

Putine, Trump... - What Can We Learn from Vampires and Idiots?

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What Can We Learn from Vampires and Idiots?

The German socialist August Bebel once called anti-Semitism “the socialism of fools.” He had in mind that a fool from the lower classes, indignant at the existing state of things instead of seeking the genuine reasons for his discontent concealed in the capitalist means of production, found a facile but false target in Jews. The result of this fool’s bad decision could prove catastrophic: instead of joining the ranks of socialists, he became their fiercest and most dangerous adversary. “Socialist foolishness” merits neither indulgence nor understanding. It is, moreover, a formidable weapon in the hands of elites, who are wise enough to know how to exploit it.

This kind of connection between the foolishness of the lower classes and the devious resourcefulness of the upper strata is not, of course, unique to the massive fascist movements of the twentieth century. Rather, what we are talking about here is something more complex and multifaceted, which possesses a tremendous ability to adapt to the new circumstances faced by the conservative spirit today. This style of thought linking the upper and lower stratas is making electoral breakthroughs once again, like those of Trump in the Republican primaries in the US, the Brexit vote in the UK, and parties such as Marine Le Pen’s Front National in Europe.

It has become a commonplace to say that support for such phenomena is a manifestation of protest. Astute observers are ever ready to discover hidden rational causes behind these irrational electoral expressions: the downfall of the welfare state, distrust of the establishment, or the consequences of austerity policies. However, when the radical Left invokes these grievances, it falls on deaf ears. But when they are reflected through the distorting mirror of conservative rhetoric, they strike a resounding chord.

This protest is expressed through a melancholic striving to recover something lost—to return to and repeat, through a disgruntled vote, a certain lost idyll. The global party of this “idiotism” (that is to say, political ignorance and civic inadequacy) is opposed today by an Enlightenment coalition of the political mainstream, the media, and a large section of the left-liberal public, who are all inclined to support the “lesser evil.” A conservative, reactionary wave is undoubtedly a significant evil, because it launches its offensive at the level of meanings and values: isolationism instead of openness, racism and sexism instead of tolerance and respect, coarseness and authoritarianism instead of pluralism and a culture of dialogue. The correct choice in each of these oppositions, it would seem, is clear to everyone who is not a complete idiot. But the masses of the “unenlightened,” the ill-mannered, and the irrational are growing, and their leaders have scored a series of victories—as though they know something about society and its future that is inaccessible to those in the enlightened coalition.

This figure of the sinister conservative subject who knows enlightened society better than it knows itself was a significant presence in the historical Enlightenment during a long stretch of its history.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the figure of the vampire emerged in European culture at the same time as the birth of political conservatism. This vampire, first appearing in the pages of a well-known novel by John Polidori, was completely unlike the insurgent corpse of today's popular superstitions. The new vampire was a Byronic beauty, an intellectual, and an aristocrat whose easy prey were the naive, enlightened representatives of high society, for whom there existed nothing beyond the limits of a rational, knowable world. The vampire carried out its attacks with impunity, existing on the frontier between the rational world of the living and the irrational world of the dead—the latter having been denied and displaced by the Enlightenment.

An astute representative of the retreating pre-bourgeois era which the bourgeois could not completely bury, the aristocratic vampire possessed the secret of its unconscious. He alone was capable of revealing the contingencies of the Enlightenment's triumph, its hidden ambiguities and limitations.

Such were the first astute conservative critics of the French Revolution, such as de Maistre and Burke. They did not deny the Revolution itself—did not doubt its significance as a colossal transformation. Indeed, for them it signified something greater than it did for the revolutionaries themselves. These critics were able to discern how the revolution conceived of itself (i.e., as the triumphant victory of reason over prejudice) and posit its place in an enduring history which was essentially represented as a grand conglomeration of prejudices. Behind the illusion of the triumph of freedom, the conservatives saw dependence on, and restraint by, circumstances.

Marx also began his critique of the Enlightenment with a diagnosis of a fatal rupture between the actual significance of the era and its ambitious self-conception. The progress of the human spirit, the realization of freedom in a state governed by the rule of law, and a democratic republic were an illusion for him too—that "German ideology" behind which was hidden the unknowable abyss of reality: the social relations of labor and capital.

The bourgeois fully realized his potential as an active citizen with inalienable rights. But this realization served only to cover up his real inner schism and his alienation from himself. Behind the illusory legal and political order was hidden a great disorder: the anarchy of production, a hitherto unprecedented stratification of society, and the bewilderment of the individual enduring isolation and vulnerability.

Thus the reign of a conceited instrumental bourgeois reason was threatened by dangers emerging from two ghosts: the vampiric conservative aristocrat, embodying the unvanquished power of prejudice; and the ghost of the worker, the authentic producer of life driven out from politics and invisible to the state. Both of these ghosts were deprived of power and recognition, remaining in a twilight zone concealed from reason, and constituting a lethal danger. From time to time they would make their presence felt with headlong dashes into modernity.

With their critique of the Enlightenment and revolution from diametrically opposed positions, Marxism and conservatism opened up a long and still incomplete dialogue. The participants in this strange dialogue never realized this themselves; they thought they had nothing to debate and nothing to share. [1] But sometimes, at moments of acute social crisis, these two displaced ghosts of the capitalist world have materialized and entered the stage of history to engage in deadly combat (as was the case in the first half of the twentieth century). Both Marxism and conservatism see, beyond the illusory capitalist order, a colossal disorder—a chaos whose endlessly accumulating "ruins" were observed by the Benjaminian "angel of history" as it hurtled toward the future.

At moments of oncoming crisis, such as the one we are living through today, this state of catastrophic disorder and disarray becomes evident to many. The masses are gripped with yearning

for a genuine order in which everyone can feel confident and have a valued role. Marxism and conservatism give two distinct and fundamentally incompatible answers to the question of how society can find its way forward. Marxism proposes the path of cooperation, self-organization, and self-discipline, while conservatism proposes the path of the leader figure and the restoration of the “ethical state” that disciplines the chaos of personal interests. We can conceive of these as two different interpretations of the Machiavellian Prince—the “Prince” of Lenin and Gramsci versus the “Prince” of Mussolini and Gentile.

In our time, amidst the ever more discernible ruin of society, the political reason of the bourgeoisie attempts to restore itself by mobilizing the ideology of the (liberal) values of individual self-fulfilment and freedom of choice. Indeed, the Brexit “remain” campaign and the ongoing presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton constantly repeat liberal mantras: “everything is in order,” “it’s not all that bad,” “the important thing is to remain reasonable, not to slip into idiocy.” For only a fool would fail to believe that everything is getting better in this best of worlds.

While the liberal establishment drones on about the need to defend Enlightenment values, conservatives play the troublemaker, subverting morality and casting off all decency. It’s not hard to see that the resounding success of Trump is based not on rhetoric about the family, morality, and tradition, but on an aggressive and rousing cynicism. Trump and other insurgent conservatives do not observe the rules of etiquette or maintain the illusion that nothing special is going on. On the contrary, they are an embodied testimony to the fact that things are far from well and that everything is going to the dogs. The advantage that this cynical, insurgent conservatism has over traditional conservatism—which continues to observe the rules of the game of conservative values—was evident in the Republican primary debates, where Trump trounced the other conservative candidates, who clung to moralism and religion. The conservative cynic calls things by their real name, undermining the illusion of stability.

It’s worth noting that Vladimir Putin, whose mutual sympathies with Trump are well known, also owes the popularity of his public image not to his loyalty to “Orthodox traditions,” but to his cruel realism and cynical jokes. In Putin’s Russia, state policies pertaining to moral discipline (e.g., the state’s official homophobia, its limits on abortion rights, etc.) serve not to restore “traditional values,” but rather to elevate the general level of cynicism. Patriotic bureaucrats send their children to study in London while Orthodox deputies enjoy themselves at private gay parties. They are permitted to do what they condemn others for doing—for the simple reason that they are on the highest rung of the social ladder. This is the “naked truth,” for which all the hypocritical acts of the ruling class serve as a demonstration. In order to prevail over modernity, conservatism needs to tear off its moral veil and bring into the open any tacit inequality. Conservatives must force everyone to reconcile themselves to this very real inequality as the only lawful reality—this is the historical task of the conservative. An authentic conservative moral revolution, a real return to the greatness of the idyll of yesteryear, can be carried out only when the ethics of the Enlightenment are turned inside out and buried. One can say that this insurgent, cynical conservatism is the political consequence of the neoliberal era. It turns historical materialism on its head, calling for us to recognize the actual relations of domination and submission not in order to change them, but to reconcile ourselves to them once and for all.

The historical socialist movement, basing itself in the working class, has also staked its existence on the dominant bourgeois morality. While conservatives unmask formal equality for the sake of formal inequality, socialists expose it for the sake of actual equality. However, the social catastrophes and political defeats suffered by the Left in the twentieth century have deprived it of such an assertive antimoralistic position. Today the Left is mainly disposed to cling to a transparent politics of values, thus ceding to conservatives the role of troublemaker. Incidentally, the short-lived success of Bernie Sanders’s campaign was owed precisely to his penchant for agitating against the political elite and

stirring revolt, constantly using seemingly outmoded words—such as “socialism” and “revolution”—which nonetheless fired the imagination of his supporters.

A new type of elite hegemony, based on unabashed cynicism and a revolution against morality, is leading an offensive on all fronts, using fear as its main weapon. This elite hegemony appeals not only to the fear felt by ordinary people—a fear of isolation and helplessness in a ruthless world. It also appeals to the fear felt by the enlightened and the wise, who are terrified of being ruled by idiots. For the enlightened, it appears that their sole option is to choose the “lesser evil.” Striving to defend themselves from the oncoming madness, they cling to any hope of preserving the status quo, convincing themselves and those around them that everything is under control, that reason will somehow prevail. This fear helps conservatives disarm their primary and most dangerous foe.

Intelligent people retreat to small defended territories: academia, the left and liberal political wings, the world of contemporary art. Their knowledge, their critical tools, their ability to reason are now directed towards preserving illusions rather than tearing them down.

In order to recognize our actual situation and to challenge the dominant ideology, we should listen, as in olden times, not to liberals but to conservatives. There is no point in demanding that idiots overcome their own idiocy. Instead, it is perhaps necessary to recall that “this demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret the existing world in a different way, i.e., to recognize it by means of a different interpretation.” [2]

The Left can defeat the open cynicism of insurgent conservatives only by going even further than them in critiquing a concealed liberal cynicism. In an era when political correctness leads only to ruin, there is no need to fear being coarse and confrontational. Above all, we must speak more often and more loudly about socialism—after all, fools, in actual fact, are desperately in need of it.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Well, almost nothing. Anglophone Marxism, in particular, has long maintained links to

conservatism. Tim Shenk, in his biography of Maurice Dobb, the only Marxist Economics professor at Cambridge, writes of Dobb's longstanding personal and professional alliance with his conservative colleagues. Eugene Genovese, the scholar of American slavery, began as a Marxist before converting to traditional conservatism. And even Perry Anderson, in his recent essay on Israel, praises Benny Morris in the following terms: "In his second phase, Morris has given voice to much crude anti-Arab sentiment. But even as his politics have changed, the historical intelligence which once allowed him to break so many patriotic taboos has not deserted him. Now in the service of a cause that once reviled him, a cool ability to call a spade a spade remains."

—Ed. note

[2] Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, 1845. Available at marxists.org:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>