

Review Essay

Ideas Matter—Lessons for Capitalism from the Moral Failures of Communism*

John Larrivee
Mount St. Mary's University
Emmitsburg, Maryland

For simplistic naïvety about how socialism would turn out, it is hard to beat August Bebel, the prominent German Socialist leader of the late 1800s. In 1971, a century after his dewy-eyed portrayal of the socialist future was published, the Soviet government issued *Society of the Future*, a condensed version whose preface stated “[Bebel] maintains that in the new society, class distinctions and the state will have disappeared, money and trade been abolished, the productive forces will have reached such a high level that the working day will last only three to four hours, and all peoples will live together in one fraternal family, while weapons will be exhibits in museums.”¹ Two decades later, these myths were officially dead.

What happened? Why did communism fail? Leon Aron argues that it was ideas.

In *Roads to the Temple*, Aron counters the dominant historical paradigm that revolutions are caused by material, structural forces, and uses extensive written accounts of the time to make a compelling case that the Soviet revolution of 1987–1991 was primarily driven by ideas, by the truth. Specifically, the openness under Gorbachev created the chance for people to learn not only that actual historical events and conditions were so far from Bebel-like fantasies but perhaps most especially how they had become corrupted themselves. Moreover, Aron’s detailed examination of how people actually behaved also illuminates how

* Leon Aron, *Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas, and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987–1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

centrally planned economic systems distort moral character, rebutting simplistic tendencies to see capitalism as uniquely pernicious.

Surprisingly, Aron neither explains *why* the disciplines of history and political science are so skeptical of the role of ideas in history and human behavior, nor does he extend his own insights to examine how ideas mattered *before* that revolution (i.e., from Marx through the first revolution and across the seventy years of Soviet communism) or what ideas will be crucial for society now. Whether it is Aron's oversight, or (worse) that the lessons did not go far enough for the Russians themselves, this failure is unfortunate because all three issues—the historical method, the Marxist system itself, and many criticisms about capitalism—are linked by the common foundational idea of philosophical materialism. The disciplines downplay ideas for the same reason the USSR was founded in the first place. Their shared assumption that people are purely material, forces them to *underemphasize* the role of values, ideas, and the institutions of civil society and *overemphasize* material factors such as the economic system. Thus the Soviet experiment is not only an interesting case study about the role of ideas in at least one revolution; it is a lesson about how conceptions of the human person shape theories of both the impacts of capitalism on morality and the role of civil society in any economy.

Aron begins by demonstrating that the various materially based factors of the structuralist model are not adequate to explain it. The Soviet economy was hobbling along and living conditions were not great but were not deteriorating either. There were no substantial demographic problems or ethnic fighting. There was tension with the United States but no imminent threat of invasion. The Communist party was not highly regarded but was still relatively strong and faced no opposition or substantial division. Conditions were bad but no problems threatened to tear things apart immediately either.

Instead, Aron proposes that Gorbachev's policies opened up the opportunity to discover what many perhaps had feared but never discussed: the real horror of how things were and what had happened. People came to know, suddenly and massively, the real truth about their nation and themselves. These discoveries delegitimized the system for which they were suffering, undermining their willingness to continue in that sacrifice. They also induced a call for personal and national repentance, and a turn from the communist system that had produced them. They longed not to throw off an oppressor but for truth and goodness.

This is not surprising given the challenging truths that suddenly became known. Aron provides a great chapter-by-chapter summary of the facts, their discovery, and the responses of the Russians to each. People found that far from

a few thousand party functionaries, it had been millions of innocent average people who had been suppressed by the state, imprisoned, exiled to work camps in Siberia, or killed. The collectivization and ensuing famines had forced perhaps ten million people from their farms and resulted in approximately three to seven million deaths. They learned that the official story of the brilliant Stalin's dealing craftily with the Germans during World War II was a fabrication. Stalin had mishandled Hitler and the war, including both misreading the Germans as well as punishing his own army in purges before the war, retreating during the war, and sending hundreds of thousands of Russia's own soldiers to the gulags after the war.

Except for the nomenklatura, who lived far better than the masses, material conditions had advanced less than a tenth what was claimed. Vaunted gains in health care or basics were fictional and stories of actual inadequacies shocking: one-sixth of hospitals had no running water, 30 percent lacked indoor toilets. A quarter of students studied in double shifts and half of the nation's schools had no heat, running water, or indoor toilets. Only 30 percent of urban dwellings and 10 percent of rural had a phone. Cumulatively, these discoveries unraveled the myths that had legitimized the regime and induced the population to endure.

Concerns of capitalism typically fall into two broad categories: material justice and the corrosion of character and social relations. Nonmarket systems have rationalized themselves as superior in the face of both hypothesized effects. While the above results indicate that communism had failed to provide either more material wealth or justice, perhaps most devastating was not what had happened to others but what people realized they themselves had become in the senselessness and chaos of the centrally planned economy. It had not produced authentic, virtuous, creative, hard-working people. Instead, as (exiled) author Alexander Zinoviev has depicted, it had produced *homo Sovieticus*, a selfish, lazy, calculating individual, cynical about the system.

Centrally set prices caused shortages and lines or excessive waiting to get everything from boots to phones. Political allocation shuffled production around. The combination made it too easy and tempting for anyone along the chain to grab what one could when the chance arose. For individual workers, there was little incentive to work well. Pay was divorced from productivity directly (one got paid regardless of work) and indirectly (actual pay in money meant little since desired goods might be available only through excessive waiting). It was better to take output or materials from one's place of work and barter. This was compounded by the inefficiency and senselessness of the system, and the behavior of everyone else: even if one did work well, there was a great likelihood that one's output

would be wasted later in the production chain. It was better to get one's piece when the opportunity arose—obtaining a certain payoff now versus an unlikely payoff later. A popular saying captured the moral conflict in the circumstances: “Not stealing from the state is stealing from one's family.” Faced with the challenge of meeting senseless, and often impossible, orders and guidelines about what to produce and how, many simply chose to lie. Dishonesty, theft, laziness, lack of concern for work, trying to get one's piece before the thing is wasted or taken by another—this hardly characterized work as a place for personal growth, virtue, creativity, and producing a gift for others.

This corruption of character was not lost on the people themselves. Popularization of the stories gave voice to what they themselves knew they had become. As one person wrote, “[L]et's find out at what point in our lives bribery, thievery, lies, humiliation of the powerless, and servility toward the powers that be have become more than just a deviation from the norm.” Aron observes overall, “In the end, as with all other aspects of the national quest for self-knowledge, the ultimate and most urgent concern was not the economy itself but rather what it did to the men and women who worked in it: their ideas, their views of themselves, their conscience, their ‘souls.’”

Aron reviews two additional elements that drove the population. They discovered that centralized control and state ownership had enabled oppression. Far from causing social tension, private property encouraged industriousness and responsibility, and economic freedom more broadly limited the state and protected other freedoms. As Hayek had foreseen, the concentration of power of every type (economic, political, military, cultural, and so forth) had attracted and allowed the worst to rise to the top. Second, the senselessness and viciousness ordinary people experienced from the massive power of the state resulted in what was called “de-individualization:” people felt themselves to count for nothing. They were alienated from their work, each other, and society.

Why, in the nation established to overcome alienation and vanquish capitalist oppression, had they not been treated with dignity? Was it concentration of power? That would be an institutional problem likely in any collectivist system (i.e., a material explanation, the type of historical analysis Aron is rejecting). Was it that Marxism emphasized class over individuals? That would be due to an idea. It does not go far enough to consider why Marx expected that merely reforming the economic arrangement would result in a people who were harmonious and virtuous. Unfortunately, Aron does not pursue this.

Alexander Yakovlev, head of the committee on propaganda for the USSR at the time (whom Aron cites frequently, but not on this point), argues that the culprit was Marxism and not merely the way in which Marxist theories had

been followed in the Soviet Union but in its foundational principles: Hegelian inevitability and, more importantly, philosophical materialism.²

Marx faced two crises: the ravages of society from the early industrial revolution and the collapse of philosophy from the onslaught of philosophical materialism. As Engels wrote, if philosophical materialism were true, ideals were merely the product of material conditions and there were no eternal moral truths. Then how could one justify replacing capitalism with something else? Across human history, people had reasoned from values to system. Many at that time argued that way regarding socialism: It is preferable because it is more just. Post Feuerbach, however, such reasoning could no longer be done. In fact, Marx and Engels caustically attacked such “utopian socialists” for proposing socialism as the embodiment of ideals that cannot exist. To be consistent with materialism, socialism needed another foundation. Marx’s brilliant insight was to portray it as the guaranteed outcome of observable laws of human society working in a demonstrable way, grounded in a purely physical understanding of the universe, including man and human motivation. This they called “scientific socialism.”

If the outcome was not inevitable, any outcome would require human choice, which itself would require moral truths by which to decide. Those do not exist if materialism is true. Moreover, if problems were inherent to the human condition (e.g., human nature, sin), they could not be solved by material changes. Thus Marx also had to explain how all personal and social problems ultimately arose from the current economic circumstances so they would be resolved not by appeal to ideals but from the inevitable change of economic conditions.

This required overweighting economic factors in causing personal and social problems. Of course, many of these mechanisms do not require materialist assumptions of human existence, but their heavy presence has distorted perceptions about the impacts of capitalism on society for the past century and a half. That overemphasis implied other factors were irrelevant. Non-Marxist materialists might find Marx’s model simplistic for ignoring other material factors. Religiously grounded individuals would further fault this for implying values, civil society, and religions do not matter. *Criticizing the Marxist model for narrowness or simplicity misses the point: To get around the implications of philosophical materialism, it had to be narrow so as to give a guaranteed outcome. Inevitability and economic causality were not merely distracting errors; they were its necessary essence.*

Thus it is strange that Aron sets his book up as a contrast with structuralist models of historical analysis but neither explores the philosophical assumptions behind why those models are materialistic and how that results in skepticism about the role of ideas, nor what that had to do with the ideas behind the communist experiments or lessons about their outcomes. He notes that structuralist models

build from Marx's theory that history had to be explained by material factors, and that they have rejected Marxist analysis as too simplistic for focusing solely on economic factors and inevitable outcomes.

A broader model does not deal with the fundamental problem across all of them. The philosophical materialism that implies material factors is all that matters because people are only material beings. It also implies there are no ultimate moral laws that would justify caring about people in the first place. As Yakovlev and Solzhenitsyn observed, this idea was itself manifest in the many ways Communist Party functionaries held such little regard for human life. People's perception of unimportance resulted from a combination of direct treatment as such by the government, as well as indirect implication of it philosophically. As Yakovlev, whose position undoubtedly gave him unique insight into the impact of ideas, writes,

Materialism inevitably leads to fetishism, however, enabling the problem of spiritual choice to be removed and thus eliminating personal responsibility, sin, and repentance. Materialism disarms a person spiritually, making him vulnerable to ideological manipulation. From the perspective of materialism, the human being is a functional phenomenon, merely a particle of nature, one of the ways material systems function. Materialism is therefore ideologically related to authoritarianism.

Surprisingly, Aron, who frequently cites both authors, does not record their contributions in this area. Could it be that Aron does not explore this point because *that* was not one of the important ideas of the revolution? Could it be that a small number of Yakovlevs and Solzhenitsyns understood, while the masses did not, that the problems were not just in the central planning, the Party, or even the institutions but were due to the vision of the human person in the first place? Can it be that the people who suffered the most from philosophical materialism and thus have such an important lesson to teach all humanity about how mistaken views of the human person can devastate society, did not actually learn that lesson? If so, we have much work to do.

That is why books such as *Roads to the Temple* are so crucial today. Knowing how the systems turned out, how they affected people, is important for countering a simplistic antimarket sentiment that hinders recognition of the role of ideas of the human person in theoretical analysis, in actual behavior, and in different systems. Even if Aron does not draw the connection as clearly as one might hope, he is to be lauded for his evidence on the role of ideas, which itself elevates the

role of the human person. Perhaps this book will serve as a foundation for a subsequent attempt to engage this most challenging question.

Notes

1. August Bebel, *Society of the Future* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971).
2. Alexander Yakovlev, *The Fate of Marxism in Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).