

E. P. THOMPSON

Agency and Choice—I

A Reply to Criticism

FIRST PLAYER: I hope we have reform'd that indifferently with us, sir.

HAMLET: O, reform it altogether.

1. **The Heresy against Man**

In calling my first article an "epistle to the philistines" I did not use the term primarily in its abusive connotations, although these are useful. We are all subject to philistine pressures during most of our lives and in most of our thoughts; that is, we are enmeshed in a tissue of commonplace actions and responses, and we fall into habits of thinking which accept commonplace appearances and received opinions not only as being true but also as being inevitable and likely to endure.

Today this philistinism has infected both social-democratic and communist ideology to the core. Although the forms of the infection are very different, it produces in both a common symptom: the denial of the creative agency of men, when considered not as political or economic units in a chain of determined circumstances, but as moral and intellectual beings, in the making of their own history; in other words, the denial that men can, by a voluntary act of social will, surmount in any significant way the limitations imposed by "circumstances" or "historical necessity." In the Communist world this heresy against man takes the form of an ideology which buttresses the ruling bureaucracy, fettering initiatives in a thousand ways, by external repression or inward inhibition. In social-democratic thought it reveals itself in an inertia of the will and a moral myopia: an incapacity to look beyond the customary forms and makeshift remedies, to comprehend the pace and significance of change in this century - the colonial awakening, the human potential in the socialist third of the world - or, indeed, to imagine the precariousness of civilisation itself in the face of the nuclear peril.

In the Communist world, wherever it is possible for submerged thoughts to find expression, we can see, especially among the younger generation a common pattern of reaction: a revulsion against viewing men in abstract administrative or historical categories; and a demand for less correctitude and more compassion in political and social relations. Sometimes this takes the form of violent iconoclasm, attacking not only the idols of Marxism but all system-building; sometimes of a growing distrust of generalisations, and a renewed emphasis on the particular and on empirical methods of

investigation. In its negative form, among the younger generation in certain Communist countries, we have not only those cultural outsiders, the **stilyagi** or hooligans, but also (to turn the penny over) those more numerous careerists and place-seekers who mouth the dead forms of Marxist-Leninist liturgies only as a necessary ceremony to ease their own advancement. In more positive form, we find the simple assertion of humanist values, irrespective of whether or not these appear to conflict with historical imperatives; sometimes as a straight challenge to Marxist determinism, sometimes as a re-assertion of the concept of human agency which has ossified within the latter-day Marxist tradition. "But you've got things mixed up," Nadia tells Drozdov in "Not By Bread Alone": "It is not the things themselves which make up the material basis but the relationships between people in connection with things."

Amongst Western socialists we are witnessing the first stages of a revolt which has certain common features to that in the Communist world, although it is taking place in a quite different context. A number of factors have conspired to induce a sense of impotence in the individual in the face of historical events; men feel themselves to be victims of vast technological changes or of international accidents which they cannot influence, powerless before great bureaucratized institutions, in the state machinery and in the labour movement, and before commercial mass media which manipulate peoples' minds and debase their responses. Historical determinism, in Western capitalist society, does not take the form of a proclaimed philosophy buttressed by the organs of the State; instead! it enters in the disguise of slavery to expediency. Theoretically men are free to choose and to change their social arrangements: and various institutions are provided, including two political parties like the two ends of a pair of dumb-bells, on which they can exercise their choosing muscles. But in fact the results of their choice are predetermined within narrow limits by "expert opinion," the needs of the economy, "practical" considerations, pressures of circumstances, and so on. Where the dissident Communist is accused of ignorance of "objective" scientific laws, the left-wing socialist in Britain is accused of "Utopian pipe-dreams" and told that "the voters won't wear it." But in the last year or two, under the influence of events in the East and in the face of the nuclear threat, there are signs that this fatalism is coming under assault; and the latest sign is the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament which opposes a categorical moral imperative to: all the life-corrupting arguments of expediency.

Thus the revolt against philistinism is taking place both East and West, in the one case against "necessity," in the other against "expediency." Moreover, these twin revolts appear to be tending to-

towards a common positive position, that of "socialist humanism." Socialist humanism asserts that human needs (bearing in mind all the difficulties of this term) are the only valid criterion by which to assess institutions and economic and social arrangements: these must be made to measure people, rather than people being chopped about or stretched on a Procrustean bed in order to measure "circumstances" or "historical necessity." In line with this assertion, a long derided trend within the socialist movement appears to be reviving Utopian (or "socratic") socialism, that is, the vindication of the right of the moral imagination to project an ideal to which it is legitimate to aspire; and the right of the reason to enquire into the aims and ends of social arrangements, irrespective of questions of immediate feasibility: in brief, to ask questions of the order of "Why?" and not only of "How?" It must be stressed that this is a trend not in the abstract, but within the socialist and communist movements; that is, accepting that the transition to socialism in one of its many forms is a necessary precondition for building a desirable and rational society, nevertheless it asserts that **choices can and must be made along the way** - indeed, unless such choices are consciously made the road to socialism may end in confusion or disaster, and, at the least, we will fail to enlist to the full the creative faculties of those who build it.

The apparent coincidence of these twin revolts may be quite accidental, and certainly we must be clear that in giving this sketchy description of some of the ideas and attitudes thrown up at this time I have abstracted them from their social context. Their full meaning can only be understood within this context, and this in turn can only be understood by the most rigorous sociological investigation into the conditions which made possible their emergence as a significant social force. Moreover, their success or failure will not depend only upon their validity or the cogency with which they are argued but on the way in which these conditions mature.

But we must get rid, once and for all, of the assumption that because we can trace the emergence as a force of this or that idea to a certain social context, we have thereby somehow explained the idea away, and that it is no more than a translation of that social context into terms of thought. We must also deal with it in its own right. In this case the twin revolts appear to converge on a common problem: that of the region of conscious human agency in the making of history.

It is no accident that the debate between "desire" and "necessity" is reaching its height in Poland, among a people whose revolution against the methods of the past (justified in the name of historical necessity) is combined with a diversity of opinion as to the

political and social measures practicable and desirable in the present. In a recent essay on "Responsibility and History" the Communist philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, has described the debate between "extreme political realism and extreme utopianism":

We say that realism is extreme when an individual is convinced of the fundamental inevitability of the details of the historical process in which he must live, and consequently of the hopelessness of any endeavours which would oppose contemporary reality by means of moral postulates. Understood in this way, realism brands any moralising concerning existing reality as barren and Utopian, and so brands it in the name of the demiurge of history which cannot abide moralists. On the other hand, utopianism in the sense used here is based on an assumption of permanent moral criticism of reality, the arbitrary measurement of reality by criteria of absolute good and evil, and the judgment of it exclusively from that viewpoint. The only protest of the Utopian against social reality is that it is morally wrong; his only instrument for influencing the course of social reality is to tell people how the world should look to fulfill those criteria of absolute good and evil . . .

In this fashion, the utopian-reformer-visionary and the realist-fatalist debate with each other, and have been debating that way ever since man set as his conscious goal the improvement of his social life, which is almost since the beginning of time. Actually, the discussion resembles voices calling from opposite banks of a river which it is impossible to ford. Between obedience to the world of reality and obedience to the moral Imperative, an abyss gapes on whose brink the great historical tragedies have been played: the tragedies of conspiratorial insurrections predestined for disaster and the opposite kind of tragedies, of collaboration with crime as a result of the belief in its inevitability. On both these brinks, the moral history of the revolutionary movement of recent years has also been staged.

Which view is right? Can the two views be reconciled? Or can they never be reconciled, and is the debate between them the quarrel at whose heart all history must be made?

2. Socialist Humanism Again

This question of agency was in fact at the core of my previous article, as most of my critics realised. It is interesting, at once, to note not only the points of alignment but also the points which most of the critics held in common. Orthodox Marxists - I mean by this those who regard Marxism as a closed and self-consistent system - reacted with scorn and outrage. Communists, Trotskyists, and a few independent Marxists who still regard Marxism-Leninism as a philosophical hold-all, revealed similar mannerisms of thought and emotive attitudes, scenting in my arguments "revisionism" and above all "idealism." While the British Communist Party does not take official cognisance of socialist discussions in this country, one can suppose that their echoes do reach some austere corner of its Executive from a recent article by Arnold Kettle in which he refers to "middle class people . . . spouting a lot of pious generalisations about socialist humanism." An unattached Marxist correspondent accuses me of "trotting out the chatter of unspeakable vicarage-tea-

drinking Labour 'intellectuals' and the professorial scum of the Western world." To Tim Enright I am "flitting on the perimeter of idealism," with one foot on the road to clericalism. And to Peter Fryer, writing in the Trotskyist "Labour Review," I am waging "an all-out assault on the philosophy of dialectical materialism," and taking a road "which leads inevitably into the swamp of subjectivism and solipsism." But from a different standpoint altogether - a standpoint which I take to be that of empirical social investigation combined with a humane, ameliorative ethic deriving from the liberal tradition - Harry Hanson reaches conclusions which are markedly similar: I am guilty of "romanticism," am a "Utopian socialist" who believes in the "power of the word," preaching principles which are "pious, academic and irrelevant."

And yet, what were the idealist fantasies in my article? Since some of my critics appear to have read something else, I must recapitulate the essential lines of my argument:

First, what my article was **not**: It was not a potted historical analysis of Communism in this century. I did, however, make certain assumptions about these historical developments, the main ones being: (a) That the Communist movement has been, in the main, the expression of a revolutionary wave of activity with a profound humanist content; that is, its social dynamic has been made up of countless acts of heroism, voluntary sacrifice, innumerable liberating impulses - material and intellectual - that are far from being exhausted, (b) That the October Revolution and its aftermath in East Europe and the Chinese Revolution have effected a fundamental revolution in property relations, and have vastly increased the real potential for intellectual, cultural and democratic advance within, these societies, (c) That in particular historical and economic circumstances of extreme pressure, the revolutionary elite degenerated into a bureaucracy whose function was to defend socialised property against internal counter-revolution and external aggression and to drive forward industrialisation. The bureaucracy now represents a distinct interest within these countries, and its state apparatus, institutions and ideology, are restricting their human potential. I am not convinced by the argument of Djilas that this bureaucracy represents a "new class," nor by the arguments of the "state-capitalist" Trotskyist section. On the contrary, I conceive this bureaucracy to be parasitic upon a great movement of human

(1) My "Socialist Humanism" appeared in the New Reasoner 1, and was followed by contributions by Harry Hanson and Charles Taylor (N.R.2), and Jack Lindsay, John St. John and Tim Enright (N.R.3). See also Peter Fryer, "Lenin as Philosopher" (Labour Review, Sept-Oct. 1957) and Arnold Kettle "Rebels and Causes" (Marxism Today, March 1958).

liberation, and now that its ideological sterility and restrictive institutions are becoming increasingly a fetter even upon industrial expansion, I think it probable that its positions of power will crumble in the face of innumerable pressures within the socialist countries. I do not think one can dogmatise on this: given international relaxation, these pressures may assert themselves in certain countries relatively rapidly and without major upheaval: but if the Cold War is prolonged, or intensifies, the bureaucracy will harden into a militaristic and administrative caste, in which case knots may be tied in the political life of these countries which in the end can only be unloosed by the knife of violence. Two ways of interpreting this problem seem to me equally false: the first is the fatuous picture of the bureaucracy effacing itself from history peacefully and without conflict, through the all-wise intervention of the Communist Party: this is to suppose that - not people - but social processes and interests admit "mistakes" and make apologies. The second is the view that the bureaucracy can only be overthrown by a merciless revolutionary struggle organised by a new "Marxist leadership": this seems to me not only to mistake the character of the bureaucracy, but also to impose a doctrinaire revolutionary pattern upon events, ignoring those innumerable examples in history where deeply entrenched vested interests have been forced to retreat before popular pressures or have been ousted by limited political upheavals. (d) The displacement or progressive curbing of the bureaucracy will not banish all economic and social problems with a wave of the wand, nor will it usher in some socialist state of nature, where all are in concord, entitled "socialist humanity." "Socialist humanism" is a term intended to characterise the attitudes and outlook of those in rebellion against the bureaucracy, its methods and ideology; if they are victorious, they will at once discover, as they have done in Gomulka's Poland, that facts are stubborn things and cannot be wished away. But if they are successful in prising loose the bureaucracy at the centre of power - that is, in the Soviet Union - I see no necessary reason why some new power group should take the place of the old; but feel confident that social processes can be engendered, and institutions constructed, whereby conflicting interests will be adjusted, not by blind or brutal contests of power, but increasingly by fully-conscious and voluntary choices. I also feel confident that there will ensue a period of great vitality and diversity in the intellectual and cultural life of the people.

Second, the main theme of my article was an attempt to abstract from its particular social contexts the "Stalinist" ideology, and analyse its main features and their derivations. Harry Hanson has little pretext for ridiculing this approach, on the grounds that "the

basic dilemmas . . . are part of the stuff of history, not merely the artificial product of Stalin's 'false ideology'." I made it clear at the outset that, in describing Stalinism as the ideology of the "Glite-into-bureaucracy" I regarded it as being in greater measure the product of events than their cause:

Stalinism struck root within a particular social context, drawing nourishment from attitudes and ideas prevalent among the working-class and peasantry — exploited and culturally deprived classes; it was strengthened by Russian backwardness and by the hostility and active aggression of capitalist powers; out of these conditions there arose the bureaucracy which adapted the ideology to its own purposes and is interested in perpetuating it

In sketching in the context within which Stalinism consolidated itself I most certainly leapt over a hundred historical problems, and in particular dealt superficially with the major problems of industrialisation in a backward country which Hanson discusses incisively and shrewdly. But whatever weight we give to the formative influences, the point of my essay was to anatomise Stalinism itself, whose ideas, attitudes and organisational forms are now a formidable influence on their own account:

Stalinism did not develop just because certain economic and social conditions existed, but because these conditions provided a fertile climate within which false ideas took root, and these false ideas became in their turn a part of the social conditions.

The confrontation in the Communist movement of the 1950s is between the bureaucracy with its dogmas and institutions secreted from past conflicts and emergencies, and new people, with new needs, attitudes and ideas. The "new man," so long announced by Communist ideologues, is at last coming onto the scene; but he is coming in a shape and mood altogether unexpected to the "Pravda" editorialists, who - having rubbed the lamp and wished - now find they have conjured a force they cannot control. Let us look at the confrontation as it now appears, and let us not evade it by fighting over and over again the battle of the kulaks or the skirmishes of 1923.

After a year of turbulent controversy, and in the face of cogent criticism, I find that I still adhere to the essential lines of this analysis: which is, that Stalinism is, in the Marxist sense, a mature ideology: "a constellation of partisan attitudes and false, or partially false, ideas," with its own inner consistency and quasi-religious institutional forms. As such it provides a theoretical justification for the "realist-fatalist" view of history, which discounts human agency, as expressed through democratic popular initiatives; and as such it is not only a "dogma" but a source from which dogmas endlessly flow. Although Stalin has been denounced, this ideology is still dominant in Russia and has great influence throughout the

entire working-class movement. Therefore we can't just shrug **it off**, but must hack away at every one of the errors and inhumanities embedded in the very structure of the theory. And this the more so, since certain features which make it up - such as anti-intellectualism and suspicion of organisational nonconformity - are generated within every working-class movement, including our own, and could, within certain contexts, become inflamed with similar results. In more than one respect "Deakinism" and Stalinism are next of kin.

Third, in developing a critique of Stalinism, I tried to distinguish between certain false or ambiguous ideas which Stalin held in common with Marx or Lenin, and Stalinism as an ideology:

This is not the same thing- as saying that Stalinism is 'Marxism with three mistakes'; at a certain point -- related to the growth of the Russian bureaucracy, the Third International, and Stalin's own influence — dogmas and partisan class attitudes which had been present in different degrees in the working-class movement crystallised into a systematised ideology, held together within a false conceptual framework.

The governing phrase here is "false conceptual framework"; it is not this or that dogma which distinguishes Stalinism, **but the** idealist mode of thought, out of which dogma breeds. **But** in distinguishing this idealist mode of thought from the method of Marx and Engels, and their flexible "ideas of movement"; and in contrasting the partisan attitudes of Stalinism with the humanist outlook of Marx, I gave to some readers the impression that I was striving to assert the virgin untouchable purity of original Marxism, to which Stalinism owes no kinship, and suggesting that all our problems can be solved if we only return to the unsullied Marxist fountain-head. I did in fact on several occasions indicate ambiguities in Marx which became fallacies in Lenin and ideology with Stalin: but - because I do indeed believe that the root of the matter is in Marx - my tone suggested that the whole matter is there. I can now see more clearly that if Stalinism is a mutation of Marx's ideas, the very fact that they are capable of undergoing such a mutation while still remaining in a direct line of relationship indicates an original weakness which goes beyond mere ambiguity - and especially at the point where the crucial distinction between determinism and agency is to be found. I therefore accept a large part of Charles Taylor's argument, and his conclusion: "Marxist Communism is at best an **incomplete** humanism . . . A really consequent critique of Stalinism cannot be a simple return to the original tradition, it must also involve a critique of the values of Marxist communism."

3. The Dialectics of the "Dilemma."

At this point two arguments should be noted, both of **which**

inhibit us from making the critique which events force **upon** us. The first is not so much an argument as an evasion, which takes refuge from moral commitment in the most sweeping, epoch-embracing generalisations. Thus Tim Enright (falling back upon arguments similar to those popularised by Anna Louise Strong) describes the deformities of Stalinism - secret police and concentration camp - as the "birth marks," the necessary "disfigurement" of a socialist society emerging from "the womb [of] Czarist Russia." These are as nothing when compared to the "millions of people wrenched from the grime of poverty and ignorance into a life of ever-expanding horizons." Jack Lindsay, with many more qualifications, betrays the same over-confidence in the judgment of history when he declares that Stalinism "represents the past, it has been exposed, its tightening coils are the death-throes of an outmoded system."

Such sweeping historical optimism may be of value when counterposed to those traumatic states of mind into which some disillusioned people (and only too many ex-Communists) fall when they come face to face with the facts of life in the Communist world; and which lead, by well-worn paths, to an anti-Communist fixation, which sees only the parasitism and not the liberating popular movement upon which the parasitism feeds, the distorted forms of Soviet society and not the human potential within. Nevertheless, we must make three warnings. First, such judgments are premature: an authoritarian regime commanding vast state power to which the people have no direct democratic access may outlive by generations the time when it has become "outmoded," and could indeed assume even more directly militaristic forms. Second, such judgments are presumptuous, if they enable us to comfort our own consciences with hazy optimistic vistas while at the same time evading a truthful appreciation of immediate human realities. The victim of oppression is entitled to keep his courage up by placing his confidence in some future outcome; the onlooker has no right to excuse himself from commitment so easily. Third, such terms as "disfigurement" and "birthmark" are so imprecise that they enable one to slide away too easily from the fact that the "birthmark" of Soviet society is not some general historical malaise, with which all citizens are afflicted equally, but the very institutions and ideology which emerged from the aftermath of revolution: and, to be more precise, above all the CPSU and orthodox "Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism." And these institutions and this ideology will not be overcome without a whole series of conflicts in which, as in every great historical issue, it is our duty to state our own commitment.

And here we come upon a second argument, stated most forcibly by Harry Hanson. If it is true that where Communism has triumphed

ed it has, by destroying feudal and capitalist property relations and social relationships, by raising the educational and technical level of backward peoples, by rapid industrialisation and in a hundred other ways, "vastly increased the real potential for intellectual, cultural and democratic advance" for countless millions of people - if this is true, and if it is also true that in the backwardness of post-revolutionary Russia and in face of internal and external hazard, the revolutionary elite could only maintain power by methods of extreme authoritarianism, does it not also follow that Stalinism was both "necessary" and historically "progressive"? On what grounds can we develop a moral critique of a system which has opened such vistas for human advance? "I may be obtuse," writes Hanson,

perhaps I have so far forgotten my Marxist post that I am arguing like a mechanist rather than like a dialectician; but it does seem to me that you are trying to have your cake and eat it.

And a great part of his critique of my argument turns upon this "dilemma" which, it seems, I had unaccountably overlooked.

It would indeed be extraordinary if I had overlooked the dilemma which is at the heart of every socialist debate in the past, quarter century, which every one of us has pondered a hundred times, and which was, indeed, the starting point and the conclusion of my own essay. Moreover, the "dilemma" is not peculiar to the past few years but is in a real sense the dilemma of all human history, and for this reason I find Hanson's jibe about "arguing . . . like a dialectician" cheap and unworthy; one need not dot every i or cross every t in Marx's writings, nor need one accept the Hegelian categories of dialectical logic, to recognise the fact that Marx's greatness lies in his refusal to fall into facile economic progressivism on the one hand, or equally facile moral absolutism on the other. I concluded my essay by quoting Marx's characterisation of human progress as resembling "that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain"; and it is the failure to view history as a whole, and comprehend the "double-edged, double-tongued," contradictory character of human progress in class-divided societies (including the Communist world today) which vitiates so much contemporary discussion. No doubt the word "dialectics" has - like the term "Marxism" - become so soiled by word-spinners and double-talkers that it is out of fashion; but I do not know a better word for describing that sense of history (in which, above all, Marx and Engels excelled) which comprehends the contradictory path of human progress, at one and the same time releasing new human energies and denying them expression.

So let us look more closely at this "dilemma." Viewed from one

aspect it is a "dilemma" no longer: it is now a part of history, and I agree with Lindsay that there is a sense in which "one must accept history unless one is to isolate oneself in some cranky self-righteousness." There is little point in re-opening the argument about whether or not the Bolsheviks should have attempted to build "socialism in one country." We are concerned with the consequences of their decision, as they reveal themselves forty years later.

Second, once we accept this decision as given, we must also accept the fact that Bolshevik power plus industrialisation involved the creating of a centralised authoritarian state, and the multiplication of pressures towards some such outcome as Stalinism: but it does not thereby follow that every step along this road, and every feature of Stalinism was "inevitable"; that is a question which future generations of historians will debate, and especially Russian historians when they are permitted to emerge from the realms of "Marxist-Leninist" fiction. It certainly does not follow that ideological and institutional developments in the Communist movement in the rest of the world were inevitable.

Third, if we accept that some form of authoritarian rule was imposed by circumstances, this is not the same thing as justifying all its features as either desirable or humanly progressive; and it certainly is not the same thing as justifying the ideology which disguised or glorified the use of repressive state power. Such a conclusion is only tenable if we assume that Bolshevik power plus industrialisation is itself an end, which includes all other human ends; or that power is its own justification and its own standard of "progress." I do not intend to offer some facile "answer" to the problem of assessing criteria of human progress, and the manifold considerations which must be brought to bear. But it is worth recalling that, when we look at past history, we do not expect to find any simple equation between productive advance and human progress. Thus we may say that the English railway network in India made possible the reduction of the incidence of famine, opened whole areas up to the world market, developed new skills and assisted in uniting the Indian people, thereby establishing the pre-conditions for awakening a nationalist movement sufficiently powerful to expel the British; but we do not therefore assume that British rule or railway bonds or taxes on salt were all aspects of an uncomplicated "progressive" historical tendency. Or again we may see that the Tudor enclosures made possible improved methods of large-scale farming, thereby stimulating the woollen industry and opening the way to an escape from a wretched subsistence economy with its "country stupor"; but this does not prevent us from responding to Sir Thomas More's denunciations of methods where "sheep eat

men." Or again we can recognise that the coming of the power-loom was economically "progressive," while at the same time acknowledging that the revolt of the handloom-weavers against the consequences, and against the factory system and its values, made them into the shock-troops of Northern Chartism - which surely we do not dismiss out-of-hand as a "reactionary," retrogressive political force?

I am not concerned here to argue the case for a dual measure of "progress" - the one economic, the other humanist; nor to argue the case for a complex measurement, which strikes a balance between the immediate and the potential; My point is that the "dilemma" of Stalinism, however acute, is not new. We are accustomed to the extremely complex issues involved in evaluating progress in the past; and only the assumption that a socialist revolution, by "abolishing classes," would abolish these "double-edged, double-tongued" phenomena, has led some socialists to be caught by the "dilemma" unawares. In fact there are no historical grounds for supposing that there can be an easy correlation between economic and moral advance, or that one or the other standard, abstracted from historical reality, will do service as a measuring-rod. If we say that Stalinism has vastly enlarged the human potential of Soviet society, we are no more committed to a moral endorsement of Stalin's methods than we are committed, in approving the Reformation, to approval of the looting of monasteries or the murder of Anne Boleyn. At the moment when we can assume that each economic advance is **ipso facto** and instantly a measure of an advance in human well-being we will indeed have entered a new historical epoch.

Fourth, even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that Stalinist methods of power plus industrialisation were inevitable and (short of a collapse into counter-revolutionary terror) were the **only** way, and therefore were to that degree historically "progressive" (in the sense that the only way to advance from point A to point C was by way of point B) it still does not weaken my argument that further advance is only possible through a moral and political revulsion against the methods and ideology of the Stalinist period. We may take one fantastic illustration and one historical parallel. First, let us suppose that a tribe is isolated in an island and facing famine, in circumstances where they and their children must die or they must take to cannibalism. They decide on cannibalism, in the interests of survival. A moralist on the island approves their action, perhaps not as "progressive" but at least as necessary. After a period, trade-routes to the mainland are restored: food becomes plentiful. But by now the adult cannibals have a taste for human flesh, they

have a new cultural pattern with sacred rites and taboos involving human sacrifice, they now make a virtue of practices which necessity once imposed. In such circumstances the pattern cannot be broken through until their children (themselves saved by such practices) revolt against it, in the name of a higher morality. If this example is too far-fetched and extreme, we might take a hundred illustrations from history, but will be content with one. Our own industrial revolution was pressed forward under slogans of human advancement scarcely less optimistic than those of Stalinism. If villagers complained of enclosures, they were informed of the increasing crop yields and the benefits to the whole of the economy. If workers rebelled against factory conditions, they were lectured by moralists (whom Mr. Popper and Harry Hanson would describe as "futurists") on the reward around the corner. Thus, Dr. Ure, in "**The Philosophy of Manufactures**" (1835):

Violent revulsions of this nature display short-sighted man in the contemptible character of a self-tormentor. What a different lot would be his, did he quietly move onwards in the progression of improvement designed by Providence to emancipate his animal functions from brute toil, and to leave his intelligent principle leisure to think of its immortal interests!

I am reminded at once of Dr. Kettle and other modern philosophers of the heavy industrial base who deplore the Hungarian revolutionaries who "sincerely but fatally play into the hands of counter-revolution." How much better if they had "quietly moved onwards in the progression of improvement designed by the Party, etc." And the reckless pursuit of industrialisation by a Rakosi will destroy human beings as surely, if not more surely, than the pursuit of profit by Arkwright and his fellow mill-owners, unless curbed by the human needs of the living generation. And just as one part of the revolt against our own early industrialism appeared simply as a revolt **against** "political economy" and in favour of greater humanity (Cobbett, Oastler, Carlyle, the 10 Hour Movement), so the revolt against Stalinism, while being intimately tied in with specific demands for more consumer goods, decentralisation, worker's control, is coloured throughout by the revolt against inhumanity, and against a political economy which can reduce to statistical expressions everything except human needs. Thus even if we accept that Stalinist methods were necessary in taking us to point C, with its vastly enlarged human potential, it is still perfectly logical to argue that this potential can only be released through an utter repudiation of the economic methods and political institutions which Stalinism employed. So far from an uncompromising moral critique of Stalinism being inconsistent with a recognition of its historical role, it is the next consistent step in socialist advance which Stalinism has

made necessary; the " Utopian " moral rebel is the child of historical " necessity."

Fifth, and finally, (2) if by the " dilemma " Harry Hanson refers not to the historical movement as a whole but to the dilemma of the individual within the Soviet Union or of the socialist outside in the past quarter century, then I will agree at once that no historical arguments whatsoever can make it less acute than it has been, and, indeed, continues to be. That is why I cannot follow those whose revulsion against Stalinism has led on to a glib denunciation of almost all goings-on in the Communist world since about 1922, and to the wholesale revision of political assessments of every event in which the Soviet Union or Communist Parties have been implicated in the intervening thirty-odd years. On the contrary, I think that each one of these events - whether the Chinese Revolution or the Spanish War or the post-war situation in France - has to be evaluated not by pettifogging scrutiny of texts nor by one-sided evidence from Trotsky's archives nor by the epiphenomena of Kremlin or Comintern intrigues, but within its historical context as a whole: and that context includes (for the greater part of the period) fascism, war or the threat of war on the one hand, and the great class movement of the oppressed, underlying and often transcending its distorted ideological expression, on the other. Such evaluation requires a depth of knowledge and research of which most of us are incapable; and while we must certainly study the work of those who, like Isaac Deutscher, are commencing this task, I think we are bound to reserve our opinions on a wide range of problems. Meanwhile we must certainly agree with Hanson that the moral dilemma of the revolutionary in Stalin's Russia has been as profound as any known to history, although history will provide us with plenty of foretastes. There is no universal, rule-of-thumb answer to the moral obligations of the individual in such a tide of circumstances: and Hanson seems to me to be opting out of the problem when he caricatures all Communist morality as " futurist" (the morality of " The Road to Life " of Rakosi in power and of Fucik in jail, of Yugoslav partisan and Soviet factory director - can all these phenomena be tidied away under a single label?). The exile to Siberia can equally well be described as a " futurist" if it is a part of his belief that, in refusing to denounce his comrades for mythical crimes, he is contributing in some way, however small, to the emergence of a more humane moral climate when more favourable conditions mature. All materialists, who believe that by their actions they can influence future events, are to this degree " futurists." It is not futurism which is the dis-

(2) I hope to return to other points in Hanson's article in the second part of this essay.

tinctive mark of Stalinist moral practice, but the reduction of all moral criteria to the single one of power plus industrialisation, and the consequent elimination from the latter-day Marxist philosophy of the concept of man's moral agency in the making of history: and the denial of every man's right and duty to bring the widest moral considerations into every act of political choice. To state this fact is in no way to " gloss over the anguished moral choices " of individuals placed within this context. And a great deal of Hanson's polemic against me is simply at cross-purposes, since it was no part of my intention to provide a neat set of moral " answers " which (if only understood by the Bolsheviks) would have enabled the construction of socialism to have taken place in peace and harmony. My intention was, first, to suggest that Stalinist ideology intensified, justified, and now perpetuates the problem: second, that the Communist movement as a whole cannot overcome the problem without rehabilitating the role of the moral imagination in political life, and without the re-emergence within the Communist world of those moral processes by which human needs are evaluated and choices made; and third to suggest certain humanist attitudes to be found (even if in unclear form) in the thought of Marx, and which find repeated expression in the working-class and Communist tradition. How these attitudes will find effective expression, in curbing the single pursuit of power plus industrialisation, must depend upon the historical context: but Hanson, while " spending some pages on describing the way in which the Soviet context enforced " draconian measures," proceeds to accuse me of hypocrisy for suggesting that these positive attitudes must re-assert themselves " whenever and to the degree that contingencies allow." I am sure that my phrase is clumsy, and in need of much greater development and definition. But what else are we to say? Are we to say that such attitudes must always find absolute expression, irrespective of contingencies? Surely Hanson agrees that there are circumstances, such as the resistance to Nazism, where the only possible effective humanist attitude is one of hatred of the oppressor? Or are we to say that our attitudes must always be wholly dependent upon the situation itself? But then we abandon all moral agency, and our decisions are determined wholly by considerations of power and expediency. My clumsy phrase is there, precisely because the problem admits of no, easy solution: each situation, each dilemma, is different. But what I think we can say is that Communism must regain a language of moral choice. In the absence of such a language, and of processes which ensure that political decisions are reached as a result of the quarrel between " necessity " and " desire," power and expediency will reign supreme. The bureaucrats in Kirsanov's poem, " Seven

Day of the Week," are offered by the poet "new hearts" for the people, and they are outraged:

For **public consumption**
such hearts are **not needed**.

And in general, novelties
 are **not** required

on our market.

We need useful **hearts**,
 like iron locks,
 uncomplicated,
 convenient,
 capable of executing any order:
 To blacken? To blacken !
 To value? To value !
 To annihilate? To annihilate !
 To feed? To feed !
 To roar? To roar !
 To keep silent? To keep silent!
 To destroy? To destroy !
 To love? To love !

And Kirsanov is right to see that bureaucracy will only be curbed when these moral energies of the people find expression through a hundred independent channels, and do not only respond to the dictates of "necessity" as interpreted by the high priesthood of the Party. Surely Hanson will agree that if people are enmeshed within a philosophy which inhibits or represses their moral agency, which denies the validity of all moral issues which are not related to the facts of production and power, then this philosophy (backed, as it is in the Soviet Union, by the entire educational system, media of propaganda, and forces of the State) will serve as a powerful reinforcement for those who wield power; and, correspondingly, tormented or repressed humanity is likely to revolt against this philosophy either with utter cynicism or with assertions of extreme moral utopianism? And does it not also follow that the critique of the determinist element in Marxism (and its ramifications in the theory of reflection, basis and superstructure, etc.) is not some side-issue (as Hanson appears to consider) but a central place of philosophical engagement in the conflicts of our time?

4. The Change Beyond The Change.

The dilemma of Western socialists and Communists during the past thirty years has been no less real, and the classical Communist and liberal social-democratic responses to the Soviet Union seem to

me to have been equally unsatisfactory. No doubt this is explicable in the context of fascism, war, and cold war, when tremendous political and cultural pressures have existed dragging people to one pole or the other: where on the one hand, the necessary defence of Soviet power against external aggression, and the reasonable expression of confidence in the broader social achievements and ultimate outcome of the Revolution, have slopped over into specious apologetics for its institutions and everyday policies, and ideological and at times even more direct forms of complicity in its criminality; and on the other hand, revulsion against Stalinism has led to a veritable pattern within our culture, marked by disillusion, retreat from humanism, barren anti-Communism, the criticism of Soviet life by abstract democratic criteria which have absolutely no bearing upon historical actualities and the real choices open to Soviet people, and only too frequently to complicity with capitalist reaction. But the important thing today is that in the past few years conditions have matured which enable - not the odd individual here or there - but a sizable and influential political and intellectual grouping to emerge, both within the Communist world and in the Socialist movements of the West, which can wrench itself free of these two compulsive patterns. The dilemma is no longer one which must be faced by each individual, always as a hopeless choice between degrees of evil; it is now possible not only to dream, with Morris's John Ball, of "the change beyond the change," but to see this change immanent within the Communist world, to align oneself with it, to take part in its intellectual and moral battles, and to help to assist its coming. We may assent, with one of Pasternak's characters in "Dr. Zhivago" to **the judgment that:**

In everything to do with the care of the workers, the protection of the mother, our revolutionary era is a wonderful era of new, lasting, permanent achievements. But as to its interpretation of life, its philosophy of happiness, its propaganda is such a comic remnant of the past that it's almost impossible to believe that it's meant to be taken seriously. If it had the power to reverse history all this pompous nonsense about leaders and peoples would set us back thousands of years — we would have to live in a Biblical time of patriarchs and shepherd tribes. But fortunately this is impossible

And we can also assert with Pasternak that the Revolution's "indirect results have begun to make themselves felt - the fruits of fruits, the consequences of consequences." In doing this we must not in any way limit our critique of Stalinism, which must be dismantled in fact and in the human mind, if the fruit is to ripen; but we must not fall in behind the old trek which started in the '30s, when a romantic espousal of Communism was followed by a purist retreat from life. This, in effect, is only to abandon the pass to Stalinism

or to anti-Communism, and to strengthen the advocates of "no-middle-way." I think we must be tougher than that, and for this reason (to the displeasure of some readers and perhaps of editorial colleagues) I still prefer to call myself a dissident Communist rather than a late convert to democratic socialism or any other hybrid. I think there is some point in some of us in the West asserting our Communist origins, instead of hoping our traces will be covered by the dust of time; we may be ashamed of past gullibility, arguments and attitudes, but we need not be ashamed of our basic decision to stand on the side on which we did when faced with this historical dilemma. Moreover, we still have a "Communist" duty to fulfil: to express our solidarity with fellow dissidents in the Communist world, to assert our confidence in the vitality of the humanist strand within the Communist tradition, to assist the Western labour movements to an understanding of the kind of society immanent within the late-Stalinist forms, and thereby to re-awaken an appreciation of the community of aspiration among the working people East and West which alone can make possible the re-unification (not the pseudo-unity of top level pacts, but the remaking of principled unity from below) of the socialist movement. Above all, it seems to me that the particular contribution which some of us can make to the over-riding issue of our time - the relaxation of international tension - is to foster an understanding amongst our own people of the historical pressures which gave rise to Stalinism, and of the reasonable grounds for confidence that its militaristic and authoritarian features, and its wooden determinist ideology, will give way before internal pressures to the degree that the Cold War is relaxed. And if we can maintain this position of commitment to the class movement and to the "consequences of consequences," together with repudiation of many features of Communist thought and organisation, I do not see how we can do it without "dialectics"; that is, without a sense of the way in which the most contradictory elements can co-exist in the same historical event, and opposing tendencies and potentialities can interpenetrate within the same tradition. I am afraid that Harry Hanson, and some other readers, find such language "self-conscious" and "inflated"; but the contradictions of human progress are part of the "stuff of history" and not my own invention.

My case must rest here, but I hope to return in the next number (if space allows) to the problem of determinism and agency: the examination of the criterion of "human needs": and the defence of the need for new "Utopian" socialist critiques. I hope to take in by the way:
1. Arnold Kettle and the Modern Machiavellianism. 2. Bishop Fryer's Theory of Knowledge. 3. Harry Hanson and the Defence of Jericho. 4. A Poke at Mr. Popper. 5. Are Human Beings Human?