

Untimely Thoughts

M. Gorky

February 9-11, 2021

Between April 18 (O.S.) 1917 and July 16 (N.S.) 1918 when it was closed down by Lenin, Gorky edited and published in the Menshevik paper *Novaya Zhizn* (Новая Жизнь). During the period 354 issues appeared. This is the collection of a number of editorials, mostly under the heading of 'Untimely Thoughts' (Несвоевременные Мысли). Although Gorky was an old revolutionary, who was exiled after the failed Revolution of 1905-06, and was sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, he did not refrain from severely castigating them in his journal during the years of upheavals 1917-18. This was very embarrassing to the Bolsheviks, many viewed him as a traitor to the cause; especially as he was considered an icon of Russian proletarian literature. Gorky, disillusioned, would return to Italy, now fascist, where he would live, partly for reasons of health (he suffered from tuberculosis) for most of the 20's and early 30's, not at Capri, where he was not allowed to go but at Sorrento. Somehow he made peace with the regime after Stalin came to power, perhaps because the heroic visions of Stalin appealed to him, and Stalin also appealed to him to return to Russia, and that he eventually did in 1933, and was welcomed in the grand style, given a Art Noveaux mansion as his private residence, where he would live for the last three years of his life; and his native city Nizhni Novgorod (Нижний Новгород) would be renamed Gorky in his honor¹. He died in 1936. Stalin acted as one of the pail bearers and he was ossified as a Soviet icon, although his accord with the authorities were not devoid of serious friction. His untimely meditations were suppressed and did not appear in his collected works, and were only published in the Soviet Union in 1988 on the eve of its collapse.

Gorky had a very pessimistic and dark view of the Russian people, the majority of which were illiterate peasants², ignorant and cruel, lazy and envious, passive and with no desire to better themselves. The industrial proletariat he thought higher of, at least they produced something tangible and of value, not just to keep people alive by daily consumption; but even here the level of culture was alarmingly low. Socialism to Gorky was not primarily about economic equality, but freedom to pursue the higher aspects of life, namely art and sciences, with a special emphasis of sciences, by which he meant natural sciences. However he was not a purist, to him art and science had a purpose, namely to improve the lot of mankind, to make it rise above itself. Thus to him Socialism was not primarily political but a logical extension of the Enlightenment. His short articles provided him an opportunity to give almost daily reports on the progress of the Revolution, but the

¹ So named between October 1932 and October 1990

² Tolstoy had a very romantic view of the peasant, as e.g. illustrated by Karatayev in *War and Peace*. Gleb Uspensky dealt a blow to this sentimental belief. Chekhov was even more critical, not to mention Bunin being derided and censored for his dark views seen as an expression of class hatred. But the peasant writers Volny and Podyachev outdid them all in gloomy depictions.

focus is not so much on the events themselves, but to address its participants and observers with a more philosophical perspective. As such the articles are polemical in spirit but with a certain restraint, which makes them so much more effective.

His criticism of the Bolsheviks consists in accusing them of adopting the methods of its enemies and thus sinking to the low level of the Tsarist suppression. People were shot or lynched by mobs, oppositional politicians were arrested and put in prison, just as in old times, and newspapers were censured and shut down. The fact that Gorky's own publication could survive so long was clearly due to his high prestige as well as his wealth as a successful writer. But beyond his criticism of the party's regression, he characterized the taking of power as a cruel experiment for which the masses would have to pay in blood. It is one thing for a scientist to perform an experiment on dead matter, with the purpose to improve conditions for the living, quite another one to perform it on living people, to satisfy the greed for power³. To this Gorky also added, that the Russian proletariat was just fodder for Lenin and Trotsky to provoke a European revolution.

Freedom of thought is necessary for achieving knowledge, and that in fact we all fought for freedom of speech in order to be able to speak and write the truth, Gorky writes. Moreover, he repeatedly points out that you can learn much more from your enemies than from your friends⁴. To repress foolish ideas, Gorky explains, endows them with a certain nobility and elicits sympathy. Instead give freedom to speak, as much freedom as possible, for when enemies speak a lot, they speak foolishly in the long run, and that is very useful⁵.

When it comes to culture and its development, the ultimate goal of socialism, Gorky stresses that culture is not just some kind of varnish, but constitutes the very chore of life. As has been noted, although Gorky was an avowed atheist, so motivated by his disgust of the official Orthodox church with its narrowness and suppression of thought, he was also acutely aware of the transcendental qualities of religion as being non-materialistic, and thought of the pursuit of culture in religious term as a construction of God. In fact he writes: Nothing corrects the soul of man as gently and swiftly as the influence of art and science⁶. Thus he also had only scorn for those who had not the idea of culture in their hearts so to speak. He continues by the admonishment that for the proletarian the gift of art and science should have the highest value and not merely an idle pastime, but a means through which to fathom the mysteries of life. What matters are not fancy words and homilies but deeds, and thus one suspects that he actually would hold science in a

³ Sentiments close to those of Popper when he criticized large social experiments, both on the obvious ethical grounds as well as philosophical, as one would learn very little from its failures

⁴ Once again this ties up with Popper, who claimed that only when you have your own ideas and opinions challenged are you able to improve them, remove their weaknesses and allow you to focus on the essentials of your arguments and thus formulate them more forcefully, because this will compel you to scrutinize them and discover what you really think. The important thing is always to remember that the other fellow may have a point you could do well to consider, if only to be able to rebut it so more effectively.

⁵ NZ 89 (May 14, '18)

⁶ NZ 2 (April 20 '17) O.S. to be used from now on in references to specific articles written before February 1918, when the Russians switched to the Gregorian calendar

higher esteem than art, or at least literature, which so easily turns out to be nothing but words. Science at least does something concrete and palpable. Beautiful sentiments are to be had everywhere, but most of them do not mean much. He provides as an example the German Social Democrats who in spite of impeccably moral stands nevertheless took part in the German war effort. War itself he considered as an unmitigated disaster, in which all the creative energies are channeled into pointless destruction. If all of that effort instead had gone into the digging of canals instead⁷. Germany he singles out as the most serious offenders, in fact it had been able to prevent that war was fought on its own territory, so the destruction of monuments of culture, could all be laid at their door. Yet, however abominable the conduct of the Germans, this is no excuse for revenge, there should be a sense of higher justice, otherwise one is led into endless cycles of violence and pointless destruction. And he reminds his readers, just as the German treatment of Russian prisoners of war was abominable, so was the Russian treatment of German prisoners of war. In other words one wrong does not cancel out another wrong, but instead adds up. The essence of morality is to look at the individual cases, ultimately it is individuals who suffer not abstract concepts, such as nations, armies and political parties. Thus his repeated call for brotherhood. The war is not so much a war as it is a European suicide. People, artists, scientists of the highest order are being pointlessly killed on both sides. There is no infamy, no crime, that is not permitted not to say justified by it. Let us face it, he admonishes his readers, that we are all guilty of it.

He discusses polemics admitting that one cannot expect to find in newspapers the same calm debate as in an academic setting, yet that one should never lose sight of the need to afford the opponent individual respect. He thus protests against personal attacks, not forgetting that he himself has been guilty of such attacks. This is of course a contradiction, and he freely admits that he is filled with contradictions, especially in the political sphere, but this is because he is a man with a soul and a passion for living and thinking. One may find this disingenuous or be reminded of Walt Whitman's dictum: I contradict myself, thus I am large. He concludes it all with: ... by expressing my respect and admiration for people who never make mistakes, who do not get carried away by anything, and who, in general conduct themselves in exemplary fashion. Hallowed be their names!⁸ Polemics, the word we use for a vicious verbal battle, he explains, is not designed to get to the truth but to prove their skills in catching the slips of tongues and finding the weak spots, of their adversaries⁹.

In his contempt for the ignorance and laziness of the Russian people, he naturally becomes a proponent for a general education and in particular the need for popularizing books on the advances of science, regretting that the publication of books has become so much more difficult after the revolution, no doubt due to the low esteem for learning among the uncouth Russian masses, for whom books are just so much firewood. The Russians must learn from European culture, and that it rests on three foundations, namely experimental science, free art and an industry strong in technology, as that is not understood by the

⁷ Gorky would be harshly judged for his support of the construction of the White Sea canal, which caused many victims, all of it denied by him.

⁸ NZ, 6 (April 25 '17)

⁹ NZ 26 (May 18 '17)

masses ¹⁰. He refers to the "People's Houses" conceived and financed by Sofya Panina in a couple of cities, places where hundreds of proletarians learned to think and feel. She was devoted to the task of raising the cultural level of the workers. And now, she is in prison. For what? Good deeds never meet with gratitude. As a further example of the fight against ignorance is the founding of "The Free Association for the Development and Dissemination of the Positive Sciences" in February 1917. He stresses how much the sciences are related to each other concluding with that they all represent the striving of human intellect and will to conquer the grief, unhappiness, and suffering of our life ¹¹. He then continues with a litany of what is wrong with Russia. How the peasants live in the most horrible conditions, how half of the children die before the age of five. How the villages are rotting with syphilis, how they have sunk into destitution, ignorance and savagery. He proceeds with pointing out how the Russian peasant is unable to cultivate his land, and gives statistical information as to the low yield compared to other countries such as Belgium, England and Japan. Agricultural technology is undeveloped in Russia, and what is worse, we regard work as if it were the curse of our life, because we do not understand the meaning of work, because we are unable to love it. The Western World is stern and mistrustful, he tells his readers, it is completely devoid of sentimentalism. For them to evaluate a man is very simple: do you like to work and do you know how to work. Then we have use for you, if not, you are useless no matter what other fine qualities you may have ¹²? But Russia is a rich country well endowed by nature, and yet we are unable to live on the products of our country. Our industry is still in an embryonic state, so there is no wonder that more industrially advanced countries look down upon us, as they look down on Africa. In fact we are no better than a colony out of which one extracts cheaply raw material to be processed and sold back dearly. We are being robbed like Negroes, and with as little shame ¹³. And once again he sings the praise of science as the clearest and most enduring expression of the human intellect. He even writes: Science is the most grandiose and striking of all mankind's madnesses, it is its noblest madness! ¹⁴. And he reminds the reader that the natural sciences, unlike the social are free from the influences of their time, country and class, and are truly international in spirit and belong to all people. He also ventures his opinion that socialism is a scientific truth, that the entire history of the development of mankind leads us towards it. This is an important faith which will give us the necessary confidence. And he reminds his readers, that it not only liberates the toilers, but all classes (one is reminded of feminism not only liberating women, but in doing so also liberates men, which is often claimed) from the rusty chains that prevent us all from acquiring true culture. But how many workers understand this, Gorky wonders, for most of them socialism is only an economic doctrine based on the egotism of the working class, just as other social doctrines are based on the egotism of

¹⁰ NZ 18 (May 9 '17)

¹¹ NZ 35 (May 30 '17)

¹² NZ 43 (42)(March 16 '18)

¹³ Elsewhere he upbraids the folly of having newspapers in Siberia printed on paper imported from Finland, when Siberia abounds in forests, NZ 97 (May 23 '18)

¹⁴ NZ 86 (May 10 '18)

property owners ¹⁵.

On Democracy, the political aspect of socialism, he has of course a lot to say. He points out that democracy itself is not an inviolable sanctuary; the right to criticize, the right to disapprove should also extend to democracy itself, this is unquestionable ¹⁶. And of course the notion of democracy is easily corrupted. The most demagogic and shrewd governments always refer to themselves as representing the will of the people, this are of course not sincere words. If the will of the people do not conform with their own, they see to it, by force if necessary, that it will ¹⁷. As to the Cadets, the member of the liberal, non-socialist party of the revolution ¹⁸, he characterizes as being foremost politicians, or rather a politico, just as fanatic about their ideas as the communists are of theirs. Democracy has two enemies, he claims, the 'communists' who crush it physically, and the Cadets at work to crush it spiritually ¹⁹. But democracy is not only built on freedom of speech, but also on the possibility of truth prevailing over lies. In fact he observes that it is utterly sickening to observe how a lie repeated a thousand times acquires for many the aspect of truth ²⁰.

Anti-semitism is one of Gorky's concern. He claims that the equality of Jews is one of the wonderful achievements of the revolution, thereby removing a shameful, bloody and filthy stain from our conscience ²¹. Having freed the Jews from the restrictions we have imposed on them we will enable us to take advantage of the energy of a people who know better than we have to work. And do we need such people! True there are disreputable Jews, just as there are disreputable Russians, Gorky argues, but should we condemn all Russians for that fact? To equate Jews and Bolsheviks is stupid. I know, he claims, that most of the Jews, to his surprise, manifest more intelligent love for Russia than do many Russians. Yet, he warns, anti-Semitism is still alive ready to again rise its vile head splattering its poisonous drivel of hatred. As an editor he also gets his share of anti-Semitic leaflets, especially from "The Central Committee of Christian Socialists". He reports on the latter organization ²². It sends a call for all anti-Semites to unite, to rid themselves from Judaic foulness, which includes the preaching of the false principles of equality and brotherhood of all peoples and races. Explaining that the Aryan race is of a positive type, physically and morally; while the Jews are of a negative type standing on a lower stage of human development. Nasty indeed is the comment by Gorky, and clearly the Committee is not Christian let alone Socialistic. It is interesting to note that they refer to themselves as Aryan although Slaves. Hitler and his cohorts would not classify them as such. Much of

¹⁵ NZ 91 (May 16 '18)

¹⁶ NZ 36 (May 31 '17). This gets close to Popper's quandary. Should tolerance also be extended to intolerance, i.e. should we tolerate intolerance? Popper decides not.

¹⁷ NZ 13 (January 19 '18)

¹⁸ The Constitutional-Democratic party, founded by Milyukov (1859-1943) who bragged that he had organized the first party completely free of socialism to be found in Russia

¹⁹ NZ 61 (April 7 '18)

²⁰ NZ 94 (May 19 '18). One is of course reminded of Goebbels. This was remarked many years before the latter turned it into an infamous boast, generally known.

²¹ NZ 52 (June 18 '17)

²² NZ 106 (June 2, '18)

this points to the hackneyed phrases and concepts such organizations trade in. Such filth scares Gorky and makes him ashamed of a country which has produced the most humane literature in the world, referring to Tolstoy. He reiterates that the animosity against the Jews has its source in envy, explaining again that the successes of some Jews are due to their ability for hard work, something which is lacking among the indolent Russians.

Apart from those general sentiments, there are also a host of particular grievances to be aired, and Gorky as an editor receives many letters of comments from readers and critics, some of which he publishes in his journal with often sarcastic rebuttals. He also reports from the streets relaying the opinions of ordinary Russians exposing their ignorance. A streetcar conductor on being told by Gorky of the socialists fighting for the equality of all people, he retorts that he does not give a damn when it comes to socialist. Socialism is just an invention of rich people; but we workers are all Bolsheviks²³. Gorky notes that the gulf between the intelligentsia and the masses will only widen as the former will be more and more tempted to pursue its interests. And this is a big misfortune he claims. But is Gorky not himself an example of this split?

Gorky is reporting on the demonstrations, masses of people congregating, and being swept by mass-psychology. And it is all incited by the Bolsheviks. People will be armed, because others are. They will fire at each other just because they want to kill their fear. They will fire without aiming, all the dark instincts of the crowd will come into play. It will all be disgusting, all the lies and filth of politics will flare up, and people will get killed, unable to suppress their own animal stupidity²⁴. A few days after the uprising and seizure of power, Gorky remarks that Lenin, Trotsky and their cohorts have all been poisoned with the filthy venom of power²⁵. Gorky hopes that Lenin's followers among the workers will see through this, to realize the depth of his madness, and that he is actually following the brand of anarchism of Nechayev and Bakunin²⁶. He goes on to warn his followers that Lenin is not an omnipotent magician but a cold-blooded trickster who spares neither the honor nor the life of the proletariat. And that Lenin has the same attitude to free speech as had the Tsarist henchmen such as Stolypin and Pleve, along with other half-humans. And does he not as the Tsarist regime seize and drag everyone who thinks differently off to prison? In fact Lenin and his gang rant and rave completing the destruction of Russia, and its people will pay for it by their blood. True Lenin is very strong and talented having

²³ NZ 59 (June 27 '17)

²⁴ NZ 156 (October 18 '17)

²⁵ NZ 174 (November 7 '17)

²⁶ Nechayev (1847-1882) Russian anarchist, known for his radical ruthlessness and resort to revolutionary terror documented in his book *Catechism of a Revolutionary* He fled Russia for Switzerland in 1869 after having been involved in the murder of a fellow revolutionary, where he was arrested in 1872 and extradited back to Russia where he was put in prison and died. The character of Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's novel *The Demons* is said to be based on Nechayev. Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) considered as one of the most influential figures of anarchism. His background was that of landowners and he studied in Moscow, Berlin and Paris, meeting Marx and Proudhon (seen as the father of anarchism, known for his slogan 'Property is theft' (*La propriété, c'est le vol!*)). Bakunin is known as an opponent to Marx and his prediction that the dictatorship of the proletariat would turn into the dictatorship over the proletariat with a one-party state. Chomsky has been influenced by him, as well as the modern anti-globalists.

all the qualities of a "leader" including the lack of morality necessary for his role. He is of the class of the nobles and consider himself justified in subjecting the Russian people to a cruel experiment which is doomed to fail. And what does he risk if it fails, it will be Russian people who will pay the price²⁷. His opinions of the Russian people, was not, as we have already seen, very positive. As to workers he reports on workers stealing from the factories where they work and selling their booty, there are also stories of workers buying raw material out of their wages, but such stories are very rare, the first kind very common. Gorky is putting his trust in the intelligent worker, but fears that there are too few of them. What will the revolution offer what is new, how will it change the bestial Russian way of life? He relates a few stories. One of how a mob decided to lynch a supposed thief. They beat him up and voted for drowning rather than shooting. They threw him in the icy water of Neva, but with great difficulty he managed to crawl up on the shore, only to be shot by a member of the crowd. Even in Medieval times, an epoch of unbelievable cruelty, a man falling from the gallows was allowed to live²⁸. Another cause for concern to Gorky is that the printing and publishing of books has almost completely ceased, instead valuable libraries are being destroyed one after the other. Clearly culture has no value among the peasant and one may doubt whether it has among the urban masses either. Gorky is pessimistic. On a more trivia level he also deplores the orgies of drunkenness which followed upon the Bolshevik take over. How wine cellars have been looted. Had that wine instead been sold to e.g. Sweden, the government would have received gold and goods vital for our well-being. Similarly many precious cultural artefacts have been stolen and removed from Russia, and are now to be seen and bought in antique stores in Scandinavian cities (specially Stockholm and Göteborg)²⁹. What frightens Gorky most is that the revolution carries no sign of spiritual rebirth, people are not more honest than before, the new authorities are as crude as the old, only less courteous³⁰.

There are not to many direct reportings on daily life, but in May 1918 we learn that people are dying in the streets out of hunger. But it is not only the workers who suffer, although they need more calories than the intellectuals to maintain their bodies, about a thousand a day, he informs the readers, the latter are also being quickly emaciated, the reason being, he explains, that they emit an enormous amount of phosphorous, which indicates an abnormal combustion of nervous tissue. Gorky is rather concerned about the state of the intelligentsia, the members of which he sees as the saviors of Russia³¹.

For all his criticism of Bolshevism he feels he needs to be fair. However much he might fight them, he should never turn a blind eye to their virtues. They are people too, he argues, like all of us they are born of women, they are no more bestial than anyone of us, in fact the best of them are excellent people of whom in due time Russian history will be proud. They are surrounded by enemies, and even worse by the hypocritical friendship of those who exploit them for their own personal careers, making their way to power like

²⁷ NZ 177 (November 10 '17)

²⁸ NZ 195 (December 7, '17)

²⁹ Many of those artefacts were not Russian, in fact Russia had a large collection of Chinese artefacts, itself looted from the sack of Beijing at the turn of the century.

³⁰ NZ 205 (December 19 '17)

³¹ NZ 105 (June 1, '18)

foxes, use it like wolves and let us hope, will perish like dogs ³². He admits that they have made many serious and depressing mistakes and are now performing a very cruel scientific experiment on the living body of Russia. I know how to hate, but I prefer to be just, he continues. They have already rendered a tremendous service to the Russian people by arousing in the masses a positive attitude towards reality, without which our country would have perished ³³. Yet of course he does not take back anything he has said about their savage crudeness, about their cruelty bordering onto sadism, about their lack of culture, about their ignorance of Russian psychology, about the fact that they are committing a disgusting experiment and destroying the working class. It all remains in its full force ³⁴.

We love heroes, Gorky states, as long as they do not oppose us, but it is not clear to most of us that heroism demands emotional exertion only momentarily, while courage demands it for life ³⁵. To conclude and summarize: Gorky thinks of the proletariat *en masse* and the peasantry only as physical forces, the spiritual forces to elevate the cultural level can only be found among the intelligentsia, part of which may of course come from the workers and the peasants, but then as individuals not as representatives of a class.

February 11-12, 2021 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

³² Gorky castigates the opportunistic revolutionary in a later article, as being merely embracing ideas of the time while remaining a conservative in the whole range of his feelings, a sad spectacle of a man coming into this world only to distort the beautiful ideas of socialism, being filled with self-pity and desire for revenge. NZ 109 (June 6 '18)

³³ NZ 100 (May 26, '18)

³⁴ NZ 103 (May 30'18)

³⁵ NZ 126 (June 30 '18)