

HUMANISM AND TERROR: AN ESSAY ON THE COMMUNIST PROBLEM. By *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*. Translated and with Notes by *John O'Neill*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. xlvii, 189 pp. \$7.50, cloth. \$2.95, paper.

First published in 1947, this book clearly owes its English translation to the current revival of interest in "Marxist humanism." It can still be read on three levels: as a polemical reply to Arthur Koestler's disillusioned communism, as a *cri du coeur* of the French Left against either alternative in a bipolar world, or as a phenomenologist's search for the way between the extremes of traditional philosophy.

In the first instance Merleau-Ponty dismisses *Darkness at Noon* as the misplaced revenge of a Marxist vulgarizer. Showing how Koestler missed the point of the profound historical ambiguity in Bukharin's "last plea," Merleau-Ponty gives his own subtle and most persuasive explanation of the trial. Because "no actual situation in history is absolutely compelling . . . , every existential judgment is a value judgment" (p. 39), Bukharin chose to break ranks when the revolution still hung in the balance, opposed by internal enemies and encircled from the outside. Like the French collaborationists in World War II, Merleau-Ponty argues, Bukharin made the wrong historical judgment when a political mistake was fatal.

Merleau-Ponty reproaches Trotsky in turn for failing to remember in exile a lesson he seemed to have learned as peoples' commissar. Having become an ultrarationalist in opposition, Trotsky refused to deal with "compromises and incoherence," which meant "denying the role of contingency in history." And contingency in history makes terror inevitable. The real question that then remains is whether terror is purposeful or merely self-perpetuating. To Merleau-Ponty, Stalin's terror was a leap of faith in the direction of the greater probabilities—that is, toward the consolidation of the proletarian dictatorship. The flaw in his reasoning here, it seems to me, lies in his acceptance of ongoing revolutionary crises as real rather than self-generated. Those who refused to jump and jump again and again are not merely left behind—they are shot. Logic compels Merleau-Ponty to conclude that "between Lenin's line and Stalin's line there is no difference that is an *absolute* difference" (p. 91). Still, he later feels obliged to admit that "there comes a time when a detour ceases to be a detour . . ." (p. 150). The USSR has not succeeded in keeping faith either with internationalism or the proletariat, he asserts, largely for military and political reasons. But he cannot finally bring himself to reject Stalin and embrace American capitalism because the USSR is after all the only place where an effort had been made to apply Marxism, and there at least property relationships had been transformed. Since Marxism "is the philosophy of history and to renounce it is to dig the grave of Reason in history" (p. 153), then Merleau-Ponty refuses to buy his personal liberty at the expense of the future of the proletariat. Consequently, he is led to take a stand against any criticism of the USSR outside historical perspective and against any preventive war with the USSR. "Our role is perhaps not very important," the author modestly concludes, "but we should not abandon it" (p. 179). However much justification he might have found today for his position, he would also have found new Koestlers (like Djilas, hardly a political naïf) who also seek the humanist way but fear that it can never be found within the confines of any single philosophy of history. We have reached full circle, and with Sartre we must conclude, "Eh bien, continuons."

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