Realism and Utopia

Edgar Morin

The unknowable real

The problem of the real is that we think we understand it very well, whereas in fact it is not very well understood at all.[1] The past, our past, which seems absolutely clear to us, in fact is not so. If we reflect upon the 20th century which, all things considered, is our past, we come to realize that not only communism but also nazism – the major phenomena which marked it – owed very little to systematic thought. The Soviet version of Marxism, to which the label 'communist' was given, was, in the literal sense of the word, a utopia: meaning something whose location is nowhere. The word 'communism' served to mask a reality which was radically different from its ideology. A reality so difficult to analyse, comprehend and know that François Furet, an author who had been a communist during the hard-line period, has been able to write about the passions of the Revolution, in for example *Le passé d'une illusion* [*The Passing of an Illusion*],[2] without for all that making obvious the fundamentally religious properties of this communism, which saw its mission as bringing about salvation on earth, so constituting a mighty source of hope. As with all great religions, communism created its own martyrs, its heroes, its executioners and its persecutors. It was not just another religion, though, but a veritable phenomenon which ravaged and transformed its century.

Reality is certainly something important. As concerns the Soviet Union, and from the utopian point of view, it must be said that this barrack-room socialist utopia, this entity which in fact did not exist, was founded on a doctrine which saw itself as the reflection of reality. What is alarming is a utopia which believes itself grounded in realism, a product of historical determinism, claiming to be founded on the laws of History and an irrefutably scientific prediction. In contrast, what is very mild and inoffensive, excessively so perhaps, is a utopia which understands that it is utopian, which knows it is completely outside of the world of the real.

So what can we do to avoid being deceived by such pseudo-realists – whose attitudes are in fact totally utopian? How can we stop ourselves from simply saying:

'Well, yes, if something cannot be made real it must be purely utopian . . .', and not thus become mired in a realism which cannot see beyond itself? The very present itself has an enigmatic and uncertain face. This is detectable even in the West. Everything that seems solid and functional is yet capable of falling apart. The present remains unknowable. We are living in a sort of cyclonic low-pressure zone. We get the feeling that the storm is about to burst at any moment, but then no, it doesn't, it seems to move away. And then, wait on, it hasn't really moved away at all. We don't really know what is going to happen. The present is the realm of uncertainty. Regarding the post-communist period, it is interesting to see just how surprising, or unsurprising, things turn out to be. The Russian historian Yuri Afanasev's[3] analysis brings to light that once that gigantic apparatus that was the Soviet State became fragmented into a thousand pieces, each of the pieces changed into a little capitalist entity. The extraordinary thing is that those same *apparatchiks* who were at the centre of a system which controlled everything were those who metamorphosed into dynamic entrepreneurs of the market economy or into intransigent nationalists of the newly emerged neo-nationalist movements. And what can be made of the new tide of democracy? What is going to happen in Russia? Afanasev shows us that, to try and interrogate the future, we must come to terms with the enigmatic weight inherited from the past. What path will Russia take towards what one no longer dares call modernity – for that concept is now as leaky as a sieve – but rather towards this amalgam of modernity and post-modernity?

The end of the future and the return of mythified pasts

The present reality is marked by the invisible impact – invisible because it has taken some time to happen – of a massive meteorite. As was the case with the huge asteroid that collided with the earth at the end of the Secondary Era, the one blamed for the extinction of the dinosaurs, this latest collision has left the whole earth covered for a long period in a gigantic dust-cloud. But it won't be dinosaurs that this new meteorite destroys. It is our future. It is that nickel-plated guarantee of progress, that steady and uninterrupted betterment that used to guide humanity and give us hope. It is the very idea of progress in all its determinist, mechanical, fated, inevitable, marvellous and radiant glory that has been annihilated.

Given such circumstances, it is very understandable why there has been a tumultuous return of the past, or of pasts plural. Granted, this phenomenon is less turbulent in places where the present retains a modicum of liveability, despite all its ambiguities. But it is much more violently expressed where anguished misfortune has taken a grip on the present: in those places where, rightly or sometimes wrongly, identities feel threatened. In such cases the past returns under a myriad of shapes, coming together to create a monstrous form derived of myth and fervid fantasy – in the words of Sami Naïr, a regressive utopia – derived of a past in which religion, race, nation are mixed together. . .

The nation-state is an expression of the desire to 'modernize', since the invention of the nation-state was one of the forms by which modernization spread across the planet. It allowed the effective emancipation of populations, especially within the

boundaries of an oppressive colonial empire. But the nation-state, as a modern and protective entity, carries within it the idea of a maternal and paternal flesh which enfolds us – we talk of the 'motherland' or the 'fatherland'. This image embodies the notion of a deeply rooted common oneness, the miracle of a union in all its most archaic sense. Out of this comes the universal call to nationhood. That is why we are also witnessing the phenomenon of calls for the creation of mono-ethnic states – let's for the moment retain use of the term 'ethnic group' as a descriptor.

Now, this proves to be a highly aberrant phenomenon if we recall that France, Spain and England were all formed as a result of the (historically slow) process of highly diverse ethnic groups coming together and integrating with each other. It is as if, suddenly, forty ethnic groups on the soil of France demanded that they be recognized as constituting France – a situation which would be fraught with incalculable consequences. Historical time makes the matter non-realizable.

In this process, we wish to emphasize the importance taken on by two aspects hitherto less visible, the twin afflictions that can grow within, and be cultivated by, the nation-state: the idea of self-purification and the sacralization of the borders. The idea of purification is unfortunately embedded within the formation of the Spanish nation, for example, built upon the rejection of the Muslims and the Jews. Similar processes occurred in England, with the expulsion of the Catholics, and in France, with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

In other words, these two ideas – purification and sacralization – are precisely those which we in Europe are attempting to go beyond. It is not so much the ethnic homelands that we want to transcend, nor even the national entities, let alone the individual States whose power nevertheless should be limited; what needs to be surpassed is the drive for purity, and the sacralization of the space. That is why the Schengen accords were symbolically very significant, as is the European passport. And that is also why the common currency, beyond whatever economic sense it might represent, may also have a symbolic justification. But it must be noted that we are not talking about a process of homogenization.

Real-politik and the politics of the ideal

To paraphrase Rimbaud: *I have made the magic study*
                          Of happiness . . .
one might say: *I have made the interminable study*
                          Of the real.

To be able to diagnose what the real consists of today, other sources of illumination would be necessary. But the subject is inexhaustible. The first thing is to reject *trivial realism*, which insists that we must adapt to the immediate, to the established order, to the *fait accompli* and admit the victory of the victorious.

But beyond such *trivial realism*, what remains? We need to recognize that the real is swarming with possibilities and we have no way of knowing what may emerge from it, nor how to choose one's own purposive direction or situate oneself in relation to it. Within the sphere of human reality, the imaginary, the mythological and

of course the affective all cohabit together, something that the compartmentalization of the social and human sciences does not sufficiently take into account. As for economics, it is much too refined a science. Why? Because its object is expressed in figures and quantities. But from such perfection, flesh, blood, passion, suffering, happiness and cultural expression have all been abstracted away. Therein lies the problem of today's reality, where politics, the art of the *polis*, has been made entirely subservient to economics, the art of the *œkos* or household.

To rediscover 'true reality', we have to be restored to a state of responsibility as subjects. It may be a commonplace to say so, but it must be constantly repeated: any knowledge – be it of an object or a crowd-filled lecture theatre – is a translation and a reconstruction. Of course, one can be deceived by hallucinations, one can be in error, but there is no knowledge which is a photographic reflection of what is real. Admittedly, knowledge in the form of ideas and theories is a translation/reconstruction of the real in a refined form, but this also can carry with it enormous illusion and error. Such illusions are the stuff of the whole of human history.

Marx and Engels said that the history of humanity was that of the errors and illusions that human beings had made about themselves and about what they had achieved. But in so saying, they also committed the same types of errors and had the same illusions. So is it not worthwhile saying to oneself: 'Can't we at least try to react?' Quite clearly, all knowledge is interpretation. The illusion lies in saying: 'I will call real what I think is real'; that is to say: 'I label as realism that which derives from my personal conception of the real.' Reality, even at its most objective, always has a cognitive and subjective element to it. To truly know reality, what is required is a subject capable of thinking critically within his/her own limited personal mental space, and then, through that ability, being capable of questioning the truths which present as self-evident within the doctrinal system into which they are incorporated. It might be added that the discrediting of all individually autonomous moralities and all autonomous assertions of responsibility is the common feature of all belligerent nationalisms and all totalitarian systems, from stalinism to nazism.

But subjectivity is not the enemy of the objective consideration of realities. It simply requires the subject who is engaged in the world to remain critical. The Polish activist Adam Michnik[4] makes reference to what amounted to an ethical revolt within the stalinist system. This type of revolt is one which I have known and experienced myself, in my own fashion, and also with my Polish friends of 1956. What happened at that time? Those who had a clear vision of the system were not those who, through a process of economic analysis, had come to the conclusion that what Marx had said about the process of decomposition of capitalism was not perhaps exactly correct and that capitalism was not in fact on the brink of decomposing. Nor were they those who were subjecting Marxism to theoretical and rationalizing examination. Those who had the clear vision were those who were saying: 'We can't put up any longer with so many lies and so much ignominy!' Often it is just such an ethical revolt which ushers in a more lucid awareness than the acceptance of the *fait accompli*. Because, when one revolts, one can see things that others can't.

The lucidity that this kind of ethical revolt provides has become crucial for the understanding of reality itself. That is the substance of the messages of the Soviet dissidents Solzhenitsyn, Grossman and others. There was where lucidity and under-

standing were to be found. Often you have to be part of a deviant minority to be in the real. Although there is no perspective, no possibility, no salvation, though we are bound up in a system that is apparently eternal, we are nevertheless always confronted with the problem of this reality, which has its mystery and its uncertainty, and which we must never accept as it is. But of course, if it were just sufficient to say 'No, we can't tolerate that', that would not be very useful either.

So what is it that is intolerable? *The intolerable is that which constantly is intolerably tolerated*.[5] What does that mean? That means that it is not sufficient just to repeat that something is intolerable. We know that. The important thing is not to accept the *fait accompli*. It is not enough just to stigmatize something, we must also not forget, and continue to go in the desired direction. In politics one is not always a victor: one is in fact more frequently among the vanquished.

There is thus an essential conflict between the politics of the ideal and *Real-politik*: the politics that seeks to realize ideals and the politics of the real. There is a contradiction. Granted, there are cases where one must be subordinated to the other. Most often, that means subordinating the politics of the ideal to those of the real. But we must understand what we are doing, or stop.

This is the essence of *dialogics*, that is to say two contrary points of view which, at any given moment, must be held together, giving priority now to one now to the other. In this context we recall the famous reality principle which is contrasted, and correctly so, with the principle of desire, the great achievement of Freud. We know that desire forms part of reality. But reality is no longer as consistent and as certain as it could still be considered to be at the time of Freud. That is why I think we should place uncertainty at the heart of reality if we are to derive a sound principle of reality.

But that does not mean that we do not know anything; integrating uncertainty within reality does not mean that everything is uncertain. We are called to navigate on an ocean of uncertainty in which are found isolated islands and archipelagos of certainty. There are numerous local, partial and fragmentary certainties which aid us in our navigation. But, even saying this, we must never forget the ambient uncertainty that surrounds us.

We are faced with the problem of a real that is complex, multiple, uncertain and still in the process of working itself out. And it is not just a subterranean process, to pick up Hegel's image of the 'old mole'. The real advances with a crablike motion, that is, by a series of oblique movements that are absolutely bizarre, abnormal and even crazy. These deviations from the rectilinear constitute tendencies by which reality will be transformed.

The real is the domain where the possible is effectively impossible, as we are forced to admit. We possess the material and technical capacities to solve a great many of the problems facing humanity. But to do so is impossible in terms of existing laws, economic norms and international relations. The world is a world where the possible is impossible and where it is possible to live the impossible. But, at a certain moment, when contradictions and conflicts come to a point of saturation, when a system becomes incapable of solving its problems of itself, either it will collapse, or a new system will appear: a metasystem possessing a certain number of principles and rules which allow problems to be dealt with. A step forward will have

taken place. And who will interdict the metasystem? We will be told that it is not possible, but who is to know?

Towards complexity of thought

What do we call complex? We call complex something that is confused, incomprehensible, uncertain; so uncertain that no definition of it is able to be given. There are some who naively think that complex thought is spreading and growing stronger because more and more people are heard to say: 'Ah, you know, that's very complex . . .'. But when they say 'That's very complex', they really mean: 'I can't give you an answer.' Now complex thought is in fact that which tries to respond to the challenge of complexity, not that which observes an inability to respond. It registers two things to which a response must be made.

The first is uncertainty. That is to say an emergent thought that strives to copulate with the real. How does one strive and copulate at the same time? That too is complex, as Delacroix showed in the very beautiful painting that hangs in the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*. Looking at the painting, you say to yourself: 'They look like they are copulating!' No, they are wrestling. But it is still rather odd, a wrestling match that looks for all the world like copulation . . . And that is exactly what wrestling with uncertainty is like; that is how it happens to confront uncertainty.

As the idea of a determinist order of the world and of History has completely collapsed, you are obliged to confront uncertainty on all sides; as the limits of the reductive and compartmentalized mode of thinking are revealed more and more, you have to try to grasp the complex in the literal sense of the word *complexus* – meaning that which is woven together. Blaise Pascal, in the 17th century, was already expressing what ought to be self-evident: 'All things, even the most separated from one another, are imperceptibly linked one to the other, all things assist and are assisted, cause and are caused' – an idea which already introduces the sense of *reciprocity*. Pascal goes on: 'I consider it impossible to know the parts if I do not know the whole, as it is impossible to know the whole if I do not know each part individually.' Pascal understood that knowledge was a shuttle passing from the whole to the parts and from the parts to the whole; it was the link element, that is, the capacity to contextualize, to situate an item of knowledge and an item of information within a context such that they might take on meaning.

Why is it becoming more and more difficult for us to make use of our cognitive aptitudes which always function through contextualization and fitting things into wholes? Because, in effect, we are now living in a global era; the problems are ever more linked one with another and are more and more vast. But it is especially because we are more and more under the influence of disjunctive, reductive and linear thought. We have retained not the words of Pascal but those of Descartes, that is, that you have to break down things into their component parts in order to know them. As soon as you have elements which pose problems within a system, you have to separate out the problems; you solve the different problems individually and then you have the solution for the whole. You have to separate science and philosophy,

you have to keep disciplines apart . . . yes, but on condition that they can link together again; whereas, today, there is a separation and compartmentalization that is hermetic. There is a disjunction between the humanist culture – that of the humanities, that which makes us reflect and think and so enriches us – and the compartmentalized scientific culture. And it is a fact that this disjunction has spread everywhere, even into politics. It is this fragmentary mode of thought which dominates, and which encloses the fragments within the world, whereas the other form of thought will dissect the world longitudinally, in slices related to economics, technology and so on. This techno-scientific thought which takes no account of creatures, people and cultures is clearly incapable of understanding the problems of these socio-centric human groupings; in the same way as such socio-centric groupings are incapable of realizing the problems associated with technicity. All of which today puts us in a very serious situation.

From this point of view, the imperative is to *create connections*. Creating connections is what complex thought strives to do. In the sphere of politics and human activity, my diagnosis is that we are witnessing a struggle between the forces of association and the forces of dislocation. Solidarity or barbarity. We are going to *burst asunder* from a want of solidarity; we will *burst asunder* from a failure to reform our way of thinking.

To what extent is it a problem of thought? To the extent that the classic alternatives block our thought. Realism and utopia are two antinomies that are mutually exclusive according to our received way of thinking. If you are realists, you can't be utopians. If you are utopians, you are excluded from realism. It is the same thing for unicity and multiplicity. The proponents of the former can but homogenize everything and unify the world in the abstract. Those arguing for the latter certainly perceive the world's diversity, but they see it as compartmentalized. The problem lies in the impossibility of escaping these self-destructive alternatives, in the impossibility of thinking complexity. But this is the great challenge that faces us.

Towards an anthropolitics

Solidarity or barbarity is an alternative which derives its sense not just from the sphere of the immediate, the concrete, the local, the experienced, but also from the European and global spheres. Wherever this debate is taking place, it obliges us to line up on the side of the forces of association and solidarity in the hope that they will prove stronger than the opposing forces of rupture, dislocation and wilful concealment. It impels us to be part of a movement which, if it is not broken, perhaps will no longer lead us to the best of all possible worlds, but may usher in the hope of a better world. Though we must set aside the messianic illusion of a radiant future, we can nevertheless nourish the hope of such a better world, even while recognizing that this hope may never be entirely fulfilled. For me, the *terrestrial homeland* takes shape in the realization that all of us human beings are derived from the same trunk, born of the same matrix – the earth – through our biological evolution. It is the awareness that we share the same identity and that, across our cultural diversities, made even more apparent since we have entered the global age, all human beings share the one destiny in relation to the great problems of life and death.

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It was this type of awareness that elicited the consciousness of belonging to a homeland. Otto Bauer,[6] at the end of the 19th century, defined the 'homeland' as a community of destiny, but which encapsulated the idea of a common identity across a culture, sharing a common, mythological, origin, tracing back to a common mythic ancestor. But in my terrestrial homeland, the ancestor is not at all mythical, he is a little bipedal creature. In him we find the grandfather of all.

This idea of a common humanity and of a homeland co-extensive with the earth is both very realist, since it is based on an anthropological identity, but also very rational, given the challenges of life and death which confront us all. It could even be called religious – in the sense that picks up the etymological origin of this term (*Lat*. religio = *a binding together*) – by binding all humankind into a fraternity.

Within our nation, as within Europe and throughout the whole world, we are having to confront immense problems. Socialism believed that the ills that afflicted humanity were the work of a single monster, capitalism: suppress capitalism and all these ills would also be suppressed. But we have seen that that did not suppress wars, nor did it suppress exploitation. We have come to realize that there is not just one monster, but a number of them. And they are not mini-monsters, they are more and more enormous in size: the technobureaucratic monster, the monster of the uncontrolled spread of technoscience . . . all these reverberate within daily life and create deep-seated ills. Our well-being is becoming a situation of ill-being.

We should not forget to diagnose the weakness of political thought of the Left which, after the organic collapse of Marxism, found itself incapable of rethinking the historical problem of mankind in society and of envisaging a positive politics of history. When socialism was formulated in the 19th century, it grew out of an historical perspective. Today, such an historical perspective is once again necessary.

I am afraid that, in the absence of a single unifying concept, if a sudden and violent crisis occurred, we would have to suffer catastrophic consequences. If a very great crisis were to come, we would not be sheltered from its terror. When the great crisis of 1929 struck, and Germany was frightfully smitten with conditions not only more severe than elsewhere but also exacerbated by the context of national humiliation in which they occurred, the world witnessed the rise of Nazism within an environment of complete legality. It must also be recognized, however, that the same period saw Roosevelt's 'New Deal' providing an alternative democratic solution. Why the New Deal worked was perhaps because the United States was a country of immigrants.

We are urged to be vigilant, without opening the door to the improbable. Even recently we have had great expectations. But of what? There were the expectations of the general spread of democracy, of the emergence from an economy of constraint and poverty. There was hope that the United Nations could perhaps function properly. Such hopes arose not only in relation to the demise of the USSR, but also in Africa and Latin America where dictatorships were falling. But the springtime of the peoples in 1848 was followed by a terrible repression. That of the last century has seen a terrible regression.

We can no longer continue to nourish disproportionate hopes, like those crazy hopes we in France had at the Liberation. We were coming out from under the yoke of Nazism, but our great aspirations were rapidly disappointed. So, does that mean

that we are always likely to be disenchanted, seeing our hopes reduced to despair? In a word, no. I believe that we must live to the full the ecstatic moments of history; they are the consolation of so many years of mediocrity. I experienced the Liberation of Paris. May 1968 was a little moment of historical delight that I also enjoyed. I was fortunate to be in Lisbon at the time of the Carnation Revolution. As for the fall of the Berlin Wall, unfortunately I was only able to experience it by proxy, not being present, but I was happy to see Rostropovitch playing in front of the Wall.

Life is bearable only if one can introduce into it not a utopia but poetry, that is, an intensity, a sense of festival, of joy, communion, happiness and love. There is an ecstasy of history which is a collective ecstasy of love. Francesco Alberoni, in *Falling in Love*[7] – whose wonderfully untranslatable Italian title is *Innamoramento e amore* – describing that marvellous, ecstatic moment when love comes upon one, wrote: 'Nascent revolutions are moments of falling in love.' It's a phrase I like quoting. But such revolutions are not 'the final struggle', they are 'the initial struggle'. I might even say 'the struggle before the initial struggle'. They are the curtain-raiser, even, to the initial struggle. Why? Because what is needed is a formidable effort of intellectual reconstruction, a whole new way of thinking, even; we must show ourselves fit and able to confront the challenge of the uncertain, and there are two ways by which it may be confronted. The first is by way of a wager: we have a clear idea of what we want, what we aspire after, and so we wager on its realization even though we may fear that our ideas will be defeated. The second is through application of strategy: in other words, the ability, in terms of information received and chances met, to modify our manner of advancing.

Resistance is not something purely negative. It does not consist simply in opposing oppressive forces, but it looks ahead to liberations. It is the Polish example, it's the example of the Soviet people, it's the example of occupied France. Resistance has an inherent virtue. We are condemned to resist. What I call 'living life' is not just living poetically, it is also knowing how to resist in life. Heraclitus said: '*If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it*.' We come back to the idea of the possible impossible, which we must explore in depth.

For a long time we human beings have said that the earth should be a garden shared by all humanity. Now what makes a garden beautiful is the cooperation between nature and culture. A garden is where both cooperate instead of mutually destroying each other. The co-tutelage of nature and culture are developed there. Among humankind as well, there should be cooperation between the forces of the conscious and the forces of the unconscious.

To civilize the earth and make it a garden is a gigantic task. We are only at the beginning of it. We don't share the same awareness of our common earthly homeland. Candide, as he withdrew from the world, said: 'I am going to cultivate my garden.' Today, with the new Candide, we must say: 'The outlook is quite fine, let's try and cultivate our garden.'

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Notes

1. An initial version of this text was published under the title 'Pour une utopie réaliste' in *Rencontres de Chateauvallon autour d'Edgar Morin*, Paris, Arléa, 1996. The present revised version is from 2005.
2. François Furet, *Le Passé d'une illusion*, Paris, éd. Robert Laffont & Calmann-Lévy, 1995, translated into English as *The Passing of an Illusion: The idea of communism in the twentieth century*, trans. Deborah Furet, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.
3. With the onset of Glasnost, Afanasev contributed actively to 'restoring their past' to the Soviet people, particularly that of the Stalinist period. He abandoned politics to devote himself entirely to the Russian State University of Human Sciences which he established and of which he became rector. Works: *That Great Light in the East* (1989, written in collaboration with Jean Daniel); *My Russia of Ill Fate* (1992); *Russia, the Crucial Issues of Today* (2002) (*Editor's note*). (None of these appear to have been translated into English as of 2005: *trans.*)
4. Born in 1946, Michnik was one of the leading protestors against the Communist regime, firstly within the precursor movement of 1970, then in 1980 during the demonstrations which brought the *Solidarity* trade union and its leader, Lech Walesa, to the world's attention. Michnik's opposition activities cost him six years in prison. Today he is editor in chief of the first independent Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* [The Electoral Gazette] which he founded in 1989. (*Editor's note*)
5. See, on this subject: *Diogenes* No. 176 (Winter) 1996, *Tolerance between Intolerance and the Intolerable*, edited by Paul Ricœur. (*Editor's note*)
6. Austrian social-democratic politician (1882–1938). Theoretician and spokesperson for Austrian Marxism before the First World War. Works: *Nationalitätenfrage und Sozialdemokratie* (1907), published in English as *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, trans. Joseph O'Donnell, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000; *Der Weg zum Sozialismus* [The Way to Socialism] (1917, *Bolschewismus oder Sozialdemokratie?* [Bolshevism or Social-Democracy?] (1920); *Sozialdemokratie, Religion und Kirche* [Social-Democracy, Religion and the Church] (1927) (*Editor's note*). (The latter three works do not appear to be available in any English translation: *trans.*)
7. Francesco Alberoni, *Falling in Love*, trans. Lawrence Venuti, New York, Random House, 1983.