



Michel Henry

Translated by Scott Davidson

From  
Communism

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Capitalism  
TO

Theory of a Catastrophe

BLOOMSBURY

# **FROM COMMUNISM TO CAPITALISM**

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*Barbarism*, Michel Henry

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Theory of a Catastrophe

**Michel Henry**  
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**B L O O M S B U R Y**  
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

**Bloomsbury Academic**

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square  
London  
WC1B 3DP  
UK

1385 Broadway  
New York  
NY 10018  
USA

**www.bloomsbury.com**

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This book is the English edition of "*Du Communisme au Capitalisme. Théorie d'une catastrophe*" © Université Catholique de Louvain

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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4725-3183-4

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham Norfolk NR21 8NN

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# TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

SCOTT DAVIDSON

Michel Henry's book *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe* was originally published in 1991. The book was written ostensibly in response to the sudden and catastrophic collapse of the Eastern bloc in the late 1980s. Westerners watched in fascination as unprecedented masses of people gathered in the public squares of Eastern capitals. Of course, this was not the first time that they had called for economic and political reform. What was unprecedented, however, was the fact that their calls were not censored or met with state violence. Instead, the masses of protestors were joined in the streets by the very same government and military officials who had oppressed them before but who now echoed their demands for reform. What is the underlying cause behind this turn of events? To answer this question, *From Communism to Capitalism* applies the conceptual tools established in Henry's philosophy of life to unveil the deep significance underlying the abrupt transformation of the Eastern bloc at the time.

The great value of Henry's book for readers today, in my opinion, does not reside so much in what Henry had to say about the events that took place in the East but in his prognosis of what this transition "from communism to capitalism" would bring about in our time. Communism and capitalism, according to Henry, are two faces of the same death. For it turns out that they are plagued by the same crisis: a crisis of the individual. This leads Henry to suspect that the economic and political reforms in the Eastern bloc may be unable to deliver the liberation and prosperity that they promise. Instead, it is likely that they will become yet another iteration of the attack on the individual.

Henry's suspicions, it could be argued, were realized in the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, if not before. This time, the sudden and dramatic

collapse did not befall communist countries, instead its effects rippled across the global system of capitalism. People across the world witnessed the simultaneous collapse of the world's largest banks, the rapid growth of paralyzing national debt, sharp declines in the value of financial markets, and real estate value, along with sharp increases in rates of unemployment. To mitigate these problems, massive financial bailouts of industries, banks and entire governments were implemented. These bailouts were subsidized primarily by individual taxpayers—the very same ones who had suffered from the effects of the economic collapse itself—although these very same individuals were mostly left to suffer the effects of this crisis on their own. Years later, cautious reports of a gradual recovery from this economic downturn are beginning to emerge, however these very same reports are often couched in an air of uncertainty. They leave open the threat of a second and perhaps irrecoverable collapse to follow.

Various explanations of the cause of this global economic crisis have been offered: greed in the real estate sector, risky behavior in the banking sector, and regulatory failures in the government sector. But, do such explanations truly go deep enough to capture this collapse in its full, global magnitude? They offer what might be called an internal critique of capitalism, inasmuch as they identify specific problems within specific sectors of the economy, say, with certain lending practices in banks or with failures of government oversight. As such, they propose to address those specific flaws through particular policy reforms in various sectors of the economy. But, if those analyses could be said to fall short, it would be for their inability to conceptualize this failure on a broader, systemic level. And, indeed, the great benefit of Henry's book for readers today is that it fills this critical gap by providing a cogent external critique of global capitalism.

Before elaborating the key elements of this critique, however, it is first necessary to situate *From Communism to Capitalism* within the broader context of Henry's oeuvre. Michel Henry (1922–2002) was a leading French philosopher and author whose writings spanned the latter half of the twentieth century. His primary emphasis throughout was on the development of his own philosophy of life. In his view, Western philosophy traditionally has been a philosophy of representation, or in other words, a philosophy of the relation between ideas in the mind and objects in the world. Due to its representational aim, it thereby ends up missing the essential meaning of life. If life is considered at all, it is understood primarily in biological terms, either as a property of objects in the world or as a process that takes place within a body. For Henry, however, the essential significance of life is not biological, instead it must be traced back to subjective lived experience. Life, as his work tirelessly points out,

is neither an object of representation, nor a physical process; instead, it is fundamentally an affective experience in which one experiences one's own living. In this auto-affective experience, one has an immediate and non-differentiated relation to oneself that is distinct from any other type of relation that the self enters into with the world or others. This discovery of the auto-affective experience of one's own life provides a new starting point through which Henry sets out to re-map and re-envision the trajectory of philosophy. Clearly, this unique philosophy of life clearly informs and guides much of Henry's analysis, but it should also be noted that *From Communism to Capitalism* has an especially strong connection to two of his earlier works: *Marx* (1975) and *Barbarism* (1987).<sup>1</sup>

Henry's critique of communism in the first four chapters of the book borrows heavily from his earlier two-volume work on *Marx*, and readers will likely welcome his ability to condense the lengthy argument developed there. Henry's study of Marx set out to distinguish Marx's philosophy from Marxism, which he defined as the "interrelated set of misinterpretations that have been given concerning Marx." That is to say that the fundamental concepts of Marxism—productive forces, social classes, History, etc.—are not at all the fundamental concepts of Marx's own thought. In fact, they stand Marx's thought on its head, because these abstractions don't have explanatory value but rather need to be explained. Instead, Henry shows that Marx seeks to explicate their meaning through a return to their subjective origin, that is, to the living praxis of the individual.

The living individual is the non-economic origin of every society and economy. But, the fault of Marxism is not that it simply ignores the living individual but that it actively turns against it. This occurs, for instance, by granting priority to the abstract notion of "social class" over the living individual. If Society, History, or Class are taken as ultimate realities, then the individual would seem to be extraneous to them. This becomes the basis for the Marxist attack on the individual. It ends up eliminating or purging the living individuals who are its true foundation and who are the source of all economic value. By failing to appreciate this original source of value, Marxism placed the so-called "communist" countries on the wrong footing from the outset, and, as a result, rendered their eventual collapse inevitable.

While the analysis in the early chapters of *From Communism to Capitalism* borrows heavily from Henry's earlier writings on Marx, the later chapters of the book have a close connection to its immediate predecessor, *Barbarism*. Originally published in 1987, *Barbarism* was the only one of Henry's books ever to make it onto the French best-seller list. This was due primarily to the controversy sparked by its thesis. Henry contends that

barbarism is not the result of individual or group psychology, neither is it tied to primitive forms of culture. Quite the contrary, even though Western thought has long been associated precisely with civilization and progress, Henry identifies it with the essence of barbarism. This claim is supported primarily through a careful analysis of the rise of the Galilean science.

Galileo's point of departure is to set aside everything that is merely subjective and to focus exclusively on what is observable, measurable, and quantifiable—in short, on what is “objective.” What Henry criticizes here is not Galilean science as such, but the ideology that accompanies it: the scientific worldview. This ideology extends the Galilean approach beyond the realm of the natural sciences and seeks to apply it to all phenomena whatsoever. In other words, it maintains that the scientific method is the only legitimate way of knowing, and it condemns, in turn, all other ways of knowing: history, literature, art, and so forth. But, on Henry's view, all of these cultural forms are the products of life. So, to set them aside and invalidate them is ultimately to turn against life. This is why Henry comes to regard the encroachment of the scientific worldview and of technology onto all aspects of life as the true face of barbarism today.

Not surprisingly, Henry's book was the topic of heated discussion at the time of its publication, especially with regard to its harsh criticisms of technology, the media, and university reforms at the time. It evoked strong criticisms from reviewers. One line of criticism contended that Henry's claims about science and technology were one-sided and ignored many of the positive contributions that have been gained through the course of their development. Other reviewers were more sympathetic to Henry's views but yet raised the question of whether Henry really needed the elaborate theoretical and conceptual edifice of the book in order to arrive at conclusions that are more or less banal: that technology permeates all aspects of life today, that the media are taking the place of traditional forms of culture, and that universities are now guided by other pursuits than that of knowledge, such as profit or job training. It is especially worthwhile to address this latter point, as it is likely to be a sentiment felt not only by readers of *Barbarism* but by those of *From Communism to Capitalism* as well.

It should be noted that in both cases Henry is doing something quite different from ordinary news reporting, which simply sets out to describe or to comment on current events. Such accounts, on Henry's view, remain merely superficial, because they only grasp the actuality of events but fail to appreciate current events as historical products that need to be understood historically. The task of the intellectual historian, accordingly, is to reveal the meaning of current events by reconstructing the chain of events,

concepts, and theories that have paved the way for them. This attempt to understand events within their intellectual lineage accounts not only for the elaborate constructions in his book but also for their critical depth.

In addition to the similarity between their methodological approaches, *From Communism to Capitalism* and *Barbarism* are also connected through their assessment that technology is a negation of life. *From Communism to Capitalism* adds an economic layer to this analysis. Technology comes into play with respect to one of the contradictions of capitalism. On the one hand, capitalism recognizes the productive value of the individual and transforms human history through its embrace of individual labor power. But, on the other hand, the aim of capitalism is the production of surplus value. Here individual labor becomes subsumed under the overarching goal of producing an abstraction: profit. Since capitalism is always in search of increased profits, this leads to increased pressure to exploit labor power more and more.

But there are limits on how much value an individual worker can produce. And it is in order to satisfy the perpetual demands to increase profits that another factor enters into the process of production and transforms it: technology. Technology progressively enhances the speed of production and decreases the need for individual workers. It transforms the process of production into an automated or mechanical process that is designed solely for the sake of producing profit. As a result, technology unhinges capitalism's connection to the living individual and abandons the productive force of the individual. By giving rise to unemployment, impoverishment, and idleness, this form of techno-capitalism rejoins Marxism as an attack on the individual.

It was out of the misery and despair that were suffered in the Eastern bloc countries that massive protests and economic reforms were introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They looked to Western liberal democracies and capitalist economies for liberation from their condition. But can they really expect to find salvation through this "liberation" movement? Henry's answer is not optimistic. He predicts that the journey of the Eastern bloc countries toward a "free" market economy is likely to be analogous to the fabled "rendezvous at Samarkand." They will flee the death and despair that surrounds them only in order to find themselves under attack yet again. This is because—from communism to capitalism—we encounter the same result: two faces of the same death.

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Let me add a few brief notes on the translation of this book. As I've noted in previous translations, Henry's style does not lend itself easily to the

stylistic conventions of written English. To make the book more palatable for English readers, I have frequently modified his style by breaking down his elaborately constructed sentences into simpler, more direct ones. In so doing, I always have sought to leave the argument unaltered. I have also retained all italics from the original text, since Henry often uses them to emphasize key points.

One troublesome expression in the work is the French "*force de travail*." Here, as with the other Marxian terminology, I have employed the equivalent in Marx, which is "labor power." It bears noting, however, that this obscures the connection to the concept of force, a concept which appears frequently in Henry's other writings, for instance in his description of life as a force. I mention this point here so that readers are aware of this implicit connection that gets lost in translation.

# INTRODUCTION: THE FAILURE OF SOCIALISM

Today one observes everywhere, at least throughout Europe, the collapse of the so-called socialist regimes. What is most striking about this upheaval, which is spreading out like a tidal wave sweeping up everything it passes over, is that it is occurring simultaneously in different places, thus overcoming national differences and historical particularities. From this it derives a characteristic that is both irresistible and universal: that of a revolution. As an event that comes from the root of things and remains indifferent to superficial phenomena, it calls for an explanation on the same scale. Neither empirical circumstances nor happenstance conditions that vary from one place to another can explain this powerful convergence. It requires a principle, a meta-historical reason, which one might be tempted to call metaphysical. Its failure should be made intelligible through a weakness or vice that is intrinsic to socialism, inasmuch as it is happening everywhere in an inexorable way.

One might be tempted, to be sure, to interpret this strange convergence of revolutionary movements in Warsaw, Leipzig, Budapest, Prague, and Bucharest, which have not even spared the Soviet Union itself in the form of nationalist protests, through considerations that are less ambitious and narrower. The simultaneous opening of spaces of contestation is coupled with a meaningful analogy. This concerns the unfolding of the process of revolutionary protest with, on the one hand, large popular gatherings, and, on the other hand, an unprecedented self-criticism of the ruling communist parties which abruptly decided to transform themselves entirely, even to suppress themselves purely and simply in order to make room for more “democratic” formations.

Communism, one could say, is carried away by a groundswell and is no longer up to the task of controlling a popular movement of this scale. It has no other solution than to join it in order to recapture it, or at least to go