

Dialogues on the Philosophy of Marxism

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Chapter 28

Remarks on the Papers of Professor Wild and Dr. Dunham

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I have accepted the invitation of your president, Professor Somerville, to present some remarks in the discussion between Marxism and existentialism, because, while no one considers me an orthodox Marxist or a convinced existentialist, I sympathize with their concern with respect to the problems of action, the relations of the individual, society, and history, the significant aspect of human existence.

Is the dialogue between Marxists and existentialists possible? It would be difficult in any event to envisage a dialogue between Marx and Kierkegaard. For if it is true, as underlined by Professor Wild, that these two thinkers are opposed to the system of Hegel because it is too abstract and remote from concrete reality, they

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are searching for that concrete reality, the determinant reality, in fields so far apart that they would be able to display toward one another only an extreme lack of understanding. What is more idealistic, for a Marxist, than the vision of Kierkegaard for whom the fundamental relation for the individual is his relation with God? What for Kierkegaard could be more remote from the privacy of the person than the vision of Marx according to which the social relations which are established in the process of production constitute the fundamental alienation of the proletariat and the primary source of every other form of alienation? Likewise, it seems that a dialogue between Marxism and the existentialism of Heidegger and of Jaspers or of Gabriel Marcel would be futile. The only known dialogue with Marxism is that of the French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, at first in the columns of the review *Les Temps Modernes* and then in the works of Merleau-Ponty (*Les aventures de la dialectique*), and of Sartre (*Critique de la raison dialectique*).

We notice first of all that in the years immediately after the last world war, the communists, as if obeying a watchword, responded unanimously by a rejection, an unqualified condemnation which is apparent as much in the articles of the official press as in the works of men as different as Henri Lefebvre¹ and Georg Lukács.² For them, as for all the spokesmen of communism at the time, "the existentialism [of Sartre] is only a class phenomenon which serves reaction"³; an "up to date form" of idealism, which "reflects the spiritual and moral chaos of bourgeois intelligence in the final period of imperialism" (Lukács). At that time, no communist even considered the possibility of a dialogue with existentialism (even left-wing existentialism); no communist wondered whether there was a possibility of learning something from the opponent.

But the situation was to change with political developments. At first there were the Yugoslav Marxists who, after 1948, found some interest in a dialogue with the Sartreans, who were deeply interested in the Yugoslav experience.

Then, beginning in October 1956, after the psychological storm caused by Khrushchev's speech revealing the misdeeds of the cult of personality, a reaction occurred in communist countries, but it found public manifestation in the circles of Polish Marxism, where increased attention had been devoted

to personal problems, to moral problems of responsibility and of individual liberty. Encouraged by the attitude of Adam Schaff, the official spokesman for Polish communism, the Marxist theoreticians attached a growing importance to the writings of the young Marx,⁴ as well as to the Sartrean existentialism which induced them to elaborate a Marxist-inspired anthropology.⁵ In the latter work, the author does not criticize any existentialist thesis, but recognizes the importance of problems which the existentialists have raised and which up till then the Marxists had entirely neglected.

The two lecturers we have just heard are very different in the style they adopt for the confrontation between existentialism and Marxism. Whereas Professor Wild takes his subject very seriously, Dr. Barrows Dunham is content to treat existentialism with scorn.

In a text of undeniable literary excellence, Dr. Dunham presents the existentialists as unwitting poets, who "treat metaphors as statements of facts."

If this is a fault for a philosopher, we are bound to conclude that Dr. Dunham makes himself guilty of it as early as the first sentence of this lecture, when he says "I'm sure you know that when the noun 'Marxism' is joined in a title with another noun, this second noun is likely to be swallowed up, along with all it signifies. The canary meets the cat, the minnow the whale, and nothing remains to be described but digestion."

As this metaphor suffices for him to get rid of existentialism, it suffices for him to speak of the impact that the latter has had on the public at large. But he does not hesitate to acknowledge that Marxism has equally undergone a change, since, for the great public, it is identified with what the official Marxists, those who hold power, insist that it is.

Unfortunately, official Marxism is not as foreign to scientific Marxism as the young people with long hair and checked blouses are to the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre. In fact, the very possibility of an official Marxism is incompatible with the scientific pretensions of Marxism. Indeed, to the extent that Marxism is not ideology but science, its thesis ought to be, like every other scientific thesis, capable of amendment, of correction, without the consequence that those who offer this improvement be immediately accused of revisionism, of deviationism, that is, of heresy. We know the fate reserved by the Polish communist party for the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski,

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who, in his book *The Man Without Alternatives* (1961), opposed institutional Marxism to scientific Marxism; he was in revolt against the undeniable fact that some official authorities of the party decided that which all Marxists, and more particularly intellectuals, must acknowledge as Marxist orthodoxy, these decisions varying with the political, economic, and social context. There is thus nothing astonishing in the fact that Marxism, having become an official ideology, should have become a little too dialectical, even for the taste of Dr. Dunham, for it is normal that its conception should vary with the social and political conditions that it ought to reflect. But if so, which is the Marxism which is to be compared to the cat or whale—is it either a variant of institutional Marxism, or one of the diverse variants of scientific Marxism, which can, however, hardly be separated from the other?

This problem brings us back to what seems to oppose Marxism more pointedly to existentialism—that is, the different relations that they lay down between the individual and the power groups to which he belongs, such as the Party or the State.

For Professor Wild, the opposition between the primacy of the objective Spirit and that of the subjective Spirit would be characteristic of the opposition between Marxism and existentialism, but this opposition seems to me to characterize better that which exists between Hegel and Kierkegaard than that between Kierkegaard and Marx. For with the latter, far from the Spirit, whether objective or subjective, being the determinant factor, it is rather the material and social conditions as they exhibit themselves objectively which play that part. In fact, if there is a conflict between existentialism and Marxism, it finally comes down to the predominant role accorded by the first to the initiative and responsibility of the individual, whereas the second insists on the primacy of history, of its objectivity and even its determinism, at least in the long run. A fertile dialogue between Marxism and existentialism would have to deal first with the respective role of the individual and of the material conditions of his action in the determination of historical phenomena.

And this leads us to the final question which I would like to raise, and which is a question of method. How can a dialogue between two different philosophical systems be initiated? Do some criteria exist, other than internal ones, which allow us to make a decision in a debate between some philosophical positions that are incompatible?

Both Professor Wild and Dr. Dunham attempt to supply the beginning of an answer to this question. Professor Wild suggests that a substantial agreement obtains between Marxism and existentialism with regard to ends, but that there is no agreement on means. Unfortunately, he immediately corrects himself by pointing out that this disagreement cannot fail to affect the conception we have concerning the ends themselves. Dr. Dunham concludes that all reasonable men are perhaps in agreement not on what there is to investigate, but certainly on what must, at all costs, be prevented, namely the destruction of humanity. Any philosophy that would enable us to avoid the final catastrophe seems to him welcome.

One may wonder to what extent the prevention of an atomic war depends on philosophical discussions. But what is certain is that the very idea of a fruitful philosophical dialogue requires the existence of criteria, whether they concern facts or values, which transcend each of the philosophical positions in question. We should apply ourselves to the investigation of dialectical tools which would make a philosophical dialogue possible and fruitful.

NOTES

1. Henry Lefévre, *L'existentialisme* (Paris, 1946).
2. Georg Lukács, *Existentialisme ou marxisme* (Hungarian ed., 1947; French ed., Paris, 1948).
3. Roger Vailland, *Pour et contre l'existentialisme* (Paris, 1948).
4. See Marek Fritzhand, *Człowiek, humanizm, moralność* [*Man, Humanism, and Morality*] (Warsaw, 1961).
5. Cf. Adam Schaff, *A Philosophy of Man* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1963).

