

Marxism as the Philosophy of History: Advanced Arguments of Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract: Merleau-Ponty advanced an argument in the early cold war years that Marxism was *the* philosophy of history. This article re-examines this position. It argues that not only in spite of but because of today's changed situation, the importance and validity of his argument remains. He argues that in spite of its many errors and weaknesses Marxism is irrefutable as a critique of any possible humanism that is not hypocritical. Marxism's teleology and scientificity are also re-examined. The article critically (and polemically) considers the context of reception for such discussions and argues that there is something terribly wrong in our contemporary intellectual climate whereby some positions (however well argued) simply can no longer get a hearing once judged to have gone out of fashion. It is argued that this is particularly dangerous in political philosophical discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

He was an intelligent man, a knowledgeable man; how could he think such a thing? The argument of this paper is that before conceitedly patting ourselves on the back and giving little chuckles about the naivety of earlier generations of public intellectuals we must re-consider that question seriously. But considering seriously does not mean giving a socio-historical pat answer like the following. "The contemporary reader's initial response on opening Merleau-Ponty's explicitly political writings is nevertheless likely to be that they look more anachronistic than timely"² is apparently *Radical Philosophy's* considered judgment. It is true that Merleau-Ponty's concerns were typical of those of the immediately postwar generation of European radicals: Stalinism, the Cold War, decolonization and the political ambiguities of liberal-democratic regimes. This is true but to suggest that his political interventions "seem now to hold little more than historical interest" is first of all to forget we study history to make sense of the present; and secondly, it is to suffer from a present perspective blinded conceit.

It is true that we have witnessed more of the history of Marxism's failure to establish itself in the facts than he. We have seen the disappointments of countless revolutions. We have seen the capitulations of the workers . . . of the students . . . women . . . blacks. . . everybody! Yes, a lot of history has passed.

But let us not be trapped within the apparently all knowing cynicism of our present age. We know (or we should know!) that we do not fully understand our own time. We know we do not really understand the history that has brought us to this point. Further, let us remember that Merleau-Ponty's argument about

the Marxist philosophy of history is not of the form that might be refuted by historical event. That is, it is a transcendental argument. If his argument for Marxism's "reprieve" is not valid, its lack of validity cannot derive from anything we have observed since the time of writing.

Well, today is Merleau-Ponty's tomorrow and the "Left" *has* replaced Marxism with any number of alternatives including the "hypothesis" that it is "Reason" itself that is the ultimate oppressor. But today's "Left" is in crisis and perhaps this is so at least partially for that very reason. So let us give this assertion the close consideration Merleau-Ponty recommends.

Why does he assert Marxism as *the* philosophy of history? It is not merely because it was the dominant left wing discourse of his time. Indeed, that was the case, and on one level this answers the question; but Merleau-Ponty was making an argument *meant to be valid not only for his time but for ours as well*. Let us look for the inseparable connections he posits between Marxism and Humanism and between Marxism and Reason in history.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that Marxism has not established itself in the facts and accordingly asks why we should consider it any further. This is a question usually answered today before it has even been asked. Today's political science graduate students can usually give a quick and elegant situating of Marxism as an outmoded Enlightenment meta-narrative on the one hand, and a quick denunciation of its economic reductiveness on the other . . . though they are a little shaky about the difference between constant and variable capital. No matter, it is a fair question. Marxism undeniably has a

history of bloody sins and stupid errors: what is there about it that suggests the wisdom of granting it a reprieve from exile? Merleau-Ponty provides us with a reasoned argument for just

such a reprieve.

Merleau-Ponty's humanism: history and hope

One can characterise Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Marxism as deeply ambivalent. As political editor of *Les Temps Moderne* he attempted to steer the "neither Washington nor Moscow" course through the early years of the cold war. So far was he from joining the Communist party that he could not even accept Sartre's "fellow traveller" position. Yet he was also the author of *Humanism and Terror* leading some to judge him as an apologist for totalitarianism, the lone (non-communist) Western defender of the Moscow trials. Yet this work was not merely a serious attempt to morally understand revolution in its own terms of Terror and Thermidor, but also to polemicise against those liberals who would profess the politics of understanding while failing to practice it. On the other hand, he critically penetrated to the heart of Marxist praxis and found it deeply wanting. The problems, he felt, were severe enough to warrant a dismissal. Yet he could not dismiss it.

Above all else Merleau-Ponty diagnosed Communist praxis as a *practical moral failure*. The revolution had failed to establish itself as a *concrete humanism*. He was equally dubious about its pretensions to scientificity. This is perhaps what makes his thinking of such value today. What he is most critical of in Marxism was its practical failure to fuse its scientific pretension to its concrete political and moral praxis. Curiously this is at the very heart of why he warrants Marxism a special critical dispensation, as it were. He does not offer a "special pleading" for Marxism in the usual understanding of that term. Rather, he argues there is within Marxism that which penetrates to the core of the human condition, a linkage between the critical understanding of the past and our future aspirations, a crucial linkage between critical reason and humanist morality.

Dreams and adventures! We no longer expect "homes for heroes" but for the "big issue"⁶ to get bigger. We no longer expect science to take us to the stars but to poison us with a new strain of virus. And for good reasons or bad, mutant sheep tend to make us nervous. We approach the future, not with hope but with anxiety, if not dread. This pessimism is well founded. Those who enthuse about the future of telecommunications and the democratic possibilities of the internet should take heed of Chomsky's reminder that half of humanity has still to make its first telephone call! The forgetting of such "minor details" is precisely Merleau-Ponty's point. Is not the intellectual relegation of Truth, particularly *moral truth*, to the provenance of George Bush, theology and the Taliban, to collaborate in the digging of Reason's grave?

The "end of history" was not the merely exaggerated pseudo-shocking assertion of an intellectual fashion. If Marxism is abandoned this conclusion is perhaps profoundly true in its most despairing sense. It is true regardless of the manner or coherence of the intellectual formulation of its expression. One can formulate the "end of history" in terms of the necessary loss

of credibility to any narrative overview as would

give meaning and purpose to scientific practice.⁷ One can formulate it in terms of loss of the reality principle.⁸ One can formulate the "end of history" in terms of Western victory and the resolution of the struggle between Communism and Capitalism that provided a meaningful context and direction to historical event.⁹ One can formulate it however one likes or not recognise it at all. In the end it makes no difference, because what is important is not so much the "end of history" as *the end of a hope for human emancipation!* Merleau-Ponty's utilisation of the term "historical mission" in the above quotation has an inextricable resonance with one of Marxism's gravest errors, that of teleology.

We shall consider the implications of this for his argument later on. We shall also look more closely at what is signified by the term "proletariat." There is more than one level of possible usage for this term. But it can be taken simply to signify on the most fundamental of philosophical levels a Master-Slave dialectic. Again more shall be said about this later. Proletariat can be juxtaposed with the debates about the continued social scientific utility of the sociological concept of class on the one hand, or utilised in the context of substantive propositions within the (alleged) science of historical materialism on the other. But that is not the full extent of its possible significations.

Merleau-Ponty expresses considerable doubt concerning the substantive propositions Marxists have put forward. We shall return later on to this topic as well. However, let us first consider the argument that Marxism is *essential* to any humanism that is not hypocritical. What Merleau-Ponty posits as Marxism's timeless truth is that it is irrefutable as a *critique of any other possible humanism*. Marxism's own weaknesses notwithstanding, it reveals very easily the hypocritical foundations to America's "liberty and justice for all." It demonstrates that affluent middle class "liberal guilt" is merely an indulgence, yet another pleasure that money can buy.

Marxism and humanism

It has become a foundational principle for moral philosophy in the analytical tradition that one cannot derive "ought" from "is." Lyotard inscribes this principle in postmodernism as well. He recites the familiar argument in terms of incommensurate language games:

There is nothing to prove that if a statement describing a real situation is true, it follows that a prescriptive statement based upon it (the effect of which will be a modification of that reality) will be just. . . . Take for example, a closed door. Between "The door is closed" and "Open the door" there is no relation of consequence as defined in propositional logic.¹¹

On one level, the argument is quite sound. But it is not nearly as profound in its consequences as he imagined. It is only sound in its analytical nakedness. Surrounding *any real example* of moral prescription there is a rich context of known and unknown

realities. Let us make a substitution of example to illustrate my point: 1) the majority of humanity is suffering; and 2) help! As a certain form of linguistic exercise, itself a particular sort of language game, the examples are *formally* identical. The plea for help falls into the category of imperatives in purely linguistic terms. It also could be said to fall into the category of prescription belonging to the language game of justice. But this is where Marxism transcends the alleged rigour of such philosophising. The imperative *is already contained* within the description of the human condition. The distinction between subject and object is collapsed in the inter-subjective production and reproduction of meaning Merleau-Ponty understood this. To the philosopher enmeshed in the language game of moral philosophy Marxism appears contradictory. Marxist political and economic analysis is passionately infused with moral judgement; yet Marxists (beginning with Marx) have poured scorn upon moral philosophy. Marxism is built upon the idea that a correct understanding of the human condition *demand*s its transformation. That facts are not value neutral does not imply the impossibility of objectivity, as many suppose. Rather, some facts demonstrate the objectivity of meaning and value.

Marxism's conception of humanity is such that the subjugation and suffering of some or many, implies a diminution of the humanity of all. The Marxist notion of species being is a set of propositions as to our nature, as to what it means to be human. Is this an "essentialist" view? Perhaps. But I would suggest that the rather tedious debates surrounding such questions are not very productive. Rather the implication of Merleau-Ponty's argument is that there is a universality of meaning with respect to inequality, suffering and pain. This, of course, does not mean that they mean the same to each of us. But the very existence of suffering, need, satisfaction, desire etc., and our individual experience of such, ensures that inequality with respect to them, as an ongoing human condition, will be in some sense *significant*.

Humanist morality posits what is perhaps a utopian goal, that of emancipation and the alleviation of suffering. However, utopian or not, our progress (or the lack of it) towards such a goal is inherently meaningful. The universality of its meaning does not lie in individual understanding, articulation, subscription to, or rejection of, such a goal. Its meaning *is inscribed in the human condition itself*! Failure to make progress towards this sort of goal (whether we recognise it or not) will be meaningful to us. It will be meaningful because we (most of us at least) will suffer the individual and collective consequences this failure will engender.

Emancipation may never be achieved. But its significance does not depend upon the immediate feasibility of its future realisation. It is the significance of a past and present actuality that falls so terribly short, so very terribly short, of this potentiality, which is undeniable.

A meaning is thus inscribed upon historical events that transcends individual and subjective belief because it is rooted in a human universality with respect to past and present actuality in

relation to future possibility. Pain is *suffered*, poverty is *suffered*, domination is *suffered*. The significance of such experience is inescapable and universal. If emancipatory utopia is only even distantly possible, then our progress (or not) toward it is meaningful. Indeed, it is the only meaning history possesses beyond individual idiosyncratic interpretation.

Marxism and science

When Merleau-Ponty says "as long as the proletariat remains a proletariat" the word proletariat is not intended to signify the concept elucidated (and debated) in Marxist "scientific" discourse. It should not be understood in terms of the problematic

concerning relations and forces of production, class formation, objective and subjective collective identity, etc. Much of this Merleau-Ponty would likely consign to the realms of the partially true, the doubtful, and the highly dubious. Thus, in order to fully understand the substance of his argument it is necessary to make distinctions between levels of Marxist discourse.

This is where a confusion of discursive level can lead to misunderstanding. The above proposition is not a formulation of economic determinism of either a reductive economic kind or of the more sophisticated (and often both confused and confusing) formulations signified by the phrase "in the last instance." Such can be (and have been) derived from this more fundamental proposition. Today, any sort of reductive economic determinism can now simply be categorised as a superseded (and corrected!) error in the history of Marxism's scientific evolution. It would be a tremendous relief if Marxism's present day critics could realise this. Marxism has moved on, and if still economic, it is now at least, an extremely complicated economicism. No matter, Merleau-Ponty's usage of the term is not on this level. Proletariat, as used here, does not assert the causal priority of the economic sphere. It does not assert that *every* exercise of power possesses an economic dimension. However, it *does assert* that economic inequality will *necessarily* entail an inequality of political power relations. Proletariat, as used by Merleau-Ponty in the quotations above, signifies that without a fundamental change in the economic system (if only as a minimal condition) there will always be "the power of the few and the resignation of the rest, some who are masters and others slaves."

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to re-inscribe Merleau-Ponty's words as a present-day political intervention. Some things seem clearer now than at the time of his writing. Some things seem less so. Marxist thought is no longer burdened with some of the prevalent misconceptions and inadequacies of earlier eras (in spite of many critics' beliefs to the contrary). It is certainly no

longer burdened with some of its earlier arrogance. This is the theoretical positive side to its practical political failures. We can admit that Marxism has a heritage with blood on its hands. We can admit that we have been politically humbled with respect to past over-confidence in our knowledge as to where history was going. One is rather less likely to polemically consign one's opponents to "history's rubbish heap" when one can see just how very possible it is that such may be one's own fate!

Struggle remains, even if one knows one may not win. Merleau-Ponty's words thus serve as a warning and a plea. They remind us of what is at stake and suggest the wisdom of a reconsideration by those who have abandoned Marxism. He implicitly articulates the alternative to Marxism – the darkest possible versions of postmodernism, intellectual despair and political collaboration. There are many who would argue that postmodernism is incoherent. But it doesn't really matter whether postmodernism is a coherent position or not. If one concludes that reason and science cannot be utilised as tools for human emancipation and the alleviation of suffering, then logical coherence is irrelevant. If knowledge is impotent in the face of suffering, then one may as well remain silent or say whatever one likes. "There can be no more dreams or adventures."

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