

## A PHILOSOPHY OF THE CLOSED MIND Some Thoughts on Communism

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The following article is an attempt to sketch briefly the mental structure of the kind of society in which all spheres of activity are subordinated to a prevailing official ideology, the kind of society that is called in modern terminology totalitarian. More specifically, the purpose of the article is to consider the particular version of the totalitarian mental structure exemplified by the modern communist state of the Soviet Union.

Any criticism of the communist system that proceeds in piecemeal fashion must necessarily be inadequate. A more comprehensive criticism should strive to lay bare the fundamental presuppositions that are common to or underlie all the forms of totalitarian society. Since the difference between the Western world and the communist states permeates all spheres of human activity—science, politics, culture — it becomes necessary to go to the primary sources of this difference and to examine the radically different mentalities or attitudes to society and the individual's place in it that from the very beginning definitively determine all social activities. We call these fundamental attitudes the **open mind** and the **closed mind**. If we grasp the nature of these two contrary attitudes and the ways in which they necessarily objectify themselves in concrete social situations, we can hope to understand more clearly the present ideological conflict of the twentieth century — and also, for that matter, the flow of the history of ideas from its dim beginnings.

Communism, in elevating an intolerant and comprehensive official view above all discussion and criticism, presents itself as a typical exponent of the closed mind. The Western world, on the contrary, exhibits in its more advanced aspects — such as the primacy of science in the realm of empirically ascertainable knowledge, the predominance of democracy in politics, the recognitions of free creative expression in the field of culture in general — genuine features of the open mind. The communist monism is opposed by the Western pluralism, the claim of one infallible and universally aggressive official view is countered by the claim that any view — provided that it respects other views — has the right to exist

It is interesting to note that the mental structure of the totalitarian society remains identical in all ages, since it is an expression of this same fundamental attitude of the closed mind. Any difference consists merely in a higher or lower level of technological progress, and is incidental. For whether the man with a new idea is silenced by the tribal witch-doctor or by the priests of the Temple of Ra or by the central executive of the Party, it amounts to the same thing; the fact of the censure is unaltered whether the offender receives the judgment orally in the form of a thrice-sacred curse, or has it delivered to him on a papyrus scroll, or finds it announced in the Party's daily. In any event, the innovator must suppress his own ideas and submit himself to the decision pronounced by the higher powers, who not only know what everyone must think but also possess the means for ensuring that everyone does think it.

Looking at this identity from a historical point of view, it seems obvious that the communist state as an instance of the totalitarian structure signifies a return not only to the despotism of the ancient Orient but also to the primitive tribal society with its closed set of compulsory beliefs. More generally, totalitarian communism signifies a conscious revolt against the attitude of the open mind and against its accompanying intellectual, political and cultural pluralism, which has rightly been regarded as the outstanding achievement, even the very soul, of Western civilization.

The closed mind, considered in its origin, is a product of the primitive society that is engaged in continuous struggle for

survival with both nature and other tribes. The primitive society, if it wishes to preserve its existence or perhaps to expand in the face of the ubiquitous enemy, is forced to demand of its members a total solidarity, a solidarity that extends beyond the division of labor to include the mental sphere, such as participation in traditional thought patterns, and observance of magical rites and taboos, for these are considered just as essential for the tribe's survival and prosperity as the more concrete activities of securing food and fighting. It is important to note that the tribal conventions, magical rites, taboos, etc. are regarded as "truths" which the member of the tribe may not question or challenge, since they are instrumental in contributing to the tribe's well-being. Any deviation is considered a dangerous betrayal, for it undermines the strength of the tribe and therefore amounts to treason. In this way there arises the sanctity of the tribal tradition or, in other words, the supremacy of ideology or official view. This social process brings about at the same time a totalitarian mentality which, though it may at first serve the tribe as a whole, may be turned to selfish ends by the more enterprising members of the society, thus giving rise to a division between rulers and ruled that is not functional or based on capacity for leadership but is absolute and dynastic.

The supremacy of ideology means the supremacy of subjectivity over objectivity. For the tribal ideology consists of the set of beliefs that are linked, correctly or incorrectly, with the tribe's survival. But since some of these beliefs are simply false, a conflict is bound to arise between subjectivity (ideology, tradition, a set of "self-evident" beliefs) and objectivity (the facts as they really are); this conflict arises the moment a traditional belief is seen to be false and yet must be accepted as a "truth" because it forms part of the not-to-be-questioned ideology. In a primitive society there exists the constant possibility of a clash between the official view, which is necessarily subjective and partly false because of the natural limitations of the human understanding or perspectivity of knowledge, and the intentional or accidental disclosure of the facts as they really are. More concretely, there is tension and the possibility of conflict between the advocates of the official view and those who have perceived its insufficiency or falsity, who understand that not all traditional ceremonies are efficacious, that some conventions are harmful and some beliefs false. It is a struggle between conformity and the spirit of progress. The conflict discloses two fundamental attitudes: The closed mind adheres rigidly to the official view, to the preconceived subjective beliefs; the open mind chooses truth, refuses to see facts otherwise than as they are, or at least as they appear to be. The closed mind signifies subjectivity, the open mind signifies objectivity. When the closed mind predominates, the principle is established that objectivity takes precedence to subjectivity, that facts are superior to traditional notions. Once the authority on ideology breaks down, three fields of human activity become possible: The absence of a preconceived and binding world-view makes possible an objective consideration of the facts as they really are (i. e., scientific inquiry); the absence of a political authority makes possible self-rule (i.e., democracy) ; and the absence of a comprehensive official view makes possible free cultural expression, freedom of conscience and sincere philosophical thought.

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The closed mind is characterized by an attitude of suspicion toward anything novel and foreign, whereas the open mind looks at others with "curiosity", with a love of knowledge, with the idea of learning all that can be learned from the views and practices of others. Cooperation takes the place of suspicion and toleration of intolerance. It does not follow, of course, that the possessors of open minds may not have firm views of their own; the point is rather that they are tolerant, and abstain in principle from imposing their views on others. For they are aware of the essential perspectivity and limitations of human knowledge and therefore are not afraid to admit that "I may be wrong and you may be right." The society of the open mind, being pluralistic, is dynamic and progressive; the society of the closed mind is static. It is no accident of history that the empires of the ancient Orient exhibit a high degree of cultural uniformity and even stagnation, whereas the open-minded Greeks cannot be excelled in their creative genius.

The open mind revolts against the absoluteness of the official ideology, A society that naturally sets up an arbitrary yet not-to-be-questioned ideology is a society of the closed mind; it must suppress free inquiry, shackle cultural expression and impose political absolutism. The open mind, on the contrary, refuses to see in political authority anything but the mere functional representation of the people themselves and at the same time holds that there exists no insurmountable barrier between rulers and ruled and that everyone has the chance of becoming an administrator given the needed ability and insight. When the open mind looks at the world, it recognizes that any preconceived ideas are only hypothetical and must be tested with reference to the facts. The open mind, being objective, paves the way for science. Since the open mind has no ideology compulsory to all, every member of society has the right to express his views and to make his contribution to the solving of problems. The open mind is an attitude of cooperation. At the same time, any view is open to criticism, just as any view has the right to be critical of other views. Tradition and conventions, too, fall within the range of criticism. (For are they not the work of other individuals?) Again, of course, it does not follow that everything must actually be criticized. The principle is a formal one: There is no view that cannot **potentially** be criticized.

The closed mind proceeds in a radically different way. It sets up an ideology above all criticism and must then necessarily suppress all views that conflict with it. As a result, scientific inquiry, democratic politics and freedom of culture do not have the sovereignty they acquire in the society of the open mind. In this way any totalitarian society, however modern and sophisticated, resembles in its structure a primitive society. In the communist system the subordination of science, politics and culture to the official ideology is indeed effected in the most thoroughgoing manner.

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It is well-known fact that Soviet **science** is now and again subject to correction by the Communist Party's ideological experts. Marx and En-gels, engaged in a controversy with the more extreme materialistic version of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century, themselves made a number of pronouncements on various scientific problems. Lenin and Stalin maintained this tradition. Since their works are held by the Communist Party to contain nothing but the truth, the views on scientific questions expressed therein serve as infallible guides for determining the value of more modern theories. The doctrine contained in the philosophical works of Marx, En-gels, Lenin and Stalin is known as dialectical materialism. The Party demands that the results of scientific research do not contradict this official ideology, and any that happen to do so are condemned. Thus it is not unusual to find in a scientific work the remark that its results "confirm the truth of the theses of dialectical materialism," while conflicting views are labeled "unscientific." As a Soviet writer on cosmology puts it, a scientific result that contradicts the theses of dialectical materialism "leads to the negation of cosmology and therefore has nothing to do with science."<sup>1</sup> Maximov, a scientist engaged in research on the theory of relativity, was accused of "subjectivistic, 'nihilistic' and 'vulgarizing' tendencies; these terms have special meanings within the system of dialectical materialism, and are therefore ideological. Maximov is not the only one who has been censured in this way, of course. The truth of any inquiries concerning the origin of life is determined by reference to the corresponding passages from Engels' "Dialectics of Nature." The classical case of the subjugation of science to ideology is doubtless the famous 1948 genetics controversy, in which Lysenko finally crushed his opponents with the phrase "My report has been examined and approved by the Party Central Committee." One of his opponents immediately sent a confession to **Pravda**: "I am now convinced that the fundamental assertions of the Michurin school of Soviet genetics have been sanctioned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. As a member of the Party, I believe it impossible to persist in holding views that have been declared erroneous by the Party."<sup>2</sup> There are many such condemnations and confessions. Needless to say, a condemnation is usually followed by a ban on lecturing and publishing, or even by a loss of academic position, since scientific institutions in the Soviet Union are state controlled.

This state of affairs blatantly contradicts the Western notion of scientific inquiry and clearly reveals the difference in mentality. It might even be said that Soviet science is not scientific. For science comes into its own when it is allowed to have nothing but the object itself as the highest court of judgment. Science has no authority other than the objects it investigates or - what is the same thing - the truths it discovers. Moreover this authority is not absolute but, owing to the essential perspectivity and limitations of human knowledge, hypothetical. There is no road to the absolute in matters of science; any ideology that claims to present science with infallible truths is, from the scientific point of view, itself hypothetical. Science, discarding absolute authority, is inter-subjective and democratic; it creates its own authority out of the contributions of the scientists themselves. Science is democratic, for every scientist has the right to discuss, criticize and correct the views of others. Science as a human activity is one of the most splendid objectifications of the open mind. The closed mind, on the contrary, sets up certain a priori truths to which science must defer and thereby lose its scientific character. As an opponent of scientific objectivity, or the primacy of science over beliefs, communism suppresses facts in favor of beliefs and is therefore a principal enemy of truth.

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Just as Soviet science is not really scientific (because it is subordinated to an a priori theory and is deprived of freedom of inquiry), so Soviet **democracy, too, is not really democratic**. That this is so follows from the elevation of the ideology above discussion and criticism (this conclusion is, of course, supported by the manner in which Soviet internal politics is actually conducted). To prevent possible criticism of the ideology-there must exist a social class or caste of ruling men who either are its unconditional devotees or identify it with their own interests. To prevent the ideology from being replaced by another, there must exist a political structure that will prevent the dissatisfied from attaining political power. Both circumstances rule out any chance of political rights. Thus there arises a deep chasm between the rulers and the ruled, although all kinds of attempts may be made to disguise the absolute distinction between the two by intentionally misleading terminology. If the communist system boasts that it has guaranteed democratic quality to all its citizens, the claim is proved false not only by such revealing phrases as "the dictatorship of the proletariat" but also by formal restrictions embedded in the very Constitution, in which the guarantees of freedom of speech, press and assembly are ominously and in a significantly vague manner modified by the phrase "in conformity with the interests of the working people."<sup>3</sup>

There is no need to elaborate this point in detail, since even the prolific verbiage of Communist propaganda cannot cover up the fact that the elector has only a single list of candidates to vote for, a fact that implies that in the background of Soviet internal politics there is all-powerful force capable of seeing to it that there is a single list of candidates and that any emergence of political pluralism is effectively and unhesitatingly suppressed by references to "the interests of the working people." The monist form of politics is a typical expression of the closed mind; its totalitarianism returns the citizen to the cage of the primitive society. (To do justice to primitive societies, it should be remarked that some of them exhibit a relatively large degree of democratic rule and are thus superior, in respect to politics, to the totalitarian states of the twentieth century.) In any case, the communist "democracy," with its political monism, merely replaces the monarchical and all other types of monism against which Marxism originally rebelled. The communist version of "democracy" is radically different from the genuine democracy expressed by the open mind, whose two principal features are political pluralism and a purely functional difference between the rulers and the ruled. Communist "democracy", on the other hand, reinstates privileges that it then accords to the Communist Party alone, transforming it into a caste of absolute rulers.

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The supremacy of the official communist ideology applies equally to those remaining spheres of human activity that can be broadly designated by the term "**culture**: activities that are neither strictly political nor scientific but that express themselves on the one hand as views about man's place in the universe and on the other hand as manifestations of the creative spirit. It is characteristic of totalitarianism or the closed mind that it does not tolerate independent thought. Leaving aside religion, to which the communist attitude is doubtless negative without dissimulation, philosophy is also subjective to close supervision by the Party authorities. What is left of philosophy consists of interpretations of the works of the four classical communist writers, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin (though the influence of Stalin has diminished recently). Thus the **Short Philosophical Dictionary**, an official publication, consists principally of quotations from these writers. Soviet philosophers themselves have noted the servility of communist philosophical activity. During a state-organized philosophical discussion in 1947, protests were made against "quotationitis," if only against its more excessive forms. But in general quotationitis cannot be avoided, for it is customary in Soviet philosophical discussion to reduce any argument to a matter of correspondence or noncorrespondence with the views of the classical communist writers. Relatively more freedom obtains with relation to those problems of which the classical writers were not aware. In all cases, however, in philosophy no less than in science and politics, an attempt is made to give any inquiry a consciously partial quality. Lack of partiality is considered a grievous defect. Even logic has a political orientation. The logician P. S. Popov was censured by the Minister of Higher Education because his formalistic approach to logic was lacking in "political spirit." G. F. Alexandrov was subjected to sharp official criticism because his latest work, **The History of Western Philosophy**, was not partial (literally, "Party-bound") enough. It is demanded of Soviet psychologists, that they show a "bolshevist Party spirit in problems of psychology."<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising that even artists, musicians and writers are regularly subjected to a thoroughgoing evaluation from the ideological point of view; the communist theory of esthetics holds definite views on the ways in which the creative spirit must manifest itself: It must be "socialist in content, national in form." This injunction follows logically from the epistemological theses of dialectical materialism, which maintain that consciousness is a reflection of reality. Thus the artistic consciousness of a socialist society can only be socialist. There is no room for other kinds of artistic or, more generally, cultural consciousness because, according to the infallible dialectical materialism, no other kinds of consciousness could even arise. Here again we have a case in which facts are suppressed in favor of a set of preconceived beliefs — an expression of the closed mind.

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In a primitive society, concerned as it is with survival, the closed mentality of totalitarian solidarity can be said to be a natural and instinctive attitude (just as it is present to some extent in every society and in every individual). But since the time of the Greeks an opposed mentality, that of the open mind, has been in the ascendant. The closed mind is no longer instinctive or self-evident; it now requires justification. The question follows: How do the communist theorists justify the unambiguously totalitarian character of the communist ideology, in view of the prevailing Western ideals of political and intellectual liberty?

The justification offered on behalf of communist totalitarianism is indeed more sophisticated than that of a primitive society, in which uniformity of expression is expected from the members as the only means of ensuring self-preservation. It is much more modern. The justification of communist totalitarianism rests on the claim that Marxist theory has grasped the inevitable law of historical progress. The communist version of totalitarianism rests on the claim that communist theory is **scientific**, that it expresses objective truth. Marxists suppose themselves to have discovered that the dialectical road to a classless society resembles an escalator that rises ceaselessly to its goal, carrying everyone with it. If there are any who have failed to grasp the unilinear nature of historical progress and who attempt to run in the opposite direction (i.e., the noncommunists, they merely cause congestion and interfere with the escalator's movement, and they must be removed — by force if necessary.

Since the unilinear progress is supposed to be a scientific truth (a scientific truth because, so the claim goes, it was discovered empirically by examining the nature of social laws), all contradictory views are to be suppressed as false. Thus only one ideology is possible, only one set of beliefs may be held and there is no point in permitting other views. For if it is true that 2 plus 2 makes 4, there is no point in permitting freedom to maintain that 2 plus 2 makes 5.

But is communist theory really scientific? On the one hand, it is true that a scientific truth is in its intention a fact, and possesses validity in the sense that a man cannot run away from it any more than he can run away from facts. Yet there is more to a scientific truth than its claim to express facts. A scientific truth must take into consideration the limitations of human knowledge; a scientific truth remains open to discussion, criticism and correction. This feature of remaining "open" is just as essential to a scientific truth as its claim to factuality. As soon as dogmatism sets in, as soon as a scientific truth ceases in principle to be subject to criticism, as soon as it becomes protected by the armor of infallibility, it forfeits its scientific character. For this reason communist theory, although it claims for itself the character of science, is not scientific, for where it has once installed itself it tolerates neither discussion nor criticism. On this principal point, the claim to a scientific character put forward by communist theory must collapse. The communist "scientific" ideology is guilty of false

pretenses. Science, being aware of its essential limitations and its perspectivity, will never offer a foundation for totalitarianism. Science and totalitarianism are the expressions of two opposed mentalities: the open and the closed mind.

**Notes:**

1. Quoted by G. A. Wetter, **Philosophie und Na-turwissenschaft in der Sowjetunion**, p. 60. The scientists referred to is M. S. Eigenson.
2. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 81 f.
3. Article 125.
4. Quoted by I.M. Bochenski, **Der sowjetrussische dialektische Materialismus**, p. 107.