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SIMONE WEIL AND THE DANGEROUS MYTHS OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

In this article I aim to clarify the role of science and technology in Weil's account of the formation and maintenance of the bureaucratic state as a totalitarian form of State, which allows to identify the similarities between capitalist, fascist and communist regimes. In the first section I characterize Weil's conception of modernity. Having The Need for Roots *as my main reference, first, I reconstruct Weil's conceptualization of human nature, after I explore the meanings and signs of uprootedness and Weil's critique of Marxism. In the second section, I analyze the relationship between Revolution, Totalitarianism and the invention of the bureaucratic State. I retake Weil's critique of Marx and the Marxists arguing that science and technology must be subjected to a new criticism today, for they have been reduced to mere means of a totalitarian logic, which ultimately reinforces social oppression. I conclude by rescuing Weil's defense of the fundamental value of individual freedom and of thought, for our humanity lies in it.*

Keywords: Simone Weil, Bureaucratic State, Freedom, Science, Totalitarianism, Uprootedness

"*There must be thought. Where irrational opinions hold the place of ideas, force is all-powerful*." (Weil 200, 112)

1. Simone Weil's account of modernity

The Need for Roots was first published in 1949, one year before Weil's death. As T. S. Eliot well puts it, it is a piece of political thought that all young people should get acquainted with, while they still have a capacity for thought (Weil 2002, xiii) This book is relevant for our purpose of understanding Weil's account of modernity. Like Arendt said in the prologue of *The Human Condition* (1958), that her purpose was to understand what we are doing[1], Weil's text clearly

[1] In the prologue of *The Human Condition* Arendt says clearly that "What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing." (Arendt 1998, 5).

reflects this intention. To understand what we are doing requires, first and foremost, to understand and bring to clarity how we became what we are, through a critical eye and methodological take. Simone Weil is a daughter of her time; while it is not my task here to offer a biographical portray of her, it is worth noting that Weil was extremely well educated in the contemporary and history of thought, moving from philosophical references to literature, art and history.

The title of the first part of this book is "The needs of the Soul", and the prelude for this discussion is quite revealing – contrary to what became common sense of reclaiming rights as the conceptual starting point (of modernity and contemporary life), Weil argues that we must start with the concept of obligation. Rights belong to an objective order, to the realm of existence and reality; they are always related to conditions that can be met. Obligations, on the other hand, are independent of conditions; "they belong to a realm situated above all conditions, because it is situated above this world." (Weil 2002, 3) Obligations are only binding to human beings; there is no such thing as obligations for collectivities, which is a crucial point to later understand Weil's critique on collectivism in general.

Why is it so important to stress this starting point in Weil's approach? Because the concept of obligation points to a supra-natural sphere – a transcendent, eternal dimension – that is capable of providing meaning and purpose for human existence[2]. It is unconditional, insofar it cannot be referred to a material condition; however, it is equally or more important than material conditions[3].

The beginning of this reflection – on the relation between rights and obligations – separate Weil from the dominant understanding of human nature and politics of her time, namely, from the rationalist tradition that goes back to Descartes and tries to reduce the comprehension of human life to physicalism; to the Marxist tradition that attributes the causes of oppression to exclusively material

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This must be understood not only as a general analysis of human activity, but "a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears." Although Weil did not witness the amplitude of the horror of the Holocaust, she already denounced the totalitarian logic to which Germany, Russia and also France were subsumed under.

[2] Weil says that the eternal obligation is coextensive with the eternal destiny of the human being, which translates itself in respect. (Weil 2002, 5) Because Weil postulates a universal conscience, arguing that it can be identified across history and specially religions, she claims that "it is an eternal obligation towards the human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the chance of coming to his assistance. This obligation being the most obvious of all, it can serve as a model on which to draw up the list of eternal duties towards each human being." (idem)

[3] "This obligation is an unconditional one. If it is founded on something, that something, whatever it is, does not form part of our world. In our world, it is not founded on anything at all. It is the one and only obligation in connection with human affairs that is not subject to any condition. This obligation has no foundation, but only a verification in the common consent accorded by the universal conscience." (Weil 2002, 4)

conditions. Weil's conception of the world unites physics and metaphysics; she is not a reductionist nor does she hide herself in a metaphysical realm avoiding the challenges of concreteness. This relationship between rights and obligations, articulating the two spheres of existence (the temporal and the eternal, the physical and the transcendent), will enlighten Weil's approach to specific problems, as well as her analysis and responses.

1.1. Weil's conceptualization of human nature – on human needs and the role of individual freedom

Positive rights, in Weil's account, are an imperfect expression of the recognition of obligations towards oneself and other human beings. The list of obligations towards the human being corresponds to the list of human needs that are vital and analogous to hunger (Weil 2002, 6) As she puts it

> Obligations, whether unconditional or relative, eternal or changing, direct or indirect with regard to human affairs, all stem, without exception, from the *vital needs* of the human being. Those which do not directly concern this, that or the other specific human being all exist to serve requirements which, with respect to Man, play a role analogous to food. (Weil 2002, 6; my italics)

Human beings have needs – some are physical, others are spiritual. For instance, collectivities are important because they are "food for a certain number of human souls." (Weil 2002, 7) In this sense, they deserve respect, for each collectivity is unique and it is a special task of projecting us into the future. A collectivity "constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead, the sole transmitting agency by means of which the dead can speak to the living." (Weil 2002, 7) However, this does not mean that collectives are more valuable than individuals, for one cannot demand individual sacrifice in the name of the collective body. Also, one must take into account the hypothesis that some collectivities instead of providing food for the soul, "devour souls" (idem) and that others may be "dead", i.e., not fulfilling their purpose.

Weil systematizes the needs of the soul: the first one, according to her, is order, i.e., "a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones. It is only where this, in fact, occurs that external circumstances have any power to inflict spiritual violence on the soul." (Weil 2002, 9) The second need is liberty: "Liberty, taking the word in its concrete sense, consists in the ability to choose. We must understand by that, of course, a real ability. Wherever men are living in community, rules imposed in the common interest must necessarily limit the possibilities of choice."(Weil 2002, 11) Weil argues that liberty is not a lack of limits; on the contrary, it requires recognition of authority of limits and rules, and it is mastered

through habit. In a reminiscence of Aristotle's ethics[4] Weil emphasizes the importance of habit, for liberty is an exercise that reflects the recognition and already incorporation of rules[5]. This leads us to the third need of the soul, which is obedience. Obedience to established rules or to leaders requires consent:

> It requires to be generally recognized, and above all by leaders themselves, that consent and not fear of punishment or hope of reward constitutes, in fact, the mainspring of obedience, so that *submission* may never be mistaken for *servility*. It should also be realized that those who command, obey in their turn, and the whole *hierarchy* should have its face set in the direction of a goal whose importance and even grandeur can be felt by all, from the highest to the lowest. (Weil 2002, 13; my italics)

Weil continues her detailed account of other needs: responsibility, for she considers that one needs to feel useful, otherwise, "political life doesn't hold any meaning" (Weil 2002,14) and equality, saying that it "consists in a recognition, at once public, general, effective and genuinely expressed in institutions and customs, that *the same amount of respect and consideration is due to every human being* because this respect is due to the human being as such and is not a matter of degree." (Weil 2002, 16, my italics)

It is important to stress how related these needs are and how they provide a full characterization of human nature. It is clear that for Weil, individuality – in the sense of individual autonomy and consciousness – can never be subsumed under collective identities. On the contrary, "every social organism, of whatever kind it may be, which does not provide its members with these satisfactions, is diseased and must be restored to health."(Weil 2002, 16) Under this light, social organizations and collectivities play a fundamental role of providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for human individual flourishing. But while equality is important, in the sense of granting respect for each individual, it is not easy nor straightforward to find the balance between the search for equality and the existing differentiations, for it may generate more pernicious kinds of inequalities, which destroy the social and cultural foundations.[6] While equality is a vital need, so it is the need for hierarchism, insofar the human soul looks for symbols

[4] See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* especially Book I.

[5] She says that "the liberty of men of goodwill, though limited in the sphere of action, is complete in that of conscience. For, having incorporated the rules into their own being, the prohibited possibilities no longer present themselves to the mind, and have not to be rejected. Just as the habit, formed by education, of not eating disgusting or dangerous things is not felt by the normal man to be any limitation of his liberty in the domain of food. Only a child feels such a limitation. Those who are lacking in goodwill or who remain adolescent are never free under any form of society."(Weil 2002, 13)

[6] For instance, Weil argues that "By making money the sole, or almost the sole, motive of all actions, the sole, or almost the sole, measure of all things, the poison of inequality has been introduced everywhere." (Weil 2002,16) The question of money will return for it represents a sign of uprootedness.

of something higher than the mere material sphere of life, as well as honor, this recognition of someone's value attached to our past history and tradition.

Weil's account of human needs goes hand in hand with her critique of contemporary social and political life, which is combined with a critique of historical and philosophical legacies. The need for freedom of opinion is particularly exemplary of it, for in this topic Weil clearly portrays the relationship between individual and collectivities in its various forms – associations, political parties, or others. The first thing to notice is that Weil analytically distinguishes freedom of opinion from freedom of association – for her, while the first is a vital need, the second is merely "an expedient employed in the practical affairs of life." (Weil 2002, 21) Freedom of expression is an absolute need of the intelligence.[7] It can only be an attribute of individuals, for only individual beings are intelligent – just like Weil puts it "there is no such thing as a collective exercise of the intelligence. It follows that no group can legitimately claim freedom of expression, because no group has the slightest need of it." (Weil 2002, 25) This has important implications, since the individual should be protected *from* groups who claim or try to have rights to express "their opinions", since "when a group starts having opinions, it inevitably tends to impose them on its members." (idem) Not only that, once opinions of collectivities of groups are imposed upon individuals, then individual intelligence is defeated.[8] Once intelligence is defeated it is only a matter of time until individuals forget about the good and become incapable of recognizing it. That is one, if not the fundamental, argument that Weil uses against political parties and other kind of associations, such as trade-unions. In an echo of Rousseau's conceptualization of the Republic in *The social Contract,* when he argues against deliberation[9] (a practice that our current democracies tend to value and which presupposes communication between men), Weil endorses the position

[7] "Intelligence can be used in three ways: 1. A technical use, as finding means to achieve an end; 2. A practical use, when it must choose what path of action to follow; 3. A theoretical use as pure speculation, operating alone." (Weil 2002, 21)

[8] "The intelligence is defeated as soon as the expression of one's thoughts is preceded, explicitly or implicitly, by the little word 'we'. And when the light of the intelligence grows dim, it is not very long before the love of good becomes lost." (Weil 2002, 26)

[9] See *The Social Contract,* especially chapter III of Book II where Rousseau says that "If citizens deliberate when adequately informed and *without any communication among themselves*, the general will would always result from the great number of slight differences, and the resolution would always be good. But when factions, partial associations, are formed to the detriment of the whole society, the will of each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members, and particular with reference to the State; it may then be said that there are no longer as many voters as there are men, but only as many voters as there are associations." (Rousseau 2002, 173) One observes two concepts of deliberation: Rousseau's, to whom deliberation is an internal process of the subject, without communication, and, on the other hand, a contemporary conceptualization that assumes that deliberation requires communication in the public sphere.

that one must fight against factions that necessarily represent specific interests. While she doesn't mention the term "*volonté générale*" it is clear that she is playing with this idea to advance the argument that political parties should be abolished, while maintaining that the ultimate danger we must be aware and afraid of would be a unique party, for it precludes totalitarianism. Probably reflecting her personal experience of being expelled from the Communist Party and in an attempt to rescue legitimacy for associations, Weil says that

> The authorized existence of associations for promoting ideas could be subject to two conditions. First, that *excommunication may not be applied*. Recruitment would be voluntary and as a result of personal affinity, without, however, making anybody liable to be invited to subscribe to a collection of assertions *crystallized* in written form. But once a member had been admitted, he could not be expelled except for some breach of integrity or undermining activities; which latter offence would, moreover, imply the existence of an illegal organization, and consequently expose the offender to a more severe punishment.
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> This would, in fact, amount to a measure of public safety, experience having shown that totalitarian States are set up by totalitarian parties, and that these totalitarian parties are formed by dint of expulsions for the crime of having an opinion of one's own.
>
> The second condition could be that *ideas must really be put into circulation*, and tangible proof of such circulation given in the shape of pamphlets, reviews or typed bulletins in which problems of general interest were discussed. *Too great a uniformity of opinion would render any such association suspect*. (Weil 2002, 30; my italics)

Weil's defense of individual freedom – of thought and expression – is at the center of her concerns, at the same time she portrays the development and transformation of the French State into a totalitarian bureaucratic machine. It is with this conviction in mind, namely, that only human beings can be *free* and that associations or groups are only instruments and not ends in themselves (Weil 2002, 31) that we should read Weil's work. Without freedom there is no thought, for this is one of the fundamental conditions for being *human*.

1.2. Uprootedness and Weil's critique of Marxism

Other human needs are equally important, such as the need for security, in the sense of not being exposed to fear and terror (Weil 2002, 31), for these sentiments represent a "paralysis of the soul" (Weil 2002, 32); but also the need for risk, which is somehow related to the need of innovation and responsibility previously mentioned. As Weil points out, there is no contradiction between fear and risk, for if risk is totally eradicated from our modes of living, then it weakens courage. Another need, which is important to understand the formation of the State and Weil's positioning *vis-à-vis* Marx's conceptualization, is the need of private property:

> All men have an invincible inclination to appropriate in their own minds anything which over a long, uninterrupted period they have used for their work, pleasure or the necessities of life. (…) Once we recognize private property to be a need, this implies for everyone the possibility of possessing something more than the articles of ordinary consumption. The forms this need takes can vary considerably, depending on circumstances; but it is desirable that the majority of people should own their house and a little piece of land round it, and, whenever not technically impossible, the tools of their trade. (Weil 2002, 33)

Weil conceives private property under the light of legitimacy given by use and personality; in this sense, she is a critic of impersonal property, such as factories owned by individuals who have no attachment with the working process. It is also why Weil recognizes the value of collective ownership, although this is more a matter of "state of mind" than of "legal formula".

Her critique focus also on the lack of connection between property and money – in fact, Weil considers that money, as Marx's characterization of universal equivalent[10], allowed a transformation not only in the productive relationship but also in the relationship one has with oneself, becoming a motive for uprootedness[11]. And having roots is, for her, "the most important and least recognized need of the human soul."(Weil 2002, 40)

> It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. (Weil 2002, 40)

Having roots is a necessary condition for human flourishing, in the sense that one can only develop one's moral, social and political sense by being part of a community. Uprootedness happens in several scenarios: when there is a military conquest (Weil 2002, 41), or when there is economic domination, to the extent that foreign influence determines one's way of being. Simone Weil considers that money is peculiar poison that has the power to spread the disease of uprootedness. She says that

> Money destroys human roots wherever it is able to penetrate, by turning desire for gain into the sole motive. It easily manages to outweigh all other motives, because the effort it demands of the mind is so very much less. Nothing is so clear and so simple as a row of figures. (Weil 2002, 42)

[10] See Marx 2013, especially volume I, part I, chapter 3.

[11] So, what is the criterion for private property? In Weil's words, "The true criterion in regard to property is that it is legitimate so long as it is real. Or, to be more precise, the laws concerning property are so much the better the more advantages they draw from the opportunities offered by the possessions of this world for the satisfaction of the property-need common to all men." (Weil 2002, 34)

Adding to this, one observes other social conditions that foster uprootedness: unemployment, which underlines the lack of utility of the individual, therefore creating an obstacle to a vital need of fulfillment and purpose; and education, which according to Weil has suffered significant transformations since the Renaissance, to the point that individuals become increasingly detached from the world, while being reduced to a specific conception of knowledge and technical science that limits one's horizons and connections to reality[12]. Weil affirms that

> A lot of people think that a little peasant boy of the present day who goes to primary school knows more than Pythagoras did, simply because he can repeat parrot-wise that the earth moves round the sun. In actual fact, he no longer looks up at the heavens. (…) What is called today educating the masses, is taking this modern culture, evolved in such a closed, unwholesome atmosphere, and one *so indifferent to the truth,* removing whatever it may still contain of intrinsic merit – an operation known as popularization – and shovelling the residue as it stands into the minds of the unfortunate individuals desirous of learning, in the same way as you feed birds with a stick. Moreover, *the desire to learn for the sake of learning, the desire for truth, has become very rare*. (Weil 2002, 43; my italics)

Marxism is, according to Weil, a contributor to the chaos of her time, for it is constituted by a set of false ideas dominated by middle-class intellectuals to which the working class could hardly relate to[13]. She does not censor Marx *per se* – instead, she criticizes what interpreters of Marx made of his thought, saying that as it is marxism directly contributes to the uprootedness of the working class (Weil 2002, 44) Uprootedness is, in Weil's account, the worst social disease for it is a "self-propagating one" insofar "Whoever is uprooted himself uproots others. Whoever is rooted himself doesn't uproot others" (Weil 2002, 45) .

Since the Revolution, Weil observes that there were two contradictory movements regarding the working class: on the one hand, the idea that we must transform society "in such a way that the working-class may be given roots in it; while the other consists in spreading to the whole of society the disease of uprootedness which has been inflicted on the working-class." (Weil 2002, 45) These two paths never meet and the second movement has spread with more intensity. On the conservative side a similar bias happens: on the one hand, they project a future based on a fictitious past; on the other, they simply want to maintain the *status quo*.

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[12] "The result has been a culture which has developed in a very restricted medium, removed from the world, in a stove-pipe atmosphere – a culture very strongly directed towards and influenced by technical science, very strongly tinged with pragmatism, extremely broken up by specialization, entirely deprived both of contact with this world and, at the same time, of any window opening on to the world beyond."(Weil 2002, 42)

[13] For Weil Marxism is "devoid of any nutritive value, for it has been emptied of nearly all the truth contained in Marx's writings. From time to time, a scientific presentation for popular consumption is added. The effect of all this can only be to bring about the most intense uprootedness among the working-class." (Weil 2002, 44)

In Weil's reading, what happen in France in June 1940 is an example of how French society was uprooted:

> If France offered a spectacle more painful than that of any other European country, it is because modern civilization with all its toxins was in a more advanced stage there than elsewhere, with the exception of Germany. But in Germany, uprootedness had taken on an aggressive form, whereas in France it was characterized by inertia and stupor. (Weil 2002, 45-6)

In France the working class has been cut away from its roots, just like the peasants. And across Europe and other continents – Asia and America – the same phenomenon happens with punctual differences. What the phenomenon of uprootedness forces us to confront is the relationship we have with our own past, with the past of our community, our traditions and our history[14]. Weil tells us that

> It would be useless to turn one's back on the past in order simply to concentrate on the future. It is a dangerous illusion to believe that such a thing is even possible. The opposition of future to past or past to future is absurd. The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing; it is we who in order to build it have to give it everything, our very life. But *to be able to give, one has to possess*; and we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated and created afresh by us. *Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past.*
>
> Love of the past has nothing to do with any reactionary political attitude. Like all human activities, the revolution draws all its vigor from a tradition. Marx felt this so strongly that he was determined to make this tradition go back to the remotest times by making class-war the one and only principle by which to explain history. (Weil 2002, 47-8, my italics)

Marx's error or bad faith was to imagine that the remedy for the class-war was the legal abolition of private property and the State, for as Weil affirms, the remedy for proletarian distress is not really material, but from another dimension[15] (Weil 2002, 50). The problem with postulating the proletariat as revolutionary class is that

> It is no use attempting to discover in the demands put forward by the workers the cure for their misfortune. Plunged in misfortune body and soul, including the imagination, how should they be able to imagine anything which didn't bear misfortune's mark? If they make a violent effort to extri-

[14] "The past once destroyed never returns. The destruction of the past is perhaps the greatest of all crimes. Today the preservation of what little of it remains ought to become almost an obsession." (Weil 2002, 48)

[15] "Marx would perfectly well have understood this if he had been intellectually honest with himself, for it is a truth which bursts forth in the best pages of his Capital."(Weil 2002, 50)

> cate themselves therefrom, they fall into apocalyptic reverie, or seek compensation in a working-class imperialism which is no more to be encouraged than a national imperialism. (Weil 2002, 50)

The problem with uprootedness is that it captures one of modernity's defining characteristics, namely, "the fact and feeling of homelessness." (Zaretsky 2021, 157) Indeed, the act of uprooting is not only physical, but also social and psychological; it represents a *mode of being* and a process of adjusting to a world that thinks about itself through technical lenses. Indeed, the ""rationalization and industrialization of the workplace grinds into bits the moral roots of countless workers." (Zaretsky 2021, 157) This means that there is a gap between subject and object, as well as an inversion on the relationship between means and ends. Weil introduces the category of idolatry to point to absence of consciousness on how we relate to work. While she criticizes what many interpreters made of Marx, she also rescues the marxist concept of alienation as symbolic example of the problem. This same concern is not new to Marx nor to Weil; already Tocqueville in the 1830's had pointed out in *Democracy in America* how political liberty through the experience of civic associations is the necessary condition to maintain a society *democratic* and to avoid a total state, marked by bureaucratic centralization[16]. In the following section we will account for the transformations of the French State and show the link between the bureaucratic state and the establishment of a totalitarian logic.

2. Revolution, Totalitarianism and the invention of the Bureaucratic State

In *The Need for Roots* one finds recurrent mentions to the history of France in the pre and post-revolutionary period. Contrary to Arendt's account presented in *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), which claimed that totalitarianism was a specific event of the XX century, Weil thinks that the totalitarian impulse and set of strategies, despite their punctual differences due to the historical *a priori*, was already present in France history, specially represented in the figure of Richelieu. When she notes the "totalitarian phenomenon of the State", her concern was not in distinguishing the different forms of government (democracy versus aristocracy or monarchy) but instead, to show "how states managed to become totalitarian or fascist in the twentieth century. " (Ford 2020, 169)

For Weil there is a totalitarianism of the State form itself. It is in this sense that she argues that the "strange spectacle" of the State – from Richelieu to the rise of fascism in the 1930s – has shown itself continually to be a "*self-same* inhumane, brutal, bureaucratic, police-ridden" apparatus which, "under the name of

[16] Robert Putnam latter in the XX century, in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000), portrays the decay of American associations, representing an increase of uprootedness or lost of social capital.

patrie, demanded absolute loyalty, total self-abnegation [...]." (Weil 2002, 124) It is worth nothing at this point that there is an analytical distinction between *la patrie* (fatherland), *la nation* (nation), and *l'État* (State). *La nation* is a result of smaller collectivities such as the family, the village or the province; under this light, it admits more diffuse forms of loyalty, for it allows differences to coexist. The nation has a crucial mission of maintaining the links between past and future, it creates a safe environment for individual flourishing due to its permanence and tradition (Weil 2002, 96). On the other hand, the State is an artificial construction which requires from its members, as its own condition of possibility, the recognition of itself as the only authority to which they are subjected to. The State, Weil argues, sets

> itself up as an absolute value in this world, that is, as an object of idolatry", insofar it replaces all other bonds of attachment. Between the State – as new artificial figure – and money (a cause for uprootedness), the new singular value of the State invites idolatry for it functions as "a nationalist *ideology* achieved through a determination of historical time. (Ford 2020, 169-170)

At the core of Weil's *The Need for Roots* we can thus find a concern with a temporal theft executed by the State, one that resonates with Friedrich Nietzsche's observation that "the state tells lies in all the tongues of good and evil [and] whatever it has it has stolen," leading to a "slow suicide of all" which is then "called 'life'". (Nietzsche in Ford 2020, 171) For Weil, the invention of the State obliges a reconstruction of the past in order to appropriate it. Ford tells us that

> For the State to ground and legitimate itself as an absolute, the past must be reconstituted as the *past of the State*. From the vantage of its power in the present, the State thus projects itself into time immemorial, reorienting the wealth of historical knowledge as an anticipation of its own accomplishment, and mobilizing the past for the sake of its conquest of the future. The past becomes more than a heterogeneous volume of events, turning points, and antagonisms; the past itself functions as the ground on which the State inscribes its own destiny." (Ford 2020, 172)

The reconstruction of the past always happens through ideological lenses, where events are kept and others are erased, according to the State's present interests. "For several centuries now," Weil notes, "[men] have everywhere destroyed the past, stupidly, blindly, both at home and abroad. [...] The past once destroyed never returns. The destruction of the past is perhaps the greatest of all crimes." (Weil 2002, 48) The revolutionary patriotism, for instance, is a symptom of this destruction, for in the revolutionary task of creating an entirely "new" people, the past is forgotten. Revolutionary patriotism – the forging of the "French People", during the Revolution – projects a future that is predetermined, therefore undermining all individual and collective freedom; the State, in this sense, captures the future in a strict ideological manner and it uproots even more its members.

The invention of "la patrie" and the State, which is parallel with the invention of the "French citizen" and the Republic, was possible by totally redefining the relationship between nature, virtue and politics. Elsewhere (see Costa 2021) I had the opportunity of showing how terror was an inevitable outcome of the Jacobin ideology. Given that revolutionaries had no historical references of the Republic, they had to invent it, by imagining (poorly) a new kind of relationship between the hypothetical laws of nature with its political counterpart[17]. Rousseau, as well as the *encyclopédistes*, became a great influence in this project of creating something radically new, inventing freedom *in* equality, *as if,* the order of nature (as order of natural freedom) could be replicated in the invention of the republic and in particular, in the invention of the concept of "volonté générale". What they didn't realize is that natural freedom is no freedom at all, for freedom requires, as its necessary condition, limits that only a moral and political order may positively declare. As we saw in the first section, freedom is a vital need that requires rules and order. The French Republic was invented having Terror and violence as its privileged means of action – for it was the only thing capable of erasing – by killing – the memories of the past. The new man emerged from the ashes of burning all signs of a previous order. The regime became "ancien" because those who could still reclaim its existence were obliterated, not only from life but from the books of history. They appeared only under the light of the new order – which embraced the task of writing its past according to its ideological intent projected into the future.

At this point it is important to notice that the revolution was supported and fed by "ideas" that claimed to have a "scientific status". The goal of the *encyclopédistes* was not only to "democratize knowledge" but also to reestablish the grounds for knowledge, science, politics and morals. That implied the adoption of a revisionist attitude. While Weil does not speak in these terms, it is clear that revisionism is a great part of what directly contributed to the re-writing of history and to the redefinition of one's relation to one's own past and sense of belonging to a tradition. Briefly, one finds in the French Revolution the implementation of a new method – via destruction, terror and war – and a new order, that represented, on its turn, the culmination of a historical process of uprootedness.

However, it would be a mistake to jump to the conclusion that totalitarianism emerges only from a formal republican or democratic form of government, as in the French case. On the contrary, given that totalitarian predispositions of the organization of the State converge in the redefinition of the relationship between past, present and future, then, all forms of government can give birth to this phenomenon. In *Oppression and Liberty* (1955)*,* Weil provides a sustained critique of the utopianism of revolutionary thought and politics. While her focus in

[17] For a reading on the relationship between nature, virtue and terror see Edelstein 2009.

this book was more on socialist praxis, Weil identifies the same passionate and affective relationship toward the future. Ford tells us that

> this is a kind of relationship chiefly defined by an awaiting, a passive expectation that the pains of the political present will be alleviated by the promise of a utopian future. In these instances, the future is conceived as ameliorative and redemptive despite what can be accomplished here and now. The future is invoked as something in which all three dimensions of time (the tragic past, the frustrating present, the anxious future) are resolved in a kind of fantasy order-word. In short, the future is imbued with a determinate image of what the present *should* be, an answer to the insoluble problem that time poses to us in every instance. (Ford 2020, 178)

This supports Weil's claim that all forms of State may conduct us to totalitarianism. Despite the tensions between the "capitalist" and the "communist" narrative that shaped the early of XX century, Weil argued that this opposition – as if there was only two options, the capitalist state and the worker's state – was *false*. The modern state was neither "capitalist" nor "worker" controlled, but in fact was of a third sort. Fascism was no more the "last card of capitalism" than Stalinism was a bureaucratic deformation of the proletarian dictatorship. Both were in fact new social forms which represented the true revolution of the twentieth century: a revolution of cadres, of bureaucratic elites, not of the proletariat. As Weil puts in in *Oppression and Liberty*

> Throughout history men have struggled, suffered and died to free the oppressed. Their efforts, when they did not remain sterile, have never led to anything except the replacing of one oppressive regime by another. Marx, who had observed this, thought he was able to demonstrate scientifically that things were different in our day, and that the struggle of the oppressed would now lead to a true emancipation, not to a new oppression. *It is this idea, which we have preserved as an article of faith, that we need to examine afresh, unless we mean systematically to close our eyes to the events of the past twenty years.* (Weil 2001, 2; my italics)

What history has shown is that the revolutionary ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity (of the French Revolution) as well as the struggle to fight social oppression (as the Russian Revolution) have been deformed to the extent that they are hardly recognizable:

> instead of a communist party destined to rally together, for the purposes of free co-operation, men possessing the highest degree of devotion, conscientiousness, culture, and critical aptitude, there is a *mere administrative machine*, a passive instrument in the hands of the Secretariat, which, as Trotsky himself admits, is a party only in name; instead of soviets, unions and co-operatives functioning democratically and directing the economic and political life of the country, there are organizations bearing, it is true,

> the same names, but reduced to *mere administrative mechanisms*; instead of the people armed and organized as a militia to ensure by itself alone defence abroad and order at home, there is a standing army, and a police force freed from control and a hundred times better armed than that of the Tsar; lastly, and above all, instead of elected officials, permanently subject to control and dis- missal, who were to ensure the functioning of government until such time as "every cook would learn how to rule the State", there is a *professional bureaucracy, freed from responsibility, recruited by co-option and possessing, through the concentration in its hands of all economic and political power*, a strength hitherto unknown in the annals of history. (Weil 2001, 4; my italics)

What Marx considered to be the obstacle of socialism, namely, the "bureaucratic and military machine", became the *status quo* and *modus operandi* of Stalin, who created a state more oppressive than that denounced in the capitalist regime. Weil gives the benefit of the doubt to Marx, arguing that he could have not imagined nor predicted that the revolutionary elite would become the great oppressor of humanity (for let us recall that the proletariat, for Marx, represented humanity as such). But she is blunt arguing that what turned out to be the technocrat elites, whether in Communist, Fascist or Capitalist regimes – created a new and more total system of oppression exercised in the name of "management". For Weil, this is what characterizes the modern state of the XX century: not only the idolatry of itself while promoting the uprootedness of its members, by limiting their political and cultural imagination to the products created with a specific ideological intent (namely, to superpose the strong State over the symbolic, real and fragile nation), but also the new mechanisms used – namely, bureaucracy and the logic of management across all spheres of the social and political body – that paradoxically ended up by placing different classes in a common plight, which most Marxists were not even capable of considering:

> ... workers are becoming more and more lacking in technical knowledge, the technicians'(…) proficiency is in many cases limited to a quite restricted field; in America, they have even set about producing specialized engineers – just like ordinary unskilled men – in a certain category of machines, and, what is significant, the U.S.S.R. has hastened to copy America in this respect. Moreover, it goes without saying that the technicians are ignorant of the theoretical basis of the knowledge which they employ. The scientists, in their turn, not only remain out of touch with technical problems, but are furthermore entirely deprived of that general view of things which is the very essence of theoretical culture. One could count on one's fingers the number of scientists throughout the world with a general idea of the history and development of their particular science: there is none who is really competent as regards sciences other than his own. As science forms an indivisible whole, one may say that there are no longer, strictly speaking, scientists but only unskilled hands doing scientific work, cogs in

> a whole which their minds are quite incapable of embracing. (Weil 2001, 12; my italics)

Weil's account forces us to rethink Marx's legacy and certainly invites us to critically reconsider what turned out to be the set of dogmas to marxists, namely, the blind attack on capitalism – as if it were the main "evil" to overcome – while purposely ignoring the concrete harm caused by communism, starting with more than one hundred million deaths perpetrated by the regime across the globe in the past century. Her thought is exemplary in the ways she associates events, current practices and theoretical references. As it is clear in the above citation, workers (as proletarians) are not the only examples of oppression; this category can be extended to other categories, from technicians to engineers and scientists. This suggests that oppression is not only visible in its "material" conditions – for instance, how many hours or under which conditions do people work – but also in its ideological and/or spiritual conditions. If our common goal is to eliminate or reduce oppression – as something that is an obstacle to the fulfillment of human, vital needs, both in its material and spiritual aspects – then we must understand not only the origins of the problem – uprootedness in its several dimensions – but also its manifestations. In particular, we must follow Weil's suggestion that what is needed – in her time as well as our own – is a critique of science and technology. Just as Marx criticized religion as the starting-point from which ideas spread, for it is there one finds the ground for the concept of authority, so we must do the same thing to science and technology, which now have occupied the space of religion. Science and technology ultimately represent the arms of the of the bureaucratic, totalitarian, state.

3. The myths of Science and Technology

I argued in the previous section that revolutionary politics was justified by "science", or, it would be better to say, revolutionary agents presented their agenda in "scientific terms" in order not only to justify, but also to claim a legitimacy to their actions, which involved violence, terror and destruction. When Jacobins reinvent the relationship between nature, virtue and politics, they make converge natural laws with scientific laws and they present themselves as "representatives" of humankind. Let us recall that the "Ideology" was a concept invented by Antoine Destutt de Tracy, in 1796, standing for a "science of ideas", which as expression of a rational system would be directly opposed to the irrational impulses of the mob[18].

Engels, on its turn, "declaimed at Marx's graveside in Highgate Cemetery that "just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature,

[18] For a detailed account on the evolution of the concept of ideology see Freeden 2003.

so Marx discovered the law of development of human history." (Engels in Thomas 2008, 2) The attempts of implementing this "scientific socialism" in the XX century had terrible results, and while one may find excuses on the "means" chosen to do so, at the root of the problem is exactly the idea that it is not only possible but also desirable to "replicate" in society the kind of laws one finds (or postulates) in nature. Weil was clearly against this determinism implicit in Marxism *à la* Engels, for it excluded what she valued the most, namely, individual freedom and the humans' natural search for truth (as for the good). But nonetheless, as Thomas points out, scientific socialism "became an article of faith among political stalwarts and academicians. The concept became pregnant." (Thomas 2008, 4) The revolutionary agenda was portrayed through "scientific" clothes or aspirations and received as such. It became a dogma to which one could appeal and use "in order to guarantee methodological certainty and doctrinal orthodoxy of a certain type." (Thomas 2008, 10).

The transformations of the State, as we have previously shown, reflected the phenomenon of uprootedness, either in one's relation to one's history, tradition, occupation/work, but also visible in one's ideas or their absence. Let us recall that not only France but Europe in general was marked by a process of secularization, where matters of conscience and faith were relegated to the individual sphere. Ultimately, this led to Marx's critique of religion, for he argued, after Feuerbach (see Feuerbach 1881), that religion was a mere projection of human beings, without real, distinguished content from them. Under this light, the criticism of religion was seen as the premise of all criticism. Simone Weil takes Marx's criticism as example and argues that "science has become the most modern form of the consciousness of man who has not yet found himself or has once again lost himself, to apply Marx's telling ducting concerning religion." (Weil 2001, 33) According to her,

> present-day science can serve very suitably as a theology for our more and more *bureaucracy-ridden society*, if it is true, as Marx wrote in his youth, that "the universal soul of bureaucracy is secrecy, mystery, inwardly through its hierarchical system, outwardly through its character of closed corporation". More generally, the condition of all privilege, and consequently of all oppression, is the existence of a corpus of knowledge essentially closed to the *working masses,* which thus *find themselves compelled to believe just in the same way as they are forced to obey.* Religion, nowadays, no longer suffices to fill this role, and science has taken its place. That is why Marx's excellent observation about *the criticism of religion, as being the condition of all criticism, must be extended also to include modern science. Socialism will not even be conceivable as long as science has not been stripped of its mystery*. (Weil 2001, 33-4; my italics)

Science took the place of religion as the arm of the totalitarian bureaucratic State. The key element to notice is that unless one subjects science and technology to

criticism, all hopes of human emancipation or of overcoming of social oppression are doomed.

If we recall, Marx had a positive understanding of technology, for it was technological development that ultimately would allow to free individuals from their alienated forms olabor[19]. If in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* Marx characterizes with a certain detail the several conceptualizations of alienation and estrangement, by pointing out the separation between the individual from his labor product, as well as from his fellow human beings, in *Capital,* for instance, it is possible to envision a positive role of technology. As Amy Wendling puts it

> technology need not be capitalist technology, developed at the expense of working-class human beings and nature, and deployed for the end of perpetuating class oppression and maximizing profit. In other words, for Marx, science and technology are potentially liberatory forces allied to the expanded but still recognizably humanist project of resisting capitalism. (Wendling 2009, 10)

However, looking at the development of the past century, one observes marxists replicating his critique of alienation without really taking into consideration the radical changes and technological advances as well as its impact in the ways we think about and actually make science. Not only that, as Weil points out, socialists and capitalists accept one premise without questioning, namely, the premise of unlimited increase in productivity. She says that

> our so-called scientific culture has given us this fatal habit of generalizing, of arbitrarily extrapolating, instead of studying the conditions of a given phenomenon and the limits implied by them; and Marx, whose dialectical method should have saved him from such an error, fell into it on this point just like other people. (Weil 2001, 45)

For Weil, this represents a distortion of modern scientific culture. Adding to this, Weil calls our attention to the fact that Marx and marxists do not really address the fundamental questions, namely, "to know in what technical progress consists, what factors play a part in it, and to examine each factor separately; for we mix up under the name of technical progress entirely different procedures that offer different possibilities of development." (Weil 2001, 46) Marxists, as all progressive contemporary thinkers that advocate for the end of social oppression, are blind to the origins, process and ends of technological and scientific matters. Let me conclude by mentioning two examples. First, regarding labor conditions, *as if* they were a symptom of the level of alienation or estrangement. Today, we observe changes in the forms of

[19] In a specific chapter on Marx and Hegel I offer an account of technology in Marx's theory (Costa 2016,170-185).

work; technological developments allow for the increase of productivity, the implementation of robotics and artificial intelligence corresponds to Marx's dream of emancipating men from the most repetitive, boring and unthoughtful forms of work. In this sense, technological development may be seen as a positive contribution insofar individuals become free to pursue other forms of meaningful work. At the same time, the progressive decoupling of productivity from employment may cause severe social and political damages, since the stability of our economic system depends on keeping a certain level of unemployment. Also, the fact that many industries have replaced manpower by machines or automatic sources, does not mean that all individuals find purposeful activities in their jobs. If one looks at how labor relations are constituted today, in a hypothetical equivalent to Marx's "proletariat" but with the necessary sensitivity that forces us to expand its horizon and include the "precariat", to borrow Guy Standing's expression (Standing 2014), one can conclude that social oppression is still to be abolished. Let us recall the recent complaints against big corporations such as Amazon, that require "robot like" responses from humans, not granting them the necessary time to fulfill biological needs such as eating or going to the restroom (see Sainato 2020). As Zaretsky puts it

> No matter how humane the intentions of an organization, no matter whether society is ordered on capitalist or socialist lines, oppression will not disappear. Oppression is nothing less than the sharp edge of force, and force is a natural, not social phenomenon. (Zaretsky, 2021, 117)

Second, oppression happens not only in its visible manifestations – as work relations – but also invisible ones, namely, through the ways scientific knowledge and technological development are produced. Weil stressed the point that the bodies of "knowledge" are used to perpetuate the power, privileges and authority of certain elites. Today, the situation got worse because they are no longer limited to national frontiers. Weil states that

> Science is a monopoly, not because public education is badly organized, but by its very nature; n*on-scientists have access only to the results, not to the methods, that is to say they can only believe, not assimilate.* "Scientific socialism" has itself remained the monopoly of a select few, and the "intellectuals" possess, unfortunately, the same privileges in the working-class movement as they do in bourgeois society. And the same applies, furthermore, on the political plane. (Weil 2001, 40; my italics)

Unless one fights the monopolies of science – as well as its technological outputs – there are no possibilities for escaping alienation nor of creating a conscious and free life. As an example, one may think about the strange claim during the pandemic (2020-2022) that "Science" could not be contested, while maintaining the causes and effects, both of covid19 as well as possible "treatments" and "vaccines" out of the horizon of public discussion. Only one

opinion – which appeared or was fabricated as "truth" – was allowed, and that was the opinion kept by the same laboratories (Big Pharma) that were the interested part in the commercialization of vaccines, for instance. Another example can be found in BigTechs. Is is common knowledge that algorithms are not neutral, however, Elon Musk, after buying Twitter, was the only one who opened the algorithm to the public (see Clark 2023).

What Weil brings to the table of discussion is the fact that by blindly accepting "science" as the new dogma, one not only becomes incapable of raising certain questions – for the "historical *a priori"* does not allow it, as it also turns more difficult for the individual to *think*. Let us recall that to think is, for Weil, what makes us human, and to express our thought is a human need. Besides that, it is, as if, the religious age of scientific belief stoped people from confronting the real problems of the working class, a fact that Marx was incapable of addressing. Weil, on the contrary, alerts us to what must be considered as variable in this struggle against oppression. To start with, Weil is sceptic about

> the ability of the elites of modern industrial societies to come to grips with the problems of the working class. This was not a matter of ideologies, nor even of the level of technical progress; it had to do with the most basic mechanisms of modern industrial society and the modern scientific culture in both the West and the East. She concluded that workers simply had to be skeptical of intellectuals and technicians, whatever their intentions, belief-systems, politics or rhetoric. Capitalist industrialists could always subsidize, or totalitarian states promote, technical experts who would seek to have "scientific rules" applied to the workers. But workers, she thought, should never have confidence in technicians or intellectuals regulating matters of vital importance to themselves. (Hellman 1982, 35)

Weil was suspicious of the narrative of progress, for the forces leading technological development were blind to the reality of workers. What is specific of her approach is that she confronts the suffering of the working classes while maintaining intact the role and place of individuals – she does not think of "workers" as collectivities, for as we mentioned in the beginning of this article, the term "collectivity" can be equated to "blind social mechanism". The ways in which all forms of government – from Nazi Germany, to Communist Russia or Liberal Western democracies – appropriate this concept and make use of it in order to guide masses, reminds us of Arendt's critique in *Origins of Totalitarianism* as well as *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* where a precondition for the success of the totalitarian State is "thoughtlessness", i.e., a condition of non-thought. Under the spell of Science, Technology and Progress, which still resonates with us today (perhaps in a even higher tone) individuals are absorbed by abstract collectivities and invited, through propaganda, mass media or "globalized" news and other means of social control, to

refuse their own ability to think. Zaretsky points to Weil's pertinence, when he says

> In a startling anticipation of our own age, Weil declares: "With the popular press and the wireless, you can make a whole people swallow with their breakfast or supper a series of ready-made and, by the same token, absurd opinions." As to whether these new forms of communication can be used for good, Weil's response is pitiless: 'You cannot with the aid of these things arouse so much as a gleam of thought.' (Zaretsky 2021, 115)

So we are led to a final question: If today's elites cannot be trusted, and if our world seems to be converging towards a totalitarian form of government, escaping all forms of accountability, what can be done? The answer can be found in Weil's written words:

> Man has nothing essentially individual about him, nothing which is absolutely his own apart from the faculty of thinking, and this society on which he is in close dependence every minute of his existence depends in turn a little on him from the moment his thinking is necessary to it. (Weil in Zaretsky 2021, 127)

There is one quality, Weil believed, that we bring to the world that no other creature can: thought. It is this experience, which constitutes a vital human need, that may rescue us from blindness and from a meaninglessness life. Human beings search for meaning and purpose – this can only be found – or discovered – once each individual embraces the task of understanding one's history and develop a perspective on facts, not as something "objective" but as something relative to us, i.e., as events that find their meaning in how we judge them, according to good and evil. Ultimately, Simone Weil forces us to revisit the original and eternal question of philosophy, of what life is worth living.

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