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Notes from the Moral Wilderness—1

A position which we are all tempted into is that of moral critic of Stalinism. One point to begin thinking about socialism from is that of dissatisfaction with this figure. This dissatisfaction may force us into a rereading of the Marxism which such a critic rejects. What I want to ask is whether our dissatisfaction with the moral critic and a contemporary rereading of Marxism may not together suggest a new approach to moral issues. It is worth mentioning that this is what I want to do, because this is so much a question to which I still lack an answer that even as a question what follows may seem too tortuous and indefinite. Moreover I cannot even say with certainty from what standpoint I ask this question. And this, I suspect, is not merely a matter of my own private confusions. The various characters who walk through these pages, the Stalinist, the moral critic, the Revisionist and so on, if they succeed in being more than lay figures do so not just because they are present in the real world, but also because they represent moments in the consciousness of all of us, masks that we each wear or have worn at some time or other. The need to overcome and transcend their limitations and mistakes, their 'false consciousness' in moral matters, is the need to find a way out of our own wilderness.

I.

'Don Quixote long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society.' (K. Marx.)

The ex-Communist turned moral critic of Communism is often a figure of genuine pathos. He confronts the Stalinist with attitudes that in many ways deserve our respect - and yet there is something acutely disquieting about him. I am not speaking now, of course, of those who exchange the doctrines of Stalinism for those of the Labour Party leadership, the Congress for Cultural Freedom or the Catholic Herald. They have their reward. I mean those whose self-written epitaph runs shortly, 'I could remain no longer in the Party without forfeiting my moral and intellectual self-respect; so I got out.' (A. H. Hanson, *An Open Letter to Edward Thompson*, N.R. No. 2, p.79.) They repudiate Stalinist crimes in the name of moral principle; but the fragility of their appeal to moral principle lies in the apparently arbitrary nature of that appeal. Whence

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come these standards by which Stalinism is judged and found wanting and why should they have authority over us? What disturbs me in the character of these moral critics of Stalinism is not just their inability to answer this question. It is that this inability seems to me to arise from a picture of their own situation, a picture profoundly influential among ex-Communists, which is at the root of much contemporary self-deception.

What is this picture? It is a picture of independence regained, of a newly won power to speak with a voice of one's own, instead of being merely a gramophone for the Stalinist bureaucracy. What this picture conceals from those whose minds and imaginations it informs is the extent to which they have merely exchanged a conscious dependence for an unconscious. The form of their appeal to moral principle is largely the outcome of the pressures upon them both of Stalinism and of the moral liberalism of the West, pressures which produce a surprisingly similar effect. So far as Stalinism is concerned, it provides a pattern which the moral critic simply inverts. The Stalinist identifies what is morally right with what is actually going to be the outcome of historical development. History is for him a sphere in which objective laws operate, laws of such a kind that the role of the individual human being is pre-determined for him by his historical situation. The individual can accept his part and play it out more or less willingly; but he cannot rewrite the play. One is nothing in history but an actor and even one's moral judgments on historical events are only part of the action. The 'ought' of principle is swallowed up in the 'is' of history. By contrast the moral critic puts himself outside history as a spectator. He invokes his principles as valid independently of the course of historical events. Every issue is to be judged on its moral merits. The 'ought' of principle is completely external to the 'is' of history. For the Stalinist the actual course of history is the horizon of morality; that what belongs to the future is progressive is made into a necessary truth. For the moral critic the question of the course of history, of what is actually happening and the question of what ought to happen are totally independent questions.

So far I have represented the moral critic's standpoint as a kind of photographic negative of Stalinism. And this would not in any case be surprising since the typical critic of this kind is an ex-Stalinist. But the hold of this pattern on the mind is enormously strengthened by the fact that it is the pattern of the liberal morality which prevails in our society. For it is of the essence of the liberal tradition that morality is taken to be autonomous. What this means can be made clear by considering it first at a fairly sophisticated

level. In the philosophical text-books it is the doctrine that moral principles can have no non-moral basis. Our judgments on specific moral issues may be supported by the invocation of more general principles. But in the end our most general and ultimate principles, because they are that in terms of which all else is justified, stand beyond any rational justification. In particular, they cannot be justified by any appeal to facts, historical or otherwise. This isolation of the moral from the factual is presented as a necessary and ineluctable truth of logic. The argument here is that all valid argument is argument in which the premises entail the conclusion; and the concept of entailment can be sufficiently explained for our present purpose by saying that one set of propositions entails another proposition or set of propositions, if and only if nothing is asserted in the latter which was not already implicitly or explicitly asserted in the former. And since clearly in going from factual to moral assertions one is clearly not merely repeating oneself, factual assertions cannot entail moral assertions. But, as entailment is accepted as the only form of valid argument, it follows that moral assertions cannot be backed up rationally at all by factual or any other non-moral assertions. And this has as its central consequences the view that on ultimate questions of morality we cannot argue, we can only choose. And our choice is necessarily arbitrary in the sense that we cannot give reasons for choosing one way rather than another; for to do this we should have to have a criterion in moral matters more ultimate than our ultimate criterion. And this is nonsensical.

About this doctrine we may note two things. First, it is remarkable how much it has in common with Sartrean existentialism. Those philosophical journalists who lament the lack of relationship between British analytical philosophers and Continental metaphysicians might take heart from seeing how the moral philosophy of both can breed the notion of unconditional and arbitrary choice as a, if not the, crucial feature of the individual's moral life. In both there is a picture of the individual standing before the historical events of his time, able to pass judgment on them exactly as he pleases. His values are for him to choose; the facts in no way constrain him. And we can see at once how this dovetails with and reinforces the negation of Stalinism. Secondly, leaving aside the question of whether this view of morality is correct or not, we can see how strikingly it corresponds to the actual moral condition of many people in our society. For them their moral principles are completely isolated from the facts of their existence and they simply accept one set of principles rather than another in arbitrary fashion. They affirm this or that 'ought'; but their

morality has no basis. I am not speaking here of the morality of intellectuals which might be thought (albeit wrongly) to reflect the philosophical currents; I am speaking of the largely inarticulate whose moral discourse nevertheless provides the standard and normal usage in our society.

There are then some grounds for a suspicion that the moral critics of Stalinism may have done no more than exchange one dominant pattern of thought for another; but the new pattern gives them the illusion of moral independence. Yet the very nature of their new morality must make their answer to the question which I originally posed seem extraordinarily thin and unconvincing even to them. Why do the moral standards by which Stalinism is found wanting have authority over us? Simply because we choose that they should. The individual confronting the facts with his values condemns. But he can only condemn in the name of his own choice. The isolation which his mode of moral thinking imposes on the critic can tempt him in two directions. There is the pressure, usually much exaggerated by those who write about it, to exchange the participation in a Stalinist party for some other equally intense form of group membership. But there is also the pressure, far less often noticed, to accept the role of the isolated moral hero, who utters in the name of no one but himself. Ex-Stalinists who pride themselves on having become hard-headed realists seem to be peculiarly prone to this form of romanticism. They are the moral Quixotes of the age.

The value of their Quixotry varies of course with the circumstances in which they proclaim it. The reassertion of moral standards by the individual voice has been one of the ferments of Eastern European revisionism. But, because of the way in which it is done, this reassertion too often leaves the gulf between morality and history, between value and fact as wide as ever. Kolakowski and others like him stress the amorality of the historical process on the one hand and the moral responsibility of the individual in history on the other. And this leaves us with the moral critic as a spectator, the categorical imperatives which he proclaims having no genuine relationship to his view of history. One cannot revive the moral content within Marxism by simply taking a Stalinist view of historical development and adding liberal morality to it. But however one may disagree with Kolakowski's theoretical position, the kind of integrity involved in reasserting moral principles in the Polish situation is entirely admirable. To speak against the stream in this way means that, even if the morality in question seems somehow irrational and arbitrary, in the protest which sustains it it can find its justification. But to assert this position in

the West is to flow with the stream. It is merely to conform.

The pressures towards conformism, moral and otherwise, do not need re-emphasising. And it ought to be said for the moral critic of Stalinism that he is usually also the moral critic of Suez, Cyprus, and the H-Bomb. At least he delivers his censures impartially. Yet even here I want to put a question mark against his attitudes. For the Western social pattern has a role all ready for the radical moral critic to play. It is accepted that there should be minorities of protest on particular issues. And it is even a reinforcement for the dominant picture of morality that the moral critic should exhibit himself choosing his values of protest. For they remain *his* values, his private values. There is no set of common, public standards to which he can appeal, no shared moral image for his society by means of which he can make his case. And if he chooses his values in the spirit of *Hier steh' ich, ich kann nicht anders*, is it not equally open to his opponents to do the same? It is this that seems to be the cause of the deep suspicion of and muddle over moral arguments among the leaders of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Thus the isolation of the moral from the factual, the emphasis on choice, the arbitrariness introduced into moral matters, all these play into the hands of the defenders of the established order. The moral critic, especially the ex-Stalinist moral critic, pays the penalties of both self-deception and ineffectiveness for imagining that moral knight errantry is compatible with being morally effective in our form of society.

The argument as I have presented it so far is highly schematic. It could be reinforced at many points. And in concluding this stage of the argument it is perhaps worth noticing one of them very briefly. Just as the ex-Stalinist critic of Communism reflects both the negation of Stalinism and the dominant temper of Western liberalism in his moral attitudes, so also with his approach to matters of fact. The Stalinist approaches the historical developments of our time with a tightly organised general theory; the ex-Stalinist repudiates theory. But what he means by 'theory' he tends to take over from the Stalinist. And in his repudiation of general theories he falls in with the prevailing empiricism of our society. I want to follow through this pattern, not for its own sake, but for the further light it may throw on contemporary thinking about morality.

What the Stalinist thinks that he possesses, what the empiricist critic thinks to be logically impossible, is a blueprint of the social clockwork. For Stalinist theory the laws which govern social development are treated as if they have a character closely similar to that of the laws which govern the behaviour of a mechanical

system. In Sartre's novel *La Mort dans L'Ame* (translated as *Iron in the Soul*), a member of the French C.P. in 1940 is made to say:

" ... it is *conceivable* that the Politburo might founder in the depths of stupidity: by the same token, it is *conceivable* that the roof of this hut might fall on your head, but that doesn't mean you spend your time keeping a wary eye on the ceiling. You may say, of course, if you feel like it, that your hopes are founded on God, or that you have confidence in the architect - but any reply of that kind would be mere words. You know perfectly well that there are certain natural laws, and that it is the way of buildings to stay standing when they have been built in conformity with those laws. Why, then, should I spend my time wondering about the policy of the U.S.S.R., and why should you raise the question of my confidence in Stalin? I have complete confidence in him, *and* in Molotov, *and* in Zhdanov - as much confidence as you have in the solidity of these walls. In other words, I know that history has its laws, and that, in virtue of those laws, an identity of interest binds the country of the workers and the European proletariat ... "

When Popper attacks historicism, it is essentially this doctrine that historical development is governed by laws and that its future course is therefore predictable which he is concerned to undermine. Equally this is what Stalin defends. But in the definition of what is at issue Stalin and Popper shake hands. The Marxism that Stalin presents it recognisably the Marxism that Popper also presents. And it is this same conception of theory which is evident throughout the contemporary anti-theoretical empiricism that is fashionable in the West both in academic and in political circles. Its relevance to the present topic is solely that it provides the straitjacket within which it is possible to confine and misrepresent the Marxist alternative to liberal morality. If it were the case that Marxism was a system in which the clockwork of society was laid bare, then it would be true that 'the *essence* of the Marxist ethic ... is its futurism.' (Hanson, op. cit.) For it would be true that the only effective way of remedying the evils of class-society would be to manipulate into existence the classless society; the blue-print of a mechanical system will tell us which levers we must pull to transform the system. And we pull the levers to contrive some new state of the system. The counterpart to a mechanical theory of society is a means-ends morality. But so too the counterpart to a rejection of a mechanical theory may be a very similar sort of morality. How can this be so?

'We have no general theory; we approach each issue on its merits. We can remedy this or that detail of the social set-up; it would be Utopian to hope for more. History eludes theory; it just happens. And the theorists and even the legislators merely trot along in its wake, writing up and codifying what has already happened.' So run the slogans of the contemporary mood. We can see how the rejection of Stalinism leads easily into this frame of

mind. It is less obvious perhaps how much the moral attitude of the political empiricist has in common with that of the Stalinist. First of all, for both human agency is essentially ineffective. History occurs, whether theory can grasp it or not, independently of human will and desire. For both, a favourite charge is Utopianism, the accusation of trying to extend the sphere of human initiative in ways beyond those which history will allow for. And both too often have an enormous faith in the 'levers' of social engineering: the empiricist in an *ad hoc* way, the Stalinist systematically. One result of this is that the rejection of Stalinism by the empiricist is for the most part based only on the charge that Stalinist means do not as a matter of fact produce the requisite ends; the means-ends model of morality survives unscathed.

What I am contending in this final part of the first stage of my argument is that the moral helplessness of the ex-Stalinist critic of Communism is deepened by his lack of any general theory; that this lack of theory reflects an identification of theory with Stalinism; and that once again his new attitudes have far too much in common with his old. And the only point of the analysis so far is to enable us to formulate with more precision the question of whether there can be an alternative to the barren opposition of moral individualism and amoral Stalinism.

II.

"... *The idea of the translation of the ideal into the real is profound. Very important for history ...* " (V. I. Lenin).

The moral critic of Stalinism, as I have tried to depict him, largely is what he is because he sees no other possibility. He envisages only two moral alternatives, Stalinism on the one hand and his own new position on the other. It is therefore only a first step to argue that his new position is a frail one. What has to be done positively is to show that there is a third moral position. And any attempt to do this will have to satisfy a number of different requirements. If it is to avoid the defects of a purely empirical approach, it will have to provide us with the insights of a general theory without falling into the dogmatic ossifications of Stalinism. If it is to avoid the arbitrariness of liberal morality, it is going to have to provide us with some conception of a basis for our moral standards. If it is going to perform either of the preceding tasks successfully it is going to have to produce arguments, not just assertions; and it is very important to remember that although in the first section of this essay I may have shown, or tried to show, that the position of the ex-Stalinist moral critic of Communism is more fragile, more ineffective and more liable to self-deception than is often supposed, I have not provided the arguments which

would be necessary to exhibit it as mistaken. In order to do this I want in the next stages of the argument to work backwards through the themes touched on in the first section.

This makes my first task vindication of the possibility of a general theory of society. And this is nothing other than the task of replacing a misconceived but prevalent view of what Marxism is by a more correct view. The misconceived view is the one contained in the quotation from Sartre, and what I want to fasten on in it is its conception of the present age, the age of the transition to socialism. It is notorious that Marx himself says very little about the details of the transition. The Stalinist interpretation of the transition is however quite clear. For the Stalinist Marxism is in essence the thesis that a given level of technology and form of production as a basis produces a given form of social life and consciousness. What Stalin did in Russia was to provide the necessary basis on which superstructure of socialism must arise. The transition from capitalism to socialism must therefore take the form of a manipulation of the economic and industrial arrangements of society and this will have as its effect the creation of a socialist consciousness among the mass of mankind. Because this transition is an exemplification of the general laws governing social development its form and nature are essentially predictable and inevitable. Side by side with this doctrine of the transition is a doctrine as to the predictable and inevitable collapse of capitalism. And it is noteworthy that when Hanson, for example, asserts that the ethic of Marxism is essentially futurist he does so on the grounds that this is the age of 'immiseration' and that all we can do, if we are Marxists, is contrive the shortest path out of it. About all this I want to make a number of separate, but connected points.

(1) Stalinism is, as it were, a meta-Marxism. That is, it not only asserts certain Marxist doctrines, but it is itself a doctrine as to what sort of doctrines these are. And under Stalinism the title 'scientific socialism' is accorded to Marxism on the basis of a view which takes physics to be the paradigm case of a science, or worse still elementary mechanics. Engels in a famous remark compared Marx's achievement to that of Darwin. And the theory of evolution seems to me to provide a far more illuminating parallel to historical materialism than does Newtonian mechanics. Here two points can be stressed. One is that the evolution of species was established as a general truth long before it was possible to say anything of the genetic mechanisms which play such a key role in evolutionary explanation. And the thesis of historical Materialism can equally be established in a way that leaves open

all sorts of questions about how at a particular epoch basis and superstructure were in fact related. A second point is that the fact that the past history of species not only can but must be viewed in terms of evolution, does not entail that the future history of species is predictable. For we do not necessarily know how to extrapolate from past to future. Someone may ask how if we are not concerned with predictability here the theory can ever be verified. The answer is to be found by reading *The Origin of Species*. Darwin states his own thesis with remarkable brevity. He then takes hard case after hard case and shows how in fact all can be fitted into the evolutionary picture. How many hard cases does he need to dispose of before his case is established? Clearly there is no simple answer; but at a certain point conviction becomes overwhelming. Equally historical materialism is established by showing the amount of history that is made intelligible by it; and once again there is no hard and fast rule as to the point at which such a view becomes plausible. Moreover there is the same distinction to be drawn between our ability to see the laws of development in the past and our inability to extrapolate into the future. Inability to extrapolate? Isn't Marxism most importantly a matter of prediction, a matter of what comes next in history? To answer this we must pass on to a new point.

(2) The predictability which Stalinism offered rested on its conception of a mechanical relation between basis and superstructure. But as Marx depicts it the relation between basis and superstructure is fundamentally not only not mechanical, it is not even casual. What may be misleading here is Marx's Hegelian vocabulary. Marx certainly talks of the basis 'determining' the superstructure and of a 'correspondence' between them. But the reader of Hegel's *Logic* will realise that what Marx envisages is something to be understood in terms of the way in which the nature of the concept of a given class, for example, may determine the concept of membership of that class. What the economic basis, the mode of production, does is to provide a framework within which superstructure arises, a set of relations around which the human relations can entwine themselves, a kernel of human relationship from which all else grows. The economic basis of a society is not its tools, but the people co-operating using these particular tools in the manner necessary to their use, and the superstructure consists of the social consciousness moulded by and the shape of this co-operation. To understand this is to repudiate the end-means morality; for there is no question of creating the economic base as a means to the socialist superstructure. Creating the basis, you create the superstructure. There are not two activities but one.

Moreover it is no use treating the doctrine that the basis determines the superstructure as a general formula in the way Stalinism has done. For the difference between one form of society and another is not just a difference in basis, and a corresponding basis in superstructure, but a difference also in the way basis is related to superstructure. And the crucial character of the transition to socialism is not that it is a change in the economic base but that it is a revolutionary change in the relation of superstructure to base. That liberation which Marx describes as the ending of pre-history and the beginning of history is a freeing of our relationships from the kind of determination and constraint hitherto exercised upon them. It is therefore absolutely necessary to grasp the nature of this determination correctly.

What may have misled here is the fact that particular features of the basis of any given society are always causally related to what may be counted as features of the superstructure. But this is not to say that the basis as such is causally related to the superstructure as such.

(3) The question of predictability often takes the form it does for the Stalinist, because Marxist economic theses are detached from Marx's general view. And predictions about the transition to socialism are tied to predictions about immiseration, underconsumption and the business cycle which seem to stand or fall as verifications of immutable laws governing our economic development. Here I want to say only that our stock picture of Marx's economics needs a lot of revision. I have mentioned the role of 'immiseration' in Hanson's argument. It is worth remembering that Marx did not think capitalist crisis an automatic outcome of underconsumption; and those like Hanson who see 'immiseration' as summarising a Marxist view need to be reminded that in Volume II of *Capital* Marx wrote that 'crises are precisely always preceded by a period in which wages rise generally and the working class actually get a larger share of the annual product intended for consumption.' So far as I can see, Marx's explanation of capitalist crisis is not a matter of under-consumption, but of a falling return on profit which leads the capitalist to lower his investment. And this explanation, like the explanation of proletarian reaction to such crisis rests on his view of what has happened to human nature under capitalism. That is Marx's economics make sense only if related to his general view of human nature. Marx's view of human nature is not a pious addendum to his economic analysis.

(4) Socialism cannot be impersonally manipulated into exist-

tence, or imposed on those whose consciousness resists, precisely because socialism is the victory of consciousness over its previous enslavement by economic and political activity. All other forms of society have been suffered by men; socialism is to be lived by them. And this is where the threads in the previous points come together. Marx inherits from Hegel a conception of the 'human essence'. Human life at any given moment is not a realisation of this essence because human life is always limited in ways characteristic of the basis of a given form of society. In particular human freedom is always so limited. But in our age we have reached the point where this can change, where human possibility can be realised in a quite new way. But we cannot see the realisation of this possibility as the predictable outcome of laws governing human development independently of human wills and aspirations. For the next stage is to be characterised precisely as the age in which human wills and aspirations take charge and are no longer subservient to economic necessity and to the law-bound inevitability of the past. But Marxists surely say, not that this might happen, but that it will? If they say this, they are no longer predicting. They are re-affirming Marx's belief that human potentiality is such that men will take this new step, and this affirmation is of a different order from predicting. For the Marxist view of history can be written up in the end as the story of how the human ideal was after many vicissitudes translated into the human reality. And at this point we can perhaps begin to establish the connection of all this with the previous argument about the moral critic of Communism.

The moral critic rejected Stalinism because it represented the historical process as automatic and as morally sovereign. And for moral values incapsulated wholly in history he substituted moral values wholly detached from history. To this he added a thorough distaste for general theorising. But if we bring out as central to Marxism the kind of points which I have suggested, may not this suggest a third alternative to the moral critic, a theory which treats what emerges in history as providing us with a basis for our standards, without making the historical process morally sovereign or its progress automatic? In order to ask this question properly we ought to re-examine some of the traditional questions about human nature and morality. What is the relation between what I am, what I can be, what I want to be and what I ought to be? These are the topics to which we must next turn, so that we shall be able to see the questions to which Marx's conception of human nature sought to be an answer.

(To be continued.)