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Dialectics of the Dictator: Sartre's Stalin, Marx's Louis Bonaparte and the Rise of Authoritarianism

Abstract: This paper offers a comparative analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's portrayal of Stalin in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and Karl Marx's account of Louis Bonaparte in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, in order to clarify the philosophical and political stakes of Sartre's engagement with Marxism. Rather than asking whether Sartre was a "true" Marxist, the paper investigates how both thinkers address the dialectical relationship between revolutionary movements and the emergence of authoritarianism. By extending Sartre's concepts of "deviation" and "incarnation" to Marx's analysis, I show that both authors reject teleological narratives of history, including Hegel's notion of "World-Historical Individuals", and instead develop a theory of dialectical singularity. Their accounts of Stalin and Louis Bonaparte reveal how revolutionary praxis can be derailed by internal contradictions and external circumstances, producing leaders who simultaneously embody and deform the revolutionary impulse. Ultimately, the paper argues that Marx's and Sartre's enquiries entail a critical understanding of the relationship between historical progress and the rise of authoritarianism, one that frames it as a non-linear, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon.

Keywords: Marx; Sartre; Authoritarianism; Dialectics; Progress

The riddle of Sartre's commitment to Marxism is far from being resolved. The reason behind this persisting problem does not lie only in the many methodological complexities that divide existentialism from Marx's theory but also mirrors the general trend that characterised the history of Marxism after the Second World War. Indeed, as Eric Hobsbawm observed, the history of Marxist theory between 1945 and 1983 is characterised by the gradual disintegration of its status as a cohesive and internationally binding orthodoxy[1].

Sartre can arguably be regarded as a major chapter in the history of the thinkers (labelled "New Marxists"[2]) that have contributed to the *pluralisa-*

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[1] E. Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2011, pp. 369-384.
[2] Ivi, p. 372.

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tion of Marxism. Hobsbawm points out that these theorists were usually trained philosophers who contributed to Marxism by confronting it with other theories, among which he lists existentialism[3]. Although his ultimate opinion of the consciously heterodox Marxists of the second half of the 20th century is favourable[4], Hobsbawm also points out that «not only the nature of their Marxism but their actual relation to Marxism was sometimes unclear»[5].

It is precisely this *unclearness* that has fuelled the discussion over Sartre's embracing of Marx: is it a convincing attempt to bridge two apparently opposed philosophies or a *captatio benevolentiae* needed – almost hypocritically – for developing a critical social thought? In this paper, I do not wish to join directly the debate but rather to offer a comparison of Sartre's analysis of Stalin and Marx's explanation of Louis Bonaparte's rise to power. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the debate on the authenticity of Sartre's Marxism by pointing out that his work was not merely written in a *Marxist* hue, but that it sought to analyse questions and address problems that were strictly *Marxian* – such as the dialectical emergence of authoritarianism from the very conditions of revolution.

The discussion will thus be organised in three sections. The first (§1) aims at framing the debate on the depth of Sartre's Marxism and justifying the choice of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* as a touchstone for the enquiry. Later (§2) I will delve into Sartre's depiction of Stalin presented in *Critique*'s second book and compare it with Marx's description of Louis Bonaparte, by extending the Sartrean concepts of "deviation" and "incarnation" to Marx I will stress how both thinkers conceive the rise of the authoritarian leaders as a dialectical *deviation* from revolution (may it be bourgeois or proletarian). In doing so, I will emphasise their shared rejection of Hegel's notion of "World-Historical Individuals" and suggest that both pursue an anti-reductionist account of history that foregrounds the singularity of those who enact it. Finally (§3), I will argue that both Sartre and Marx resist linear, causal explanations of historical change. Instead, they advance a theory in which past historical moments continue to haunt the present, shaping and constraining contemporary praxis.

[3] *Ibidem*. He also openly refers to Sartre when listing the author that have contributed to this process: ivi, p. 366, p. 371.
[4] Ivi, p. 376.
[5] Ivi, p. 371.

1. *Is "Marxist existentialism" a* contradictio in adiecto*?*

Sartre's attempt to reconcile Marxism with existentialism unfolds in a polemical register: *Search for a Method* is written both in the name of Marx and against mid-twentieth century Marxists - especially those who, in their pursuit of orthodoxy, have transformed the dynamic and temporal character of Marxism into a static, ahistorical, quasi-Platonic doctrine of eternal and universal forms. Against such tendencies, Sartre reaffirms Marx's philosophy as «the one philosophy of our time which we cannot go beyond»[6].

Sartre's ambition is to integrate existentialist philosophical anthropology into the framework of Marxism. In Chiodi's words, Sartre seeks to «establish the existentialist problematic as a critical tool for demolishing the bloc of adherents to the theory and practice of the absolute truth of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalinism»[7]. Clearly, the main methodological problem faced by existential Marxism concerns the tension between the quasi-solipsistic individualism of Sartre's "pure" existentialism (i.e. as presented in *Being and Nothingness*) and the later focus on the collective authorship of history offered in *Critique*[8]. The difficulty in addressing this *prima facie* unsolvable contradiction has led many commentators to claim that Sartre never truly (one is tempted to say, *authentically*) embraced Marxism.

[6] Ivi, p. xxxiv. For discussion see L. Basso, *Inventing the New: History and Politics in Jean-Paul Sartre*, translated by D. Mesing, Brill, Leiden Boston 2024, pp. 19-31.

[7] P. Chiodi, *Sartre and Marxism*, translated by K. Soper, The Harvester Press, Hassocks 1976, p. 108.

[8] In *Critique* this topic is largely addressed in the well-known pages on Place Saint-Germain bus stop: J.-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith, edited by Jonathan Ree, Verso Books, London and New Tork 2004, pp. 256-269 (hereafter "CDR I"). Clearly, this does not mean that the ideas presented in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* are exclusively discussed in that context. On the contrary, topics similar to them are widely discussed and analysed by Sartre in multiple works written between the 50s and the 70s. For instance, the problem concerning "singularity" and its relationship with universality is analysed in *Singular Universal*, similarly Sartre's three-volumes study of Flaubert deals with the question of how individuality is intertwined with social and historical conditions; see J.-P. Sartre, *Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal*, translated by J. Matthews, Verso Books, London and New York 1974, pp. 141-169; J.-P. Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857*, vols. 1-5, translated by C. Cosman, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981. For discussion see L. Fretz, *Individuality in Sartre's philosophy* in C. Howells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 67-99 and M. Russo, F. Tava, *Fraternity-without-Terror: A Sartrean Account of Political Solidarity* in «The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology», n. 54, vol. 3, 2023, pp. 234-248.

In recent years, this controversy has been revived in 2019 by Alfred Betschart[9]. In his paper, Betschart provides a precious reconstruction of the many essays that, already during the years of Sartre's popularity as a Marxist *engagée* intellectual, negatively answered the question about the purity of his Marxism. An array of essayists – ranging from the French Stalinists to the Polish writer Adam Schaff and the Croatian unorthodox Marxist Danilo Pejović – as well as two philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Raymond Aron (both of whom were friends and severe critics of Sartre), claimed that he simply failed to make his philosophy entirely coherent with Marxism[10].

Betschart's own argument belongs to this line of thought. He claims that Sartre's attitude in *Critique* is too distant from the general tone that characterises Marx's works and that his usage of the concepts of scientific socialism is overly free and, ultimately, unfaithful[11].

For all these reasons Betschart is prompted to conclude that «Sartre, deep down, feels his existentialist method to be superior to the Marxist one»[12], thus *Search for a Method* and the two volumes of *Critique* are not an attempt to marry Marxism and existentialism but rather to state that the latter *is* the philosophical synthesis needed for the *engagement*, while the former is the real «parasitical system (…) on the margin of Knowledge»[13] and as so has to be considered. In conclusion, Betschart claims that Sartre's political position is best described as *anarchist*[14] and that his self-professed Marxism must be understood as a «*captatio benevolentiae*»[15] fuelled not by an inner conviction that Marx proposes "the philosophy of our time" but

[9] A. Betschart, *Sartre was not a Marxist* in «Sartre Studies International», n. 25/2, 2019, pp. 77-91. The paper appeared as a critique of an article by Aronson published in *The Boston Review*: R. Aronson, *The Philosophy of our Time* in «Boston Review», November 2018, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/ronald-aronson-when-existentialism-met-marxism/> (last accessed 30.09.2025). Aronson eventually replied: R. Aronson, *Revisiting Existential Marxism: A Reply to Alfred Betschart* in «Sartre Studies International», vol. 2, n. 25, 2019, pp. 92-98.

[10] Betschart, *Sartre was not a Marxist*, cit., p. 78.

[11] More specifically, Betschart lists the substitution of 'class' with 'series' and Sartre's mistrust both in Marx's view of history-as-progress and in his economic determinism as proofs: ivi, p. 85.

[12] Betschart, *Sartre was not a Marxist*, cit., p. 86.

[13] Sartre, *SfM*, cit., p. 8.

[14] According to Betschart this is proved not only by Sartre's work but even more blatantly by his political positioning in the 70's, especially in P. Gavi, J.-P. Sartre and P. Victor, *On a raison de se révolter*, Gallimard, Paris 1974, pp. 77-78.

[15] Betschart, *Sartre was not a Marxist*, cit., p. 84.

rather by a partial overlapping of positions and values between Sartre and the Communists[16].

Aronson has replied to Betschart's claim that «existentialist Marxism or Marxist existentialism are cases of a *contradictio in adiecto*»[17] by stressing Sartre's *historicization* of Marxism and stating that "defining him is less important than recognizing that he was committed to creating an *existential* Marxism still committed to human self-determination"[18]. According to Aronson, the question does not concern whether Sartre's thought can be characterised as essentially Marxist – we can indeed delineate within the history of Sartre's philosophy a (quasi-)Marxist phase extending from 1947 to the early 1970s, framed by both a pre-Marxist and a post-Marxist period[19] – but rather concerns the extent to which Sartre's contributions remain relevant to the development of Marxism as a philosophical tradition capable of sustaining its critical task today.

While Aronson's argument is intriguing and correct it seems to rest on a sort of ambiguity. He states that «[Sartre] was trying to reinvent and revitalize our ways of looking at ourselves and our societies so as to bring together perspectives forcibly kept separate virtually everywhere else»[20]. This statement may seem to suggest that Sartre was operating in a fundamentally free and creative way informed by a Marxian *spirit*. Such a reading can supported by some passages, for instance when Sartre states that his theory of Human action in history «is inspired by that of Marx»[21].

If not clarified, the reading that Sartre was operating not through a strict problematisation of Marx but rather in his "spirit" would – ironically – prove Betschart's point that Sartre's maintained a quasi-bourgeois

[16] Ivi, pp. 82-83: «Sartre's political core values can be defined by four primary refusals: no to militarism, no to colonialism, no to discrimination (against women, Jews, blacks, gays), and no to bourgeois morality. (…) Sartre forged tactical political alliances with the Communists because their ideology was the only politically relevant one with whom he could share, if only in part, his core values. The Communist parties proclaimed their opposition to war, colonialism, racism, and bourgeois morality – although that opposition rarely entailed more than lip service». For an overview of Sartre's complex relationship with the French Communist Party see T.R. Flynn, *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, pp. 283-313; for discussion of the interplay between his changing political positioning and philosophical stances see M. Russo, *Sartre. Vita di un filosofo radicale*, Carocci, Roma 2024, pp. 257-272.

[17] Ivi, p. 77.

[18] Aronson, *Revisiting Existential Marxism*, cit., p. 95.

[19] Ivi, pp. 94-95; 97.

[20] Ivi, p.95.

[21] Sartre, *CDR I*, cit., p. 97.

concept of absolute freedom and did not faithfully embrace Marx's doctrine. Quite the opposite, Aronson's argument can reach greater force if it is stressed that – in Sartre's view – Marxism' status as "the philosophy our time" and the need to embrace it in order to reach true knowledge does not arise by any immaterial characteristic but rather from the urge to understand and criticise the concrete *problems* and *praxis* that were being immanently carried out.

It is possible to get a clearer picture of the dilemma by turning to Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*[22]. It is well known that Sartre's credit the text as the example of a deep, politically productive, non-determinist Marxian investigation, elevating it as a model for his own research[23]. Indeed, in the first page of the essay Marx writes «men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past»[24]. This formulation plays a crucial role, serving as the foundational maxim of Sartre's existential Marxism: «Men themselves make their history but in a given environment which conditions them»[25].

Sartre's affirmation of the heuristic value of this principle should not be overstretched in an idealist-methodological sense; rather, its materialistic foundations should be emphasised. As it is made clear in the opening of *Search for a Method*, Marxism is the philosophy of our time as long as we live in the present moment and the historical material conditions that gave rise to it have not been overcome[26]. When placed in the context of the essay in which it is presented, the sentence meaning appears clearly: Marx is not primarily suggesting a methodology for the enquiry but rather recalling it in the context of a specific investigation on a situated historical

[22] K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in *K. Marx, F. Engels*, *Collected Works. Volume 11: 1851-1853*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1978, pp. 99-197 [hereafter *EB*].

[23] Sartre, *SfM*, cit., p. 45: «The original thought of Marx as we find it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte*, attempts a difficult synthesis of intention and of result; the contemporary use of that thought is dishonest».

[24] Id., *CDR I*, cit., p. 103.

[25] Sartre, *SfM*, cit., p. 85. In the first book of *Critique* Sartre rephrases this idea as a question: *CDR I*, cit., p. 97: «This brings us back to our problem in the first part of this book: what does it mean to *make* History on the basis of earlier conditions?». It is also repeated in the second Book: Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason II*, translated by Q. Hoare, edited by A. Elkaïm-Sartre, Verso Books 2006, p. 120 (hereafter *CDR II*): «we must recall that men make History in so far as it makes them».

[26] Id., *SfM*, cit., pp. 4-8.

phenomenon. As Sheldon Wolin observed, in doing so Marx maintains that *authoritarianism* had become part of the circumstances transmitted from the past[27].

Therefore, in appropriating Marx's principle Sartre is not only endorsing its *spirit* but also admitting that his own concrete situation presents the same political *problems* embedded in similar material conditions, socio-economic structures and ideological superstructures[28]. Put simply: the conditions that gave rise to Marxism – and that it sought to overcome – had not yet been defeated.

Marx's problem in the essay is *why do revolutionary moments end up producing authoritarian leaders*? A significant part of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (especially in the second book) is fuelled by a similar concern. For Marx, it was the French revolutionary upheaval of February 1848 that led to Louis Bonaparte; for Sartre, it was Stalin – the aftermath of the October Revolution and Lenin's successor – who demanded critical analysis.

It is fundamental to clarify this comparison. Obviously, a deep theoretical difference distinguishes Sartre's book and Marx's essay: as Sartre speaks in a later moment of History he deals with Marxism *as a mediation*. This is fully coherent with Sartre's own remark about the relationship between totalisation and the synchronic researcher, who is constantly informed by the past history of the process of human development and plays a role in this broad inter-generational experience[29].

The claim that Sartre's concern with Stalin resembles Marx's own with Louis Bonaparte should not be taken as suggesting a simple equivalence between the two analyses. Rather, it points to a shared preoccupation within the dialectical tension between *revolution* and *authoritarianism* - a problem that transcends specific historical episodes while being unequivocally embodied in concrete social agents and material conditions. To put it more bluntly, Marx seeks to understand why *universal suffrage*, considered necessary for reaching socialism[30], resulted in a new French Emperor while

[27] S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision. Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2004, p. 443.

[28] In recent literature the thesis that philosophy (especially moral, social and political) is mainly concerned with problems and attempts to solve them has been proposed by different voices. See M. Queloz, *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021; R. Jaeggi, *Critique of Life forms*, translated by C. Ciorin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2018.

[29] Sartre, *CDR I*, cit., p. 54.

[30] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 153. For discussion on Marx and universal suffrage see P.J. Kain, *Marx, Revolution, and Social Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020, pp. 40-57.

Sartre aims at grasping why *socialism*, managed by Stalin under the conditions of post-Zarist Russia, "could be a synonym of *Hell*"[31].

Independently of their differences, both Marx and Sartre are concerned with the *dialectical logic* underlying the shift between revolution and authoritarianism and can be meaningfully compared on this basis.

Although Sartre focuses only on the opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and on its methodological maxims, it is reasonable to argue that by taking Marx's core idea – namely, historical actors and conditions are reciprocally determined – and applying it to a similar problem, Sartre is by many means *repeating* Marx's essay in a different historical context. As it is clearly stated in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*:

> In the methodical reconstruction of History it is practically forbidden to follow analogies of content, and to interpret, for example, a revolution such as Cromwell's in terms of the French Revolution. On the other hand, if we are trying to grasp formal bonds, (for example, any kind of bonds of interiority) between individuals or groups, to study the different forms of practical multiplicities and the kinds of interrelations which exist within them, the best example is the clearest provided by culture regardless of date[32].

Therefore, it is reasonable to search common conceptual structures in the two texts – despite their deep temporal and contextual differences – due to their shared commitment in grasping the "formal bonds" within a Marxist framework.

Before proceeding it is fundamental to justify the choice of Sartre's analysis of Stalin as a sort of 'case study'. Despite the great number of pages devoted to politics, Stalin emerges as one of the political characters more deeply studied by Sartre[33]. Russo claims that Sartre's study of Stalin in the second volume of the *Critique*[34] can be interpreted as one of his many *psychobiographies*: «returning to *Search for a Method*, [Sartre holds that] Joseph Stalin is similar to Paul Valéry: he surely is a Soviet executive, but

[31] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 116 [italics on the original text].
[32] Sartre, *CDR I*, cit., p. 55.
[33] Two more names can be added, Sartre's early study of Kaiser Wilhelm II during the Second World War and his discussion of Patrice Lumumba; see respectively J.-P. Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War*, translated by Q. Hoare, Verso Books, London 1999, pp. 294-340 and Id., *The Political Thought of Patrice Lumumba* in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, translated and edited by A. Haddour, S. Brewer, T. McWilliams, Routledge, Abdington 2021, pp.156-206.
[34] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., pp. 118-272.

not all Soviet executives are Stalin»[35]. Thus, to understand the outcome of the Soviet Revolution and the Stalinist turn toward "socialism in one country" it must be comprehended the historical path that led Stalin to governing. There is a further reason that drives Sartre's enquiry, although the man "Stalin" passed in 1953, Stalinism outlived itself. As Sartre had already claimed by the time of *Critique*, "Stalin" is also a *ghost* that haunts the Soviet Union, his (apparently) post-Stalinist leaders and – most importantly – Marxist theory and praxis[36]. We are, thus, led back to *Search for a Method*, where the problem is «the great deal of reductionist nonsense that had emanated from the PCF's intellectuals in the Stalinist years»[37].

2. *Revolution, 'incarnation of deviation' and singularity*

2.1 *Failed Revolutions as a Call for Better Theory*

Broadly speaking, Marx's theory of history presents socialism as the historical successor and political consequence of bourgeoise capitalism which is, in its turn, that of aristocratic feudalism[38]. However, both Marx's essay on Louis Bonaparte and Sartre's analysis of Stalin recognise the peculiar characteristics of both revolutions and thus cannot be easily flattened on this general structure. As argued above, Sartre shares with Marx the *problem* of the rise of authoritarian leaders from revolutionary circumstances. It must be clarified the reason *why* this dynamic is problematic. Indeed, in Sartre's thought – as presented both in *Search for a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* – the trouble with Stalin concerns his lasting "ghostly" aftermath on socialist politics, mirrored by the "sclerotization" of Marxist political theory[39]. In brief, the aftermath of the Soviet Revolution concerns Sartre primarily on both the theoretical and the practical levels.

[35] Russo, *Sartre*, cit., p. 303 [translation mine].
[36] J.-P. Sartre, *The Ghost of Stalin*, translated by M. H. Fletcher, George Braziller, New York 1968.
[37] I.H. Birchall, *Sartre against Stalinism*, Bergahn Books, New York 2004, p. 175.
[38] K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works. Volume 29: 1857-1861*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1978, pp. 257-420, p. 263. I am not considering the "Asiatic" and the "ancient" mode of production as they are not useful in this context. For discussion see G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History. A Defence,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2000, pp. 197-201.
[39] Sartre, *CDR I*, cit., p. 50: «Critical investigation could not occur *in our history*, before Stalinist idealism had sclerosed both epistemological methods and practices» [italics in

A comparable concern with failed revolutionary outcomes can be identified in Marx's own work, albeit in a more concealed and less developed form. As Basso points out:

> The defeat of 1848 and the rise of Bonapartism certainly did affect Marx's political perspective. These events questioned the idea of a world-revolution and forced him to re-develop his method of political analysis. As a result, for instance, the state is no longer understood as a sort of 'executive committee of the bourgeoisie', because its margin of autonomy from the mechanisms of bourgeois society is now recognised[40].

In Marx's view, the problem lies not only in the *moral and political regression* caused by Louis Bonaparte's dictatorship, but also in the fact that it emerged from the revolutionary hopes sparked by the "*coup de main*" of February 1848[41]. A failed revolution did not merely preserve the status quo; it significantly reversed it: «instead of society having conquered a new content for itself, it seems that the state only returned to its oldest form, to the shamelessly simple domination of the sabre and the cowl»[42].

It is precisely the need to analyse the specific structure of the 1848 French Revolution that leads Marx to formulate his broader generalisations in a more contextually sensitive way. The point is clearly stated in the 1869 edition preface: «I [Marx] demonstrate how the class struggle in France created circumstances and relations that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part»[43].

It becomes clear that Marx's aim is to investigate how the dialectical jumble between class struggle and its particular configuration in 1848 France led to the rise of Louis Bonaparte. Indeed, as Marx argues the French Revolution of 1848 does not present a straightforward conflict between

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the original text].

[40] L. Basso, *Marx and Singularity. From the Early Writings to the Grundrisse*, translated by A. Bove, Brill, Leiden and Boston 2012, p. 14.

[41] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 106.

[42] *Ibidem*. Adopting today's terminology, it can be claimed that to Marx the problem is not merely a first-order one (Louis Bonaparte's authoritarian rule) but also spans in a second-order dominion (the lack of intellectual critical tools to understand it).

[43] K. Marx, *Preface [to the second edition of the Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte]* in K. Marx, F. Engels, *Collected Works. Volume 21: 1867-1870*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1978, pp. 56-58, p. 56 [italics in the original text; hereafter *Preface*]. For discussion on Marx's non-reductionist attitude in *The Eighteen Brumaire* see B. MacDonald, *Inaugurating Heterodoxy: Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire and the "Limit-Experience" of Class Struggle*, in «Strategies Journal of Theory Culture & Politics», vol. 1, 2003, pp. 65-75.

distinct social classes; rather, it is primarily a conflict *within* the bourgeoisie, divided between monarchist and republican factions. Although the proletariat played a small but significant role in the latter, Marx contends that its early expulsion from the political stage by the "Party of Order" is sufficient to argue that in 1848 there was essentially a *bourgeois* revolution[44]. Similarly, Sartre acknowledges that the Soviet Revolution was an authentically socialist and proletarian uprising. Nevertheless, it occurred in a severely underdeveloped country – more agrarian than industrial – that was not only inertially burdened by centuries of feudalism but also encircled by hostile powers[45].

2.2 *From "World-Historical Individuals" to singularities*

As previously noted, both Marx and Sartre confront the problem of explaining, through theory, the emergence of authoritarian leaders from revolutionary movements. For both thinkers, analysing the rise of a specific authoritarian figure serves to illuminate and improving the diagnostic and critical power of theory[46]. In Marx's words: «it remains to be explained how a nation of thirty-six million can be surprised and delivered unresisting into captivity by three swindlers»[47].

The focus on 'contexts', 'circumstances' and 'situations' reflects the anti-Hegelian orientation of both authors. In contrast to Hegel's notion of 'World-Historical Individuals'[48] – figures who advance the necessary unfolding of World History – Marx and Sartre seek to understand why certain authoritarian leaders appear not as *incarnations* of the progressive world spirit, but rather as *incarnation of deviations* within historical processes: they reflect their tendencies without bringing it to their supposed conclusions.

[44] Marx, *EB*, cit., pp. 108-112.
[45] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 172. For Sartre's analysis of the peasant war and towns-countryside conflict see Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., pp. 173-182.
[46] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 106: «Society now seems to have fallen back behind its point of departure; it has in truth first to create for itself the revolutionary point of departure, the situation, the relations, the conditions under which alone modern revolution becomes serious». Sartre is not as straightforward as Marx and explains the need of providing a strong theory in many passages scattered along *Critique*, *Search for a Method* and other essays: see Sartre, *CDR I*, cit., pp. 15-76.
[47] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 108.
[48] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Sibree, Batoche Books, Kitchener 2001, pp. 44-47.

The concept of "deviation", along with its conceptual correlative "incarnation", forms the backbone of Sartre's analysis of Stalin and, as we shall see, may also be extended to Marx's analysis of Louis Bonaparte.

Deviation is conceived as 'praxis-process' understood on the basis of *itself only*[49]. When discussing it openly in the second book of *Critique*, Sartre recalls a cornerstone of his philosophy of history: every attempt to act practically on history produces unforeseeable counter-finalities[50]. "Deviation" designates this *movement* not yet reduced to its original aims nor historical origins (as Plekhanov's "objective idealism" does[51]); in other words, deviation refers to praxis conceived in its "practical irreducibility"[52].

Incarnation is presented as the next step after deviation, attaining a higher degree of concreteness (in line with Sartre's claim in *Search for a Method* that dialectical enquiry must proceed from abstract-general to concrete-particular structures[53]) through *practice*. Sartre observes that speaking of "deviation" is not sufficient, since *every* praxis answers a specific challenge arising from a specific context, and every historical process is therefore *singular* insofar as its actors are[54]. It is due to praxis-process need of a mediating directive, who is not merely symbolic but primarily *practical*, to attain unity that "incarnation" must be taken into account. In Sartre's words:

> For the dictator was precisely required when the common forces *needed his mediation* to carry on their action. That means this mediation was not symbolic but *practical*: in other words, the sovereign-individual had to achieve the integration of the national forces or disappear, ruining the nation. And this, of course, was due to the very circumstances that had structured the social powers of the directing groups and the society – ruled *in such a way* that praxis would be either paralysed or centralized in the hands of a single person[55].

While the label "deviation" is needed to comprehend the paradoxical process from a certain projected praxis to radically different and opposed

[49] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., pp. 224-225.
[50] This is a recurring theme in Sartre's thought, for one of the clearest dispositions see: Sartre, *CDR I*, cit., pp. 122-252. For discussion see C. Turner, *The Return of Stolen Praxis: Counter-Finality in Sartre's "Critique of Dialectical Reason"*, in «Sartre Studies International», vol. 20, n. 1, 2014, pp. 36-44.
[51] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 225.
[52] Ivi, p. 216.
[53] Id., *SfM*, cit., pp. 108-109.
[54] Id., *CDR II*, cit., pp. 211-212.
[55] Ivi, p. 219.

counter-finalities, "incarnation" marks a deeper level of understanding, in which deviations are not merely understood *passively* – as products of their material causes – but also considered in relations to the attempts to *actively* deal with them. Sartre notes that incarnation is the *radical* outcome of deviation, at once its agent and its effect. Precisely because it is carried out by a single sovereign individual, "incarnation" allows for integrating biographical facts into the overall picture of the historical process[56].

In Marx's and Sartre's analyses alike, the studied figure is conceived as the *incarnation of deviation* of a historical process. This is made evident in the definitions each author provides. Louis Bonaparte is not the purest embodiment of bourgeoise values and ideas; on contrary, he is the parodic version of his uncle, brought forth by «the scum of bourgeois society»[57]. Louis Bonaparte contradicts every idea held by the 1848 liberals, although being supported by them. Similarly, Stalin, a former Georgian seminarist consistently more learned than Trotsky[58], despite formulating «the ideological monstrosity of 'socialism in one country'»[59], nevertheless incarnate *the* Socialist Revolution.

Indeed, Marx and Sartre's rejection of Hegel's linear providentialism does not entail a wholesale rejection of his conviction that history is *embodied* in its actors. On the contrary, Marx and Sartre remain profoundly committed to it but, instead of holding that they are driven by «an unconscious impulse that occasioned the accomplishment of that for which the time was ripe»[60], they examine historical individuals who stand in contradiction to the very movements from which they emerge.

The concept of 'incarnation' provides Sartre's critical reworking of Hegel's World-Historical Individuals[61]. It is precisely Stalin the subject through whom is possible to understand the concept of 'incarnation': he is the man who embodies the course of the October Revolution. Therefore, Sartre argues that by studying him it becomes possible to understand the event it in its *historicity*:

[56] T.R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason*, voll. 1-2, vol.1 *Toward an Existentialist Theory of History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1997, pp. 165-166.
[57] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 112.
[58] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., pp. 98-100.
[59] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 98.
[60] Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, cit., p. 44.
[61] Sartre seems to counter Hegel's idea openly when he writes: «The men History makes are never entirely those needed to make History, be they even as unrivalled as Stalin or Napoleon» (Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 221).

> [T]he totalization-of-envelopment, *if it exists,* must not be a mere rule – or even a synthetic schema – ensuring the temporalization of particular events from outside. It can be realized as a singular incarnation – at a given moment, and in a given fact (or a given action) – only if it is itself, in itself, singularity and incarnation. This, moreover, is what constitutes its *historicity;* and it is in the name of this historicity that we discover *the* Russian Revolution as a unique adventure and *the* Stalin regime as a quite singular phase of its development[62].

Very similarly, Marx begins *The Eighteenth Brumaire* with the famous statement «Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce»[63]. As it has been observed by Mazlish and Harries, by introducing the distinction that Hegel "forgot" between tragedy and farce Marx is rejecting Hegel's providentialism and stating that historical characters must be studied in light of their answer to specific historical conditions[64]. Indeed, Hegel's claim Marx refers to appears while discussing Caesar's dictatorship and ultimately justifies his authoritarian rule over Rome[65], Marx «turns this sanction topsy-turvy to attack another»[66] coup d'etat, the regressive one made by Louis Bonaparte.

To resist the Hegelian tendency toward overly sweeping generalisations[67], Marx and Sartre affirm the need to study the *singularity* of historical figures, thereby avoiding, at the theoretical level, the night of black cows (rephrased by Marx as «night in which all the cats are grey»[68]).

[62] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 188.
[63] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 103.
[64] B. Mazlish, *The Tragic Farce of Marx, Hegel, and Engels: A Note*, in «History and Theory», vol. 11, n. 3, 1972, pp. 335-337; M. Harries, *Homo Alludens: Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire*, in «New German Critique», n. 66, 1995, pp. 35-64.
[65] Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, cit., p. 313.
[66] M. Harries, *Homo Alludens: Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire*, cit., p. 38.
[67] Hegel's philosophy, especially his philosophy of history, has often been criticised for neglecting individual particularity and for presenting a metaphysical, theologically charged, and politically conservative account of history and society. While a complete overview of this long-standing debate cannot be provided here, classical discussions include K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Routledge, London 1957; K. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1949; and H. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, Routledge, London 1955. For more recent contributions to this discussion see E. Dale, *Hegel, the End of History, and the Future*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014; S. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2009.
[68] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 127.

Nevertheless, insofar as they remain within the Hegelian framework of dialectical rationality, both authors also affirm that history is embodied and transformed by its actors, without reducing history to its agents or agents to history.

The critical target, therefore, is not solely Hegel. In 'saving' singularity from Hegelian generalisations, Marx and Sartre generate room for a conception of critical and dialectical historiography that is neither strictly "objective" nor purely "subjective"[69]. The former reduces historical events to their pre-existing conditions; in the texts under discussion, paradigmatic examples of objective historiography are Plekhanov and Proudhon[70]. 'Subjective' historiography, by contrast, falls into the opposite error by overemphasising figures such as Louis Bonaparte or Stalin as autonomous agents. In Marx's view, Victor Hugo exemplifies this position, as he «confines himself to bitter and witty invective against the responsible publisher of the coup d'état […]. He does not notice that he makes this individual great instead of little by ascribing to him a personal power of initiative such as would be without parallel in world history»[71].

Against the one-sidedness of both objective and subjective historiography, Marx and Sartre emphasise the centrality of *singularity,* understood as the dialectical interaction between class struggle and the particular dynamics at work in specific geographical locations and historical moments. In this light, Hegel's World-Historical Individuals are not teleologically oriented historical agents but rather context-bound responses to concrete situations.

[69] Marx uses explicitly the formula "objective" historiography (*Preface*, cit., p. 57) only, identifying it with Proudhon's work on Louis Bonaparte. It follows that Hugo's method can be held to exemplify "subjective" historiography as it is diametrically opposed to the Proudhon's.

[70] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 92: «As I have already said, I am far from sharing Plekhanov's fine indifference and declaring, like him, that the outcome would have been just the same. That is anti-historical and inhuman dogmatism: the fortune of the *particular* men who would have died under Cromwell during those five extra years just does not interest Plekhanov». In a stance quoted above Sartre defines Plekhanov's position "objective idealism"; Marx, *Preface*, cit., p. 57: «Proudhon, for his part, seeks to represent the coup d'état as the result of preceding historical development. Unnoticeably, however, his historical construction of the coup d'état becomes a historical apologia for its hero».

[71] Ivi, pp. 56-57. Sartre does not define it extensively as his main critical target is objective historiography (especially in *Search for a Method*). However, his whole intellectual enterprise after *Being and Nothingness* can be broadly characterised by the attempt to conceptualise the dialectical interplay of individual action and social circumstances. For discussion see T.C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics. From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle 1993.

What I have described as Marx's and Sartre's 'anti-Hegelian' attitude should not be mistaken for a wholesale rejection of Hegel – least of all of dialectical thought itself. On the contrary, it is a form of self-correction internal to the dialectical tradition[72].

What, then, becomes of historical materialism within this framework? Tomba argues that Marx's aim in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is «a question of showing how History I of the class struggle interacted with History II of French politics from February 1848 onwards»[73]. Yet a critical philosopher concerned with the dialectical interplay between the overarching structure of class struggle and the peculiar conditions of mid-nineteenth-century France is not simply oscillating between abstract "laws" and empirical "cases". Rather, the aim is to grasp their relation as a dynamic totality.

Louis Bonaparte and Stalin must be studied not as *World-Historical* figures, but as *concrete* historical agents whose singularity is nonetheless embedded in, and shaped by, a specific trajectory of social contradictions. They are singular figures, but their singularity is *dialectical*. As Sartre observes, from the standpoint of the historian or critical social theorist, there is no strict division between the private and public lives of a dictator[74]. The singularity of Bonaparte and Stalin arises from their personal histories, but it is expressed in their authoritarian rule and rendered intelligible through their actions.

2.3 *Toward a Dialectical Understanding of Authoritarianism*

What is at stake, then, is not simply a dual level of analysis, but a multiplicity. In Sartre's account of Stalin's rise to power, at least three distinct levels can be identified: his personal traits – shaped by his childhood and limited education; the absence of a clear orientation regarding the future direction of the Revolution (whether toward *à la Trotsky* internationalism or "socialism in one country"); and the enduring influence of material scarcity rooted in Russia's historical legacy (such as the absence of a

[72] A famous and classical the connection between dialectical thought and self-criticism is T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London 2004, pp. 83-96.

[73] M. Tomba, *Marx as the Historical Materialist: Re-reading 'The Eighteenth Brumaire'*, in «Historical Materialism», v. 21, n.2, p. 24. A very similar concern is faced by Sartre while studying Stalin's Soviet Union, where 'socialism' transitions into 'communism' «through a gigantic and bloody effort» (Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 116) and is tragically deviated into Stalin's 'socialism in one country'.

[74] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 200.

heavy industrial base)[75]. A similar logic underlies Marx's portrayal of Louis Bonaparte. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx does not limit his explanation of the coup d'état to bourgeois class interests; he also traces Bonaparte's authoritarian ascent through the details of his personal biography. This is why Marx devotes significant attention to Bonaparte's indebtedness[76] and even extends the analysis to include his psychological disposition[77].

A truly dialectical understanding of the rise of authoritarianism is therefore neither reducible to a teleological, Hegel-inspired reading of history nor to unilateral interpretations in terms of conditions or personality. On the contrary, it is the interplay of multiple factors that allows authoritarian regimes to emerge. Louis Bonaparte and Stalin are figures who incarnate the deviation of revolutions. For the historical enquiry, their personality is neither irrelevant nor of absolute value: they are not *symbols* but *agents*, whose actions carry the collective revolutionary struggle to its aftermath. The "brutality" of Stalin and Bonaparte's "grotesque mediocrity" enter and shape history because the internal contradictions of the Revolution make their appearance possible. Both material factors and ideological tensions are identified as the conditions that permit authoritarianism to seize power[78].

It is now possible to fully compare the "formal bonds" discovered through dialectical analysis in both Marx's and Sartre's enquiries. Authoritarian leaders emerge from the turmoil of failed revolutions: they at once undergo history *passively* and *act* upon it, embodying the deviation imposed on revolutionary movements by specific material conditions and internal contradictions. Their emergence corresponds both to contingent events and to the objective contradictions within revolutionary groups. Although the singularity of their authoritarian rule resists generalisation, their appearance and historical function are nonetheless far from *arbitrary*.

[75] Ivi, pp. 118-234.
[76] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 116; p. 139; p. 192.
[77] Ivi, p. 177.
[78] Here, I use the term 'ideological' in a non-Marxian sense, referring broadly to conflicts between opposing ideas. I will not attempt to offer an exhaustive account of the numerous contradictions identified by Sartre and Marx in their respective analyses. However, a brief summary is possible. On the economic front, one can point to Russia's incomplete industrialisation and, in the French context, the enduring tension between industrial and agrarian forms of property. As for ideological conflicts, notable examples include the internal disputes within Trotskyism and Russia's persistent fear of encirclement, while in France, tensions arose among the various factions of the so-called 'Party of Order' - including Social Democrats, Republicans, Legitimist monarchists, and Orleanists.

Stalin's "monstrosity" and Louis Bonaparte's "grotesque mediocrity" are neither trivial anecdotes nor timeless psychological traits; they are historically situated characteristics, made possible by the conditions of a specific conjuncture. In Sartre's own words: «contingency appears only through strict exigencies»[79].

3. *Non-linear explanations and 'progress'*

The multiplication of layers of enquiry leads both Marx and Sartre to reframe the concept of *progress*, a notion central not only in Hegel's philosophy and many interpretations of Marxism, but to modernity itself more broadly[80]. Elements relevant to this reframing have already been discussed; by introducing the terms "regression" and "deviation" and by opposing Hegel's causal-linear providentialism Marx and Sartre confront directly the problem of *historical progress*.

According to Hegel, *World-Historical Individuals* fulfil the role of advancing progress. Returning to the example of Caesar discussed earlier, we should recall that for Hegel the historical significance of the World-Historical Individual named "Caesar" lies in having euthanised the decaying Roman Republic and paving the way for the Empire: «he founded the theatre which was on the point of becoming the centre of History […]. It became immediately manifest that only a single will guide the Roman State»[81].

Hegel's conception of progress is often defined as a *linear* one, where the goal is teleologically determined in advance and history drives necessarily toward it in a straight march. Independently of the correctness of this reading of Hegel[82], Marx (especially in his historical writings) and Sartre stand opposed to it.

[79] Sartre, *CDR II*, cit., p. 226.

[80] On Marx and Progress see S. Sayers, *Marx and Progress*, in «International Critical Thought», v. 10, n. 1, 2020, pp. 18-33; on Sartre and Progress see R. Aronson, *Sartre on Progress* in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, pp. 261-292. For broader analysis of the concept of 'progress' see R. Koselleck, *"Progress" and "Decline": An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts*, in Id., *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Standford University Press 2002, pp. 218-235; P. Wagner, *Progress: A Reconstruction*, Wiley, Hoboken 2015; G.A. Almond, G. R. Marvin and R.H. Pearce (eds.), *Progress and its Discontents*, De Gruyter, Leiden 2023.

[81] Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, cit., pp. 312-313 [italics in the original text].

[82] See T. Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice*,

In *Search for a Method* Sartre openly contrasts the linear view of progress (without crediting it openly to Hegel) in a lengthy footnote: «Marxism caught a glimpse of true temporality when it criticized and destroyed the bourgeois notion of 'progress' which necessarily implies a homogeneous milieu and coordinates which would allow us to situate the point of departure and the point of arrival»[83]. For Sartre, by contrast, a plurality of temporalities intersects within social and political forms and historical events[84].

In Sartre's own terms, this is characterised by the distinction between 'synchronicity' and 'diachronicity'. In the case of Stalinism, Sartre points out how diachronic conditions embed the Soviet enterprise throughout. Discussing Soviet economic planning, Sartre writes: «the Revolution, whatever it may be, does not work miracles, it inherits the misery which the *Ancien Régime* produced»[85]. In the *Critique*, the threat posed by the lasting effects of past structures constitutes one of the many circumstances that drives the Revolution toward deviation. In describing the efforts to create the 'Soviet Man' (that is, the ideal revolutionary citizen) through the institutions of bureaucracy and propaganda, Sartre observes that this process:

> Ended up making Stalinist man into an extraordinary contradiction. He was wholly thrown forward like a bridge towards the socialist future, and at the same time he remained indefinitely what he was. His past, against all experience, became his unalterable law. For everyone was modified, even in his self-awareness, by a bureaucratic ossification that- inasmuch as he *was not* a bureaucrat - was not produced directly within him, but - inasmuch as he was linked to the Bureaucracy, at least by the immanent relation of obedience - *determined him from afar*[86].

Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2017; E. Renault, *Hegel e la storia come processo*, in «Polemos. Materiali di filosofia e critica sociale», vol. 2, 2017, pp. 33-60.

[83] Sartre, *SfM*, p. 92.

[84] M. Lievens, *Freedom and domination through time: Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of the plurality of temporalities*, in «Philosophy & Social Criticism», v. 48, n. 7, 2022, pp. 1014-1034. The question of whether the concept of progress can adequately account for a pluralism of perspectives and paths of development – given that pluralism is normatively desirable – has recently been addressed from various angles within contemporary Critical Theory, see A. Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York 2017 for a critical perspective, and R. Jaeggi, *Progress and Regression*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2025 for a more affirmative reading.

[85] Sartre, *Ghost of Stalin*, cit., p. 67.

[86] Id., *CDR II*, cit., p. 254 [italics in the original text]. Another good example of this clash is Stalin's antisemitism: see ivi, pp. 263-271.

Therefore, the deviation that Stalin synchronically incarnated was simultaneously shaped by longstanding effects and dynamics yet remained *revolutionary* insofar as it created something radically new into the world, although not in accordance with the original intensions and expectations of the revolutionaries[87].

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx catches a similar critical point regarding progress. The French Revolution started in 1789 led theorists to identify 'Progress' and 'Revolution', the latter always entailed the former[88]. He writes:

> Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm swiftly from success to success, their dramatic effects outdo each other, men and things seem set in sparkling brilliants, ecstasy is the everyday spirit, but they are short-lived, soon they have attained their zenith, and a long crapulent depression seizes society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm-and-stress period[89].

This, in stark contrast, highlights the difference from nineteenth-century revolutions, which "criticise themselves constantly"[90] and thus appear unable to reach their objectives. Marx juxtaposes the revolutions of two centuries to support his idea that his own century's politics was still on the path toward emancipation. Moreover, his claim implies the conviction that 'revolutions' such as the 1848 revolution (from its second phase onward[91]) were not truly revolutionary, as they removed the revolutionary class by definition – the proletariat – from their ranks.

Earlier, I recalled how Marx argues that the main reason for the failure of the June insurrection was the common opposition that republicans, social democrats and the two factions of monarchists formed against the proletariat[92]. It was this original act of force by the so-called 'party of order' that doomed the revolution, as it initiated a spiral of growing conservatism whose ultimate outcome was the coup d'état[93].

[87] On the centrality of the creation of novelty in history as the core of Sartre's theory of action see L. Basso, *Inventing the New*, cit., pp. 113-238.
[88] W.M. Nelson, *The Time of Enlightenment: Constructing the Future in France, 1750 to Year One*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2021.
[89] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 106.
[90] *Ibidem*.
[91] Ivi, pp. 180-181.
[92] Ivi, p. 110.
[93] Ivi, p. 124. Marx also describes in a similar way the usage of the word 'socialism' as a buzz word for justifying repressive stances against progressive liberal ideas and institutions: ivi, pp. 141-143.

Marx writes «every fairly competent observer, even if he had not followed the course of French development step by step, must have had a presentiment that an unheard-of fiasco was in store for the revolution»[94]. The significance of this remark lies in Marx's idea that by denying the role of the proletariat in contemporary society from the outset, and thus avoiding a true clash, the revolution set itself on the path toward *regression*.

The political factions failed to comprehend in advance the the upcoming course of their actions because they were haunted by the memory and the idealisation of the old Revolution: «from 1848 to 1851 only the ghost of the old revolution walked about»[95]. The tropes of 'ghosts' and 'spectres' play a relevant role in Marx's text. They serve to criticise the attempts of connecting the present revolution to the past, as made by utopian socialists[96], and support the claim that a revolution, to be truly revolutionary, must *break* with the past[97].

It emerges how 'ghost' is the label Marx uses to denote influences on the present that originate from past historical moments. Its meaning resembles that of 'illusion', but it does not entirely coincide with it: at the end of the Revolution in 1852, one 'ghost' becomes real, while all the other disappears:

> The Constitution, the National Assembly, the dynastic parties, the blue and the red republicans, the heroes of Africa thunder from the platform, the sheet lightning of the daily press, the entire literature, the political names and the intellectual reputations, the civil law and the penal code, the *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and the second Sunday in May 1852 – all has vanished like a phantasmagoria before the spell of a man whom even his enemies do not make out to be a magician[98].

The man in question is, obviously, Louis Bonaparte, whose 'ghost' is that of his uncle living in the memory of the French people: «they have not only a caricature of the old Napoleon, they have the old Napoleon himself, caricatured as he must appear in the middle of the nineteenth century»[99].

[94] Ivi, p. 107.
[95] Ivi, p. 105.
[96] D. Webb, *Here Content Transcends Phrase: The Eighteenth Brumaire as the Key to Understanding Marx's Critique of Utopian Socialism*, in M. Cowling, J. Martin (eds.), *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire (Post)modern Interpretations*, Pluto Press, London 2002, pp. 243-257.
[97] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 106.
[98] Ivi, pp. 107-108.
[99] Ivi, p. 105.

It is now clear why both Stalin and Louis Bonaparte cannot be considered merely reactionary leaders who perform their role transparently; rather, they emerge in a confused mixture of *revolutionary* tendencies and *regressive* stances. Stalin is squeezed between the weight of the past and the task of bringing the Soviet society to communism, his actions make 'socialism' a synonym of 'hell', characterised by a 'monstrous' ideology and a brutal rulership. Louis Bonaparte is haunted by the memory of his uncle and the desire to emulate him[100], although in a *parodical*, grotesque and comical way within a new age.

As noted in the previous paragraph, the appearance of authoritarian leaders cannot, in Marx's and Sartre's historical materialist perspectives, be explained linearly as a mere politically repressive measure against social classes in turmoil. It is precisely because they emerge as responses to radical social transformations that the moral and political regression entailed by authoritarianism is not measured against a fixed or achieved static level but arises from the contradictory deviations taken by a transformative process.

4. *Conclusion*

In my discussion, I began by revisiting the debate on the purity of Sartre's Marxism and argued that the claim that Sartre's post-war philosophy was genuinely committed to Marxism becomes more plausible if, rather than emphasising the 'Marxian flavour' of his work, one focuses on his methodological commitment to addressing problems akin to those examined by Marx.

Accordingly, I have justified the choice of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as a reference point for comparing and examining Sartre's Marxism, given the methodological value accorded to it in *Search for a Method*. Drawing on Sartre's claim that Marxism remains the living philosophy of our time, insofar as the material conditions that produced it have not been overcome, I argued that Marx's 1852 text and Sartre's extended analysis of Stalin pursue a common objective and examine an analogous phenomenon. For this reason, they can be meaningfully compared. More

[100] Marx, *EB*, cit., p. 177: «The coup d'état was ever the fixed idea of Bonaparte. With this idea he had again set foot on French soil. He was so obsessed by it that he continually betrayed it and blurted it out. He was so weak that, just as continually, he gave it up again. The shadow of the coup d'état had become so familiar to the Parisians as a spectre that they were not willing to believe in it when it finally appeared in the flesh».

specifically, both works aim to grasp, through dialectical analysis, the formal structure underlying the rise of authoritarian leaders.

I then suggested that Marx and Sartre both conceived their enquiries as a theoretical response to the failure of revolutionary movements. In Marx's case, this refers to the French Revolution of 1848, and in Sartre's to the Soviet Revolution of 1917. By emphasising their politically motivated rejection of Hegel's theory of 'World-Historical Individuals', I argued that both thinkers regarded historical figures not as mere reflections of class interests but as *singular* agents. At the same time, this singularity must be understood in its proper context: its value lies in the fact that it emerges from and responds to specific historical conditions, which can be analysed and clarified through theory. On these grounds, I proposed to read the call for factoring singularity into historical analysis as aimed at grasping *dialectical singularity*.

Finally, I suggested that both Marx and Sartre understand the emergence of authoritarianism through a critical examination of the concept of progress. I have argued that authoritarianism involves a moral and political regression, which must be understood as the product of complex and internally contradictory temporal dynamics.

In conclusion, Marx's and Sartre's multifaceted dialectical analyses present authoritarianism – a complex and ongoing historical phenomenon[101] – as sustained by broad social groups and characterised, on the synchronic level, by a form of personalism, while combining, on the diachronic level, elements of revolutionary inertia with regressive, dystopian tendencies.

[101] It is not possible to explore further the topic in this context. The emergence of Donald Trump as a crucial political character over the last decade and his growing authoritarian attitude has been regarded as the aftermath of progressive neoliberalism: see N. Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*, Verso Books, London 2019; W. Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, Columbia University Press, New York 2019; Id., *Neoliberalism's Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century "Democracies"*, in «Critical times», vol. 1, n. 1, pp. 60-79. Such readings could be helped if Trump, whose personalisation of power and 'revolutionary' attitude is crystal clear, is framed as the consequence of the neoliberal revolution.