

Neo-Stalinism: some thoughts

by James Como



Our current civil war seems cultural, and therefore political, and therefore necessarily lapel-grabbing personal. Rarely does anyone on the Left attempt reasonable argument, or *any* persuasion; all is hortatory, imperative, urgent, condemnatory, dismissive. I used to think ‘progressives’ – progressing towards . . . what? – knew better but spoke their nonsense opportunistically, cynically: after all, it might just work, sway some minds (‘mind’ here being a euphemism for a tourettes trigger). The Beast of Narcissism, with its trailing familiar of Self-Righteousness, would be fed. The madding crowd could label, demonize, and ultimately dismiss the opposition, and it feels good, too. (There are exceptions: every now and then Amanpour seems ready to reason, as she did with Claire Lehmann of *Quillette*). Withal they are Eric Hoffer’s True Believers – still cynical, still opportunistic, but now simply childish, intellectually shallow, and often – there is no polite way to say it – stupid.

Bumper sticker thinking – not as slogans but as actual thought – walks the earth as political philosophy, as do figures of speech, -isms, and -ogonies. Manners are deemed repressive, rudeness celebrated, an inventory of fallacies (e.g. the whole for the part, the part for the whole, a failure to define, causal confusion, red herrings, strawmen, smokescreens, shifting of ground) proliferate, whole new vocabularies are invented . . . Does all this sound familiar? Every revolution has done the same; our case is simply the current flavor (though maybe here, too, we will be renaming months). New congresswomen who belong in a sandbox, old senators who should be medicated, an excitable audience as our neo-Coliseum (print, electronic and social media) mob who enable with their cheers and amplifications, and self-reinforcing mutual satisfactions – a mob cheering on a street fight.

It is nothing less than Neo-Stalinism.

They speak what they *feel*, and therein lies the fault. A simulacrum of thinking comes later, to justify the feeling, and the feeling comes from – well a *Weltanschauung* arising from attitudes fundamentally collective, fungible (cause to cause), and improvisational: abstractions expressing goals, not principles. A bagful of self-deceiving fetishes (diversity, inclusion, equality) and the rule of chromosomes (that is, demographic descriptors having nothing to do with actual achievement) dominate. Deliberative rhetoric, the type that requires explanation (at which Trump, Obama, and W are and were so inept, Reagan so adept), is too much trouble: why explain dogma? In short, we have – and take seriously – children pontificating with religious zeal. Are we in the greatest generation gap in our history? Self-styled alphas of our brave new world follow a dead white male, Pico della Mirandola, whose “Oration on the Dignity of Humanity” (the so-called manifesto of the Renaissance) teaches that one’s station is not fixed but is determined by what one chooses to enact.

And that sounds like freedom, but in fact the neo-Stalinoids want nothing to do with freedom. They are C. S. Lewis's Innovators, who invent new values, on their way to becoming his Conditioners, who see through all value, seeking nothing other than power; they will level us, tribalize us, and finally de-humanize us – while they remain free. They weave their own web of meaning, an internal framework of understanding. And they are cyclothymic, which is a mood disorder. In it, moods swing between periods of mild depression and hypomania, an elevated mood. The swings never reach the severity or duration of major depressive or full mania episodes, but when shouting at the moon (literally) becomes tiresome, they jubilate over a Green New Deal.

At work here, I think, is what Jakob von Uexkull called *Umwelt*: how living beings [perceive](#) their [environment](#). Organisms experience *Umwelten*, a 'self-in-world' of subjective reference frames (*surrounding-world*, *phenomenal world*). These are distinctive from [Umgebung](#), the living being's surroundings as seen by an observer. *Umwelt* is a *perceptual* world in which one exists and acts. A new Re-birth. Pico lives, thus the 'neo'.

And so we have, inevitably, a clash of *Umwelten*, with so many weaklings caught in the middle, eventually submitting to Romper Room wails of accusation. (Joe Biden, chump that he has always been, apologizes for calling VP Pence "a decent guy.") Well then, try saying islamophobia is not rampant, white privilege is not preponderant, socialism is imbecilic, anti-Semitism is largely of the Left, sex is biological, climate change is not apocalyptic, unfettered immigration is a menace, same-sex unions are fine just don't call them 'marriage', the unborn are people too, truth exists, history matters, anger does not trump reason, 'social justice' is a damaging sham, sin is real, humans are not perfectable, there can be no earthly utopia – and do not apologize.

Sound exteme? It is the way of extremes, especially sneaky

ones, to beget loud, angry, *woke* extremes from the opposite direction. But my litany is *not* extreme and never has been – except to Stalinoid extremists.

Consider the deep divide between Globalization[\[1\]](#) (from open borders, to no borders, to the elimination of the nation-state, “melted away,” as Jurgen Habermas happily has put it) and Populism, though the battle has been largely one-sided. Globalists – old-school ‘one-worlders’ – gradually encroached, until populists, so-called – patriots (and more than a few bigots) whose allegiance is to a nation-state and a particular culture – awoke to find themselves demonized. A people simply may not oppose an *acquis*, something permanent, unassailable, whether a program, a policy, or even a social norm. Of course, few people voted for *this* Union, one of the greatest long cons in history: the essence of Stalinism. And by the way, questioning this fetish invites a rhetoric that makes Joseph McCarthy’s look like a Gregorian chant.

Not long ago a friend, an extraordinary man, formerly a student whose mother was an original Black Panther, gave me a flash drive loaded with broadcasts from Pacifica Network, the ultra-liberal radio station. In some instances these archives went back fifty years, to James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Malcolm X. The programs are not balanced – the advocacy was always front-and-center – but they are rational. Karen Armstrong on religion and violence, Reza Aslan on the politics of Jesus of Nazareth, a celebration of Cesar Chavez, and several from “Out of the Vault,” most notably featuring Ruby Dee[\[2\]](#) and Ossie Davis as narrators: making no pretence to debate but attempting actual explanations, they do not drive me nuts. Their *positions and dispositions* are not very different from what we hear these days from the Neo-Stalinoids, but none seemed to me to be totalitarian, to demonize the opposition, or, simply put, to be juvenile.

But that was long ago. Now Bill DiBlasio honeymoones in Havana, Bernie Sanders in Moscow, one child congressperson praises the

old Soviet Union, another the Maduro regime, and fellow-travelers check their brains at the door, not caring to call them out for the firing squads, squalor, gulags, or the other uncountable depredations. Why bother? It's America's fault, or capitalism's. Whether by mockery, ostracism, expulsion, imprisonment, or merely by exile to the black hole of neglect, opposition is marginalized, or silenced. The Soviet empire may not exist, but its ideology (*mutatis mutandi*) does: total, despotic, fraudulent, treacherous, utterly earthbound. Now too many in public life want that game without the name, and so the time to change that has come.

Barbara Reynolds has reminded us that the journey to God is the journey *into* reality, but rarely does anyone dig deeply enough to find the spiritual tumor blocking the way. Many strong thinkers diagnose the disease, offering their prescriptions; and every now and then there emerges real thinking from real thinkers (for example, Jordan Peterson's *12 Rules for Life* or Anthony Esolen's *Nostalgia* or Ben Sasse's *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal* or Arthur C. Brooks's *Love Your Enemies*) who would get us back on track if only we listened. But alas, reports of the death of Stalin were pre-mature.

[\[1\]](#) Defined variously: 1/ "a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions . . . generating transcontinental . . . flows of networks or activity" (David Held). 2/ ". . . the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (Roland Robertson. 3/ "the intensification and acceleration of social exchanges and activities" (Manfred B. Steger). It has produced wealth for millions who were in poverty but has

also contributed to staggering, and institutionalized, inequities.

[\[2\]](#) Decades ago Miss Dee visited York College to conduct a workshop for our acting students. Her broken leg was in a cast, but it did not matter. She was brilliant, tireless, gentle and acute. The improvements in the scenes played by our students were nearly unbelievable. Living in Westchester, I had the pleasure of driving Miss Dee home to her house in New Rochelle. We talked all the way: her generosity of spirit and conversational eloquence were extraordinary (and her religious belief palpable)