

instead of the insignificant and useless knowledge so often produced. And some research has clearly been dangerous, e.g. in biological warfare and eugenics.

The result of this excursus is that radical philosophy must define itself in terms of the task of social liberation. It is part of the theoretical arm of that task. As such it cannot be neglected, at least not until the theory is realised in practice. Moreover radicals can not be knownothings, since rationality is essential to their social critique. The project of liberation arises within common human experience and practice, of course. Ordinary and theoretical reflection on that experience yields and articulates the criteria used in criticizing other areas of life. The criteria radical philosophy employs to criticize OLP as ideological cant, for example, are derived hence, at least in significant part. However, the fatalistic common sense of oppression can only be the object of radical critique, never its source. The repressive elements in common sense and the sciences inhibit their emancipatory potential and veil the ways in which they support domination.

In sum radical philosophy's attitude to both science and common sense is the same: where it helps, use it; where it doesn't, criticize it; where it gets in the way, remove it.

- 12 On this problem see the references in note 8 and the following works: J. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society and Knowledge and Human Interests* (Beacon, 1970 and 1971); H. Marcuse, *Negations* (Beacon, 1969), ch.6; *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (Free Press, 1953), pp76-83; S. and H. Rose, 'The Radicalisation of Science' in the 1972 *Socialist Register* (Merlin, 1972), pp105-33; T. Ferguson, 'The Political Economy of Knowledge', *Telos*, no.15 (Spring, 1973), pp124-38; and the March 1972 issue of *Liberation* (New York).
- 13 On the ecological critique of the technical domination of nature and its connections with modern science see Wm. Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Braziller, 1973); Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (Knopf, 1971) and D. McKinley and P. Shepard, eds., *The Subversive Science, Essays toward an Ecology of Man* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1969) part 5.

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# Discussion

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## Merleau-Ponty's Politics

Madan Sarup

A reply to Sonia Kruks' article 'The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty' RP11

*By concentrating on only two of Merleau-Ponty's early works in her article, Sonia Kruks gives a rendering of his life-work that I do not agree with. Only in the penultimate paragraph does it become apparent that in his later work he came to reject not only the 'Communism of his time' but Marxism as well. In the following brief note I offer an alternative reading; I give an account of his rejection of Marxism by referring, mainly, to The Adventures of the Dialectic. Kruks writes that Merleau-Ponty's notion of a philosophy was of one who examines things 'in wonderment at the complexity and coherence of the world', but I want to ask: was his philosophy subversive? Does it bring the basic contradictions of capitalism to consciousness? Does his philosophy accelerate a development which leads to a society without exploitation?<sup>1</sup>*

It is often not generally known that Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Marxism reached its final form as early as 1955. His writing during this period gives one the impression of an individual immersed in himself; the question he is continually asking is: was he a Marxist or not? Defensively, he wrote that it did not make sense to ask whether one is a Marxist or not, since even those who reject Marxism do so only in terms of reasons which owe a lot to Marx. He contended that the contradictions within communist regimes belonged to theoretical Marxism as well. One of his main topics is the relationship between theory and practice, as exemplified

in the roles that the proletariat and the Party play in history. He outlined three main interpretations of their inter-relationship which he held were embodied in Lenin, Lukacs, and Trotsky.<sup>2</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty:

Lenin refused to recognize that the proletariat could achieve a revolution on its own. By itself, its consciousness was limited, and to anticipate a spontaneous revolution would involve an indefinite period of waiting. Lenin therefore asserted that the political initiative had to come from a strong centrally-organized, vanguard Party.

Lukacs had a notion of dual mediation: on the one hand, the Party mediates between the proletariat and history, and on the other, the proletariat mediates between the Party and history. Lukacs hoped for an equal mediation in which the Party and the proletariat together bring about proletarian consciousness and lead it to action. This view however is in conflict with the Leninist view, in which the Party is the final interpreter of history for everyone. As is well known, Lukacs' early work was repudiated by official communist circles and by its author. Trotsky believed in the spontaneity of the proletariat, with the Party playing only a minor role. Such a belief in the proletariat, Merleau-Ponty thought, can only be based on some notion of scientific predictability, or historical determinism - the notion that history is so determined that the proletariat will automatically come to power.

Merleau-Ponty was thus torn between Lenin's elitist view or some sort of historical determinism. He did not believe in the Leninist view because he felt that the Party had betrayed the Revolution, and had become the new ruling class. Nor could he be an historical determinist as the proletariat had failed to materialize in any universal form. As early as 1948 he was acknowledging that the proletariat had forgotten its mission. In his last statement on this question he declared that the

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1 This is a brief extract from a forthcoming book dealing with the problems of theory and practice in Marxism entitled: 'Praxis. On Some Attempts to Make the World less Unacceptable'.

2 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, Heinemann, 1974

proletariat as a universal class no longer existed in international politics (*Signs*, 1960). I suggest that Merleau-Ponty took Marx's notion of proletariat too literally, that the proletariat need not be the only historical agent, but can at different times be substituted by the peasantry, students and intellectuals, or the colonially exploited.

Lukacs and Trotsky personified these dilemmas of theory and practice for Merleau-Ponty, who inferred that Lukacs gave too much weight to action and compromised the integrity of his thought, whilst Trotsky, however, gave too much weight to thought thus divorcing himself from historical action. Unwilling to accept the contradictions of theory and practice, and wishing to remain pure, the conclusion that Merleau-Ponty draws is that 'Revolutions are true as movements and false as regimes'.<sup>3</sup> This difficulty he believed, is not only that of Bolshevism but that of every Marxist organisation. This general pessimism, his disillusion with institutions and the proletariat coincided with a renewal of interest in Husserlian phenomenology, and his adoption of a 'Weberian' liberalism. His project was now to find a basis for a philosophy into which all the sciences of man could be integrated - to outline 'an ontology of finitude' in which the natural world and historical man are seen in their relations to one another.

Merleau-Ponty continued his critique of Marxism by using Weber's typology on authority to provide a framework for his criticism. The description of the 'positive revolutionary regime' which betrays its aims parallels Weber's account of the institutionalisation or bureaucratisation of leadership. Merleau-Ponty's despondency seems to extend to all human institutions; he is haunted by the dilemma that if one remains within an institution one never knows when it has compromised away its potential effectiveness. But if one cannot see in any institution an effective remnant of society's best hopes then one has no recourse but to abandon institutions. I would suggest that the problem posed in this way is the dilemma of a 'liberal', and that his ultimate choice to abandon all institutions is 'not surprising' considering his divorce of theory from practice.

What Merleau-Ponty found hopeful in Weber is his belief in possibilities other than violence, in spite of violence in political life. This he terms 'heroic liberalism'.<sup>4</sup> These and other questions, such as the relationship between philosophy and politics, are discussed in his later work.<sup>5</sup> His inaugural lecture too is very revealing in this respect; in it he makes a distinction between the philosopher and the man of action and argues that the philosopher's task is to think critically just as the task of the man of action is to choose. He states that since it is virtually impossible for one man to be all things the man of action and the man of thought should be open to each other. The philosopher is peculiarly fitted for the task of criticism by the very fact that he is 'at a distance' from action for this enables him to 'experience more fully the ties of truth which bind him to the world and to history'.<sup>6</sup> Thus Merleau-Ponty came to view the writer and especially the philosopher as above the immediate battles of society - the typical liberal position.

It should be noticed how Merleau-Ponty tends to pose his questions in such a dichotomous way that they limit possibilities of action:

*We begin with abstract alternatives: either history is made spontaneously or else it is the leaders who make it through cunning and strategy - either one respects the freedom of the proletarians and the revolution is a chimera or else one judges for them what they want and Revolu-*

*tion becomes Terror.*<sup>7</sup>

And consider: 'the philosopher's task is to think critically, just as the task of the man of action is to choose'. As he presents only 'binary oppositions' he does not allow alternatives that combine theory and practice in a revolutionary praxis such as that of Gramsci, Luxemburg, or a Mao-Tse Tung, nor does he consider that it is possible to be both at different times of one's life. With institutions too there is little choice: they compromise their best intentions, and secondly, every institution ceases to be revolutionary once established. Merleau-Ponty did not realize that these dilemmas, mysteries are incapable of purely theoretic solution, but they are contradictions to be resolved by practice. He was forgetful that 'all social life is essentially practical. All the mysteries which lead theory towards mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and the comprehension of this practice'.<sup>8</sup>

Though his writings are situated in the historical context of the France of his time, his political essays now seem curiously dated, like the Cold War. Partly because of this he conflated Russian communism (read, state capitalism) with Marxism.<sup>9</sup> Being particularly concerned with the necessity of institutions being capable of, and internalizing, self-criticism he suggested that, to prevent the betrayal of a revolution, there had to be a means of revolution against itself. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty would not have been quite so disillusioned about institutions had he been able to see, for example, the attempts being made in China to institutionalize the 'uninstitutionalizable' - the permanent revolution.

In this reading of Merleau-Ponty I have attempted to show that he placed too much weight on theory, and thus divorced himself from political practice; given that he did not fully grasp the notion that in Marxism man's actuality and his potentiality change in the course of man's historical development; given that this was the interpretation of praxis that he chose, it was ironical that this came to mean 'the rejection of a notion of politics which arises from the practice of life, and the acceptance of the politics of philosophers which no one practices'.<sup>10</sup>

3 *ibid.*, p207

4 *ibid.*, p25

5 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, Northwestern University Press, 1964

6 M. Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, Northwestern University Press, 1963

7 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror* Press, Boston, 1969. It is useful to compare Merleau-Ponty's views in this book with those in *The Adventures of the Dialectic* to see the extent of his shift to an anti-Marxist position.

8 Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach, Early Writings*, Pelican, 1974, p423

9 'It seems a truism, yet it has been repeatedly overlooked, that Marx's political theory should not be judged by Lenin's or Stalin's policies any more than Mill should be judged by Gladstone's performance.' Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*

10 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, op. cit.

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