

The Rhetoric of “Revolution” Dismantled: The Case of Communist Propaganda

Abstract: This paper issues a highly controversial point: is there possible that a concept of ‘revolution’ can legitimize the historical revolutionary action and, if yes, how could this be possible? This debate on revolution is a subsequent part of a larger puzzle: the hermeneutics of the historical fact. Roughly explained, the concept of ‘revolution’ is the major piece of a ‘revolutionary rhetoric,’ which generates the interpretation of the historical fact. Samples are offered by means of the concept of ‘revolution’ issued by modern historiography. The case focuses on three main parts: a brief debate on the concept of ‘revolution’ viewed by the apologists of the French Revolution and their adversaries; a critique of Marx’s and Lenin’s ideology of revolution; finally, an illustration of a rhetorical dismantle of ‘revolution’ at hand in Kenneth Burke’s comments on Marxist ‘revolution.’

“Madness’ is but meaning carried to the extreme”
Kenneth Burke

1. The Rhetorical Imaginary of a “Revolution” (France 1789-1799)

As the historians of the Revolution thoroughly suggest, “only with the French Revolution did the concept of ‘revolution’ take on its modern meaning”¹. Long since that moment, for philosophers and historians Revolution meant “the very opposite of the idea of ‘irreversible change’ or ‘total change’ with which the later term came to be associated”². Locke, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, presents the “dissolution of government” as a return of the legislative power to the hands of its original

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beholder, and Hobbes describes the events in England between 1649 and 1660 as a “Revolution” and a “circular motion of Sovereign Power”³.

As an event endowed with a “battering charge” of political imagination, French Revolution is often described as the expression of a *rhetoric of national regeneration* brought in front of the National Assembly carrying “a unifying political charisma to replace sacred absolute monarchy”⁴ in a tremendous display of force. This display resided in a staged symbolic festival in which citizens were to invoke certain formulas and words as “revolutionary incantations”: nation, constitution, law, regeneration, virtue, and vigilance.

The first two sources describing French Revolution as a “war of words” and the inauguration of a new kind of political rhetoric (which is partially functional even nowadays after more than 200 years in our political democratic life) were La Harpe (*Du Fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire*, Paris, Mignet, Year V, 1797) and L.-S. Mercier (*Néologie ou Vocabulaire de Mots nouveaux, à renouveler, ou pris dans des acceptions nouvelles*, Paris, Moussard et Maradan, Year IX, 1801).

La Harpe analyses the linguistic particularism of the Revolution, naming it “the language of the Revolutionaries” and “a powerful system of symbols”⁵. Mercier also speaks of a “republican language”, and considers it as the counterpart of the “language of the Court”. La Harpe, though, shows little consideration for this kind of alteration and brutality towards the old models. He speaks of the “abuse of words and malicious alteration of their meaning”⁶, making an analogy between the “dreadful chaos created by the writers of the Revolution” and the Reign of Terror on the streets. The “empty, hollow language” of the Terror and of Jacobinism displeases him and, for this reason, he concludes:

“Calling people names abusively, that is to say using words that have no sense, that was to pass the sentence to death” (...) “It was all those empty, hollow phrases, and even those which were the most unintelligible, which bonded the prisons and the scaffolds together”⁷

To Mercier, an adversary of the new *régime*, the abuse of words is the product of an “ambitious demagogic horde” which “created for itself a language calculated to deceive and seduce the multitude”, but which, in the end, managed to make itself “understood” and to “succeed”. Nevertheless, introducing a new language in society during the Revolution was not only a question of linguistics or of terminology⁸. It was a real “desecration” of the world’s religious order, and because of this Revolution should be understood as a Revolution “in words”, as an attempt to legitimate *de iure*, from a political point of view, the movements of the masses.

From this vantage point, the new revolutionary language becomes part of a “logomachy”, a “political struggle around the language, which is conducted through the language itself and which appeals to (the ‘modern’, enlightened) linguistic science and an (archaic) mythology of the powers of the Word”⁹. This interest in language stems from a certain epistemology of language (accepted both by the royalists and by their opposite party): the epistemology of the direct *representative feature* of language. It was said, a word represents the idea of a thing; “any disturbance in the realm of vocabulary reflects or forecasts a disorder in the realm of mental representations”¹⁰. Therefore, “each lexicological skirmish is thought to project them into the heart of reality in exactly the exact same way as each revolutionary ‘novelty’ (of that they are quite sure) cannot fail to disturb the language”¹¹.

Three consequences derive from here for the future accounts on political language. Firstly, because of the

fact that the transition from things to words can function just as well also the other way around, it follows that *language is utterly powerful and dangerous*, and therefore, those who use words against their political enemies must be reduced to *silence*¹². Secondly, the language of the Revolution, as suggested by scholars¹³, launches the theme of the “language of the part” seeking to take over the “language of the whole”, as a direct consequence of that group’s claim to be considered as *the totality*.

Thirdly, by “sacrificing politeness to truth”, as the utopian dream of the revolution would do, the language becomes *harsh and violent*, being “definitionally transparent”, bringing us face to face with “the brutality of an order of discourse which is wholly identifiable with a discourse on order”¹⁴. This, paradoxically, renders the task of the opponents of this type language (the rationalistic writers of the Enlightenment) almost impossible, for, consequently, they have to adapt their language, inasmuch as they want to criticize it, to the more and more energetic and neological force of the Revolution.

Summing up these results, we come to the main characteristics of “revolutionary” language: *effectiveness*, *totality* and *directedness*. These main features will be “handed down” to the following “revolutionary” rhetoric of the XXth century, which will assume the modern “logic” of the French Revolution.

Therefore, the fact that the French revolutionaries developed their own *revolutionary rhetoric* (consisting of utopian intentions and expectations), thus legitimizing¹⁵ its own political actions, is an unquestionable political fact. The fact that this model inspired other revolutions or revolutionaries is also unquestionable. But, from these facts though, one still cannot draw the conclusion that, from this moment on, the history of Europe will be governed by the logic of revolution.

The main problem for the historiography of the French Revolution is that of establishing its true character: was it a social or a political Revolution after all? For almost a century (1850-1950) the Marxist historians (Marx himself included) insisted that French Revolution was the model for any “*bourgeois* revolution” being a social upheaval; its aim was to overthrow the absolutistic political order or monarchy, to establish a new social order, to *stage* the *bourgeoisie*. However, the Marxists developed a historical scenario of the Revolution upon an inherent historical *teleology* that, in the end - as we shall see - turns to be the result of pure rhetorical invention.

The first authors to assault the Marxist stronghold of “Revolution” were François Furet and Denis Richet, (*La Révolution française*, Paris, 1965). At the core of the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution, Furet saw two major claims: (1) that it was a class struggle and (2) a “bourgeois revolution” which overthrew feudalism in order to establish a bourgeois and capitalist France¹⁶. Furet knew very well also that Marx derived these issues from the French liberal historians of the Restoration: F. A. Mignet (1796—1884) - *History of the French Revolution* and François Guizot (1787–1874). In fact, Furet himself explains Mignet’s view on the Revolution as a result of a strong belief in historical determinism:

“Thus Mignet saves his philosophical reading of the revolutionary events at the cost of logical inconsistencies. The year 1789 was inevitable, an event prepared beforehand by the entire evolution of the Ancien Régime; yet it provoked tremendously hostile reactions on the part of individuals and classes with enough strength and freedom of action to oppose it. The “second revolution,” that of 1792, made by the “multitudes” against the middle class, does not possess the dignity of the first, since it did not correspond to any larger necessity of history. It could not, by definition, create institutions or laws since its violence was entirely defensive; and yet it

too was inevitable, if only temporarily, as a provisional line of defense for the first revolution. In this manner the determinist interpretation is able to encompass all the detours of revolutionary politics in the name of a grand design, as in Joseph de Maistre, though in a completely different sense. Even those struggles most closely tied to personal rivalries draw their *raison d'être* from the two provisional ends of the Revolution, to destroy the Ancien Régime *and* push back the enemy, in order to restore it to its normal course, its original social base and project, the establishment of the rule of law. The dictatorship was a parenthesis necessary for the establishment of liberty; the rule of the people was the necessary instrument of middle-class government"¹⁷

In Mignet's view, there were in fact two Revolutions: the first Revolution of the bourgeoisie -(1791) and the second Revolution of the People (1794). As Furet explains, after Guizot and Mignet, Marx also provided a social interpretation of 1789, in modified terms. Marx too claimed that the bourgeoisie crowned its domination by seizing political power. Thus, the bourgeoisie established a representative democratic state, the successor of the absolute monarchy:

"That is to say it established a public sphere that appears autonomous—radically separating the political from the societal realm—but which remains dependent. This state appears autonomous because its representative character expresses the separation of society from the state, and its democratic character (its universality) expresses the abstract equality of the citizen relative to the individual's real situation in civil society. This autonomy, however, is a lie: the state is merely the communitarian mask for a social reality marked by private individualism; a simple alibi that provides the illusion of equality in an inegalitarian world. The separate individuals of modern civil society have alienated themselves within the imaginary community of the state. (...)

This dialectic between the social and political realms provided Marx not just with a general interpretation of the Revolution but with elements for charting its course. As an exemplary expression of modern politics, the French Revolution disclosed with exceptional clarity what Marx called "the state's idealism." This was the significance of 1789, but even more so of 1793 and the Jacobin dictatorship, during which period the revolutionary spirit was revealed in its most radical form. But in this unequal contest, where the social man was the real basis of the imaginary, political man, civil society ended up recovering what the Revolution had temporarily usurped. If 1793 had been the apogee of the citizen's emancipation, Thermidor 1794 was its truth."¹⁸

The story has been completely rewritten; Marx finally found the "scientific" explanation for the two Revolutions: the first (1789) was *bourgeois*, severing the state from the real political individual (*a state idealism*); the second (from 1793 to 9th of Thermidor/July 27, 1794)¹⁹, patterned by massive terror and bloodshed (the Jacobin dictatorship), was the real "revolution of the people".

Lenin, however, legitimizing his own Russian Revolution (and Reign of Terror), emphasized the *act* of the Revolution and its necessity²⁰; the French Revolution appears as an "epic drama (...) as a succession of regimes punctuated by violent acts in which the bourgeoisie struggled with and triumphed over a formidable counterrevolution"²¹.

As Hobsbawm's remarks thoroughly suggest, the French Revolution as a moment of history had nothing to do with the aspirations of a Communist review. Such unhistorical, i.e. teleological judgments are irrelevant to the study of these phenomena:

"There was not, in 1789, a self-conscious bourgeois class representing the new realities of economic power, ready to take into its own hands the destinies of the state, eliminating the declining feudal aristocracy; and

insofar as there was such a class in the 1780s, a social revolution was not its object, but rather a reform of the institutions of the kingdom; and in any case its conscious objective was not the construction of an industrial capitalist economy”²²

This conclusion resists *even if* (as we have seen) *the utopist scenario circumscribes the intentions or expectations of those who made the Revolution:*

“Such phenomena are usually associated with declarations of intent before, during, and after the event, and the temptation to judge them accordingly is great, all the more so since those who occupy the main parts in these dramas are usually rational, goal-oriented, problem-solving decision makers, “engineers of men’s [bodies and] souls,” to adapt the phrase of one of them (Stalin)”²³

2. The Uses and Abuses of Revolution: Marx and Lenin

Considering what has already been said, we can say that one of the main issues of the Marxist social theory was the “materialist-dialectical”²⁴ establishment of a non-stratified structure of social order. This is already obvious in the Marxist remarks on the French Revolution. Moreover, in his account on The French Commune of 1871, Marx saw the weakness of that movement as a failure resulting from the attempt to launch a revolution while still wanting to keep intact the structure of the state: “. . . the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”²⁵ You cannot seize the power without smashing the entire structure of the existing state. This was a lesson that Lenin will never forget.

Even though revolution seems to be only one stage in Marx dialectical-historical program, it remained an obscure spot on his rationalistic firmament. Another big failure of Marx of Marx was his deception regarding the historical fate of his predictions about the overthrow of the bourgeoisie in the most advanced of the capitalist countries of the time, England. The development of communism as a theory, obviously, is strongly related to its concept of revolution. The doom of the latter is a prophetic sign for the debacle of the former. The key points of this debate on the revolution were, firstly, the presence of optimal developing conditions for a revolution, i.e. the advanced industrialization and the accumulation of capital, and secondly, the historical manner in which the revolution occurs. We are tempted to assert - “Marx thought of a mass revolution planned and organized by the trade union, and not of a coup organized as a conspiracy and fought by a group of quasi-anarchists. His theory tried to answer the question: *What is a communist class revolution?*” Did the next subsequent question, of “*Who leads a revolution?*” remain unanswered, as the historians declare?

Apparently, we are inclined to say yes. But this draws a thick ethical line between Marx and the others who performed a real revolution, like Lenin and Mao, saving Marxism from the Marxists and thus leading the way to a next form of Marxism, which could be, in principle, a “decent theory”.

In this respect, I would put my confidence rather in the astuteness of the argument than in the “cunning of Reason”. For Marx, the agent of the revolution is the “class consciousness”, a concept that mesmerized the Marxists, but remained as unclear as ever from the very moment it was brought about. By advocating a society without classes endowed with a new, superior ethics (common interest, common good), Marx planned the

transforming of the revolution from an anarchical, non-rational act to a legitimized rational/civilized venture. Nevertheless, besides the sociological contradictions of the mass revolution²⁶, the “revolutionary practice” campaigned by Marx clearly indicate the “transformation” of the individual purpose into a common purpose, which is also “shaped” by the force of the circumstances (circumstances were always an excuse to legitimate the terror of the revolution). This common purpose is the voice of an objective or structural rationality²⁷, which operates *dans les coulisses* to secure the outcome of the revolution, facing also the capitalist alienation of man, “which obstructs the development of class consciousness”. This fuzzy dialectical understanding of the relation between “objective” and “subjective”²⁸ captures the way from intention to outcome²⁹. For Marx, the issue that remained unsolved was the presence of the revolution with a rational outcome that would result from an unintentional (necessary) practice. This sudden gaining of a revolutionary consciousness is explained through the thesis of the “explosion of consciousness”³⁰. This thesis obviously stands in contrast to the desired self-education, by which the working class acknowledges its interests.

The legitimized venture of the revolution is disclosed by its revolutionary practice: Marx’s revolution is sectarian in essence; it implies what is scientifically called as a “revolutionary polarization”, severance of classes. Secondly, this type of proletarian revolution implies, as David Lockwood, following a Durkheimian model, suggests, “the actor’s non-rational commitment to ultimate ends”³¹, patterned by the involvement in *rituals: the ceremonial occasions* (celebration of collective values and beliefs), *familiarly tendency towards oligarchy* (transformation of organizational means into ends in themselves), *the ritual action of membership experience* into an organization.

Lenin drew further consequences from Marx’s analysis of revolution³². In his *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), he totally rejected the standpoint that the proletariat was being driven spontaneously to revolutionary Socialism by capitalism and that the role of the party must be only that of the struggle of the proletariat’s diverse sections on a national and international scale³³. As he puts it in a famous paragraph,

“We have said that there *could not have been* a Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, that is, the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions to fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass the necessary labor legislation, and so forth. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophical, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals”³⁴

So, in order to avoid Marx’s theoretical dilemmas the Gordian knot had to be cut: why argue with these subjects? Surely, there was nothing spontaneous in a revolution and nothing miraculous in its nature; so, we should “give history a push” and lead the workers towards revolution, with the help of the revolutionary intellectuals, the *propagandists*. The Machiavellian politics of Marx has finally reached its climax: the end of the revolution (whatever this might be³⁵) is more important than the means through which it is done.

Lenin looked for the possibility of a revolution in Marx’s words and found it in the very essence of Marxism: class consciousness. However, there was a disagreement in this point: Lenin asserted that class consciousness came from ‘knowledge’ rather than from ‘experience’, and so he repudiated a fundamental tenet

of Marxism. But, for Lenin, his explanation was not inexpedient, and suited the circumstances; it gave him the right to write history by himself with the help of his idea of an elite “vanguard Party”. As he believed, the masses had to be ruled by the party and the main instrument for education was *propaganda*³⁶. The Bolsheviks were the first to accept officially, as a part of their ideology, the modern means of communication. Moreover, Lenin carefully distinguished between a propagandist and a simple agitator:

The propagandist dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalist nature of the crisis, the causes of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity for the transformation of this society into a socialist society, etc. In a word he must present “many ideas,” so many, indeed, that they will be understood only by a (comparatively) few persons. The agitator, however, speaking on the same subject, will take as an illustration a fact that is most glaring and most widely known to his audience, say the death of an unemployed worker’s family from starvation, the growing impoverishment, etc., and utilizing this fact, known to all, will direct his efforts to presenting a *single idea* to the masses, e.g., the senselessness of the contradiction between the increase of wealth and the increase of poverty; he will strive *to rouse* discontent and indignation among the masses against this crying injustice, leaving a more complete explanation of this contradiction to the propagandist. Consequently, the propagandist operates chiefly by means of the *printed* word; the agitator by means of the *spoken* word³⁷.

The Bolsheviks acted using a profoundly ideological rhetoric. They saw ideology as a part of education. It is noteworthy that in 1920 the supervision of much of this work was delegated to a special commission, *Glavpolitprosvet*, which was a department of the Commissariat of Education. A synonym for propaganda in

early Bolshevik phraseology was “political education work” or *politprosvetrabota*.

Lenin converted the idea of the cultural backwardness of Russia into an obsessive challenge, thus bringing to mind the idea of the need for liberation (with political education as a remedy) and creating for himself the image of a moral leader. People’s “full potential” was not recognized by the *ancien régime*, he said; someone had to actualize its complete awareness. For Lenin, “learning” socialism was the ultimate solution. Therefore, “teaching people the fundamentals of knowledge and spreading the Bolshevik message were inseparable in Bolshevik opinion”³⁸.

Other commentators affirm that Lenin took full advantage of the old nationalistic rhetoric of the Tsarist regime and of the symbolic powers of the Church, transforming the old religious idea of the “chosen people” into a political one, protected from the outside by proletarian universalism and humanitarianism. If we take for granted Berdyaev’s views, the Russian Communism could not have been created without a fully persistent pattern of religious belief³⁹.

However, proletarian “humanitarianism” can also be interpreted in a different manner, without a religious intermediacy. As a (*false*) *consciousness*, ideology is grounded on some original political act or decision (in our case, the Revolution); consistent with what has been said about the “moral” standing of the Bolshevik orator, the grounding act or decision and the additional acts or decisions must be ethical as well. This explanation suits best Lenin’s smooth but significant shift from a (sometimes)-drifting proletariat to a vanguard Party.

3. The Burkean Reading of Marxist “Revolution”

Kenneth Burke's (1897-1993) prodigious activity as a literary critic and rhetorician over more than fifty years has also attempted to expand the scope of rhetorical analysis and to apply it to all possible usages of language, including the ideological one. Burke's focus in what concerns ideology is firstly dialectical, i.e. he scrutinizes the interplay between narrative (temporal) and logical order, underlining the difficulties involved in providing solid grounding for social order. The narrative order is prior to all successive efforts to construct a discourse. It is noteworthy that the key point of Burke's theory relies upon the *symbolic action*, which is the major ingredient in any cultural achievement. The fundament of any symbolic action is language, so language is not merely a *reflection* of reality, but presupposes also a *selection*, and consequently, a *deflection* of it⁴⁰. In his definition of man as symbolic animal, Burke accepts the view that

“much of what we mean by ‘reality’ has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems (..) words are a link between us and the nonverbal, [they] are by the same token a screen separating us from the nonverbal—though the statement gets tangled in its own traces, since so much of the ‘we’ that is separated from the nonverbal by the verbal would not even exist were it not for the verbal.”⁴¹

He talks about the existence of “terministic screens”, asserting: “much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms”⁴².

Frederic Jameson has rejected Burke's criticism, under the suspicion of creating a new individual false consciousness, and, as a result, he did not give up to some

old Marxist patterns of ideology. As Jameson suggests, Burke's theory rejects history, being “finally only another form of aestheticized reassurance in which gesture, ritual, and the illusion of full subjectivity come to prefigure every act and every reading”⁴³. Citing Jameson's own remarks,

“the whole paradox of what we are calling the subtext can be measured by this, that the literary work or cultural object itself, as though for the first time, brings into being that situation to which it is also, and at the same time, a reaction. It articulates its own situation and textualizes it, encouraging the illusion that the very situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text, that there never was any extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it.”⁴⁴

In our attempt to catch a glimpse of Burke's view upon symbolic action, which is a mature phase in his inquiry into the problem of language and social action, we have inevitably overlooked many fundamental tenets of his method. In what follows, we will thoroughly reappraise the question of ideology.

With the second edition of *Permanence and Change* (1954),⁴⁵ Burke had already surpassed a period of uncertainties regarding his own ideological position. His ideological position became a position towards ideology, which is no longer seen as neutral. He saw ideology only in terms of the dispute between idealism and materialism.

His dispute against standard ideological thinking stipulated that in Hegel's ‘ideology’ ideas came ‘from the top down’, whereas Marx's dialectic sustains the other way round, ‘from the bottom up’⁴⁶. He dissolves this dilemma by putting forward a “metabiological” standpoint that refused to reduce ideas to matter or vice versa: “By the biologic point of reference, disputes between materialists and idealists would seem to be dialectically dissolved (...) Whether you call the fundamental substance

matter or idea seems of no great moment when you talk of mind and body with a hyphen, as mind-body.”⁴⁷ Burke emphasizes his ‘metabiological’ point of view by highlighting the ‘symbolic’, which necessarily involves both the mind and the body. The mind-body problem is reissued by the difference between the symbolic and the non-symbolic. As Brian Crable makes it clear,

“It is in this way that symbols allow us a shortcut in meaning-formation. Our use of symbols in the interpretation of an event relates it to a previously experienced context. Thus, we no longer have to rely upon experiencing the event in various contexts; instead, we can use symbols to place the event in relation to different contexts, to give the event meaning and significance”⁴⁸

The connection between event and characteristic is offered by *orientation*, which becomes a *motive*, if we discuss our encounter with the social sphere. If we need to find a *motive* for our *action*, Burke says, then, we must “engage in a kind of retrospective sense-making. When the other asks us to account for the switch in subject, when we are asked to provide an account of our action in terms of a motive, we reflect upon the action as already past.”⁴⁹ Motives are shaped by language, because, as Burke himself declares,

“when introspecting to find the explanation for his attitudes, he would naturally employ the verbalizations of his group—for what are his language and thought if not a socialized product? To discover in oneself the motives accepted by one’s group is much the same thing as to use the language of one’s group; indeed, is not the given terminology of motives but a subsidiary aspect of the communicative medium in general?”⁵⁰

However, Burke appears to be neither a naïve realist nor a pure social constructionist. He also does not provide a new ground for the discussions about Marx’s ‘thesis of ideology’, which stipulated that ideology is “false consciousness” reproducing a mode of production.

Burke assumes an epistemological path, which is not a mere “relativism” or subjectivism; rather, Burke sees relativism as a “deviation” from his “unending conversation[al]”⁵¹ pattern. For Burke, relativism appears when discourse is monological, and not conversational as “one act in dramatic or dialogic competition with other acts”⁵². The “never-ending conversation” is therefore a kind of paradoxical solution required to avoid relativism, for relativism is avoided “only insofar as a discourse is placed in the context of the conversation, where it is considered relative to other discourses that qualify it ironically/dialectically”⁵³. The epistemological status of superiority over discourse is actually a privileged position, transgressing the level of conversation – like Locke’s or Descartes’s epistemological agencies (sense, mind). Burke rejects this position of superiority of a single character taking a step further towards a “perspective of perspectives”. Anticipating the postmodernist views upon discourse, he sees it dynamically as a kind of agonistic struggle among epistemological positions, which relentlessly quarrel one another.

This digression was meant to clarify Burke’s epistemological attack on Marxist ideology. Marx was tempted to lapse into an illusion, Burke states, “as they (the proletariat) are not merely equal participants along with the other characters, but also represent the *end* or *logic* of the development as a whole”⁵⁴.

A small chapter of *A Grammar of Motives* is dedicated to Marxist ideology⁵⁵. First, we will try to find out how Burke’s “grammar of terms” works. For Burke, a “motive” is “the name (or naming) of the Act”⁵⁶. As he explains in the *Introduction*, there are “basic forms of thought which, in accordance with the nature of the world as all men necessarily experience it, are exemplified in the attributing of motives”⁵⁷. These fundamental terms are Act, Scene, Agent, Agency and Purpose. This is the basic terminology upon which every kind or argu-

mentation focuses. Either we are arguing about poetry or fiction, politics, metaphysics, or we are only gossiping, the terms that motivate our action are the same:

“In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (*agency*), and the *purpose*.”⁵⁸

He further identifies the possible relations established by these terms, which are actually “dramatistic”, i.e. created by analogy to the course of action of a drama:

“Though we have inspected two ratios (i.e. scene-agent; scene-act), the five terms would allow for ten (scene-act, scene-agent, scene-agency, scene-purpose, act-purpose, act-agent, act-agency, agent-purpose, agent-agency, and agency-purpose). The ratios are principles of determination.”⁵⁹

Hence, the *scene-agent* relation, for example, is co-determining: there is a particular agent for a scene and a particular scene for an agent. Suppose that the *scene* is an industrialized society: this is, of course, a *material condition* for the presence of workers and capitalists. No workers and capitalists without mass industry, no mass industry without capitalists. The scene-agent relation is therefore “pre-cast” by a “grammar” of motives.

Burke applies the exact same line of argument exemplified above to construct a “Dramatist Grammar for Marxism”⁶⁰. When speaking about the *Communist Manifesto*, Burke explains that Marx uses the scene-agent ratio materialistically when he asserts that “every change in the conditions” of man’s existence is accompanied by a change in “man’s ideas, views, and consciousness”. The statement is clearly contradictory to other statements and speciously “rhetorical”⁶¹, for in other passages Marx

is forced to rephrase his account because the “*Manifesto* itself is an act of propaganda”⁶². Such an act of propaganda presumes that the “ideas contained (in the propagandistic program n. b.) are *social forces*”, so these ideas are not simply reflected conditions but “guides for the *changing* of conditions”⁶³.

Consequently, Burke rejects also Lenin’s idea of a non-spontaneous revolution, which must be carried out by a group of “professional revolutionaries” (i.e. propagandists), under the leadership of the Party. Thus, Burke suggests, Lenin stages a fundamental shift in the Rhetorical effectiveness of revolution, overemphasizing the growth of *technological* power when invoking *social* powers. Lenin mixes idealistic and materialistic ingredients in a noxious compound which, in the end, is not a scientific theory of classes and social power, but the perfect “rhetorical” disguise for a moral utopia, focused on a single redemptive act, the revolution:

“The mingling of idealistic and materialistic ingredients due to the fact that this materialistic dialectic was derived from a philosophy of “Spirit” serves well the double purpose of exhortation and polemic; for the idealistic aspects assist party unification, and the materialistic aspects serve well as a critical instrument for disclosing the special interests that underlie bourgeois pretenses to disinterested idealism, impartial justice, and similar universal motives (...) From the standpoint of our Grammar, the whole philosophy is essentially ethical rather than scientist, in that its entire logic is centered about an act, a social or political act, the act of revolution, an act so critical and momentous as to produce a “rupture” of cultural traditions (...)”⁶⁴

“I must always see in Marxist terminology Grammatical conditions calling for a rounded terminology of *action*”⁶⁵. Burke’s claim is that once the Revolution in Russia succeeded, the political rhetoric aimed at preserving the new political status and not at “withering the State

away". Thus, the term "act" used in the pre-revolutionary period does not have the same meaning *after* the Revolution. The esthetic movement encouraged by the Soviet State prior to World War Two, the "*Socialist realism*", is an example of "active" endorsement ("a tendency towards the featuring of *act*") acknowledged by the State.

In short, Burke's Grammar aims at elucidating the rhetoric of revolution using the terminological method:

"So far as our dramatic terminology is concerned, the Marxist philosophy began by grounding *agent* in *scene*, but by reason of its poignant concern with the ethical, it requires the systematic featuring of *act*. On the Symbolic level, it does feature act implicitly but intensely, in having so dramatic a pattern. On the Rhetorical level, its scientific and anti-scholastic vocabulary is needed for purposes of political dynamism (for the use of an ethical terminology would fail to differentiate the doctrine sufficiently from non-secular ways of salvation). But if, as an experiment, you try a systematic development of terms generated from *act*, the entire system falls quickly into place."⁶⁶

In Burke's opinion, against all odds, Marxism still remains a kind of veiled idealism, "antithetically grown out of German Idealism"⁶⁷; his rhetorical outline of Marxist ideology exposes once more the incoherencies that dominated this philosophy bearing the name of "scientific realism":

"(...) A class suffering visible tangible deprivation has a proportionately greater incentive to question the structure of the State than does a class not so suffering.

The agencies of the State, insofar as they represent the properties of a ruling class, prevent the transformation of such passion into action (guided by adequate ideas).

The class thus suffering visible tangible deprivation may transform its passion into action by a revolutionary act designed to change the nature of the State.

In the acts preparatory to this revolutionary act the revolutionary class is guided and represented by a party (a class within a class) whose ideas are active insofar as they are adequate, and are adequate insofar as they correctly name the malign and benign properties of that society.

Insofar as the changes of property relations would produce the desired betterment of society as a whole, the revolutionary effort is rational, hence active.

But the revolutionary act (and its preparation) is irrational, hence a passion, to the extent of the confusions resulting from the real or imaginary dislocations of society involved in revolution.

The revolutionary body can transcend these passions insofar as its ideas are adequate and lead to the success of the revolutionary act.

Insofar as the act succeeds, a new status is established.

Insofar as the new status is common to all members of the society, the society enjoys properties in common.

During the early stages of the new status, it may be necessary to protect by force the new structure of properties, until those who conceive of reality in terms of other properties have changed their ideas or lost their powers of dominion. (...)"⁶⁸

Notes:

¹ Theda Skocpol and Meyer Kestnbaum, *Mars Unshackled: The French Revolution in World-Historical Perspective*, in: Ferenc Fehér (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 13.

² Steven B. Smith, *Hegel and the French Revolution: An Epitaph for Republicanism*, in: Ferenc Fehér (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 221.

³ Hobbes, *apud* Steven B. Smith, *ibidem*.

⁴ Theda Skocpol and Meyer Kestnbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁵ La Harpe, *Du fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire*, p. 70, *apud* Philippe Roger, *The French Revolution as 'Logomachy'*, in: *Language and Rhetoric of the Revolution*, edited by John Renwick and produced with the assistance of the Institut Français d'Ecosse Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1990, p. 6.

⁶ Philippe Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁷ L.-S. Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris, A Gênes, de l'imprimerie de la Gazette Nationale*, An III Républicain, vol. I, p.xxiii, *apud* Philippe Roger, *ibidem*.

⁸ As Philippe Roger points out, "the question of the 'language of the Revolutionaries'", seen from this angle, is not a matter of lexicography even though the innovation was lexical in kind. It is political, philosophical, and religious too. For if that 'language of the Revolutionaries' is denounced by its detractors as being intrinsically sacrilegious, it will increasingly be extolled by the opposing camp as pure Energy and Power of the Word", in *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Philippe Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibidem*. Ironically, King Louis XVI in person is the first to speak up against the use of neologisms. He did so publicly, in his letter from June the 16th, 1789 to the

Third Estate: « Je désapprouve l'expression répétée des classes privilégiées que le tiers état emploie . . . Ces expressions inusitées ne sont propres qu' à entretenir un esprit de division. »

¹² This epistemological turn concerning the *effectiveness* of rhetoric and word (which is not thereafter seen as a simple *decorum*) is, I suppose, influential throughout the 19th century, and has also inspired Communism starting with Marx, and continuing in the next century with Lenin, Stalin and Mao.

¹³ Philippe Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ As Ferenc Fehér clearly suggests (*The Cult of the Supreme Being and the Limits of the Secularization of the Political*, in: Fehér (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 174-194) Robespierre's "religious revolution from above" casts a shadow of suspicion over the *rationalization* proclaimed by the Revolution: "The rationalizers had to sanctify, and thus mystify, the new sovereign to such an extent that, by their tyrannical overrationalization, they also prepared the ground for the most irrational type of politics: the redemptive one. The final result of doctrinaire rationalization and tyrannical functionalization was the complete fiasco of the church policy of the Revolution." (p. 184) This aspect puzzles also the possibility of legitimating "revolution" through a rational discourse. Paradoxically, the rhetorical impetuosity and directivity of the revolutionary word could appear rather emotional and irrational than demonstrative. This point looks a lot like the strange case of Fascist propaganda, which transforms the directedness of its language into an irrational and terroristic mystique of words. The same pattern will be developed in the Marxist theme of "revolution."

¹⁶ See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Making of a "Bourgeois Revolution"*, in: Ferenc Fehér (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 34.

¹⁷ François Furet, *Transformations in the Historiography of the Revolution*, in: Ferenc Fehér (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 266.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 266-267.

¹⁹ All the historical information about the French Revolution are gathered from the 1999 CD-Rom Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The article “*The French Revolution and Napoleon 1789-1815*” is signed by Isser Woloch.

²⁰ François Furet, *op. cit.*, p. 269: “In contrast to Marx, the Leninist historian of the Revolution celebrates the course of the Revolution more than its results. This explains the greater emphasis placed on 1793 than 1789, and the preference for the Jacobins over the Constituents, to say nothing of the Thermidorians. With the men of 1793, the historian who admires October 1917 finds himself on familiar ground, since the Soviet experience also illustrated the necessity of dictatorship and Terror (...) In the case of Marxism-Leninism, the problem is to situate the Revolution’s least bourgeois period—characterized by the provisional domination of the sans-culottes, a state-controlled economy, and a terrorist dictatorship directed not just against the aristocracy of birth, but of wealth as well—within the overall necessity of the Revolution’s bourgeois nature.”

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Eric Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

²³ *Idem*, pp. 31-32.

²⁴ A brief account on what Marx understands through the idea of “dialectical materialism” is given by George L. Mosse in: *The Culture Of Western Europe. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, John Murray, London, 1963, p. 175: “History moved from thesis to antithesis until the final synthesis of the classless society. What determined the thesis-antithesis relationship was the class structure of society. Thus feudal monopoly, the domi-

nance of the feudal classes, was a thesis in history opposed by the antithesis of free competition advocated by the commercial classes. A struggle ensued which was won by the commercial classes who now formed a new thesis in their turn. The engine of history was the internal contradictions which existed in any ruling class and the pressure of an “inevitable” new and hostile class from below. The internal contradiction of the ruling class of the bourgeoisie was that, on the one hand, it presupposed competition, and on the other that, through the formations of monopolies and cartels, it excluded competition. The new class was the proletariat upon whom the bourgeoisie was dependent but who would also be its grave diggers. History was, therefore, a struggle between classes.”

²⁵ Marx, cited in Mosse, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

²⁶ David Lockwood (*Solidarity and Schism. ‘The Problem of Disorder’ in Durkheimian and Marxist Sociology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992) analyzes the three Marxist arguments for a proletarian revolution: 1. Economically, the theory of the revolution centers on the relative or absolute material impoverishment of the working class. 2. Ethically, the revolutionary impulse of the proletariat is located in its moral impoverishment (degradation). 3. Socially, the revolution is the outcome of a process of proletarian self-education. p. 211-212.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

²⁸ See G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 71: “*the dialectical relationship between immediate interests and objective impact on the whole of society is located in the consciousness of the proletariat itself*” cited by D. Lockwood, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

²⁹ In Engels’ words: “What each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed. Thus past history proceeds in the manner of a natural process and is essentially subject

to the same laws of motion. But from the fact that individual wills (...) do not attain what they want, but are merged into a collective mean, a common resultant, it must not be concluded that their value is equal to zero. On the contrary, each contributes to the resultant and is to this degree involved in it” Marx and Engels, cited by D. Lockwood, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

³⁰ D. Lockwood, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

³² “Marxists must not compromise with but strike out against the state which was the repressive force used by the bourgeoisie against the exploited. The dictatorship of proletariat was still a revolutionary necessity. But unlike the Marx of the *Communist Manifesto* for whom the dictatorship was a short-range necessity, for Lenin it became a long-range totalitarianism”. – George L. Mosse, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

³³ Lenin’s activity as a party leader is highly submissive to historical events. His carefully planned advancement to power is briefly presented in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (the article “*Lenin*”, signed by Albert Resis).

³⁴ Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* cited by Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State. Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 5.

³⁵ Lenin shaped his self-image as being that of a “liberator who tried to lead Russia out of oppression and ‘unculturedness’ and save her from a pseudo-revolution” - Adam B. Ulam, *Ideologies and Illusions. Revolutionary Thought from Herzen to Solzhenitsyn*, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 149.

³⁶ Peter Kenez, *op. cit.*, p. 5. “The instrument used by the revolutionaries to approach and lead the masses was the vanguard Party, Lenin’s unquestionably greatest contribution to the theory and practice of revolution making. This was clearly meant to be a manipulative organization, as it aimed to do more than to express the

outrage of the oppressed and give form to the already-existing revolutionary spirit. The Party was to lead the proletariat to a successful revolution on the basis of its superior understanding of the process of history.”

³⁷ Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* cited by Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State. Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 6.

³⁸ Peter Kenez, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³⁹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, R. M. French transl. G. Bles, London, 1948, p. 169: “When politics are placed under the banner of an orthodoxy, then the State is regarded as a Church, and persecution on the ground of faith and opinion cannot be avoided. Christian theocracy in the Middle Ages was like this, and so is the Soviet communist ‘theocracy’, so is Hitler’s Third Reich, and so is every state which professes to be totalitarian. I have already said that Ivan the Terrible, the most notable exponent of the theory of autocracy, founded the conception of an Orthodox Tsardom in which the salvation of the souls of his subjects was one of the duties of the Tsar. The functions of the Church are transferred to the State. The communist government also is concerned for the salvation of the souls of its subjects; it desires to bring them up in the one saving truth; it knows the truth, the truth of dialectic materialism. The communist government, which is an unlimited government, finds its motive power in hatred of Christianity, in which it sees the cause of slavery, exploitation and darkness of mind.”

⁴⁰ Cf. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, p. 45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3,5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴³ Thomas Carmichael, *Screening Symbolicity: Kenneth Burke and Contemporary Theory*, in: Greig

Henderson and David Cratis Williams (ed.), *Unending Conversations. New Writings by and about Kenneth Burke*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville 2001, p. 148.

⁴⁴ Frederic Jameson, *The Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 4.3 (Spring 1978), p. 512-513, cited by Thomas Carmichael, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁴⁵ The first edition of the book (1934) contains many Marxist influences, confirming the still pervasive uncertainty in respect of “ideology”. As Bryan Crable illustrates, in 1934 Burke was still fond of the “human ends of Communism”. See also, Schiappa E./M.F. Keehner, *The “Lost” Passages of Permanence and Change*. *Communication Studies* 42.3 (1991), p. 191-198. He later fully rejected the Marxist notion of “ideology”, seeing it “only in terms of the dispute between idealism and materialism”. See Bryan Crable, *Ideology as “Metabiology”*. *Rereading Burke’s Permanence and Change*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 307.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change. An Anatomy of Purpose*, New Republic Inc., New York, 1935, p. 292: “Marx himself implicitly acknowledges this fact when saying that he had simply turned Hegel upside down”.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁸ Bryan Crable, *Ideology as “Metabiology”*..., p. 308.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 309.

⁵⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*..., p. 32.

⁵¹ See Robert Wess, *Pentadic Terms and Master Tropes: Ontology of the Act and Epistemology of the Trope in ‘A Grammar of Motives’*, in: Greig Henderson and David Cratis Williams (ed.), *Unending Conversations. New Writings by and about Kenneth Burke*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville 2001, p. 165.

⁵² *Ibidem.*

⁵³ *Ibidem.* As Wess suggests, Burke redefines “irony” as “true irony, humble irony”, not giving the spectator an insight superior to that of the actor. Burke himself argues that true irony “is based upon a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*, being consubstantial with him”, cited by R. Wess, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁵⁴ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, New York, Prentice-Hall, 1945, p. 516.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 200-213.

⁵⁶ See Andrew King, *Burke’s “Motive”*, *American Communication Journal*, Vol. 1 Issue 3 (<http://acjournal.org/holdings/vol1/iss3/burke/king>): “The name does not describe the conditions surrounding the Act. It does not skewer the essence of the Act. It does not isolate the genetic programming of the Act or explain the physical and material trajectory of the Act. It is not the unverballed chemical twitch activating the psychic depths. It is none of these things. The Motive is the name that situates the act within the orbit of social communication. Motive is what differentiates motion from action.”

⁵⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, New York, Prentice-Hall, 1945, p. xv.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. xv.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*, p. 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 208.

⁶¹ The meaning of the term “rhetorical” is here parallel to “propagandistic”, i.e. deliberately used to introduce a monopolist view upon the object. This kind of use of persuasion as propaganda is actually “unrhetorical”, for it involves an external agency upon demonstration. Aristotle was the first to make this crucial difference between “clean” *rhetoric* and unfair *propa-*

ganda or *sophistry*. See *Aristotle on Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse*, Newly translated with introduction, notes, and appendixes by George A. Kennedy, New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 33-34: "In addition, [it is clear] that it is a function of one and the same art to see the persuasive and [to see] the apparently persuasive, just as [it is] in dialectic [to recognize] a syllogism and [to recognize] an apparent syllogism; for sophistry is not a matter of ability but of deliberate choice [*proairesis*] [of specious arguments]. In the case of rhetoric, however, there is the difference that one person will be [called] *rhētôr* on the basis of his knowledge and another on the basis of his deliberate choice, while

in dialectic *sophist* refers to deliberate choice [of specious arguments], *dialectician* not to deliberate choice, but to ability [at argument generally]".

⁶² Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, New York, Prentice-Hall, 1945, p. 207.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 207.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 208.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 208.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 210-211.