Of Gorbachev's Perestroika, Plato's Noble Lie, the Utopian Tradition, and the Third Sophistic

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> Upon the success of perestroika depends the future of socialism and the future of the world.
> —Mikhail Gorbachev

> The empire of Russia will aspire to conquer Europe, and will itself be conquered.
> —Jean-Jacques Rousseau

> Russians have a singular genius for drastically simplifying the ideas of others, and then acting upon them: our world has been transformed, for good and ill, by the unique Russian application of Western social theory to practice.
> —Isaiah Berlin

The erosion and dismantling of Communism and the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe have been explained in various ways. One of the less trodden paths views these phenomena not in an economical and geopolitical but in a cultural and ideological light. (This is the approach of Hilary Appel, for instance, in an effort that leaves something to be desired in terms of historical, cultural, and theoretical depth.) In this essay, I follow a similar direction and suggest that it is rewarding to view Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika and the subsequent infusion of a new, neoliberal capitalist ideology in Eastern Europe from the mid-1980s onward through the combined lenses of two ancient doctrines: first,

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Plato's concept of the noble lie as outlined in the *Republic*—which also means casting a look at the Western utopian tradition of which glasnost, perestroika, and the noble lie are constituents—and, second, Plato's, Aristophanes's, and Aristotle's criticism of the Sophists as pseudophilosophers. Can ancient and modern philosophy, certain cultural narratives that have been in circulation for millennia, and some rhetorical strategies help us to understand better what happens in the present? The reader is invited to peruse this text not as an objective and strictly academic article, but as an essay in the classical tradition of Montaigne—passionate and compassionate intellectual poetry in the costume of scholarship. If for the majority of the Western intellectuals the downfall of Communism is yet another field for rational investigation, for their Eastern European brethren this is an existential problem that is better elucidated in the genre of subjective theoretical fantasy.

Perestroika and Plato's Noble Lie

The notion of the noble lie is productive because it has been an obligatory part of Western political theory since antiquity. A society that has dispensed with rule through the right of natural force in the name of security and the good of all erects its institutions on laws expressing the common will of the people. The concept of the legislature as an embodiment of the common will rests on the presumption that the laws have been invented by a superhuman entity, which has benevolently bestowed them on a grateful human race. This type of myth is repeated in the biblical story of Moses and the Ten Commandments, Plato's *Republic*, Plutarch's "Lycurgus," More's *Utopia*, Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

The critical juxtaposition between the philosopher and the Sophist, which is one of the pivots of Plato's thought, because it defines philosophy by outlining its limits with regard to its Other—pseudophilosophy laying claim to a philosophical status—is instrumental in my essay because it seems that democratic social habitat, ancient or contemporary, is where the Sophistic thrives. Despite the fact that the Second Sophistic has been officially defunct for some fifteen centuries, one could argue that the Sophistic is, nonetheless, with us, and Plato's criticism of this phenomenon is still pertinent, although we may give it different names. One such designation is ideology. When in *A Theory of Semiotics* Eco defines ideology as a partial and noncontradictory representation of the contradictory semantic universe, a representation that, however, purports to be a full and truthful portrayal of this universe, he, knowingly or not, resuscitates Plato's opposition of the Forms, which stand for reality and truth, and appearances, which are but a simulacrum and imitation of reality. Transposed in terms of philosophy and the Sophistic, this dualistic metaphysical division becomes the comparison between philosophical dialectic, which speaks the truth, and persuasive rhetorical public discourse, which seems to speak the truth but offers only its fake replication. The similarity and distinction between philosophical dialectic

and rhetorical persuasion is outlined in Plato's "Gorgias" and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Jocularly, so that the continuity between the ancient and the modern Sophistic and rhetoric is palpable, I call the current Sophistic the Third Sophistic. To follow these introductory words, let us see how the distant past helps us better understand the recent past and the immediate present.

In the *Republic*, Plato writes about necessary and noble lies, which strengthen order and justice in the ideal city-state. They are designed by philosophers and are put into practice by poets. These lies convince both the rulers and the ruled of the divine origin of the most just social order that can be conceived. The lies are noble in that they lead to the great truth of social justice by means of small political, artistic, and ideological falsehoods.

To understand the connection between the Gorbachev era and its successor, capitalism, and the noble lie it is necessary to bear in mind that there are two opposite tendencies in Plato's thought. On the one hand, and mainly in his political theory, his philosophy is elitist, aristocratic, and exclusive: in Kallipolis, or the ideal polis, the rulers are philosophers; they alone know the logically noncontradictory and eternal Form of Justice. The rest of humanity, the nonphilosophers, must follow the philosophers so that ideal and just order prevails. On the other hand, Plato's philosophy, in its moral, epistemological, educational, religious, psychological, and aesthetic ideas, tends to be inclusive and accessible to all. Socrates, for instance, roams the streets of Athens for half a century and converses with purported experts, exposing their ignorance in the hope that they will step on the path of philosophical understanding, which commences with awareness of one's own lack of knowledge. And during his trial Socrates speaks to the five hundred members of the jury as if they were philosophers. Because of the general accessibility of philosophy, the philosopher can lead nonphilosophers to knowledge and wisdom, as seen in the myth of the cave in the *Republic*. In terms of ethics, no one would do evil if he or she knows what good is. In the context of epistemology, the doctrine of transmigration of the souls, or palingenesis, holds that every soul enters the body at birth with knowledge of the Forms. Plato's theory of education states that all people, even the uncultivated slave, can attain ultimate knowledge of the Forms, which their souls remember, if they are asked the right questions. In the sphere of religion, everyone who lives like a philosopher will wander in Elysium after death; and—if we agree that Plato rethinks in philosophical terms traditional myths and beliefs concerning the afterlife—all individuals who have reached philosophical wisdom will become equal to the gods, because such individuals will have learned the secrets of the universe and will not be guests subject to the caprices of an unknown fate but will be at home in a familiar cosmos. In Plato's psychology, everyone can order the parts of his or her soul so that the good parts restrain and lead the bad ones, not the other way around. In aesthetics, every artist can understand that verbal and musical art must have didactic and pedagogical goals and provide instruction in virtue and justice, that is, to imitate only one thing by singing dithyrambs; but if art imitates many things, as in comedy,

tragedy, and epic literature, it is only titillating entertainment, and its place is outside the walls of the ideal city-state.

Gorbachev's perestroika nullifies the noble lie by forgetting the aristocratic tendencies in Plato. Behind perestroika is a literal belief in the inclusivity of philosophy—in every person's ability to become a philosopher, in every individual's capacity to embrace rational ideas and noncontradictory metaphysical knowledge as the guiding principle in his or her life. The main idea in glasnost is that, once they understood the full truth regarding the economic incompetence and injustice exercised by the outdated former Communist dignitaries, Soviet and Eastern European citizens would open their arms to new Communist leaders who would bestow on them this absolute knowledge as philosophers guiding nonphilosophers out of the cave, and would gratefully roll up their sleeves to build a new Communism, with a human face, as a slogan that was used from 1986 to 1991 read. To put it a different way, it was believed that total criticism of past mistakes and the whole truth in the media would result in radical social and political reforms in the name of social justice and a political course named "new thinking" (*novoe myshlenie*), which would surmount all partial and pragmatic boundaries between people, boundaries of class, ideology, national origin, language, and so on, differences in the name of an abstract and universal philosophical unity of all humanity. For instance, in Gorbachev's (and his ghostwriters') best seller, published in the United States in 1987 and in the Soviet Union in 1988, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (in the Russian, *Perestroika i novoe myshlenie dlia nashei strany i dlia vsego mira*), which sketches the major points of perestroika and glasnost, the equality of all Soviet citizens, including the Communist Party leaders, is demonstrated in their unity in enthusiastically embracing the new political ideas. Gorbachev, as the book declares, is met everywhere in the Soviet Union with warm hospitality from ordinary people; to their leaders in the Kremlin they write euphoric letters in support of the party's new course and fervently promise to rebuild the country according to the precepts of perestroika. Gorbachev's book views as a homogeneous mass not only the Soviet people, but all humans around the globe. The "new thinking" in international politics visualizes humanity as a whole in the spirit of Tolstoyan Christian universality, voiced in the epilogue of *Resurrection*, where human beings are described as being equal in that they are all sinners. For Gorbachev, in a similar way, the human race can be perceived as one, in that we all would perish in the event of a nuclear war. For both Tolstoy and Gorbachev, abstract humanness is based on the idea of trespassing ethical borders and suffering. Seen as populist projects, glasnost and perestroika revealed most fully the utopian character of socialism—both in the philosophical, ideal, and humane sense of the word utopia and in the worst pragmatic, quotidian, inhuman, and destructive consequences of an embodied utopia. Thus, in its last days, Eastern European Communism shone with divine and demonic light simultaneously.

Perestroika and the Utopian Tradition

Before going further in our analysis of the noble lie and perestroika, it is necessary to shed more light on the utopian and antiutopian character of glasnost and perestroika as delineated in Gorbachev's *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*. I will touch on some of the more conspicuous utopian features of the book and explain how they turn into their dystopian opposites, that is, how the former come to naught under the pressure of the latter. To begin with, for Gorbachev, as in the Socratic-Platonic tradition, humans both in the Soviet Union and around the globe are thought of as predominantly rational and logical beings. In the Soviet Union, the common people hail perestroika and are one with their leaders because they all understand the need for an overall reconstruction of Soviet society. What Gorbachev names with the clichéd party oxymoron *democratic centralism*—perestroika is engineered and proclaimed from above, by Communist dignitaries, yet is supported by and made a reality from below, by commoners, in an allegedly dialectical nexus of society's top and bottom; in other words, perestroika presupposes the democratization of society—rests on the rational Platonic belief that there is only one truth, and it is independent from the context. This truth is spelled out by glasnost, and it is the fundament for the common effort of all individuals in the Soviet Union and abroad, because they understand the logic of the truth in a single and, therefore, shared way.

The first weakness of the abstract anthropological view that humans are first and foremost rational beings is that it disregards the fact that human nature can be reduced to bare-bones rationality only in theoretical doctrines that cannot be applied directly to real life. The second vulnerable point of so-called democratic centralism and revolutions from above is that they are based on Cartesian rationalism: perestroika from above, through democratic centralism, presupposes the primacy of the ideas of the political elite in reference to the praxis of the people. A similar objection to Stalinist Marxism has been raised by Sartre in *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Critique of Dialectical Reason). The Communist elite lives in bad faith, in Sartre's *mauvaise foi* as explained in *Being and Nothingness*, namely, self-deception or wishful thinking—in their ivory tower the leaders believe blindly in their own doctrine without bothering about whether it has an ontological referent. They think of themselves only as leaders, and this makes them unable to transcend themselves and become also human beings; that is, it makes them unable to connect with ordinary people—which makes democratic centralism an existential impossibility. (At this point in my ruminations I turn away from the possibility of viewing perestroika as a conspiracy of the elite against the people, aiming to turn Communist leaders into capitalist oligarchs. In other words, I do not follow Plato's idea in the *Republic* that, under certain conditions, the guardians of the polis may vanquish the citizens or the dogs devour the flock, rather than, in both cases, protecting their charges. The conspiracy theory is a different, antiutopian way to problematize perestroika, a point I do not address in this essay.)

The presumption that humans are first and foremost rational beings leads to the second feature of perestroika, one that is most conspicuously and fully expressed by glasnost. Glasnost is, in fact, a new version of a cardinal feature in Plato—and, before him, in Confucius's *Analects*—namely, the concept of language as a tool that clearly, fully, and without any residue formulates universal truth. The world, the human mind, and language are thought of as three synonymous phenomena translatable into one another: everything that happens in the world can be understood by reason and expressed through language. It is convenient to name this type of language cataphatic language. In theology, cataphatic language speaks of God in positive terms. For me, this concept is broader and intimates a language that renders fully and in positive and affirmative terms the noncontradictory logical truth of all things. Throughout Gorbachev's book the cataphatic language of perestroika termed glasnost is juxtaposed with the apophatic language of the enemies of Communism. In theology, apophatic language procures knowledge of God through negation. Here I use this term more broadly, namely, as a language that speaks about things indirectly, by means of what they are not. In Gorbachev, apophatic language has two main forms. The first is anti-Communist and anti-Soviet propaganda in Western media. This form is attacked time and again throughout *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*. The second variant of apophatic language is political, and it is most vehemently deconstructed in the final, seventh chapter of Gorbachev's book: while Soviet leaders offer simple and straightforward solutions for disarmament, and for the reduction and ultimate elimination of the threat of nuclear war, the American government and its diplomats react through obfuscatory and overcomplicated documents that circumvent the issue of disarmament.

Gorbachev's juxtaposition of cataphatic and apophatic language is not new in the Western utopian tradition. Broadly speaking, utopian states—as in Plato's Kallipolis in particular and his philosophy in general—praise and practice cataphatism and detest and avoid apophatism. In Plurach's "Lycurgus," for example, the Spartans speak in witty cataphatic maxims and apothegms, whereas their Athenian guests deliver sophisticated Sophistic speeches. In Chernishevsky's novel *Chto delat'?* (What Is to Be Done?), Rakhmetov, the exemplary utopian hero, speaks cataphatic language. In Utopia of More's *Utopia* and in the country of the Houyhnhnms in part 4 of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, lawyers, those grandchildren of the Sophists, have no place in perfectly ruled societies. These lawyers, through their interpretations, turn ideal laws that are simple and understood by all into rigmarole. In Montaigne's essay "Of the Vanity of Words," political rhetoric thrives where and when society and the state are in the deepest crisis. In Campanella's *The City of the Sun*, laws are few, short, and plain, and hang outside the temple, next to the tersely defined essences of all metaphysical truths.

In Gorbachev, as in Plutarch, More, Montaigne, Campanella, Swift, and Chernishevsky before him, one may observe the paradigmatic Platonic clash between philosophy and the Sophistic, dialectic and rhetoric, and elenchus and eristic. The

dystopian retort to glasnost is that language is used not solely for speaking the truth but also for lying. As Plato shows in "Lesser Hippias," the person who knows the truth best is also the best liar because he or she can best hide the truth (this dystopian objection to glasnost leads us straight to the conception of perestroika as a conspiracy, mentioned above).

The third distinguishing quality of perestroika linked with the Socratic and Platonic anthropological view of the human as principally a rational being is self-criticism. In Plato, Socrates becomes a philosopher at the moment when he recognizes his own ignorance, and thus the negativity of self-knowledge and self-doubt opens the path to true knowledge in general. This is the famous Socratic *docta ignorantia*. Glasnost and perestroika as utopian projects commence with a similar act of contrition for the past political and economic sins committed by the Communist leaders. Curiously, the theory and practice of the allegedly atheistic glasnost and perestroika are colored by Christian Orthodox repentance and supplications for forgiveness and mercy, which are expected to guide the country to a new and holy existence. Going back to the years when the notables of the Soviet Union came out with voluntary and shocking revelations, which pulled the rug out from under their feet, one cannot help but remember Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who, in a utopian ethical paroxysm, goes to the crossroads, falls on his knees, kisses the earth, and cries in all four directions that he is a murderer. Actually, the parallel between Communist leaders and Raskolnikov in the framework of Plato's philosophy is not accidental, because Dostoevsky's novel expands two ethical principles in Plato's "Gorgias": first, that justice is not based on natural force (Raskolnikov's Napoleonic delusion, the crime) and, second, that it is preferable to be the victim rather than the executioner, and that it is better to accept punishment when guilty than to avoid it (Raskolnikov's punishment). The antiutopian objections here are at least twofold, and rephrase Machiavelli's idea in *The Prince* that for a statesman it is better to be feared than loved, if fear does not beget hatred. First, leaders who criticize themselves à la Socrates do not strike fear because they act as philosophers, not as practical leaders, and need philosophically minded subjects to appreciate and love them—something that is practically unthinkable—and, second, in practice, these leaders are perceived as suicidal and mad or as evil self-serving rogues and hypocrites and lose public credibility and support. By imploring love the leaders earned hatred and, consequently, Communism crumpled without a fight.

The fourth utopian characteristic of Gorbachev's doctrine is the idea that perestroika will unleash the full potential of Communism, which, so far, has been suffocated by the innumerable mistakes of former and present-day Communist notables. The division between what is real and what is perfect reminds one of Plato's dualistic metaphysics and its unbridgeable separation between appearances, or the material world, and the Forms, or the ideal rationally achievable domain. Yet if Plato is aware of the purely philosophical need for this distinction, whose constituents coexist in time, Gorbachev is convinced that the real, defective Communism and the

Communism that will fully achieve its potential succeed each other in time. Once again idealism undermines Gorbachev's allegedly materialistic thinking: the former type of Communism had been quite palpable for decades with its ominously empty stores even in the very center of Moscow, whereas the latter has never been seen, since it exists solely in Gorbachev's theories.

The next, fifth utopian peculiarity of perestroika is entwined with the fourth in its constructing a temporality in which the real humdrum Communism of the present morphs into the splendid bountiful Communism of the future. This temporality takes shape at three idealistic intertwined levels: the historical, the nondialectical, and the narrative.

First, on the historical plane, the transformation of present-day indigent Communism into the future affluent Communism presupposes a modern model of temporality of the type found in Hegel or Marx, where the passage of time inevitably brings progress and amelioration.

Second, nondialectical temporality is based on the three possible relations between the Self (the present) and the Other (the past) as expounded in Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*. In the first relation, the Self and the Other are seen as completely different, and the present is totally dissimilar from and unrelated to the past. In the second case, that in which I am most interested here, the Self is like the Other, and, therefore, the present coincides with the past. And the third option is the Self being dialectically both the same and unlike the Other; that is, the present and the past coincide and do not coincide in a dialectical nexus. How do these three possibilities of the nondialectical temporality relate to Gorbachev's thinking? In his book, Gorbachev incessantly associates the theoretical ideas of perestroika with Lenin's writings, especially the late ones. Thus, the Other or the past (Lenin) becomes the same as the Self or the present (perestroika). Despite the incantation of Lenin's name and the obsession with the word dialectic, it is never explained which of Lenin's ideas are used, and how exactly perestroika employs them dialectically. In this regard Gorbachev's book is a spitting image of his (and his ghostwriters') political report read at the Twenty-Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, held in 1986, in which the ideas of the Communist classics are supplanted by quotes from them ad nauseam.

The third, narrative temporality is based on the archetypal plot of Paradise-Paradise Lost-Paradise Regained, or, the same thing, of Paradise-Fall-Redemption. The first stage is the happy time when Communism thrived under the leadership of Lenin; during the second stage Communism falters because of inept dignitaries (Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, Iurii Andropov, Konstantin Chernenko); finally, in the third stage (Gorbachev), Communism will reach its full potential through perestroika. Despite the Communists' protestations that they are materialists, narrative temporality is burdened with idealism and is ontologically questionable because it rests on the relations between signs alone, not on the link between signs and real referents.

In the second and third temporality—the nondialectical and the narrative—Lenin figures as the mythical demigod ruler, an exemplary blend of leader and wise man, gifting the humans the laws of the perfect new society. In this regard he is a twin figure of the biblical Moses, Plato's king-philosopher, Plutarch's King Lycurgus, More's King Utopus, and Bacon's King Salomona.

What are the weak points of these three hypostases of temporality? The defect of the first, historical, temporality offered by Gorbachev is that modern time is not the only possible time, as Gorbachev thinks, but one of many existing times. For instance, mythical time, as presented in Hesiod and Ovid, causes only deterioration: the Golden Age is superseded by the Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages. Perestroika promises a history that is progressive and rational and follows the models of Hegel and Marx, that is to say, modern: in it, time causes only amelioration; the new is better than the old, the present is preferred to the past and the future to the present. Ironically, perestroika promised modern time but became the harbinger of mythical time. The second hypostasis of temporality, as we saw, is nondialectical, and the third is idealistic.

The sixth utopian peculiarity of perestroika as portrayed by Gorbachev is the paradox of closed openness or open closedness. By definition, utopias are closed worlds impermeable to influences from outside because they are perfect in principle, and any importation of alien ideas and practices is impurity and imperfection that will contaminate and destroy them, as Plato, Plutarch, More, Bacon, Campanella, Swift, and Dostoevsky in the short story "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" write. In Plato's *Republic*, for example, the tragic and comic poets, as well as their brethren writing epic poems, will be prohibited from living in Kallipolis, because they erode the ideal order of the city-state. On the other hand, utopias export perfection, and this is the ideological basis for their militarism and imperialism and export of political advisers as Lycurgus's Sparta, More's Utopia, and Campanella's *The City of the Sun* demonstrate.

Gorbachev follows the same utopian oxymoronic pattern. From one vantage point, he depicts a Soviet Union firmly dedicated to building Communism, allegedly the most advanced social order, and, therefore, vehemently rejecting any effort of the capitalist West to change the Soviet political system. (In this regard Gorbachev is strikingly similar to Isaiah Berlin's portrait of a closed Soviet Union in the decades after World War II in *The Soviet Mind* and "Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956.") The Soviet leader also affirms that all countries and people are free to choose their social and political orders; that is, he recognizes the right of every state to be politically and ideologically closed and impassable to foreign political models. The strongest example of the self-sustained character of perestroika as utopia is found in chapter 7, where Gorbachev speaks of the lack of political and human dialogue between the Soviet Union and the United States, the two most powerful, self-centered, and self-sufficient states in the world. From another standpoint, however, perestroika is supposed to invigorate Communism in the Eastern European

Communist countries, to change the political and military thinking of the imperialist West and, in the final analysis, as the book's title proudly implies—and what my first epigraph suggests—to transform the whole world for the better. (I have to thank the unknown *traduttore-traditore* of Gorbachev's book for sabotaging my effort for elegant writing by translating the sentence used as the initial epigraph wrongly. The Russian original reads: "Ot uspekha perestroiki zavisiat sud'ba sotsializma, zavisiat i sud'by mira" (55). The official translation is: "Upon the success of perestroika depends the future of socialism and the future of peace" (58).) As it turned out, perestroika demolished one pole of the paradox, namely, openness as an expanding dialogue between two opposite political systems, Communism and capitalism, and cleared the way for the domination of the other pole, closedness as an authoritative monologue of capitalism.

Critical perusal of Gorbachev's *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* as the representation of a utopia reveals a deplorable discrepancy between philosophical intentions and practical results: at every turn the copulation between noble theory and brute reality gives birth to monsters. Where is the place of Plato's doctrine of the noble lie in this dissection of perestroika? In the *Republic*, Socrates states that as a philosopher he cannot build Kallipolis in reality, and that is why he builds it with words. Because political science is not a purely philosophical, but also a utilitarian, discipline, the concept of the noble lie serves as a bridge between the abstract philosophical aspect of political theory and its applied character. Putting it differently, without the noble lie, political theory loses its double—recondite and utilitarian—character and turns solely into a cerebral philosophical construct, which falls apart and transforms into its uglier opposite, into anti-intellectual bestiality. The noble lie, therefore, serves a double purpose: it ensures a free space for general, pansophic philosophical meditation, yet it provides a criterion of social refinement of nonphilosophical reality. The noble lie harmonizes the world as it should be and the world as it is by bestowing on the former social relevance and grafting onto the latter culture to make it bearable.

To sum up: In Act One of glasnost and perestroika, two things happened. First, certain philosophical ideas and utopian narratives were understood one-sidedly, and were applied literally in political and social life. Second, and as a result of the first, Communist leaders rebuffed the social and political laws formulated as the noble lie and as connecting philosophy and reality. In this way we reach Act Two of glasnost and perestroika, where it turns out that the beautiful rationalism of the Communist ideology, which is its chief source of pride and its most potent weapon in the battle against capitalism, in a dialectical and unexpected way leads to the appalling demise of this very ideology. Act One was directed by the Soviet leaders themselves, who misread Plato and the whole utopian tradition. Act Two was and still is being directed by contemporary Sophists. To understand how this happens, we have to start a new intellectual journey, using as our initial point the sixth utopian peculiarity of perestroika—the paradox of closed openness and open closedness.

Perestroika and the Third Sophistic

Glasnost and perestroika as a philosophical, political, and social dual project underestimated the fact that in the world of political and social competition there was a powerful adversary, which was outside the realm controlled by Communism; that is to say, there was a noble lie called "democracy." As a utopian project perestroika functioned according to the rule of closed openness and open closedness: it guarded its closedness and supposedly respected the closedness of its capitalist opponents, yet it desired to penetrate and alter the closed domain of its adversary in its own favor. Western "democracy" as a noble lie acted in a similar way. Before continuing with the relation between perestroika and "democracy," it is necessary to define the latter concept. The quotation marks here designate that by "democracy" I do not mean democracy as an ideal theoretical notion defined in political philosophy for millennia, nor do I mean real contemporary democracy in the developed Western countries. "Democracy" stands solely for the noble lie of developed capitalism as it had been formed in the decades of Communist rule in Eastern Europe by the official media, as well as the image that the West projected of itself through the filters and screens of Communist censorship. "Democracy" could also be thought of as the Eastern European image of the political West. "Democracy," therefore, is a murky mythical and ideological conglomerate of concepts, such as elected political government, freedom of speech, the American Dream or the conjectural possibility that anyone can become rich, happiness understood as material satisfaction and luxury, human rights, harmony between the rich and the poor (an idea proclaimed by Andrew Carnegie in the opening sentence of his 1889 treatise "The Gospel of Wealth"), an unrestrained free market economy, art as entertainment, the sacredness of private property, and so on. Finally, as Berlin notes in "Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956," "democracy" is inseparable from the fallacious logic of closed societies, which compensates the lack of information about the world outside with wishful fantasizing about this world, according to which if something is bad in Soviet Communism, it must have a good double in Western capitalism. Today, more than twenty five years since the collapse of Communism, it is not easy to put into words the notion of "democracy," which was so palpable for all those who lived in the time of Brezhnev and Gorbachev. Today the context of "democracy" has changed, and words alone are unable to re-create its meaning, because meaning consists of a text in a context. Let me provide three examples of "democracy"—arranged in an ascending order in respect of their philosophical scope—for those who have faded, or no, memories of Communism as context.

Recently I read and reread the memoir *Nizkie istiny. Sem' let spustia* (Mean Truths: Seven Years Later) by the well-known Russian film director Andrei S. Konchalovsky in the hope of understanding what spurred this successful artist, pampered by the Communist system, to leave the Soviet Union and try his luck in the United States and Hollywood. I admit that I was unable to put my finger on one particular reason

for this somewhat strange journey, so I concluded that it was "democracy" that had motivated him to chase in reality what existed, perhaps, only in his head. Another, even better example of "democracy" could be found in Aleksandr Zinov'ev's novel *Russkaia tragediia (Gibel' utopii)* (The Russian Tragedy: The Death of a Utopia), in which the narrator ponders why the Soviet people passively lost the security of their Communist life for some unclear dream of a better life in capitalism that eventually brought only tragic chaos and suffering. The third case in point is a phenomenon studied by scholars such as Paulina Bren and Susan E. Raid. In Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union after WWII, they write, the Communist governments tried to neutralize the temptations of Western capitalist consumerism in the minds of their citizens by propagating the higher quality of life under Communism. For our purposes I should add that seen in a broader cultural context, the opposition between material affluence that presupposes private property, on the one hand, and high quality of life whose fundament is lack of private property, on the other, is a pivotal idea in Western utopia: Plutarch's Sparta, More's Utopia, and Campanella's *The City of the Sun* are guided by justice because they have abolished private property and the citizens live in a world where all their needs are adequately met but without any lavishness. The utopian Sparta of Lycurgus collapses when avarice and sumptuousness replace reason and social equality. Further back, noble philosophical poverty characterizes Socrates as described by Xenophon (and parodied by Aristophanes in *Clouds*). In a word, materially unassuming Communism counterattacks capitalist opulence with utopian and philosophical arguments. In this ideological battle, Communism entwines the two major postulates of utopia: first, the belief that all people are rational and, therefore, philosophers, and, second, that the prerequisite for social justice is lack of private property. Because the enormous majority of the people would prefer a tangible pair of jeans (in the mid 1980s, in Moscow, a pair of jeans, not necessarily new or original, were sold on the black market for 150 rubles, a good monthly salary) to the abstract notion of social justice (free education and medical care, job security, etc.), "democracy" took its chance to trump and triumph over Communist philosophical wisdom. Thus, the collapse of Communism could be viewed as a colossal reenactment of Plato's myth of the cave.

The end of Communism came when human curiosity, ignorance, stupidity, and greed in real, everyday Communism united forces and opened the gates of the Communist utopian fortress to the Trojan horse of capitalism—the noble lie termed "democracy." In the last days of perestroika and the first days of post-Communism, in the time of chaos when everything was possible because of the softened, porous, or already nonexistent old rules and the still nonexistent new ones, the literal and childish philosophical truth of perestroika, which had rejected the noble lie of Communism, was tacitly supplanted by "democracy," the noble lie of developed capitalism. It seems that at that time, the late 1980s and early 1990s, these two phenomena were not recognized as different, and the latter, "democracy," was thought of and offered aggressively by the media as the perfect and final version of the former. This

substitution to a great extent resulted from the fact that the two doctrines overlapped in the presentation of their universality and populism. Because of this overlapping, the two conceptions were wrongly interpreted as being identical.

Let me explain this differently. I already noted that perestroika nullifies the Communist noble lie by shifting the balance between philosophical aristocratism and philosophical populism in the direction of populism based on the utopian idea that all people are nothing short of philosophers. "Democracy" is a noble lie precisely because it mythologizes populism; that is, universality, equality, fair chances, fair start, the rule of the people, democratic elections, and so on, and thus guarantees the more or less unchallenged power of the financial and political elite. Perestroika moves from elitism to the universality of utopia where everyone is philosopher, and thus deconstructs the noble lie, whereas "democracy" moves in the opposite direction—from the universality of the crowd, of the unenlightened general opinion, or doxa, to financial and political elitism—and thus constructs the noble lie. Let me stress that the conceptions of universality and elitism have different meanings in the Communist utopian project and in the time of neoliberal "democracy." In Communism, populism, inclusivity, and universality mean that everyone is capable of being a philosopher. Communist elitism, on the other hand, is the foundation of democratic centralism, and stands for the philosophical quality of the ruling elite. For "democracy," populism and universality are concepts referring to the rabble, the non-philosophical crowd, whereas the elite stands for the rulers who control society not in the last place by rhetorically manipulating the mob in the way shown in Plato's dialogues analyzing oratory and the Sophistic, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Perestroika ends where "democracy" starts. The overlapping of the end of perestroika and the beginning of "democracy" in the Eastern European context—an overlapping that is not only chronological but, more important, quasi-logical and semantic—leads to an exchange of the meanings of the two concepts. "Democracy" seized the nimbus of philosophical truth characteristic of perestroika freed from the noble lie, whereas perestroika became a synonym of the next Communist noble lie. (A similar exchange of the meanings between truth and falsity—although not in a social and political, but in a personal and ethical overlapping, context—is portrayed in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. On the one hand, the impeccable integrity of Prince Mishkin is perceived as a mark of the child and the saint in him, but on the other hand, it is interpreted as the summit of lying because of his alleged ability to present a perfect lie as a perfect truth.) It is necessary to iterate again that the exchange of meanings between perestroika and "democracy" has no general validity, but is a feature of Eastern European life from the late 1980s onward.

What is the role of the Third Sophistic in my ruminations about perestroika and "democracy"? Answer: the Third Sophistic, as suggested in the previous paragraph, plays a decisive role in the exchange of meanings between perestroika as a simplified rationalism or the philosophical truth, on the one hand, and "democracy" as a practical political and ideological noble lie, on the other. Plato and Aristophanes point out

two major types of Sophistic lying or, to use the technical term, of eristic. The first type is quasi-logic, deficient yet striking thinking, which looks logical but is illogical, because it is contradictory and thus does not have truth value. For example, Plato's "Euthydemus" reads, "Then since he [the dog] is a father and is yours, the dog turns out to be your father, and you are the brother of puppies, aren't you?" Here eristic parades masked as elenchus, or Socratic dialogue. This type of seemingly correct, noncontradictory, and truthful thinking, which actually is inaccurate, contradictory, and false, is analyzed in Aristotle's logic. Aristotle formalizes numerous examples of such thinking, already pointed out and mocked by Plato. The second major weapon of the Sophists in refuting their opponents is juggling with verbal ambiguities: the same word is used for various meanings, but it seems that it is employed with only one and the same meaning (above I underscored this peculiarity when defined the contrasting meanings of "populism/universalism" and "elitism/aristocratism" in perestroika and "democracy"). For instance, in the First Agon in Aristophanes's *Clouds*, the Worse Argument, in refuting the Better Argument, makes use of the ambivalent word "agora." The Better Argument states that young men should not waste time in the agora, while the Worse Argument insists the opposite, referring to the authority of Homer, who states that noble men spend time in the agora. The ambiguity consists in the fact that in Homer's time the agora was not a marketplace, the meaning that the Better Argument has in mind, but a place for conversation and exchange of opinions. Going back to our Communist and post-Communist subject, we could say that the Sophistic deceit hides in the fact that when one talks of the noble lie termed "democracy," it is presented as a philosophical truth or simply the Truth, which it is not, whereas when one talks about the philosophical truth named perestroika (and, after a certain period of time when glasnost and perestroika pass into history and are metonymically supplanted by the notions of socialism and Communism in general), this notion is set forth as a political noble lie or simply the Lie (again the conspiracy analysis of perestroika), which it is not.

I conclude my essay with four observations. First, here I offer a "high," abstract, and model analysis of perestroika and "democracy," whereas in reality they take place in all symbolic activities: at the heights of pure theory, on all levels of the media, and in the subterranean currents of common beliefs. The media is the most influential factor in shaping public opinion and social and ideological myths and narratives. The general opinion, or doxa, is assumed by faith and is not subjected to the microscope of the intellect. In the rare cases when it is, the analysis is often in the form of general opinion disguised as science or scholarship, and, therefore, the conclusions are predetermined. The doxa is one of the main obstructions of hermeneutic questioning leading to truthful understanding, as Gadamer's *Truth and Method* points out. When doxa triumphs over questioning, it is impossible to ask open questions that lead to new and unexpected answers pointing to the truth. It seems that Eastern European Communism was dismantled without a single shot because by the late 1980s the Third Sophistic had turned "democracy" into a doxa unassailable by questioning.

Second, in the framework of ancient Greece, the Sophistic and philosophy clash as intellectual and ethical positions mostly in the consciousness of the enlightened (as in the writings of Plato), and from there they move to the common people—in courts, politics, and mass celebrations (as in the three domains of rhetoric defined in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*), and in comic entertainment and the education in civic virtues of all free men in the polis (as in the comedy *Clouds* by Aristophanes). The contemporary Third Sophistic, which has colored Eastern European realities since at least the mid-1980s, is a universal discursive phenomenon shaping the lives of some half a billion human beings. This is why it is imperative that the Third Sophistic be studied seriously and honestly.

Third, returning to the noble lie in circulation today, I have to mention two instances of its preservation as a social and political necessity. The first example comes from the thriving contemporary Communism of China, the other from the not-so-thriving contemporary capitalism of the United States. In China, there was no glasnost and perestroika, and the Chinese Communist government never defamed itself or melted into mawkish repentance. This seems to be one of the main reasons for the economic prosperity of that country in recent decades, while the Eastern European countries and the former Soviet republics that rejected the noble lie have fallen into perennial economic and social crises. Certainly, we should distinguish between the true reason for the Chinese boom, the adoption of modern global production and trade, on the one hand, and the official ideology asserting the leading role of the Chinese Communist Party in building a socialism with Chinese specificity, on the other. The second instance of preservation of the noble lie is the well-known fact that since 2007 or 2008 the United States has been agonizing in an economic recession comparable to the Great Depression. Despite the fact that the official American media openly state that the recession was caused by the avarice of banks, the noble lie of democracy—already in the West itself, not in the heads of Eastern Europeans from the mid-1980s onward—which supports these same financial institutions, is never questioned or deconstructed. This gives me hope that the recession will not turn into an apocalypse, as in the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe after the late 1980s.

And fourth, the analysis of the noble lie reminds us of the shortage of disciples of Plato's philosopher and stentorian critics of the Third Sophistic in Eastern Europe in the past several decades. Paradoxically, the unchallenged rule of pseudo-Marxism in the former Soviet Union, which led to the extinction of all other philosophical views, also led to the extinction of the dominant philosophical view itself. Had it been otherwise, had Plato and non-Marxist political theory been better known, most probably the noble lie of Communism would have been preserved in one form or another, and there would have been no glasnost and perestroika. And I would have not written this essay, of course.

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