, they both understood the obviousness of what appeared inane to most contemporary Western intellectuals: that the more complex a society and economy, the more impossible and incoherent the task of central planning becomes. Without the price mechanism to reflect the choices of individuals, there is no efficacious way to discover and allocate economic knowledge or to harmonize the activities of disparate actors toward human satisfaction. More

¹ Ludwig von Mises, Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis, trans. J. Kahane (Indianapolis, IN: LibertyClassics, 1979), 1–2.
deeply, in terms of the most profound consequences for human life and society, both Hayek and Mises understood that central planning placed us, in Hayek’s phrase, on “the road to serfdom.”

In the late 1920s, Communists began to distinguish analytically between “socialism” and “communism.” Departing from Marx, who certainly appeared to use the terms interchangeably, the Communist Party of the USSR—and, hence, the world Communist movement—argued that “socialism” was a transitional stage between capitalism and a final “communism.” In some sense, Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944)—though much, much more than this—was a sustained argument that independent of intention, “democratic socialism” also could only be transitional toward something else. It would not be toward utopia, however, but ineluctably toward something akin to Soviet Communism, the totalitarianism that was the final stage of the abolition of economic and social liberty.

At the heart of this argument lay Hayek’s chilling, inductively correct, and, in its predictive reach, prescient chapter, “Why the Worst Get on Top.” Hayek argued that it was no accident of time or place, specific to Nazism or Bolshevism, that the concentration of power over all life in a centrally planned society attracted and rewarded the morally worst. Persons of what views, personalities, and behaviors would succeed politically in a collectivist system? In Hayek’s view, they would be the strong and aggressive. They would be the least scrupulous about the choice of means. They would be men who attracted and coalesced around them the simultaneously submissive and ruthless. They would be demagogues who could rally the docile, gullible, and passive. They would be leaders who skillfully divided society into a “we” and a dangerous “they” and who succeeded, also, in linking socialism to a virulent and popular nationalism and anticosmopolitanism. Above all, they would be those who took power not as a necessary evil, but as the very goal itself.

In a competitive society, Hayek reasoned, economic and political power were split, and no one could have more than a fraction of the breathtaking dominion available to those who planned the economic, social, educational, and cultural lives of a society in its totality. Economic power over the whole life of another person, however, centralized as political power, created a society of virtual slaves. It is slavemasters who seek to rule slaves, in a society in which the ruler’s decisions about “the good of the whole” override all the prescriptions and prohibitions of individualist ethics and law. In such a society, those with concrete ideals of right and wrong will flee the immediate service of a ruler. Those “literally capable of everything,” in Hayek’s words, will rise to positions just below a ruler whose primary passion in life is the love of being obeyed. It is not just that the indulgent, principled, and restrained will not find power in a collec-

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3 Ibid., 134–52.
tivist society, but that the very worst alone will succeed. Whatever the ideals, whatever the initial intentions, whatever the source of early socialist conviction, there are systemic institutional and psychological reasons why socialism will always lead to serfdom and the sacrifice of multitudes.4

Hayek’s analysis has never been the common view in the West, and least of all in political Europe and in American intellectual circles. The collapse of the European Communist regimes would only entail disillusionment with the substance of socialism under other names if the latter were linked, in the Western mind, to the catastrophic experience of the former. There is no reason to believe that this has occurred. Let us examine, for a point of reference, the first wave of significant disillusionment that swept across Europe and the West in the 1930s in response to the perceived “excesses” of Stalinism or, indeed, to the sense that it had not succeeded in accomplishing the Bolshevist dream. Note well, to understand the nature of such intellectual anti-Stalinism, that in the case of Nazism, there were no significant works that spoke of “disillusionment” because national socialism had failed to fulfill appropriately the rightful ideal of tribalism, exclusive and expansive nationalism, the corporate state, and the führer principle. The anti-Communist texts of greatest appeal to Western intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s, however, generally reached the conclusion that Communism had failed to achieve the rightful socialist ideal. Although many reached to the existential autonomy of the individual’s experience, not one of them concluded on behalf of classical liberal society and its system of private property, free enterprise, voluntary exchange, and individual rights.

George Orwell’s Homage to Catalonia (1938) celebrated above all, as the antithesis of Communism, the anarcho-syndicalism that he saw as the most antiliberal strata of the Spanish Left. Communism, in contrast, was decidedly “bourgeois.” Orwell’s ineffable 1984 (1949) touched on the personal liberty of the private life and the life of the mind, but not on the economic liberty that has been the greatest friend of both. The final tragedy of his brilliant Animal Farm (1945) was that the leadership of the revolution has become just like the bourgeoisie. Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon (1940)—the deepest, most moving, and most compelling analysis and criticism of Communist moral logic ever penned on the Left—dreamed of a future in which the socialist struggle against “economic fatalism” would be joined to a universal sense of humanity and absolute ethics.

Few anti-Communist works have had more influence or a longer shelf life than The God That Failed (1949), edited by Richard Crossman, the British socialist and Labour Member of Parliament.5 The essays of polit-

4 Ibid.
ical disillusionment in this anthology are stunning pieces. They explain more compellingly and empathetically than any other work the appeal of Communism to its intellectual devotees. They make vivid and credible the nightmarish experience of participation in the Communist movement (or of fellow-traveling) during the interwar period, the cognitive dissonance of remaining involved long after one should have seen the betrayal of one’s ideals, and the pain and moral necessity of a final break. They also conclude, every one of them, with an ongoing rejection of a liberal, and, above all, an economically liberal society.

Crossman’s introduction made plain that the appeal of Marxism was that “it exploded liberal fallacies—which really were fallacies.” He depicted the intellectual underpinnings of free enterprise as the belief in “automatic Progress” and the denial “that boom and bust are inherent in capitalism.” He determined that “no intelligent man after 1917” could have chosen liberal “dogma,” and given only two choices, any honest mind would have chosen Communism. Fortunately, however, Crossman opined, “two world wars and two totalitarian revolutions” had taught the Western democracies of their need “to provide an alternative to world revolution by planning the co-operation of free peoples.”

In his essay in The God That Failed, Koestler compared his time with the Communist Party to Jacob’s finding himself with Leah, not the beloved and beautiful Rachel. Communism, he claimed, presented itself under false appearances. He hoped that he, like Jacob, would be given, after appropriate labor, the reality of Rachel. Ignazio Silone spoke of his “faith in Socialism” being “more alive than ever in me.” Socialist theories, he decided, were transient and unimportant. “Socialist values,” on the other hand, were “permanent,” and on the basis of them, “one can found a culture, a civilization, a new way of living together among men.” Richard Wright concluded of the Communists, “They’re blind. . . . Their enemies have blinded them with too much oppression.” Nevertheless, he said to himself, “I’ll be for them, even though they are not for me.”

André Gide, whose essay in Crossman’s anthology was taken from his Retour de l’U.R.S.S. (1936) and his Retouches à mon Retour de l’U.R.S.S. (1937), was disillusioned with Communism both because of its trampling of artistic independence and, above all, because he found in the Soviet Union “privileges and differences where I hoped to find equality.” Soviet workers, he noted, “are no longer exploited by shareholding capitalists, but nevertheless they are exploited,” and “all the bourgeois vices and failings are still dormant, in spite of the Revolution.” Stalin’s Russia, for

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6 The quotations in this paragraph are from R. H. S. Crossman, “Introduction,” in ibid., 1-11.
Gide, was “the same old capitalist society.” In his essay, Louis Fischer turned to Gandhi, not Western democratic socialism, and called for a “Double Rejection” of competing liberal and Communist systems. Stephen Spender was emphatic in his own form of double rejection. Although he held out no hope for Communism, he felt that “if it could achieve internationalism and the socialization of the means of production, [it] might establish a world which would not be a mass of automatic economic contradictions.” He assured his readers that “no criticism of the Communists removes the arguments against capitalism.” Indeed, he argued that “America, the greatest capitalist country, seems to offer no alternative to war, exploitation, and destruction of the world’s resources.”

Indeed, “socialism” almost never has been judged, as a goal and value, by the experience of Communism in power. Like the Marxists themselves, however, Hayek rightly asked his century to judge forms of human society not by their ideals, but by their living incarnations. Let us do this. The goal of socialism was to reap the cultural, scientific, creative, and communal rewards of abolishing private property and free markets, and to end human tyranny. Using the command of the state, Communism sought to create this socialist society. What in fact occurred was the achievement of power by a group of inhumane despots: Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tsetung, Kim Il Sung, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot, Castro, Mengitsu, Ceaucescu, Hoxha, and so on, and so on. On the whole, these despots ruled (and some still rule, personally or dynastically) until old age. Traditionalist societies were supposed to be the ones that valued the aged, but revolutionary societies gave us undreamed-of lessons in gerontocracy. Hayek didn’t know the half of it in 1944: “the worst” loved and clung on to ruthless power at all costs. We are invited now to discuss what follows these tyrants, and what lessons we have learned from them, and what sort of world might emerge from the loss of belief in Communism. There is one problem, however: the bodies.

We are surrounded by slain innocents, and the scale is wholly new. This is not the thousands killed during the Inquisition; it is not the thousands of American lynching. This is not the six million dead from Nazi extermination. The best scholarship yields numbers that the mind must try to comprehend: scores, and scores, and scores, and scores of millions of bodies. All around us. If we count those who died of starvation during Communists’ experiments with human interactions—twenty to forty mil-

13 Of so few works of scholarship may one say that it is indispensable to honest debate in one’s time. The following book, with its documentation, is just that: Stéphane Courtois et al., The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). For the numbers of Soviet dead, see also Robert Conquest, The Great Terror: A Reassessment (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), which makes use of data made available by glasnost.
lion in three years in China alone\textsuperscript{14}—we may add scores of millions more. Shot; dead by deliberate exposure; starved; and murdered in work camps and prisons meant to extract every last fiber of labor from human beings and then kill them. And all around us, widows and widowers and orphans.

No cause, ever, in the history of all mankind, has produced more cold-blooded tyrants, more slaughtered innocents, and more orphans than socialism with power. It surpassed, exponentially, all other systems of production in turning out the dead. The bodies are all around us. And here is the problem: No one talks about them. No one honors them. No one does penance for them. No one has committed suicide for having been an apologist for those who did this to them. No one pays for them. No one is hunted down to account for them. It is exactly what Solzhenitsyn foresaw in \textit{The Gulag Archipelago}: “No, no one would have to answer. No one would be looked into.”\textsuperscript{15} Until that happens, there is no “after socialism.”

The West accepts an epochal, monstrous, unforgivable double standard. We rehearse the crimes of Nazism almost daily, we teach them to our children as ultimate historical and moral lessons, and we bear witness to every victim. We are, with so few exceptions, almost silent on the crimes of Communism. So the bodies lie among us, unnoticed, everywhere. We insisted upon “de-Nazification,” and we excoriate those who tempered it in the name of new or emerging political realities. There never has been and never will be a similar “de-Communization,” although the slaughter of innocents was exponentially greater, and although those who signed the orders and ran the camps remain. In the case of Nazism, we hunt down ninety-year-old men because “the bones cry out” for justice. In the case of Communism, we insisted on “no witch hunts”—let the dead bury the living. But the dead can bury no one.

Our artists rightly obsess on the lesser but still immeasurable Holocaust, which lasted several years, and when we watch “Night and Fog,” “Shoah,” “Schindler’s List,” and almost countless other films, we weep, we lament, and we rededicate the humane parts of our souls. The greater Communist holocaust, which lasted decade after decade—the great channel house of human history—educes no such art. Its one tender, modest film, “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich,” based on Solzhenitsyn’s novel, is almost never replayed and cannot be found for purchase. The Communist holocaust should have brought forth a flowering of Western art, and witness, and sympathy. It should have called forth an overflowing ocean of tears. Instead, it has called forth a glacier of indifference. Kids who in the 1960s had portraits of Mao and Che on their college walls—the moral equivalent of having hung portraits of Hitler, Goebbels,

\textsuperscript{14} Courtois et al., \textit{The Black Book of Communism}, 487–96; see also the works and articles to which this part of the book refers.

or Horst Wessel in one’s dorm—now teach our children about the moral superiority of their political generation. Every historical textbook lingers on the crimes of Nazism, seeks their root causes, and announces a lesson that should be learned. Everyone knows the number “six million.” By contrast, it is always “the mistakes” of Communism or of Stalinism (repeated, by mistake, again, and again, and again). Ask college freshmen how many died under Stalin’s regime, and they will answer, even now, “Thousands? Tens of thousands?” This is the equivalent of believing that Hitler killed “hundreds” of Jews. The scandal of such ignorance does not derive from this or that textbook, but from an intellectual culture’s willful blindness to the catastrophe of its relative sympathies. Chile offered refuge and asylum to Erich Honecker, the tyrant of East Germany who wanted the tanks in the streets—it is time to bury the past without rancor, everyone said—but clamors now for “justice” for Augusto Pinochet. On the same day that Spain indicted Chile’s Pinochet, it welcomed, with honors, Cuba’s Castro, while Castro’s critics or naysayers—or any groups, like gays, that annoyed the tyrant—lie dead, rot in prison, or try to recover from the deadly work camps to which he sent them. Most of Europe has outlawed the neo-Nazis, but the French Communist Party has been, from 1999 to 2002, part of a ruling government. One may not fly the swastika, but one may hoist the hammer and sickle at official events. The denial of Hitler’s dead or the minimization of the Jewish Holocaust is, literally, a crime in most of Europe. In contrast, the denial or minimization of Communist crimes is an intellectual and political art form. The most recent of Communist mass murderers, Pol Pot and his Communist Khmer Rouge, enslaved a people and slaughtered a fifth to a fourth of the entire Cambodian population (as if an American regime had murdered some fifty-six to seventy million of its people). Pol Pot learned his politics in Paris from the French Left, and he was supported, above all, by his Chinese Communist patrons. The consensus about him today, however, is that he was an aberrational creation not of his beliefs, values, and allies, but of American bombing on behalf of anti-Communism in Indochina. The bones of Cambodia and the millions who risked death to flee Communist Vietnam and Laos for an uncertain life anywhere else tell us about the value—though not the tactical wisdom—of the anti-Communist cause there too. “Antifascist” is a term of honor, where “anti-Communist” is a term of ridicule and abuse. Therefore the dead lie among us, ignored, and anyone with moral eyes sees them, by their absence from our moral consciousness, spilling naked out of the television and movie screens, frozen in pain in our classrooms, and sprawled, unburied, across our politics and our culture. They sit next to us at our conferences. There could not have been an “after Nazism” without the recognition, the accounting, the justice, and the remembrance. Until we deal with the Communist dead, there is no “after socialism.”

The record is truly plain. Socialism, wherever it actually had the means to plan a society, to pursue efficaciously its vision of the abolition of
private property, economic inequality, and the allocation of capital and
goods by free markets, culminated in the crushing of individual, eco-
nomic, religious, associational, and political liberty. Its collectivization of
agriculture alone led to untold suffering, scarcity, and contempt for prop-
erty as the fruit of labor. It was, at its best, the ability, through horror and
servitude, to build Gary, Indiana once, without the good stuff, and with-
out the ability even to maintain it. Socialism in power produced relative
poverty, murderous inefficiency, arbitrary inequality, cronyism, enslav-
ement, concentration camps, torture, terror, the destruction of civil society,
ecological disaster, brutal secret police, and systemic tyranny. Everywhere
it ruled, there were, beyond our ability to comprehend their courage or
their suffering, those who endured solitary confinement, sleep depriva-
tion, the sadistic infliction of pain, and slow or rapid death because they
said “No,” because they criticized their rulers, because they would not
denounce their friends and colleagues, or simply because they annoyed,
for whatever reason—even with a joke—a Communist with power. Until
we come to terms with all these crimes and victims, there will be no “after
socialism.” To be moral beings, we must acknowledge these awful things
appropriately and bear witness to the responsibilities of these most mur-
derous times. Until socialism—like Nazism or fascism confronted by the
death camps and the slaughter of innocents—is confronted with its lived
reality, the greatest atrocities of all recorded human life, we will not live
“after socialism.”

It will not happen. The pathology of Western intellectuals has commit-
ted them to an adversarial relationship with the culture—free markets
and individual rights—that has produced the greatest alleviation of suf-
ferring, the greatest liberation from want, ignorance, and superstition, and
the greatest increase of bounty and opportunity in the history of all hu-
man life. No one has explained the etiology of this pathology adequately,
although it constitutes one of the deepest flaws and tragedies of societies
based on free markets and individual rights, the most radically progres-
sive civilizations that the planet has seen thus far. It is a pathology that
with each passing decade becomes coarser and more detached from any
principle of reality.

This pathology allows Western intellectuals to step around the Everest
of bodies of the victims of Communism without a tear, a scruple, a regret,
an act of contrition, or a reevaluation of self, soul, and mind. In his essay
in *The God That Failed*, Spender noted that it was a general human moral
failure to treat in categorically different fashion the various victims of
history. He meant his observation, correctly, to describe the adherents of
all ideologies and political camps, but his judgment is vital to under-
standing why Communism’s countless bodies—the Holocaust at least ten
times over—can remain among us. When men pursue a political course,
Spender wrote, human beings who stand with them become “vivid and
real . . . real human beings with flesh and blood and sympathies like
yourself.” By contrast, those who stand in the way of their cause become “abstractions . . . tiresome, unreasonable, unnecessary theses, whose lives are so many false statements.” In the first case, they see “corpses”; in the second case, they see “words.”

We and our children are educated, entertained, instructed, informed, and given art by individuals who do not see this unspeakable mass of piled bodies, but see only words about them.

The cognitive behavior of Western intellectuals faced with the accomplishments of their own society, on the one hand, and with the socialist ideal and then the socialist reality, on the other, takes one’s breath away. In the midst of unparalleled social mobility in the West, they cry “caste.” In a society of munificent goods and services, they cry either “poverty” or “consumerism.” In a society of ever richer, more varied, more productive, more self-defined, and more satisfying lives, they cry “alienation.” In a society that has liberated women, racial minorities, religious minorities, and gays and lesbians to an extent that no one could have dreamed possible just fifty years ago, they cry “oppression.” In a society of boundless private charity, they cry “avarice.” In a society in which hundreds of millions have been free riders upon the risk, knowledge, and capital of others, they decry the “exploitation” of the free riders. In a society that broke, on behalf of merit, the seemingly eternal chains of station by birth, they cry “injustice.” In the names of fantasy worlds and mystical perfections, they have closed themselves to the Western, liberal miracle of individual rights, individual responsibility, merit, and human satisfaction. Like Marx, they put words like “liberty” in quotation marks when these refer to the West. Note well, of course, that when an enemy arose that truly hated Western intellectuals—fascism and Nazism—and whose defeat depended upon the West’s self-belief, intellectuals had no difficulty at all in defining and indeed popularizing a contest between good and evil.

This intellectual behavior is a pathology that freezes time selectively to suit its purposes. The first economic dislocations of capitalist industrialization became the intellectuals’ model for the future that would emerge from such dynamism, as if one should ignore the process that raised previously unimaginable numbers of human beings to a dignified, free life, protected as never before from helplessness before nature and men. Russia from 1914 to 1917 became frozen for all time, with war and Rasputin being the only alternative to Stalinism, as if the curve of Russian economic and social development by the early twentieth century did not point to energetic and promising change. Once able to mobilize large numbers at any moment, Communists were given a right to permanent and absolute power, as if the Republican Party of 1920, which at least won an honest election, had gained a permanent right to govern America and

to choose the party’s own successors. The pathology also allowed one simply to ignore history and to restake one’s claims anew with no accountability for the past. First Stalin, then Mao, then Castro, then Ho Chi Minh and the Khmer Rouge, and then the Sandinistas, truly ad nauseam.

The intellectual manifestation of this pathology was and is a collective delusion that ignores both history and ethology. It is a belief that goodness, stable order, justice, peace, freedom, legal equality, mutual forbearance, and kindness are the default state of things in human affairs, and that malice, disorder, violence, coercion, legal inequality, intolerance, and cruelty are the aberrations that stand in need of historical explanation. Getting the defaults precisely and systematically wrong, Western intellectuals fail to understand and appreciate the form of society that has given us the ability to alter them. The pathology is also the demented belief that evolved successful societies may be redrawn at will by intellectuals with political power and that the most productive human cultures are almost wholly dysfunctional.

Rousseau and all the Marxisizing intellectuals who have cast their darkness over the past one hundred years and more have had it all backward in this domain. It is not aversion to difference that requires historical explanation—aversion to difference is the human condition. Rather, it is liberal society’s partial but breathtaking ability to overcome tribalism and exclusion that demands elucidation, above all in the singular American accomplishment. Tyranny and abuse of power have also been the human condition. It is, in contrast, the limitation of power and the recognition of individual rights that demand historical explanation. It is not slavery that startles, because slavery is one of the most universal of all human institutions. Rather, it is the view of self-ownership, liberty, and voluntary labor that requires historical explanation, the values and agencies by which the West identified slavery as an evil, and, to what should be our wonder, abolished it. Western intellectuals write, dramatically, as if it were relative pockets of Western poverty that should occasion our astonishment, when in fact the term until recently for almost infinitely worse absolute levels of poverty was simply “life.” What generally remains unaddressed by our secular intellectuals is the question of what values, institutions, knowledge, behaviors, risks, and liberties allowed the West to create such prosperity that we even notice such relative poverty at all, let alone believe that it is eradicable. Tragically, the very effort to overturn the evolved systems and values of the West has produced the most extreme examples in history of, precisely, malice, disorder, violence, coercion, legal inequality, intolerance, and cruelty.

Ironically, of course, the main traditions of socialism and Communism both claimed Marxist credentials, and the Marxists surely had one argument right: we should judge human systems, in the final analysis, not as theories and ideal abstractions, but as actual history and practice. In ineffable bad faith, they applied that measure to everything except what
allegedly mattered the most to them. From one end of the earth to the other, Marxist intellectuals, propagandists, professors, and apologists never contrasted the existing “socialist world” with the more or less liberal societies of Western Europe and North America. They contrasted, instead, a fictional perfect society that never was to an existing imperfect society that had accomplished actual wonders. Marxists were fond of denouncing such antirealism as “philosophical idealism” when they condemned it in others. It was they, however, who feigned an ideal world of their own spinning—it was they, that is, who were always the most antirealist of all. It is fitting, now that historical evidence has taken everything away from Marxism, that its heirs—the anti-Western postmodernists of the cultural Left—should embrace that antirealism explicitly, as a chosen cast of mind.

The gulf between a realistic appraisal of the socialist dream of the twentieth century and the socialist reality is both vast and largely ignored. This appraisal could have occurred time and time again throughout the past three generations, and those who in fact did it well should be among the lionized intellectuals in our midst or memory. In fact, they remain—pockets of recognition aside—the most marginalized. The gulf between what central planning has brought us and what individual economic and social liberty has brought us should be, given the intellectual and moral passions engaged in the contest between these two visions, the most studied phenomenon of our times. One looks in vain for the fruits of such study—or, indeed, such study itself—in our textbooks, schools, colleges, and universities, and in both federally funded and philanthropically funded research. Economists who might understand such things rarely do economic history, though it could shed the light of the profoundest human experience across the fields of theory. Historians who do the so-called economic and social history of capitalism still teach the history of the world’s greatest liberation and enhancement of human life as the history of repression (objective and internalized), regimentation, mystification, degradation, and waste. The humanities in general have become schools of “oppression studies” in the very societies that have extended more freedom, choice, and bounty than humanity has ever known. Everyone who cares about this should take one afternoon to wander the aisles of required reading at a local college bookstore and to examine college syllabi. It is far, far worse than you surely think, even if you are a pessimist.

What should have occurred “after socialism”? Think just upon the American experience. For almost fifty years, the United States sacrificed its wealth and, at times, the lives of its young to contain armed Communism. Its brave pilots risked their lives by skimming the hills of Western Europe (and, above all, of West Germany)—such perilous training was a prerequisite of any deterrence and defense—to the great annoyance of the picnickers whose liberty depended upon such risk and, often, sacrifice. Its submariners left comfort, family, and friends behind to make full deter-
rence real. It did whatever it had to do to prevent the armed Bolsheviks from achieving tactical or strategic superiority, an anti-Communism not to be confused, as it is now, with ordinary, long-term American and Russian diplomatic history. It ran itself into staggering debt to meet the final Soviet military buildup. It sustained its will even when its young, its artists, its professors, its authors, and its filmmakers turned against the alleged folly of such efforts. It obsessed on Communism and anti-Communism. It was haunted by its and its enemy’s bombs and missiles, and by the national-defense strategy of “mutually assured destruction.” This was the burden the United States chose to bear, and then, in a seeming miracle, the fatal weaknesses of tyranny, central planning, and illiberalism were actualized in the collapse of European Communism. Now, it could do a real accounting of what it had fought to preserve and to prevent.

To say the least, there was and is no rush to do the accounting that ought to have been the most urgent and welcome task confronting an America suddenly free of its long, heroic charge and of its worst fears. What might an optimist have expected? The list is long: An anti-Communist epiphany. A festival of celebration. A flowering of comparative scholarship about them and us. A full accounting of the Communist reality—political, economic, moral, ecological, social, cultural, and so on. (What wouldn’t one want to know?) A rededication to the principles that underlay—from our side—the differences. A set of profound, anguished, and soul-searching mea culpas from all of those who, without malice, had been tragically wrong. An acute sensitivity to the nature and policies of persisting Communist regimes. A revision of curriculum. A recognition of the ineffable value of a truly limited government.

Examine any one of these perfectly reasonable expectations, and the data are grimly discouraging. What has fallen into place at all, let alone with flash of insight, for those who teach, comment upon, or write about such things? Have they turned to Mises or Hayek, to the dissidents, or to those few historians who told the truth all along, avidly reading those perspectives from which Communism had been rightly and deeply understood? Have they even connected the dots between Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Castro? Where were the fêtes, the outpourings of joy, at the triumph of liberal civilization? Leonard Bernstein played Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Berlin, in the shadow of the Wall, and substituted Freiheit (freedom) for Freude (joy). Where else did events like this occur? And why not? There have been more jeremiads about the world being adrift than jeroboams of champagne celebrating the defeat of the oppressive evil armed with nuclear arms. Then again, when Ronald Reagan uttered his notorious phrase to describe the Soviet Union, “evil empire,” it occasioned only derision among almost all commentators.

Imagine if World War II had ended with a European Nazi empire, from the Urals to the Channel, soon armed with nuclear weapons, in a mortal
contest with the United States, with peace kept only by deterrence. Imagine an evolution from a Hitler to an Albert Speer. Would the children of the Left have led songs of “All we are saying is give peace a chance” beneath symbols of unilateral disarmament? Would American opposition to Nazi influence anywhere, let alone the Nazi securing of bases in the Western Hemisphere, have led to domestic charges of our being the imperialist “world policeman”? Would our intellectuals have mocked or cheered the phrase “evil empire”? What were the differences? Deaths? Camps? The desolation of the flesh and of the spirit? The bodies will not be buried without an answer to this. How we celebrated the fall of Nazism and the blasting down of the swastika. How mute we were in 1989 during what should have been (and still should be), at the least, the solemnization of the fall of the world’s most powerful hammer and sickle, symbol of the ultimate slaughter. If it had been the Third Reich’s swastika that had fallen after two generations of cold war, the joy and catharsis would have lit our cities. Do our intellectuals, our politicians, and our teachers believe or disbelieve what Solzhenitsyn stated so directly about the Soviets?

[N]o other regime on earth could compare with it either in the number of those it had done to death, in hardiness, in the range of its ambitions, in its thoroughgoing and unmitigated totalitarianism—no, not even the regime of its pupil Hitler.17

After generations of conflict between two systems, where now is the excitement of comparative scholarship? From the economists to the cultural scholars of gender and sexuality to the ecologists, history now has opened a vast terrain in which to study the differences in real terms between private property and commons, markets and planning, and individual rights and collective purpose. Have the Greens, in anguished study of centrally planned pollution of air and water, discovered the tragedy of the commons? Are historians teaching their students any differently about the human consequences of free markets in a real world of comparative phenomena? Have our Foucauldians and postmodernists reexamined their own premises in the light of intensive study of gender and sexuality behind the Iron Curtain or, indeed, so close by in Cuba? It is extraordinary that we do not have an intellectual, moral, and, above all, historical accounting of who was right and wrong, and why, in their analyses of socialism and of socialism in power. We live in an era of appalling bad faith.

The contestation between liberal and socialist societies and visions had been the defining condition of Western lives and debates, so now, where is even the effort toward an empirical and moral ledger? The Black Book of

Communism has had influence only in France (which notwithstanding elected, soon after the book’s publication, a front of Socialist Party and Communist Party deputies and ministers). Where else? Why has it never penetrated American life—or even college bookstores—when it answers the question that should be most on everyone’s mind? What will we teach the children? Was deterrence, for example, worth it? Soon after the Berlin Wall came down, my children’s high school, in a conservative school district—and the case is not atypical—did a week on the cold war. Their one supplement to discussion was the antidefense film “Fail-Safe.” A year later, their textbook explained how the saintly Gorbachev led the “cowboy” Reagan down the road to peace. Far, far worse, our children do not know what happened, in any domain, under socialism in power. Those who depend on our media and our films do not know. The strength of even relatively free enterprise and relatively limited government will ensure that our civilization lives on, prosperous and strong by any historical standard. It does so without self-belief, however, without moral understanding of its place in the drama of organized human life, and without an accounting of both the scores of millions of dead and of the societies and beliefs that butchered them.

There is no revivification of the principles that separated us from the socialists in power. “You put private property ahead of people” remains a potent malediction, as if we had not learned sufficiently and amply that the former is essential to the well-being, dignity, liberty, and lives of the latter. “You put profits ahead of people” remains of equal force, as if we had not learned sufficiently that profits are the measure of other people’s satisfactions of want and desire. Indeed, it is precisely to avoid the revivification of classical liberal principles that our teachers, professors, information media, and filmmakers ignore the comparative inquiry that the time so urgently demands.

Indeed, it is precisely because of the lessons that would be taught by knowledge and truth that no revision of the curriculum occurs. For at least a generation, intellectual contempt for liberal society—as a civilization, a set of institutions, and a constellation of ideals—has been at the core of the humanities and soft social sciences. This has accelerated, not changed, despite the fact that now there is no intellectual excuse for ignoring certain verities. We know that voluntary exchange among individuals held morally responsible under the rule of law creates both prosperity and an unparalleled diversity of human choices. Such a model also has been a precondition of individuation and freedom. By contrast, regimes of central planning create poverty and occasion ineluctable developments toward totalitarianism and the worst abuses of power. Dynamic free-market societies, grounded in rights-based individualism, have altered the entire human conception of liberty and of dignity for formerly marginalized groups. The entire “socialist experiment,” by contrast, ended in stasis, ethnic hatreds, the absence of even the minimal preconditions of
economic, social, and political renewal, and categorical contempt for both individuation and minority rights. Our children do not know this true comparison.

When our political and media leaders examine the ongoing Communist regimes—in China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—however transformed some of these may or may not appear, their minds’ gaze should be informed by the history we know and by the bodies we ignore. Think, yet again, upon the historical double standard. When the right-wing Joerg Haider achieved political success in Austria—by democratic means, no less—the governments of Western Europe made him a virtual pariah or outlaw for his symbolic or rhetorical ties to the Hitler of two generations ago. Fine. And the ruling Communist heirs of Stalin and Mao? In terms of death and suffering, the laogai of China should be more infamous than the concentration camps of Germany and German conquest, and, indeed, they are yet more extraordinary because they are with us still. By the most serious estimates, perhaps fifty million individuals have passed through them.18 Good scholarship suggests that in the 1950s and 1960s, close to 10 percent of all Tibetans never returned from prison camps, and severe political repression and the attempt to destroy one of the world’s remarkable cultures continue apace.19 Out of eleven million Cubans, two million now live abroad, and we will never have a full count of the multitudes who have died trying to escape.20 Indeed, in all of these countries with Communist regimes, the right of exit—“Love it or leave it” is immeasurably far from the worst of mottoes—in fact is still a crime. In North Korea, which is building nuclear arms, a nation starves because of the folly of its planners, while across the border, South Korea has evolved humanely and productively both economically and politically in one short generation. Yes, world peace, world stability, and even a strategy for the change of enslaved societies may well counsel normalization of relations with all of these murderous regimes. We should do this, however, with eyes open, and do everything possible for the victims. In addition, there must be moral lines that we will not cross.

As for the mea culpas, we await them in vain from those who claim not to have known or who still choose not to learn. When Eisenhower heard that the German residents of a nearby large town “didn’t know” about a death camp whose stench should have reached their nostrils, he marched them, well dressed, through the rotting corpses, and made them help dispose of the dead. We lack his authority. Milan Kundera, the dissident Czech novelist during the Communist period, stated the moral reality with reference to its only appropriate genre, tragedy. Take the extreme case, he suggested. What about those with good intentions? he asked in

19 Ibid., 542–46, and the references therein.
20 Ibid., 663–65.
**The Unbearable Lightness of Being.** What about those who didn’t know, and who acted in good faith? Kundera wrote of Oedipus:

Little did he know that the man he had killed in the mountains was his father and the woman with whom he slept his mother. In the meantime, fate visited a plague on his subjects and tortured them with great pestilences. When Oedipus realized that he himself was the cause of their suffering, he put out his own eyes and wandered blind away from Thebes. . . . Unable to stand the sight of the misfortunes he had wrought by “not knowing,” he put out his eyes and wandered blind away from Thebes.21

How not to be tempted by this? For me, I would offer one indulgence. Let the socialists, fellow travelers, apologists, and revisionists acknowledge the dead, bury the dead, teach what they have learned, and atone for the dead. Otherwise, given the enormity of what has occurred, let them indeed be forgiven only when they have put out their eyes and wandered blind away from Moscow, Beijing, or Thebes. Let Western intellectuals repeat the phrase of “Requiem,” a work written during the Stalinist terror by Anna Akhmatova, the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century: “I will remember them always and everywhere, I will never forget them no matter what comes.” 22 The bodies demand an accounting, an apology, and repentance. Without such things, there is no “after socialism.”

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