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**Marxism and Humanism**

In the search for a new definition of humanism, Edward Thompson takes his stand as a Marxist Communist, and, by exposing the full humanist context of this tradition, gives a definite answer to the facile view which would assimilate Marxist values to the more hideous aspects of Soviet practice of the last decades. Certainly, now, at the moment when this tradition is being reborn, it is not the time to refurbish "the old emotive stock-in-trade phrases of anti-Communism." (U. & L. R., II).

But the question of Socialist Humanism is of too great importance for us to leave any facet of the problem unexamined. And there is one major question that seems to arise from Thompson's article, where I can't help finding myself in disagreement with him. The question can be put in the following way: If the practice known as Stalinism is not in the true Marxist tradition, and if therefore the assimilation Communist-Stalinism is false, can we go to the other extreme and brand Stalinism as a pure deviation from Communist practice? Can Communists repudiate Stalinism without also repudiating something of Communism? The answer may not be simply the unqualified "yes" of Edward Thompson or the unqualified "no" of classical anti-communists. There may be a more nuanced solution which will bring us closer to the truth.

I agree with Thompson that the most fruitful way in which to consider Stalinism is as an ideology, i.e. as an incomplete, partisan, distorted view of reality. But on a theoretical level, I don't think that this ideology is adequately characterised as a kind of "economic automatism." Granted, theories of this kind, quite incompatible with the early writings of Marx were produced by Stalin and his cohorts, as Thompson clearly shows, but it seems to me that the nub of the question lies elsewhere.

Stalinism, in fact, put forward many important truths in Marxism, but in a strangely twisted fashion. The Moscow trials of the 1930's, thoroughly dishonest as they were, provide an interesting example of this. For the trials elaborated something like a Marxist conception of historical responsibility. In the effect the individual cannot be the final judge of his historical responsibility in the light of his own intentions, conceptions and outlook. For these and the actions based on them are also part of a social reality in which they figure as objective factors among others. His intentions may be in one direction, but the real tendency of his actions may be quite another. And this tendency in turn cannot help but condition his intentions. We cannot, therefore, judge the role of an individual or a group solely on the basis of what they thought of themselves, nor can we restrict ourselves to considering him or them as a force tending in this direction, or an obstacle in the way of that movement. Marxism teaches that a proper understanding of man in history must incorporate both these elements. From this point of view, it makes perfect sense to say that an idea or an attitude is "objectively" anti-humanist although those who hold it have no evil intentions, i.e. although it is "subjectively" not anti-humanist.

When we see how these words have been abused, we see one of the main features of Stalinist ideology. A revolutionary party has to be conscious of historical responsibility. But the Moscow trials represent a complete travesty of this consciousness. For the principal aim of the prosecution, apart from creating a false view of the objective tendencies of the defendant's views, was to equate "objectively counter-revolutionary" with criminal intent. The very idea of judging historical responsibility in the context of a trial, reflects this assimilation of error in historical judgment to ill-will, bad faith. In the Stalinist mind, this mystification took firm root: ideas, aspirations and intentions were seen purely as a function of the objective historical role of their protagonists.

This "objectivism" of course, had its correlative. A judgment about the historical roles of people or ideas implies someone who judges. This judgment is itself a view, an idea whose objective tendencies must be weighed in turn. But if every one else was to be judged accordingly to their objective rôle, Stalinists could only be judged by their aims and intentions. Any attempt to assess the real role of the C.P.S.U. and its satellites in the struggle for Socialism was castigated as "bourgeois objectivism." Thus history of bourgeois society was to be understood by the most crass objectivism, i.e. without account of the intentions, aspirations and aims of any of its protagonists; Soviet society on the other hand could only be understood from the standpoint of the bureaucrats who ruled it.

Communist theorists under Stalin operated a kind of disjunction of the dialectic whereby human subjectivity, the creative intelligent response of man to his social condition, was concentrated in the party bureaucracy, while the rest of humanity struggled within the objective limits of this condition, conceived as very narrow ones. Marx on the other hand saw man as both limited and able to transcend limits, as both conditioned and creative, as inseparably one and the other. The extreme economic determinism and the unbridled voluntarism which are the two components of the Stalinist dialectic are equally foreign to Marxism.

On a theoretical level, Stalinist ideology is not therefore simple "economic automatism," but correlatively a refusal of human limits on the part of the judges of history, a kind of historical solipsism. The characterization "Ideas are no longer seen as the medium by which men apprehend the world." (E.P.T. p. 112) does not apply to the "works of genius" of J. V. Stalin. This was
of course masked in the traditional Marxist language. The creative power was supposed to lie in the "working class" as a whole. But the definition of this "working class" was a queer one. It was a metaphysical entity, neither incorporating the real flesh and blood workers nor the party apparatus. In reality it was a mask for the latter.

Since the subjective, creative side of man was gradually located by stages, in the Communist Party, in the C.P.S.U., in its Central Committee and finally in Stalin himself, the task of "building" Socialism was conceived in terms of engineering. The founding of a new, really human society was seen as something of the same type as, even confounded with, the very necessary building of heavy industry. The metaphorical characterization of Stalin as "the driver of the locomotive of industry" is very revealing, as is Stalin's definition of the writer as the "engineer of the soul." What man is to do to nature, according to Marx, the Stalinist bureaucrats were to do to their unfortunate subjects. They wanted to forge a new human nature without, or even in spite of, the spontaneous action of the masses. The result was as Edward Thompson points out, the worst kind of alienation. It was not simply rule by bureaucrats, but also rule in the name of abstractions. The peasants who were herded into the ill-fated, experimental agro-gorods were the unwilling function of an abstraction, the historical necessity of proletarianization.

Since the greatness and humanity of man, for Marx, lies in his ability to remake his world and his own nature into a human world and nature, humanity became, almost the preserve of the party bureaucrat. The "enemies of Socialism" imagined or real, ceased to be really human. If they could not be used or moulded, they could be swept aside like obstacles, as a bulldozer removes the unevenness in the terrain. This statement is not too strong. The image springs to mind when one thinks of the deportation of the Baltic peoples. It is clear that an outlook of this kind could have no place for any spontaneous moral feelings on the part of the people. These were necessarily suspect; originating outside the apparatus, they could hardly be genuine, and must therefore be ruse or pretext. This is the ideological basis for the disappearance of "the creative man at the heart of labour," who has not "escaped from the categories of Stalinist ideology" (E.P.T. p.122) but from all the categories but one, that of the "vanguard of the working class."

All this appears to be a clear deviation from and distortion of the real import and practice of Marxist Communism: but no system of thought is a complete self-consistent whole. It is not inconceivable that some of the roots of this distortion may be found in the thought of Marx himself. And it is at first sight a quite tenable view, that we can find these roots in Marx's conception of the proletariat, as the class, that is the suppression of all classes, the locus of Communism as a living force, and not simply as a system of ideas. This was surely one of Marx's greatest insights, one that his contemporaries among Socialist thinkers did not share, that Communism could not be primarily an ethical idea, that the problem was one of incarnating values in history, and that this could only be accomplished if these values were embodied in the life of a political force which could mould history: "Communism is not for us a state which must be established, nor an ideal to which reality must conform. We call Communism the real movement which puts an end to the present state of affairs." (German Ideology, p.175).

But nothing ensured finally that the proletariat would take up its historical role. The party as the spearhead of awakening working class consciousness had to take the lead. But if the working class alone had the mission to establish a truly human world, the Party as its conscious wing was alone in conceiving correctly what this mission was. In proportion as the proletariat was weak or failed to rise spontaneously, the Party's role became more important. Thus in the Tsarist Empire, the Bolsheviks under Lenin are already preparing the ascendancy of the Party over the proletariat. The next step will be the Stalinist one: the identification of the proletariat and its historic mission with the Party itself. The new humanist society exists by right in the Party, which has then simply to make itself coextensive with, or to ensure its dominance over all men, to make them over in its image in order to bring the new society to fruition. The dialectic portrayed in the "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" once more takes shape.

Edward Thompson puts it: "Loyalty to Party and cause displaces loyalty to particular human beings" and "the centre of moral authority" is removed "from the individual conscience and conferred on the leadership of the Party" (E.P.T. p.121). These represent two stages, of which the first, and perhaps to some extent the second too, was prepared in the works of Marx.

But surely the answer to this also lies in Marxism? The very rejection of the classical dilemma—does the end justify the means?—should be enough to guard a consistent Marxist from Stalinism. In effect Marxism claims to overcome the dilemma by rejecting the dichotomy between means and end itself. The means cannot be considered simply as externally related to the end, but are in a real sense part of it. If the end is to build a genuinely human society, it can only be accomplished if the values it implies are already alive among those whose historic task it is to bring this society into being. The political activity of the proletariat is thus not just a means to communist society, it is also and inseparably a beginning of that society itself. "When Communist workers meet, they have as first aim, doctrine, propaganda, etc. But they take to themselves..."
at the same time and by this token a new need, the need for Society, and what seems a means has become an end . . . Smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means to union. Society, association, conversation, the aims of Society are enough for them—with them the brotherhood of man is not a simple formula but the truth." (Political Economy and Philosophy, Marx, Ed. Molitor, p.64).

With this in mind it is difficult to see how murder, lying and betrayal of comrades could be a "dialectical moment" of a Communist society. Thompson sums this up in saying: (pp.125-6), "A moral end can only be obtained by moral means."

It could seem therefore that one can find within Marxism itself the values by which to repudiate Stalinism. Thompson shows clearly that a certain vulgar Marxist amoralism or moral relativism is not consistent with Marxism. The thesis that morality has been "class conditioned" is not only an historical observation, but is also an implicit condemnation of all previous moral systems as incomplete. It is also and inseparably a call for a higher and more conscious morality.

But the concept of a class morality is dangerous to humanists not only in a vulgarized mechanistic form. Thompson touches on this when he says: "such a morality (i.e. the real communist morality, leading to an outlook of 'socialised humanity') contains also the attitudes of hatred to the enemy, utter repudiation from human fellowship of the blackleg or scab, vigilance against the agent or collaborator" (p. 127). These attitudes are implied in the concept of a proletariat, which is as it were the incarnation of Communism, bringing a new society into being by revolutionary struggle, as they are often unavoidable in fact in the struggle itself. But, as Thompson says, the fact that violence is inescapable does not justify our glorifying it. It must on the contrary be combatted and reduced to a minimum. It is here that the question arises: In the name of what? Because, "Socialists work to liberate all humanity." But the ideal conjunction of events, whereby humanity as a whole will accept spontaneously the end of class society is not likely ever to be realized. The question remains: What value has a man, even unregenerate and obstinately resisting the most elementary social justice? This question is a crucial one for humanism.

Marxism held that man creates his own nature by labour, builds up through history a human world, and human potentialities. It is this great effort and its results that give man "his value, that make him the source and the object of morality. This means that man creates that for which he is to be valued. But how about those individual men and women who have no part in the development of human potential, or those, who even resist this development in the name of some prejudice or privilege? Such for instance are the petty bourgeoisie or the "lumpen proletariat," "the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society" (Karl Marx, The Communist Manifesto, Lawrence and Wishart, p.19). There is at least an equivocation in Marxist Communism at this point. Marx has emphasized countless times that the proletariat cannot free itself without freeing all mankind, that it cannot break its fetters without breaking all forms of exploitation, but this does not tell us clearly enough what attitude to take to those individuals who will not be freed. "Mankind" is still mankind, even shortened by several heads. It is a good thing, in a Marxist outlook, to have compassion, but it is not an unqualified duty, as taking the side of the proletariat is an unqualified duty. The knowledge that "they know not what they do" can just as well motivate an attitude of disdain as one of compassion.

Stalinism has built much on this equivocation. It has created a kind of metaphysical gap between those who are "of the proletariat," and those who are not, so that at the limit, the latter are barely part of mankind at all. The practice of Stalinism has shown the limits of the concept of class morality, not just in its mechanistic form, but in its true form as the postulate of a new moral life, borne forward by a class, in virtue of its historical role. This concept is essential to Marxist Communism. It needs to be completed by the assertion that man is of value as man, irrespective of the part he plays or fails to play in the development of human potentialities. Marx said: the proletariat cannot free itself without freeing all members of society. Socialist humanism must add: the proletariat must not free itself by depriving some men of their status as human beings.

A second crucial equivocation hangs over the Marxist conception of Communism. Marx sees the Communist society as the return of man to himself, his appropriation of alienated human nature, and thus the unfettering of the creative powers and potentialities stored in the human nature built by human labour. But this return to self will also represent the return of man to his fellow, the realization of the brotherhood of man. Marx believed that these two developments were inseparable, and could only be accomplished together—this because of the nature of human labour, as social labour. The equivocation arises because the crucial historical problem is ignored. Perhaps ultimately the two aspects of Communism must be present together or not at all, but in given historical contexts the condition of one may be the negation of the other. What is to be done? The very nature of the link that Marx posits between these two developments seems to incline us more towards the first than the second. For if brotherhood is a necessary concomitant of the freeing of human nature, because that nature is the product of social labour, then
the temptation is to build the new human nature by social labour, even if it involves trampling underfoot for a time the brotherhood of man. Marx never posed this question because it seemed to him to be an historical and not an actual one; it was the one the bourgeoisie had faced in creating the conditions for a new society, but at the cost of increasing alienation. But in 1917 it became an actual problem for the Bolshevik party. The conflict between the value of Promethean man, whose creative forces must be liberated from the domination of things, and social man in need of fellowship was decided in favour of the former. The "Stalinist transformation of nature," the fetishism of heavy industry, and much of Socialist realist art reflect this basic option. Stalinism succeeded in reproducing the worst features of the bourgeois period of accumulation. The peasant masses were forcibly proletarianized, not simply by their concentration in large towns, but in the countryside as well by means of the "kolhoze," and this was glorified in the name of the dominance of man over nature, the key to the new human nature.

The protest that the means must be consonant with the end is not decisive, because the end itself here is ambiguous. If the powerful Promethean man, dominating himself and his world, portrayed (so badly) in Soviet monuments, is alone capable of founding a real brotherhood, then many of one's objections must fall. This is at least a possible reading of Marx. Marxist Communism is at best an incomplete humanism. This is not to say that it has nothing to teach us—the opposite is patently true. A humanism without the contribution of Marx is abstract and cannot come to grips with the conditions of the modern world. But Socialist Humanism cannot be based on Marxist Communism alone. Stalinist ideology as the response of a revolutionary elite imbued with Marxism to the problems posed by a politically and socially backward society threatened by hostile powers represents as much the inadequacies of Marxism as it does a distorted image of it. A really consequent critique of Stalinism cannot be a simple return to the original tradition, it must also involve a critique of the values of Marxist communism.