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## A STORY OF DISILLUSIONMENT: GEORGE SANTAYANA'S VIEWS ON THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND COMMUNISM<sup>1</sup>

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*The paper traces the evolution of George Santayana's views on communism and the Russian Revolution on the basis of his correspondence and his reflections contained in his only treatise in political philosophy – Dominations and Powers (1951). It seems that the thinker's initial hopes related to the revolutionary changes in Russia were inspired by a Platonic dream of a universal commonwealth where spiritual life in all its human diversity could bloom due to the partial alleviation of the burden of necessity achieved by means of rational and competent governing. The actual development of the Soviet state in the totalitarian direction is reflected in Santayana's all the more bitter reflections on the causes of the collapse of the ideal of human paradise, the impossibility of a successful, practical realization of any socio-political utopian scheme, as well as the costs of such attempts.*

Key words: George Santayana, communism, the Russian Revolution, utopia

Communist views were relatively popular in the America of the 1930s, particularly amongst the intelligentsia, even if they were never to become part of a dominant worldview.<sup>2</sup> One of the most influential American thinkers of all times, John Dewey, is considered by some to have been initially communist-friendly if not influenced by communist ideas, especially in his progressive theory of education and his anti-individualist idea of the overall 'socialization' of man. And conversely, his books such as *Schools of Tomorrow*, *How We Think*, and *The School and Society* were translated and published in Russia as early as in 1919-1921. The author himself was invited for a guided tour of the Soviet Union in 1928. He was impressed by the Soviet 'experiment', as he called it, with its new education system. As one may read in his *Impressions of Soviet Russia*, Dewey clearly thought of education as a vehicle for conveying pro-social values and attitudes, a tool for shaping worldviews. He considered the spirit of economic competition and individualism so typical of capitalism to be a major obstacle on the way to education reform. Definitely not utterly uncritical and not without reservations about the communist system in Soviet Russia, he still sounds

<sup>1</sup> The text is part of the project financed by National Science Centre, Poland, project number 2016/23/D/HS1/02274.

<sup>2</sup> Guenter Lewy, *The Cause that Failed: Communism in American Political Life*, (Oxford University Press, 1990).

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optimistic about the future results of the 'experiment'.<sup>3</sup> By way of digression, Dewey was among the signatories of a letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt supporting the diplomatic recognition of the USSR. In point of fact, as Guenter Lewy notes, a few years later, in the 1930s, Dewey, alongside other prominent intellectuals of the time – Horace Kallen and Morris Cohen, to mention just two – belonged to the group of the so-called liberals or progressive liberals in America that were against both fascism and communism.<sup>4</sup> What prompted Dewey to condemn Stalinist Russia decisively were the infamous Moscow trials. Dewey became overtly hostile toward the faction of 'radical liberals' (centered around the *New Republic*), which supported the Stalinist regime, and in the 1940s was actively engaged in a campaign against it. Lewy mentions Dewey as a perfect example of the liberal intellectuals who advocated certain left-wing ideas and yet 'allegedly suffered from the so-called red terror'.<sup>5</sup>

Leaving the intricacies of the ideological engagement of the American intelligentsia aside, it did not escape the attention of Dewey's early readers, his contemporaries – Corliss Lamont (1947),<sup>6</sup> Jim Corc,<sup>7</sup> or George Santayana – that some features of his evolutionary naturalism bore semblance to the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels. And this holds true despite the fact that Dewey's acquaintance with Marxism was most probably – just like Santayana's – second-hand. Santayana, who as a philosophy student took part in the early stage of the formation of the pragmatist movement in America, later parted ways with his colleagues, the pragmatists, and developed his own system of philosophy, namely a nonreductive sort of materialism/naturalism, which assumed an irreducible realm of spirit. An 'exile by nature,' as he would call himself, in 1912 Santayana resigned from Harvard University and moved to Europe. He wandered from Oxford to Paris and Nice, paying occasional visits to his homeland, Spain. In 1940, while in Italy, he was denied permission to travel to Spain and found himself 'imprisoned' in Rome. After the Second World War, the philosopher – who was in his mid-80s at that time – decided to spend his remaining years in the Eternal City, devoting himself exclusively to writing.

The thinker's 'situatedness' in-between America and Europe granted him a privileged, broad perspective, which characterized his astute yet synthetic criticism of culture and politics. Already during his Harvard years Santayana came to be recognized as an uncompromising and hence, controversial critic of American intellectual life.

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, 'Impressions of Soviet Russia', in *1927-28, vol. 3 of The Later Works of John Dewey 1925-1953*, ed. Joe Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 203-241.

<sup>4</sup> Lewy, *The Cause that Failed*, p. 48-49.

<sup>5</sup> Lewy, *The Cause that Failed*, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> Charles W. Tolman and Brad Piekkola, 'John Dewey and Dialectical Materialism: Anticipations of Activity Theory in the Critique of the Reflex Arc Concept', *Activity Theory*, 1(3-4)/1989, p. 43-46.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Corc, 'John Dewey, Karl Marx, and Democratic Socialism', *The Antioch Review*, 9(4)/1949, p. 435-452.

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Interestingly, after Santayana severed his professional relations with American academia, he came to be perceived by some as a recalcitrant intellectual, a solitary sage, perhaps a little outlandish but all the more alluring. Thus, a number of intellectuals and activists, some of them of leftist and emancipatory sympathies – such as Horace Kallen, Kenneth Burke, Sydney Hook, Max Eastman, or W.E. Du Bois – exchanged letters with Santayana, sought inspiration in his ideas, and sometimes cared to travel across Atlantic to meet the old thinker in his cell in a Roman nursing home.

Notwithstanding the fact that Santayana cannot be regarded as an expert either on Russian history or on Marxist philosophy (his familiarity with these was – just like Dewey's – most probably second-hand, mediated by Stalin's works and the secondary sources that he read), he was an important figure in the Anglo-Saxon intellectual milieu of that time, an open-minded and insightful observer and commentator of the events of the day, and an author of *Dominations and Powers* – a treatise in political philosophy. An initial inquiry into his correspondence and the magnum opus *Dominations and Powers* suggests that his approach to communism underwent an evolution – from a moderate skepticism not deprived of some rays of hope to a disillusionment, which finally reinforced his initial skepticism and merged with his disapproval for any attempts at a practical realization of utopian ideologies.

One learns from Santayana's correspondence that he was acquainted with some of Stalin's writings as well as those of the American communists' of the day – in particular two books by Max Eastman – 'Stalin's Russia and the Crisis in Socialism' (1940) and 'Marxism: Is It Science?' (1940).<sup>8</sup> Santayana followed also the pragmatist philosopher Sydney Hook's engagement in American left-wing intelligentsia. The letters he exchanged with Eastman are evidence of his interest and appreciation of his colleague's work, even though he straightforwardly declares that he never belonged to Eastman's 'camp.' Typically of the era, Santayana refers to the left-wing, often pro-communist activists in the United States as 'radical liberals,' whereas the label 'liberals' includes, among others, the representatives of the mainstream pragmatism (like John Dewey) with its pro-social and progressivist spirit. When John Gray, then, in *Post-Liberalism*, describes Santayana as one of the most insightful critics of liberalism, one should keep the distinction in mind and note that the criticism in question concerns in particular certain aspects and tendencies within the historical development of what we call 'liberalism' today. Santayana, as I read him, was a selective critic (and an advocate at once) of liberal ethos and civil society.

What is important, the author of *Dominations and Powers* noticed a number of assumptions common to pragmatism and communism. Besides the fact that he finally rejected Soviet Russia's totalitarian ambition and method (even though, as we shall later

<sup>8</sup> Letters of 17 March 1940 to Max Eastman and of 21 December 1940 to Nancy S. Toy, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Six, 1937-1940*, ed. William G. Holzberger, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 425.

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see, he initially shared in some illusions about its future perspectives), he presented his own materialism as incompatible with the so-called dialectical materialism, just as his naturalism differed fundamentally from the Deweyan, evolutionary type of naturalism, of which he was one of the first critics. In point of fact, these two incongruences are not unrelated. To put it in a nutshell, Santayana was critical of both philosophies on account of what he recognized as their 'ingenuity.' The materialism/naturalism declared by these doctrines was, in his view, a cover-up for a crypto-idealistic, if not crypto-religious philosophy of an instrumental kind, which reduced reality to the field of action. Both represented what he called a 'dominance of the foreground' – a biased perspective (in one case the perspective of the proletariat engaged in a class war, in the other that of social experience), which they proclaimed to be absolute so that they might better represent certain interests. Dewey's anthropocentrism, or rather – action-centrism or activism – overshadowed the recognition of the autonomous realm of nature and thus, in Santayana's reading, Dewey abandoned naturalism for an idolatry or a 'religion' of social progress.<sup>9</sup> One of the main targets of his critique of liberalism was, by the way, its progressivist strand. As for Marxism, he denied it the status of being 'scientific.' In one of his letters he wrote: 'I entirely accept historical materialism, which is only an application of materialism to history. But the phrase carries now an association with the Hegelian or Marxian dialectic, which if meant to be more than the doctrine of universal flux, is a *denial of materialism*.'<sup>10</sup> In another letter, addressed to Max Eastman – the already mentioned leftist intellectual and editor, who later was to become a staunch opponent of communism – he wrote: 'That Marxism is not a science, for me is a truism. It is a last revision of Hebrew prophecy, as Hegel's system is also.' Kołakowski, by way of digression, also considered Marx's 'faith in the 'end of history' ... not a scientist's theory but the exhortation of a prophet.'<sup>11</sup> Rather than being a genuine materialism or a science, Marxism seemed to be 'an idealism that prefers material images... in formulating its dream... [A]n idealist who uses mechanical or economic or pragmatic terms remains a dreaming idealist.'<sup>12</sup> The 'dream' was harmless unless it became dogmatic, hubristic, and usurped the rights to a forceful transformation of human reality with no or little respect to its costs. Santayana's sensitivity to arrogance in philosophy and his distrust toward utopian visions was rooted both in his conviction about the limitations of reason

<sup>9</sup> George Santayana, *Obiter Scripta: Lectures, Essays and Reviews*, eds. Justus Buchler and Benjamin Schwartz, (New York: Scribner's; London: Constable, 1936), p. 213-240.

<sup>10</sup> Letter of 18 September 1937 to Harry Slochower, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Six, 1937-1940*, ed. William G. Holzberger, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. Paul S. Falla (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 307.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of 31 December 1940 to Max Eastman, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Six, 1937-1940*, ed. William G. Holzberger, p. 430. Kołakowski clearly shares this opinion of Santayana: 'Neither Marx nor Engels are materialists in the exact or historical meaning of the word' (Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, p. 332).

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(which, by the way, co-existed with his appraisal of rationality) and his idea of contingent reality; both ideas, by the way, were rejected by Marx. Throughout his essays and the treatise *Dominations and Powers*, he recommends humility and warns of the dangers carried by certain overtly ambitious doctrines for the visions of which there was neither need nor readiness in the real life of peoples.

Having said this, one should not lose sight of Santayana's intellectual openness and the fact that he enjoyed the belief that there was no one, specific political option that might be recognized as universally valid and the best for mankind. Neither did he ever claim to be a living depository of universal truths. Thus, on some occasions he did express hopes that Marxism and, specifically, the Russian Revolution, might indeed bring desirable changes to humanity. There are a number of examples in his writings.

He had no principal 'hostility' to socialism and communism, according to his letter of 1921 to Horace Kallen, even though he decisively dismissed the idea that they ever might or should become universal and lasting. At that point Santayana seems to have thought that at certain places and in specific historical moments communism might be justified as a sort of *cathartic medium*. While communism should be accepted 'only when inevitable',<sup>13</sup> there was a possibility, he admitted, that the early twentieth century was just the right moment for a communist revolution in a crisis-ridden Europe. Or at least – it was not unthinkable. What hopes did he attach to communism? That it might cater for the most basic needs of the many and do away with the vice of capitalism, without encroaching on certain liberties cherished by civil societies, such as freedom of speech, opinion, association, etc. As he would confess a few years later:

I am more drawn by the Zeitgeist ... towards communism than I was towards liberalism in the old days. Communism would turn the world, physically and spiritually, into one vast monastery, giving the individual sure support and definite limited duties while leaving him free and solitary in the spirit. That doesn't seem to me a bad ideal, even if certain selective forms of society might have to dive under while the universal brotherhood prevailed. It would not, in any case, prevail equally, or forever.<sup>14</sup>

The premises of these and similar wishful speculations rest in his critical assessment of what had happened to liberal ideals in the democratic *and* capitalist world, and his premonitions of future weaknesses and perversions of liberalism, which, by the way, as the development of what we call neo-liberalism has proved, were not far off the mark. His

<sup>13</sup> Letter of 21 November 1921 to Horace Kallen, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Three, 1921-1927*, ed. William G. Holzberger, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Letter of 26 December 1945 to Horace Kallen, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Seven, 1941-1947*, ed. William G. Holzberger, p. 203.

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diagnoses uncovers widespread nihilism, agency crisis, and the hypocrisy of governments, which are alienated from the interests of those whom they are meant to represent and form a sort of parasitic organisms instead. He sounds sensitive to the working conditions of the poor, the so-called modern slavery, and does not spare the mentality of the elites some bitter words.<sup>15</sup> 'Conviction has deserted the civilized mind,' Santayana says in his final book, 'and a good conscience exists only at the extreme left, in that crudely deluded mass of plethoric humanity which perhaps forms the substance of another material tide destined to sweep away the remnants of our old vanities, and to breed new vanities of its own.'<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, he notices a sort of nemesis of ideology in that the 'banners of humanitarianism and equality' previously put forth by liberals, 'have now been snatched from their hands by a return wave of communism and dogmatic unanimity.'<sup>17</sup> This is where he is immediately concerned with the dangers inherent in the communist ideals. While their rise was not unrelated to the inertia of liberals, it seems dubious to Santayana whether 'unanimity and communism [may] coexist with' what he valued most in the society and what he called 'vital liberty.' Marx was right unveiling the class nature of liberalism – '[...] liberalism secured vital liberty for the rich and for the geniuses, ... for the liberty fostered by prosperity is intellectual as well as personal.' However, it was 'on the varied fruits of this moral and intellectual liberty that the spirit of unanimous mankind might feed at first.'<sup>18</sup> This sounds like the evidence of skepticism about the possibility of a successful and long-term implementation of *any* social and political ideal, accompanied by the concern as to the self-defeating tendencies inherent in literally all ideologies.

Nevertheless, Santayana did flirt with the idea of universal communism. In a response to the question 'Through whom might wisdom rule the world?'<sup>19</sup> we read:

Perhaps the Soviets ... they are a real power, with an autonomous army.... Secondly the Soviets are theoretically international... Thirdly, they represent the Dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, of the nondescript masses of human beings without country, religion, property, or skill. *We are all born proletarians, and remain such all our lives long in our physical being and in respect to those radical animal wants which are alone coercive. The dictatorship is therefore not artificial here, but simply a recognition of the fundamental conditions of our existence.* At that level, and in those respects, we live under the control of universal material forces; it would be childish not to recognize them and irrational not to confront them with foresight and method. Lastly, such foresight and method

<sup>15</sup> See: George Santayana, *Dominations and Powers: Reflections on Liberty, Society, and Government*, (New York: Scribner's; London: Constable, 1951), p. 379-380.

<sup>16</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 254.

<sup>17</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 310.

<sup>18</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 310.

<sup>19</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 453.

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are foreshadowed in the Soviet doctrine of Historical Materialism. ... if the management [of economy] were competent, a universal communism, backed by irresistible armed force, would be a wonderful boon to mankind.<sup>20</sup>

While the motivation behind Santayana's hopes related to communism seems to be Platonic, the passage testifies first, to Santayana's metaphorical use of the term 'proletariat' and, second, to his (materialist) idea of politics as managing necessity.<sup>21</sup> Having recognized the rudimentary material slavery, the homage humans pay for staying alive and the inevitable situation of bowing to necessity, Santayana speculates on the possibility that communist regime – *under the condition of a genuine economic competence* – might free people from the shackles of narrow-minded materialism and the spirit of competition, thus liberating them to spiritual life. To stress it again, Santayana accounts for the term 'proletariat' *metaphorically*, saying that all people are potentially proletarians inasmuch as they are incarnate beings who suffer and have certain fundamental needs. This – and only this – may constitute the basis for unanimity or brotherhood. 'Proletarians thus tend to become equal in the only thing in which equality is possible – in their misery. And this is a great bond' and the source of the idea that 'all men are equal by nature.'<sup>22</sup> The supposed promising aspect of communism is that it recognizes and addresses this condition and aims at overcoming it by way of just distribution of the costs of necessity.

Now, these speculations are usually accompanied by some reservations and Santayana's skepticism seems to be growing with time. As mentioned previously, the thinker never sided openly with the communists, and the so-called Moscow trials, which shocked American public opinion at the end of 1930s, confirmed the viability of his ultimate distrust toward revolutions and utopias at large.

First of all, for the Soviet ideal to be meaningful and beneficial, the Soviets, he says, would have to guarantee pluralism of opinion and 'renounce all control of education, religion, manners, and arts.'<sup>23</sup> Freedom of expression, religious affiliation, travel and migration, etc., are plainly the conditions of possibility for the spiritual liberty that is at stake. This is where a paradox appears. In reference to the previously mentioned unanimity of all people, it turns out that

We are proletarians and unwitting communists only *in the absence of these things* [the liberties listed above] []; *in their presence, we all instantly become aristocrats.*

<sup>20</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 455. My emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> See: Katarzyna Kremplewska, 'Managing Necessity: George Santayana on Forms of Power and the Human Condition,' in *The Life of reason in an Age of Terrorism*, ed. Charles Padron and Krzysztof Skowroński, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), p. 28-42.

<sup>22</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 369.

<sup>23</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 455-456.

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Everything except the mechanical skeleton of society, all culture in the German sense of this word, must be left to free associations, to inspiration founding traditions and traditions guiding inspiration. ... a just universal government would not disturb them.<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere the idea is restated in a different way: 'The real equality between men is ... [either] an equality in misery... [or] an equality in spiritual autonomy.'<sup>25</sup> In the former case we are proletarians, in the latter – we are 'aristocrats.' Only and exclusively in an environment of natural diversity would 'the principle of spiritual wealth in spiritual liberty ... be vindicated.'<sup>26</sup>

Another issue tackled by Santayana is that of *moral representation* and *rational authority* being a challenge for the government. The latter involves the recognition of the authority of facts, the former 'lies in furthering the interests, not in catching the votes, of the people represented.'<sup>27</sup> Communist praxis contradicted both principles, leaving many of its former advocates disillusioned. Unable to thrive in the situation of liberty and assert its popular legitimacy, the communist regime resorted to large scale violence showing its totalitarian face. Santayana came to a conclusion similar to that of Andrzej Walicki, who argued that there is a genetic relation between totalitarian enslavement and the attempt to materialize the Marxist idea of freedom. The idea itself entailed a full and rational control over socio-economic forces, a "collective mastery over people's own fate."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the freedom in mind concerned not the concrete individuals of here-and-now, but an abstract, future community of humans who have reached identity with their abstract, ideal essence. Meanwhile, Santayana believed that doing away with an element of unreason in the human world was an impossibility and 'could only come at the price of eradicating the bodies which are the material basis for unreason to flourish.'<sup>29</sup> Stalin, victorious in World War II, remarked Santayana,

adopted the policy of vetoing everything that did not conduce to the extension of communist domination... [T]here is a militant thirst for the political assimilation of all peoples to the social regimen of Russia, *which in that claim forfeits all rational authority. Rational authority according to my analysis, can accrue to governments only in so far as they represent the inescapable authority of*

<sup>24</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 455-456, my italics.

<sup>25</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 368.

<sup>26</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 368.

<sup>27</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 381.

<sup>28</sup> Andrzej Walicki, *Marksizm i skok do królestwa wolności* (Warszawa: PWN, 1996), p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Till Kenzel, 'Santayana, Self-knowledge and the Limits of Politics', in *The Life of Reason in an Age of Terrorism*, ed. Charles Padrón and Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), p. 98.



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*things, that is to say, of the material conditions of free life and free action. In the Marxist theory this almost seems to be involved in its materialistic character; yet in Russian practice it is not the authority of things but nominally the material class interests and militant Will of the proletariat and really the ambition of the self-appointed inner circle of the Communist party that not only rule absolutely but intend to keep the whole world unanimous by 'liquidating' all dissentients. And half by the wonderful power of propaganda and mass-suggestion and half by systematic extermination of all other ways of thinking, this artificial unanimity has actually seemed to cover vast regions of Europe and Asia like a blanket of Siberian snow. The depth of it is unknown, but the silence is impressive. It is not, then, by the authority of universal physical conditions of existence that the Russian government would exercise control over all nations in military and economic matters; it would be rather by a revolutionary conspiracy fomented everywhere that it would usurp a moral and intellectual domination over all human societies. Such baseless pretensions cancel the right which economic science might have to guide a universal material economy.*<sup>30</sup>

In reference to what one of the contributors to the collection of essays entitled *De Profundis*, Alexander Izgoev, noted, namely that life itself proved the ultimate critic of communism and there is no superior critic than life,<sup>31</sup> let us note that Santayana suggests that communism – as a materialization of Marxist doctrine – finally rendered itself illegitimate in a manifold way: first, by proving incompatible with or contradictory to its own emancipatory spirit (liberating people into the spiritual richness of their human nature), second, as failing against the tribune of moral representation and rational government, third, as disavowing the myth of the scientific authority of Marxism, and finally – as proving incompetent in practice and hence, failing from the viewpoint of the authority of facts. The origins of the failure rest equally in the erratic assumptions of Marxism and in the inevitable perversities of its practical application. Among the 'myths' of Marxism that Santayana opposed were the ideas that 'there can be a perfect identity between collective and individual interests,' that it is possible to remove all the sources of antagonism among individuals by enabling them to merge with the social 'whole,' and that there is a prospect of a full emancipation of man, or, in other words, the attainment of his ideal nature.<sup>32</sup> That would entail bridging the gap between necessity and freedom, which means not simply alleviating the burden of the so-called human condition, but rather doing away with the human condition whatsoever. This is where Santayana is most

<sup>30</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 457. My emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander. S. Izgoev, 'Socialism, Culture and Bolshevism', in *Out of the Depths (De profundis)*. A Collection of Articles on Russian Revolution, trans., ed. William F. Woehrlin (Irvine, California: Charles Slack JR Publisher, 1986), p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> Kofakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, p. 108.

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clearly at odds with (orthodox) Marxism. Even though he believed necessity may and should be understood to some extent, the recognition of human finitude was part of his philosophical credo. Marx, in turn, 'did not believe in the essential finitude and the limitation of man... Evil and suffering, in his eyes,... were purely social facts.'<sup>33</sup>

Looking back at the early correspondence with Kallen, Santayana thinks communism should 'be accepted only when inevitable, and confined to the community to which ... [it is] fitted, and by no means to be set up by the philosopher as ideals compulsory at all times and places over all men.'<sup>34</sup> These limitations pertain to any grand socio-economic and political design and stem on the one hand, from the limitations of reason, and on the other from the contingency and unpredictability informing reality. The (arbitrary) conceptual schemas on which such grand projects are based cannot be but provisional and at best adequate for a specific place and limited time. 'We think .. in aesthetic or moral terms [the so-called 'dynamic units'] which correspond to no lines of cleavage or motion in nature.' Consequently, when the application of an ideal turns out a disaster, 'we are consumed with astonishment and indignation at what we think the folly and wickedness of mankind, whose actions and sentiments are so strangely oblivious of the units we wished to preserve.'<sup>35</sup> As for the discernment of the dynamic/operative 'units' of reality, in this case the central categories of scientific materialism such as class struggle, it has been questioned by many, including some of the authors of *De Profundis*, Santayana's contemporaries, like Petr Struve, who called the doctrine of class struggle a 'bad publicistic cliché, appropriate only for use by demagogues.'<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, as noted by Semen Frank,

the people, in the sense of the lower classes or, in general, the masses of the population, may never be directly guilty of political failure [...] for the simple reason that in no social order, nor in any social circumstances, is the people the initiator and creator of political life. Even in the most democratic state, the people is always the fulfiller, the instrument in the hands of some directing and inspiring minority.<sup>37</sup>

And not unlike Santayana, who speaks of the strategy of blaming the 'folly' of the people for the failures of the Russian Revolution, Frank asks, ironically, ' what kind of

<sup>33</sup> Kotakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, p. 338.

<sup>34</sup> Letter of 21 November 1921 to Horace Kallen, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Three, 1921-1927*, ed. William G. Holzberger, p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> Letter of 21 November 1921 to Horace Kallen, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Three, 1921-1927*, ed. William G. Holzberger, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Petr Bergardovich Struve, 'The Historical Meaning of the Russian Revolution and National Tasks', in *Out of the Depths (De profundis). A Collection of Articles on the Russian Revolution*, p. 212.

<sup>37</sup> Semyon Lyudvigovich Frank, 'De Profundis', in *Out of the Depths (De profundis). A Collection of Articles on the Russian Revolution*, p. 221-222.

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politicians are these, who, in their programs and their mode of action, deal with some kind of imagined, ideal people, and not with the people as it really exists!<sup>38</sup>

The very question of *the people* and *the proletariat* on the behalf of whose authority the Bolsheviks reached for power seems to the American thinker highly problematic. Many years later he returns to this issue and asks:

does the proletariat exercise any power at all? Or do the vested interests at work regard the special interests of the proletariat or of their own prestige or chosen ambition? Here is a revolution entangled in the complexities of its own success and carried by its organized instruments into enterprises of which it cannot plan the course or see the end. Meantime, what may we expect the spiritual condition of the people and the character of the liberal arts to become in this future realm of equality and unanimity? The temper of the communist masses ... may give us some hint of it.<sup>39</sup>

As for the question who exercises power – Santayana's answer is: a sect, a party of conspirators, who, notwithstanding their 'apostolic zeal,' remained essentially politicians, counting not so much on the loose lost orphans of society as on the organized working class, that could be indoctrinated, trained and mobilized into a political army.<sup>40</sup> In a letter to a friend, Santayana, utterly disillusioned, wrote: 'It is already notorious that in Russia the governing clique lives luxuriously and plans 'dominations' like so many madmen.... There would be no 'communists' among factory hands if they knew their true friends.'<sup>41</sup> Moreover, he notices some crypto-religious features of the whole enterprise:

In such a conspiracy there is the same intrepid consistency or internal rationality as in any theocracy... Both reform and reason would thus be banished from the scene, and eclipsed by faith and by prescribed action ... the undertaking is not only horrible in its methods but vain in its promise...<sup>42</sup>

The moral and spiritual condition of the communist form of society that was being established on the ruins of the Russian past seemed dubious for Santayana, who already during the Civil War in Russia spoke of the tragic destruction of institutions and values, and the subsequent dissolution of the (inherited) cultural, social and/or national unity. Meanwhile, when a moral unity is missing in a society,

<sup>38</sup> Frank, 'De profundis', p. 221.

<sup>39</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 349.

<sup>40</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 347.

<sup>41</sup> Letter of 2 May 1952 to John W. Yolton, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Eight, 1948-1952*, ed. William G. Holzberger, p. 443.

<sup>42</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 321.

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the government cannot be rational; it can never be an art; for the country supplies no guiding purpose to its rulers... That has been happening in Europe under our eyes; for it is materially impossible that the proletariat should govern itself systematically; it can only flow like a swollen river.<sup>43</sup>

The lack of economic competence in the new Soviet system and the inefficiency of a state-controlled economy, one deprived of a free market, seemed to this thinker from Ávila an equally important problem. Not unlike his Russian contemporaries, the authors of the *De Profundis* collection, Santayana doubts in the possibility of decent wages for workers and free social services.

But how, if all profit on land and equipment is abolished is the state to continue paying always higher wages for shorter hours of work, and supplying a more complete system of free social services? Evidently when a government has assumed possession of all means of production and controls all business, it cannot distribute... more than industry, so organized, will produce; and it will probably... produce rather less than was at first produced by rival capitalists and private enterprise.<sup>44</sup>

The central planning of the economy, doomed to failure, according to John Gray, is one of the key features of totalitarianism. Its Soviet variety may be better characterized as 'an economic chaos contained in a political state of nature,' rather than as a despotism or a tyranny.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it brings about a moral degradation of its participants, who become unwilling perpetrators in this self-reproducing system.

Rational leadership, according to Santayana, ideally would entail not the destruction of what had been established in the past but rather critical, selective continuity and reform. It should be disinterested and knowledgeable, 'steady and traditional, yet open to continual readjustment,' aware of the limitations of reason and its own inability to 'define or codify human nature: that is the error of militant sects and factions. But it can exercise a modicum of control over local and temporal impulses and keep at least an ideal of spiritual liberty and social justice before the public eye.'<sup>46</sup>

Valerian Murav'ev noted that Soviet communism involved discontinuity not only through the negation of history and tradition but also of actual reality, and their

<sup>43</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 380.

<sup>44</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 381-382.

<sup>45</sup> John Gray, 'Totalitarianism, reform and civil society', in *Post-Liberalism. Studies in Social Thought* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 163.

<sup>46</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 382.

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replacement by an abstract ideological construct.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Santayana ascribes to the revolutionaries 'hatred of any view that recognized realities.' In particular it was the past that 'was the great enemy, the dreadful past.' The annihilation of values involved in this process gave birth to a new kind of man, whom Santayana calls *a momentary man*, one who can afford no other past – and consequently no other destiny – than that prepared for him by the state. 'The undifferentiated proletariat,' the mass of 'momentary men,' would glorify undifferentiated existence. Such may be the ultimate voice of revolutionary democracy.<sup>48</sup>

The undifferentiation in question appears as if in response to the demand for equality and unanimity. The unanimity sought by communists disregards the fact that human needs and the ways humans realize their vital liberty 'are centrifugal and divergent, so that the goods they pursue are incompatible existentially.'<sup>49</sup> In a striking semblance to what René Girard says about the relation between undifferentiation and war, Santayana clearly sees that '[t]he more equal and similar all nations and all individuals become, the more vehemently will each of them stick up for his atomic individuality... But when all are uniform the individuality of each unit is numerical only.'<sup>50</sup> In other words, equality rather than leading to brotherhood results in atomization or atomistic individualism and, possibly, in mutual hostility.

*Uniformity between classes or between nations is not favorable to peace, except as it destroys units capable of action. There must be organic units at some level or there would be no potential moral agents or combatants; but similarity in these units, if they live in the same habitat, renders them rivals and therefore, in spite of their brotherly likeness to one another, involves them in war.... Similarity is therefore a danger to peace, and peace can be secured only by organization. But the collateral completeness of similar units excludes organization; and then war becomes inevitable at the first shock of competition, unless some higher power, itself organized, stifles the conflict.*<sup>51</sup>

Let me note that these reflections of Santayana find resonance in the already mentioned diagnoses of Soviet totalitarianism by John Gray, who emphasized the reduction of the society to the Hobbesian state of nature, where (equal) agents predate against one another in competing for goods, which are in permanent scarcity.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, cultural and intellectual pluralism along with the institutions of civil society are being annihilated.

<sup>47</sup> Valer'yan Nikolaevich Murav'ev, 'The Roar of the Tribe', in *Out of the Depths (De profundis). A Collection of Articles on Russian Revolution*, p. 166.

<sup>48</sup> All quotations in this paragraph: Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 350.

<sup>49</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 310.

<sup>50</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 180.

<sup>51</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 364-5-6. My italics.

<sup>52</sup> Gray, 'Totalitarianism, reform and civil society', p. 185-186.

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Perhaps the most mature expression, synthetic and yet pregnant with meaning, of Santayana's final views on the Russian Revolution and its totalitarian fruits is contained in the passage quoted below.

The same nominal humanitarianism, inwardly contradicted by a militant hatred towards almost all human institutions and affections, has descended from the wealth-loving liberals to the poverty-hating communists. The moral inspiration of communism is brotherly, pacifistic, ascetic, and saintly. Christianity was originally communistic, and all the religious orders continue to be so in their internal economy and discipline. It is built on tenderness, on indifference to fortune and to the world, on readiness for sacrifice, on life in the spirit. It cannot be militant. But what is now called communism is more than militant, more than a doctrine and a party bent on universal domination; It is ferociously egotistical, and claims absolute authority for the primal Will of a particular class, or rather a group of conspirators professing to be the leaders of that class. This class, far from embracing all mankind, does not include all the poor, nor the fundamental rural population that traditionally till the soil and live on its products, but enlists only the uprooted and disinherited proletariat ... Thus the authority of the 'Communist Party' usurped without previous delegation, like the authority of conquerors and bandits, proclaims itself to be absolute and to extend prophetically over all mankind. And whose interests meantime does it serve? At bottom only the imaginary interests of a future society, unanimous and (like the Prussians of Hegel) perfectly free because perfectly disciplined to will nothing but what the State wills for them. Meantime, in order to clear the ground for that ideal plenty in peace, war must devour millions of the faithful communists themselves, as well as millions of their surprised and unconverted fellow creatures; there must be slaughter of enemies, forced migrations of whole peoples, disappearance of institutions, civic and religious, destruction of all traditions...<sup>53</sup>

To conclude, whatever Santayana's initial hopes were when related to communism, they were motivated predominantly by the idea of the spiritual (cultural, moral, intellectual) gains and greater personal liberty related to a more competent economic order and more just distribution of the costs of necessity. The hopes waned and gave way to harsh criticism along with the recognition of the totalitarian nature of Soviet communism and its detrimental influence on the spiritual and moral condition of society. Did Santayana's disillusionment with Soviet communism make him abandon altogether his ideal of a universal commonwealth? It seems not. In a letter to a friend, written a few months before his death, he mentions his 'playful speculations' about a model of what a rational

<sup>53</sup> Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, p. 320.

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government might be.<sup>54</sup> He continues to dream about a possible multi-national/cultural, universal 'empire,' where the military, economy, and healthcare would be controlled by the state with the support of scientific knowledge, making – at least to an extent – natural necessity less burdensome and more justly distributed. The commonwealth he speaks of is perhaps only to a small degree influenced by the Marxist doctrine, in which the thinker continues to see some aspects as promising. It is also unclear what the scope of state intervention in the economic life of the people would be. Nevertheless, Santayana insists that governmental control should by no means extend further than the already mentioned spheres of common life, while securing freedom and encouraging diversity in all the remaining ones. Such a commonwealth – a new *Pax Romana*, as Santayana at times called it – would secure internal peace for its subjects and cater for a *modus vivendi*. These, however, remain, as he would note, merely 'playful speculations.'

<sup>54</sup> Letter of 2 May 1952 to John W. Yolton, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Eight, 1948-1952*, ed. William G. Holzberger, p. 443.