

The Delusions of a Marxist Professor

by Theodore Dalrymple



When it came to Hitler, Karl Kraus, the Viennese satirist, said that he couldn't think of anything to say.

This sounds odd, first because Hitler was, and will remain, an inexhaustible subject for biographical and psychological speculation, probably beating Napoleon or Stalin in the amount already written about him; and second because Kraus wrote millions of words and had an opinion about almost everything else.

But one knows what Kraus meant. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," wrote another Viennese, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, albeit in another context. The unspeakable is the largest subject of all.

I remember one of the first prisoners I met as a prison

doctor. He had killed three children and then impaled them. Of course, it is not the place of a doctor to expatiate on the sins of his patients: the man had bronchitis and needed treatment, that was all.

But what, in any case, could anyone usefully say? Could one, for example, prove by syllogism that killing and impaling children was wrong, such that he would then reply, "Ah, I now realize that what I did was wrong and I promise that I will never do it again"? The very idea is absurd.

The other day I had a discussion with a well-known [Lenin's](#) literary style alone.

Leninist viciousness was viciousness of a new and more thoroughgoing type that acted on the mind as a virus acts on a computer (viciousness, both actual and potential, is, alas, a constant of human history because of our flawed nature).

Solzhenitsyn was right about the difference between Macbeth, who from personal ambition killed people, but only a few, and the ideologically-motivated mass-killings of the Soviet Union and elsewhere—the difference being precisely in the effect of ideology.

But what was really different about Solzhenitsyn, apart from his literary talent, was that Western intellectuals were now prepared to believe what he said, whereas shortly before they had rejected as mere propaganda evidence of a very similar nature produced by others.

It was so startling to meet someone who still believed that a "pure" revolution could take place, and that such a person was teaching history of all things, in a reputable, or at any rate reputed, university, that, like Karl Kraus confronted by Hitler, I could think of nothing to say.

I had no idea whether he still taught undergraduates, or whether in doing so he suppressed at least some of his views

(as a judge is supposed to suppress his own private opinions): but I confess that the charge against Socrates, that of corrupting youth, came into my mind.

The sentence of hemlock, however, did not. As I said, I liked the professor, and by temperament (I cannot claim it as a virtue) I am a poor hater. I like the vast majority of people I meet.

Of course, corruption of youth can come about by many means, passively as it were rather than actively.

A few years ago, I gave a talk to students in Switzerland, I forget what about. The students were brilliantly intelligent, multilingual, and all very charming.

I discovered quite by chance that not a single one of them had heard of Solzhenitsyn, or indeed of any of his subject matter—and those students were of the infamous one per cent of the population if anybody was.

The past meant nothing to them, and while I do not say that those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it (there is no such fatality in history), it makes repetition the more likely.

First published in the [*Epoch Times*](#).