

Humanism and Terror: Merleau-Ponty's Marxism

Garry Potter



Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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.

Keywords: Marxism, Merleau-Ponty, humanism, philosophy of history, postmodernism, teleology.

Introduction

Over half a century ago . . . in the last millennium, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote:

On close consideration, Marxism is not just some hypothesis that might be replaced tomorrow by some other . . . it is the philosophy of history and to renounce it is to dig the grave of Reason in history.¹

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 reconsider 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.

Yes, the Communist Party of France had at that time as yet to fully disappoint us (or embarrass itself, depending upon your point of view). In the France of the fifties it

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 153.

did not seem at all absurd to speak of the Communist Party as the party of the working class. Among the left of that era the question “are you going to join the party?” did not require a clarification as to which party. Third world revolutions were immanent. People were fearful (the Bomb!) and yet hopeful. The political question of the age for intellectuals such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty was how to articulate a sensible politics for the cold war. “Neither Washington nor Moscow” was the difficult political tightrope line they invented and tried to walk. They pointed out in *Les Temps Moderne* not only the contradictions of capitalism but the contradictions of socialism. They probed deeply into both philosophy and the practical political issues of the day. They thought about these things seriously. “Oh, the political naivety of those optimistic early days” one might think. But they were not so naive as all that. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty was writing:

. . . in effect there is no standpoint for those who remain Marxists in the classical sense. But why should we grant a reprieve to this philosophy? It has not established itself in the facts; it is a utopia. Why consider it any further?³

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. One must demonstrate the flaw in his reasoning (ironically, of course, it is an argument about reason and history) and it is the argument of this paper that the logic still stands. So let’s look at that first quotation again.

² Diane Coole, 2001.

On close consideration, Marxism is not just some hypothesis that might be replaced tomorrow by some other . . . it is *the* philosophy of history and to renounce it is to dig the grave of Reason in history.⁴ [my italics]

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

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1969 p. 153.

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.

His argument thus has particular resonance today. If “modernist” history can be characterised as meta-narrative, then there are some meta-narratives *which we cannot do without*. Merleau-Ponty writes:

It [Marxism] is the simple statement of those conditions without which there would be neither any humanism, in the sense of mutual relations between men, nor any rationality in history. In this sense Marxism is not a philosophy of history; it is *the* philosophy of history and to renounce it is to dig the grave of

⁴ Ibid.

Reason in history. After that there can be no dreams or adventures.⁵

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!*

If Fukuyama’s argument seems superseded by the Gulf war and positively absurd in the context of September 11, then let us reflect upon some similarities between the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The *Big Issue* is the name of a newspaper sold on the streets by Britain’s homeless. Homelessness is certainly for them “the big issue.” The logic of Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that it should be for us as well.

⁷ See, for example, Jean Lyotard, 1979.

⁸ See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, 1998.

⁹ See, for example, Francis Fukuyama, 1989.

cold war and today's "war on terrorism," which Merleau-Ponty's argument draws our attention to. We have an ideological misunderstanding propagated, which suits the purposes of those on both sides. Just as "neither Washington nor Moscow" was a sensible Left position for the cold war, rejecting both Bush and bin Laden's "for us or against us" dividing line is now. The real struggle is between humanism and barbarism (with both Bush and bin Laden representing the barbarians) and if this battle is over then indeed we *have* reached the end of history! I must reiterate the connection Merleau-Ponty is positing between humanist hope and Marxism. He asserts a fundamental linkage between reason and humanist aspiration capable of providing a framework of meaning through which historical event may be understood in relation to the present and future. He asserts that such is *only* to be found in Marxism. One can further assert that such a linkage between reason and aspiration is the only possible basis of transcending the limitations of science governed by capitalist investment and instrumental reason. That is to say, it is the only possibility of overcoming the limitations of an allegedly disinterested science in the service of Capital rather than humanity. Without Marxism there is only the philosophy of despair or selfish satisfaction, the crippled science of self-deceit and apology for existing power relations. Without Marxism "there can be no dreams or adventures." Good liberals do not understand this. They do not perceive the moral bankruptcy and the politics of hypocrisy that are so painfully evident to any Marxist. "Morally virtuous capitalism" is not to liberals a tasteless joke but a goal of political reform. So let me spell it out to them. Capitalism has *fundamental* principles of operation. Capitalism has relations of power, *unequal relations of power*, inscribed within it. Let me make it still clearer: socio-economic inequality is not an accident of the present, a contingent condition; it is a *necessary feature* of the system. Suffering and injustice are part and parcel of the fundamental principles of the capitalist dynamic. Marxism explains these fundamental principles of operation. It makes clear the nature of those relations of power.

Merleau-Ponty is willing to concede a very great deal with respect to Marxism's possible weaknesses. He concedes that Marxism may be wrong about a great many things; indeed he suggests that probably this is the case. But these are errors on a different level of analysis than that which he propounds below as fundamental:

It is possible to deny that the proletariat will ever be in a position to fulfil its historical mission, or that the condition of the proletariat as described by Marx is sufficient to set a proletarian revolution on the path to a concrete humanism. One may doubt that all history's violence stems from the capitalist system. But it is difficult to deny that as long as the proletariat remains a proletariat, humanity, or the recognition of man by man, remains a dream or mystification. Marxism perhaps does not have the power to convince us that one day, and in the way it expects, man will be the supreme being for man, but it still makes us understand that humanity is humanity only in name as long as most of mankind lives by selling itself, while some are masters and others slaves.¹⁰

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.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1969 p. 163-164.

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.

Media images of flies and children’s hunger-swollen bellies *are an imperative*. Do “we” hear “them”? Are we simply the individual recipients of a meaningful message? Or are we crying out ourselves? Does the “message” need to be uttered to be heard? To be understood? The fundamental analysis of the human condition propounded

¹¹ Jean Lyotard, 1979, p. 40.

by Marxism transcends these notions of language games! The reality of the human condition *contains a grounding for meaning itself*. The fact of suffering simply *is* meaningful. Reality is significant whatever Baudrillard might say to the contrary. Marxism thus transforms questions of moral philosophising into *questions of political strategy* and praxis.

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*.

Merleau-Ponty expresses it like this:

To say that history is (among other things) the history of ownership and that wherever there is a proletariat there is no humanity is not to advance an hypothesis which would then have to be proved the way one proves a law of physics. It is simply to enunciate a conception of man as a being who is situated in relation to nature and to other men – a view Hegel adopts in his master-slave dialectic adopted by Marx. Do the slaves, once they dispossess the masters manage to transcend the alternatives of lordship and bondage? That is another question. But even if this were not to be the outcome, it would not mean that the

Marxist philosophy of history should be replaced by some other. It would mean that there is no history – if history means the advent of humanity and humanity the mutual recognition of men as men and consequently that there is no philosophy of history. It would mean in the end, as Barres has said, that the world and our existence are a senseless tumult.¹²

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.

Merleau-Ponty's argument here is that in this sense Marxism is irrefutable as a critique of any other possible humanism. It contains the *imperative* to practically transcend the historical dialectic of master and slave! The “masters” may possess a concern for others and dispense their charity in the name of Christianity, the welfare state or whatever you like, *but as humanism it is hypocrisy!*

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1969, pp. 155-156.

I began this section with Lyotard so let me end it with him. Can we know, Lyotard asks, if knowledge will be beneficial to the obtaining of justice? Perhaps not; but it is particularly unlikely if we posit no moral imperatives with respect to its production. Perhaps not even so. But to refuse the attempt to attach emancipatory imperatives to knowledge production, is to refuse the imperatives themselves. Or at least this is so, unless we can know absolutely (which we cannot) that knowledge will be of no benefit to us with respect to justice. And this, of course, is precisely what is at stake. The significance of Marxism to any consideration of history (or “the end of history”) is the conjoining of a hope for reason, with reason to hope! And if things look rather bleak at the moment, it is all the more reason to hold on to what hope remains. And while we may harbour our (justifiable) suspicions of science, nonetheless, it still offers us hope!

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.

The term “proletariat,” as utilised here, relates to propositions that are central to Marxism as they provide the basis for both its humanism and its materialism. But they are *logically prior* to the more detailed (and debatable!) substantive propositions Marxist science offers us. However, these prior propositions are not *a priori* concepts either. Reason and observation have been utilised in their formulation and one hesitates to call them scientific only because they are such elemental observations about the human condition as scarcely to be contestable. As Merleau-Ponty is using it, the term proletariat first signifies the existence of an inequality of power relations. Then, more importantly,

it further signifies the fundamental connection of the economic system to this inequality. But it means no more than that.

Perhaps no proletariat will arise to play the historical role accorded to the proletariat in the Marxist system. Perhaps a universal class will never emerge, but it is clear that no other class can ever replace the proletariat in this task. Outside of Marxism there is only the power of the few and the resignation of the rest.¹³

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 economism. 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.”

One of course may be sceptical concerning Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “it is clear” there are no other possible candidates for the humanist emancipatory task. Certainly not only have alternative candidates been put forward (for example, the vague notion of the “Left” from Ernesto Laclau; or the now sadly ludicrously optimistic hopes for students by Marcuse) but the very notion of a working class as understood in Marxist

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 156.

terms has been subject to much sociological scrutiny and correspondent doubt. However, once again the assertion is made by Merleau-Ponty on a different discursive level than is commensurate with such arguments (important as they are!). Rather we have once again an application of reasoning to the relations of power and economic inequality. The very definition of the proletariat (on this discursive level) is with respect to inequality and its *potential* transcendence. The proletariat is defined in terms of present inequality and the struggle against it.

Does this struggle in fact exist; that is, does it actively exist? Marxists would insist that it does. But that too is an argument on a different level. On the discursive level being discussed here, a failure of recognition of collective identity and/or passivity with respect to Capital's demands, signifies not that the struggle does not exist, but only that the proletariat is at present *losing it*. Marxism's fundamental propositions concerning human beings situated in relation to nature and to other human beings are such as to provide a framework of meaning with respect both to the past and to our present situation: a materialist Master/Slave dialectic. Any present day analysis based upon such a framework is bound to be rather pessimistic (if not in near despair for at least the immediate future). Nevertheless, we are left with at least a possibility of hope for the future; and, Merleau-Ponty argues, this is the *only possibility of hope* from a *truly humanist* perspective.

While these propositions are not, as Merleau-Ponty informs us, "an hypothesis which would then have to be proved the way one proves a law of physics" but instead are situated on a different and logically prior discursive level, neither are they wholly unrelated to science. In fact, they form the philosophical basis for it. These propositions are pieces of reasoning and observations about fundamental aspects of the human condition: ". . . a conception of man as a being who is situated in relation to nature and to other men." We are physical beings living in a physical reality. We interact with other human beings in the process of interacting with the natural environment. These interactions, the social and the natural, are intertwined with one another. These are simple propositions. They lack the refinement of detail and consequent error correction of which scientific discourse and activity consists. However, observation and reason *have been* utilised in their formulation and a scientific investigation of greater refinement

and sophistication *can be built upon them*. Also, and this is a crucial point, they serve as a reminder to us of *fundamental realities*, when at times we may feel overwhelmed with empirical complexity or lost in theoretical abstractions.

Merleau-Ponty did not directly address the issue of Marxism's scientificity. Or rather he did not address it as it needs to be understood: as a flexible and developing system of thought and practice, as a discourse infinitely capable of refinement and adjustment, as a discourse one hundred and eighty degrees opposed to doctrines and dogma. Unfortunately, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of this aspect of Marxism emphasised its mechanistic nature; simply plug in the data and the answers pop out immediately and unambiguously. Laws of history are thus understood as the logical extension of a Newtonian clockwork universe. He saw this as the basis of its subsequent failures. There is historical truth in this argument. But this was part of Marxism's history of *misguided attempts to be scientific*; it was not *real Marxist science*!

That Marxism has often been mechanistic and dogmatic is undeniable. But it is a heterogeneous discourse, and such is certainly not a fair description of its entire history or its present. The distinction made between Marxism as *humanism* and Marxism as *science* can and must be transcended. Merleau-Ponty has reminded us of Marxism's foundations, which precisely demand this.

Marxism's opponents are correct when they assert that Marxist discourse is totalising, that it tries to incorporate all other social scientific, historical and political discourse within it. But this does not have the implications some have suggested. There is an all too easy logical slippage from "totalising discourse" to totalitarianism. As remarked before, the Marxist political project has a history soaked in blood. Marxists are perhaps more aware of this than anyone . . . as a not insignificant portion of that blood has been the blood of Marxists themselves. So we did not require post-Marxists to remind us of our history. Philosophy is not innocent. Science is not innocent. Our own history has taught us that. Something like a hermeneutic of suspicion is a cornerstone of self-reflexive science. And Marxism *is* such a science! Or at least it sometimes has been and remains potentially so.

Those who would quickly dismiss Marxism need reminding that Marxism responds to critique and that "straw man argumentation" is invalid. The critique may

come from inside or outside of Marxist discourse. But where Marxism finds critique compelling, it then attempts to modify itself so as to include such insights. That is, Marxism is *evolving*. If, for example, the criticism is made that there is something intrinsic to Marxist discourse in its “attitude” to nature with respect to “control,” which is akin to a tyranny of instrumental reason that will ultimately enslave us and despoil the planet, then Marxism *does not ignore it*. It doesn’t automatically accept it either of course. Perhaps it only partially concedes the argument. But nonetheless it then modifies its language, its environmental perspective and its actions.

That Marxists possess sufficient “arrogance” to act upon their conclusions is not something for which we need apologise. We are aware of the possibility and consequence of error. Such is science and such is politics. One carries forward a memory of the past as a part of one’s responsibility for the future. Such is life. But still, the point, as Marx said, is to change the world!

Marxism’s theoretical constitution of a historical subject and its political attempt to actualise it, does not obliterate difference. It seeks to scientifically understand it . . . and to politically overcome it where it constitutes a barrier to an ethical goal. Marxism need not reduce “woman” to a universalised “man,” or attempt to invalidate the lived experience of the collective identity of ethnic groupings. Insofar as it has done so in the past, these things may now be seen as wrong steps (ones which it shared historically with many other discourses) in the sometimes faltering movements toward the production of knowledge and political change. It may be correctly perceived as a failure to escape the confines of thought of a particular age. But past failures may subsequently be corrected. Merleau-Ponty’s own language is a case in point. All Marxists today would likely be aware of the sexist implications of utilising “man” as a generic term for humanity.

The concept of class is obviously crucial for Marxism. But if, for example, certain categories of occupation, lifestyle, statuses, subjective identifications, etc. present us with contradictory indications as to class location or other sociological issues, we should neither be dismayed, nor instantly prepared to abandon the concept of class altogether. Reality is complex and good science is difficult. As a fallible (like all human discourses) and flexible science (like all good science) Marxism is capable of engaging with such problems seriously even if it is not always capable of immediately resolving

them. Some Marxists might conclude that many of the above problems have already been resolved. But Marxist science does not stand or fall with their answers. Such answers are subject to scrutiny (both inside and outside Marxist discourse) and subject both to demands of proof, and to further debate as to what constitutes the criteria of that proof. Such endeavour, however, should not be confused with assertions propounded as articles of faith. Dogmatic assertions presented under the banner of Marxist politics are not at all Marxist. One can, of course, hope that the last vestiges of Marxist dogmatism crumbled along with the Berlin Wall. If not (which is likely) we certainly can say now that that sort of discourse is *not* Marxist science, but only an ideological cross that is our continued misfortune to have to bear.

Marxism and teleology

As Gregory Elliot once wittily put it, the train of history seems to have “. . . terminated not in Finland Station but at the nearest hypermarket. All roads lead to Disneyland.”¹⁴ Whether Finland Station would have actually been desirable is debatable. More importantly though, it must be recognised that “the train of history,” admittedly one of the most frequently utilised analogies in past Marxist discourse, is just possibly the most distorting, mystifying and misdirecting metaphors ever uttered! Such a metaphor suggests history moving inexorably towards a known goal (whether desirable or otherwise). Yet this is far beyond science’s present or likely future predictive power. It suggests Marxism as ascribing such predictive power to itself. It suggests inevitability.

Let me be very clear about this. That historically some Marxists have been guilty of just this sort of extraordinarily arrogant error is true; but this should not be taken as a fundamental criticism of Marxism. It wholly misdirects and ultimately directly contradicts Marxism’s scientific aspirations. How intrinsic teleology is to Marxism is not an issue that can be resolved through scholarship or textual analysis. It does not depend upon what Marx or subsequent Marxists have said on the subject. For example,

¹⁴ Gregory Elliot, 1993 p. 5.

personally I am wont to ascribe Marx's remarks (in the *Communist Manifesto* for example) about the inevitability of socialist revolution, to particular (and quite understandable in their historical context) political purposes. I understand such remarks as being of the order of "go team, go," "we're going to win," etc. I do *not* take them as any *serious assertion of actual inevitability* because of the "laws of history." However, my views upon this subject are neither here nor there. Historical "laws" should be understood as *tendencies* which may or may not be actualised. Let us not mince words. If Marx really believed socialism was inevitable, then he was wrong . . . and to just that extent was himself failing to be properly Marxist!

What then of Merleau-Ponty's usage of the phrase "historical mission"? To speak of such (even in terms of denial) now has a definite anachronistic ring to it. (Coole was not entirely wrong.) It seems that such a conception is clearly embroiled with the sort of perspective suggested by the "train of history" metaphor criticised above. Who, or what, has constituted socialist revolution as the proletariat's "historical mission"? There is a very clear answer to this question. Past and present Marxist theorists and activists have done so. The proletariat themselves have thus far refused (and may forever continue to do so) the starring role offered to them by Marxist meta-narrative. Our "heroes" may prove to be wholly inadequate with respect to the task we have conceived as theirs. But this is to speak of the future and science does not have the capacity to offer a definitive final prediction on the matter. Rather the "historical mission" refers to a (possibly unachievable) goal, consciously ascribed to by some of us (unfortunately only few at present).

The analysis of the conditions for the "mission's" possible realisation includes an achievement of class consciousness and successful struggle by the proletariat. A humanist moral imperative, conjoined with scientific analysis and a description of past and present reality (including some limited predictive power), is thus further conjoined with a political project. The "historical mission" is thus, on one level, only the struggle which Marxists would like to see the proletariat understand and undertake. On another level, it corresponds with a description of the (minimal) conditions of possibility for the emancipatory transformation of the human condition. In this latter sense it thus possesses universal significance.

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 re-consideration 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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