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CURRENT REFLECTIONS ON HISTORICISM AND MARXIST HUMANISM

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Abstract

Humanist directions in ethics are generally defined as the ones where man, his happiness and perfection provide the final standard of good and evil. Many schools of ethics take another approach, perceiving the essence of moral good and evil in something else than harmony or disharmony with human happiness and perfection. For some, for example, the standard of moral good in the creation of God, for others the direction of biological evolution, while for still others moral good is not a derivative value at all, but rather a self-existent and final one.

This article attempts to identify the expression of the qualitative difference between Marxist thought in the past and in modern times. It points out how the thoughts of the ancient Marxist Humanism stopped at the threshold of historical cognition and could not approach from historical point of view either in contemporary society or the history of mankind.

This work explains that only when the entire reality as history (i.e. as current history, not the ancient Marxist history) will give the current or up-to-date aspect of the thoughts of Marxism, otherwise the ancient thoughts in Marxist Humanism will create nothing new, because a river remains a river for ever.

1. Marxist Ethics Before Critics

In the opinion of most bourgeois critics (e.g. Karl Popper in the *Open Society and its Enemies*), Marxist ethics is not humanistic. According to them, Marxism does not confine itself to the thesis that morality is a historical phenomenon, that it shapes in the process of historic development. Marxism is also supposed to claim that history should be seen as the highest referee on questions of morality, deciding what at any given moment of historic development deserves moral recognition or condemnation. This means, allegedly according to Marxism, that at each stage of historic development that is morally good which is in keeping with historical necessity, while that which opposes such necessity, which slows down the development of history, is morally evil.

Those critics claim that Marxism is in favour of communism not because the latter deserves moral approval but because history is ready unavoidable victory for communism in future. After all, Marxism identifies moral good with historic necessity, and the fact that communism must win leads Marxists to its moral approval. This means that Marxism stands on grounds of historicism in ethics according to these critics, is the quintessence of Marxist ethics.

2. Marxists' Response

Does Marxist ethics indeed identify or derive moral good from historic necessity? Is it indeed historic rather than humanistic? In our conviction and in the conviction of many other Marxists, it is a humanistic ethics par excellence and has nothing to do with historicism as one should not confuse Marxist historicism which is a fully recognized and just methodological stand with historicism which is an ethical stand accepted by many non-Marxist philosophers (see W.G. Everett in *A Study on Principles of Conduct*, 1961, 3rd ed.). That is why we would be most inclined to pass on immediately to criticising those critics of Marxism who ascribe it historicism in ethics... were it not for the fact that there are Marxists who show a tendency to historic interpretations of Marxist ethics.

Certain Marxists indeed believe that the scientism of Marxist ethics stems from basing their fundamental moral choice only on the knowledge of historic necessity, that they derive the moral principles only and solely from knowledge of overwhelming tendencies in historic development. To be sure, Marxist ethics propounds this stand together with thesis of authentic humanistic character, yet this thesis and this stand are incompatible and lead to internal contradiction. It is either one or the other; either man, his happiness and perfection, is the highest point of reference, and then historical necessity cannot be that point of reference, or the other way round, historical necessity could serve as this point, meaning that the happiness and perfection of people cannot be in that place. Therefore, either humanism or historicism; either humanistic ethics or historicistic ethics. Yet, not all Marxists are of that opinion, so that the polemics with ascribing to Marxism a historicistic understanding of ethics are not directed solely against the critics or Marxist ethics.

3. Historicism and Marxism

Contradiction between historicism and humanism becomes clearly evident once historicism is compared with Marxist humanism. The central problem for historicism is to recognise historic necessity while for Marxist humanism the central problem is to liberate man. Recognized historic necessity provides historicism with a basis for determining that which is good and morally just, while for Marxism it permits the determination of ways leading to realization of that which is good and morally just, namely that which serves to liberate man, to assure him a life in keeping with its axiological rank.

Historicism cannot elevate itself to a moral evaluation of history, since it is exactly history which serves it as the basis of every moral evaluation. Marxism, on the other hand, evaluates history from the moral point of view, since for Marxism it is happiness and perfection of man which provides the basis for all moral judgements. For historicism the final criterion of morality is provided by force, because unavoidably coming is nothing more than force which will rule in the future. For Marxism, however force can never - serve as the criterion of morality, since that criterion is the welfare of man.

Historicism cannot but morally approve of history so far, despite its inhumanity, while Marxism, understanding the unavoidability of past history, still does not morally approve of it. Historicism is general agreement with past history, while Marxism is general protest against its anti-humanitarian, spontaneous course which disregards the good of the people. Historicism is conducive to quietism, while Marxism is an

activism calling for transferring past history, which it calls pre-history, into human history running in a direction mapped out by the people, corresponding to their needs and aspirations.

According to historicism, every stage of past history called for total approval as long as it was necessary, up to the time when it became obsolete. Marxist humanism, while fully aware of the unavoidability and positive aspects of past history, refuses to sanction it morally. From the point of view of that humanism, for example, while capitalism was an indispensable and civilizationally important stage of human evolution, it is still worthy of sternest moral condemnation.

In keeping with historicism approval should be withheld for those liberation movements which turned against the reality oppressing the working masses in the days when the reality was still not outdated. Marxist humanism highly values these movements and count their heroic struggle among the traditions of the socialist movement.

In order to have historicism morally accept communism, in order to have it come out in its favour it would be sufficient to have it ascertained that communism will come with unavoidable necessity. For Marxism this is not enough, because Marxist humanism allows for a negative moral evaluation of that which is historically unavoidable. Marxism comes out morally on the side of communism, because it sees communism as the realisation of desires and longings of human masses as a system permitting all people, the universal development of personality, where historic necessity will stop ruling men, but rather will become an instrument serving the achievement of their human goals.

The critics of Marxism therefore quite wrongly accuse it historicism in ethics. On the other hand, those Marxists who try to combine Marxist humanism with elements of historicism are proceeding erroneously. Introducing these elements to Marxism they only cut down the glow to its humanist ideals, lead to confusion, provide staple for anti-Marxist propaganda and come into conflict with the conscience of humanity which has been shaped over millennia, with their own revolutionary values and moral postulates. The superiority of Marxist ethics over others is not due to its alleged historicism but to its most consequent affection of man, freedom and justice, to close bond with the theory of scientific socialism, which causes that which is not insipid moralising but a component part of a scientific ideology successfully struggling for a new, better world and a new total man.

4. Historicism and Scientism of Ethics

It would be a serious error to believe that historicism eliminates from ethics all elements of subjectivism and choice, that it makes it into such a science as Physics or Sociology. This could happen only in the case when knowledge of history would lead to deduction of knowledge about what deserves a positive or negative moral evaluation. Yet, this is not so. The fact that something is historically necessary does not logically mean that it is also morally positive.

Historicism by no means scientific ethics basing it on the knowledge of history and historic necessities, in order to do so it has to assume that what is historically indispensable by the same token then deserves a positive moral opinion. Such a supplementary assumption is by no means a theoretical thesis but rather an axiological thesis, and is not one of the theses which have their place in the science of history. A

thesis of historicism is by no means a statement of facts but of values. In effect it states a certain choice, a choice of primary significance, concerning the notion of moral good and evil, moral justice and injustice.

Historic necessity may determine moral choices, but it cannot justify them. It gains such ability only on the condition that it was previously given to it. Yet, the problem of whether historic necessity should be recognized as the gauge of moral good and evil or should such recognition be opposed, is more than just a theoretical question. This is just as much as a practical problem, a moral problem, a problem of moral selection.

While having chosen historical necessity as the guide to moral life we gain, on the basis of this guide and knowledge of history, the opportunity to objectively determine moral evaluations and norms, we can also gain a similar opportunity when we choose the happiness and perfection of people as the guide. In the latter case just the knowledge of history will no longer suffice. It will be necessary to have the participation of other sciences as well, particularly of sociology and psychology.

Historicism no less than humanism, is a subject of moral choice, while humanism to the same degree as historicism gives the possibility of objective scientifically - based determination of good and moral obligation. Historicism, however, stands in clear contradiction with the Marxist outlook on life, while humanism constitutes its organic component part.

5. Infiltration of Historicism into Marxist Ethics

How did it happen that historicism (though not under this name) started to penetrate the writings of certain Marxists? After all, the writings of Marxist classics are thoroughly saturated with fervent humanism, they are full of moral valuations carried out from the point of view of happiness and perfection of people. All too frequently harsh moral judgements were passed on that which expressed historic necessity. This is all true, yet one has to consider that the classics of Marxism wrote in years when the workers' movement was penetrated by Utopia and ethical moralists when the most important task was not to provide an ethical justification. Under such circumstances the attention of Marxist classics focused on analysis of historical necessity, on uncovering those laws of historical development which on the one hand, allowed for treating socialism as the most current and urgent task of the present, as a possibility and necessity of history, and on the other hand, pointed out the means which should be put in operation in order to successfully and quickly implement this task. No wonder, then, that on this occasion the Utopians and moralisers heard many a harsh word addressed to them, even though, contrary to false interpretations, they were never directed against morality or ethics.

The state of affairs made it possible later, in the days when positivism enjoyed particular popularity, and the thoughts of Hegel, unsubjected to critical analysis, still exerted a lively impact on many Marxists, to approve of one-sided reading of Marxism. It diminished the significance of moral values and judgements contained in Marxism, omitting entirely the volitional and ethical aspects of the Marxist philosophy of history, while absolutising the role of the objective factor and a body of purely theoretical statements concerning facts and laws particularly the facts and law of history. According to the positivist postulate of science free from valuations, there were frequent attempts at presenting Marxist ideology in such a way as though it was

common with any sort of valuations.

Hegelianism, on the other hand, facilitated this task, since it at least seemingly placed history above the sphere of human judgement and, no longer seemingly, promoted historicism, something quite understandable on its grounds.

6. Erroneous Conclusion

Writing on the source of infiltration by elements of historicism into the thoroughly humanistic ethics of Marxism, it is not possible to pass over certain theoretical misunderstandings which considerably contributed to this infiltration. One of them was already mentioned, namely the belief that ethics could be scientific only through historicism. Another misunderstanding was the confusion of Marxist sociology of morality with Marxist normative ethics. Since according to this sociology, morality is a historically conditioned phenomenon, a false conclusion was drawn that Marxism proposed ethical relativism, limiting the obligatory quality of all moral norms and values solely to the socio-economic conditions which gave rise to them. This conclusion is erroneous, since it is clearly founded on confusing the question of historical heritage and conditioning of moral norms and values with the question of their obligatory quality, with the question of whether they deserve acceptance or rejection.

Historicism slipped into Marxist ethics, also we praise the greater trustworthiness of its formulae that this is morally good which serves historical progress. It was forgotten that, according to Marxism, historical progress is by no means uniform, but quite to the contrary, it is saturated with internal discrepancies. Marxism indeed represents an optimistic view on the overall direction of history and treats particular historical eras as ever higher stages of development. At the same time, however, Marxism clearly differentiates between progress of civilizations and moral progress and stresses that progress of civilization so far took place in certain important aspects, at the cost of moral progress and incalculable suffering as well as dehumanisation of the masses of people.

A clear rejection of all historicism is also hampered by the fear that this will mean rejection of history, of knowledge concerning the laws and necessities governing the process of historical shaping. This fear is unfounded. Marxism does disapprove morally of past history, yet it would be necessary to reject the stand of Marxism before one could abstract from history or the knowledge of history. This knowledge does not free Marxists from the feeling of tragic nature of past history, but it frees them from viewing this tragic nature as an inseparable feature of historical process. What was indispensable in the past stopped being necessary at present and in the future. The very historic necessity led to a stage where man has to knowingly take the helm of history into his hands in order to have humanity and avoid a catastrophe.

Marxism comes out in favour of communism, because communism is nothing more than humanism transferred from the sphere of thoughts and postulates to the sphere of life and reality. Marxism could not however, come out in favour of communism at the obligation of the present day, as the practical goal of workers' movement activities, were it not for the knowledge of history, were it not for the materialistic theory of history giving it the right to such a conclusion. A communist solution of the basic dilemma of the present day in which the fate of humanity is at stake

A communist solution, even completely free of historicistic premises, is sometimes accused that it still continues on grounds of historicism. It is claimed that the communist treat the contemporary generations as the much of history, as a generation which fighting for the sense of life, happiness and perfection of people in the future, will never itself have a chance to make use of these treasures. These charges are completely unfounded. First of all, this is so because the contemporary generation finds the sense of its existence, enriches its life and realizes its happiness just in that revolutionary fight, in building a new shape of social life. Secondly, because the future generations will also have to struggle for retaining and multiplying the treasures passed over to them, and in that struggle they will also gain a feeling of unpassing sense of their existence. This ancient claim is also no stranger to Marxism. The completeness of man's life will never be a finally achieved state, will always be a task requiring further efforts and struggle.

7. A Reasonable Conclusion

To avoid the negative conclusion, this work believes that the origin of a truly human history will be possible when the contradiction between intentions of human communities and the objective results of their conscious actions is overcome and gradually solved on a social dimension. It also upholds that the possibility to pass to a period of conscious history is when the will of the society and its actions will be harmonized for the first time, and when a social man for the first time will be doing what he wants to. Naturally, no one can be satisfied today with the one sided accentuation of the problem of freedom of a class community in which one is not allowed to do what he wants to. No history of revolutionary period can better free peoples' thoughts in all directions from the oppressing fetters of routine. With these understandings, the view of accepting Marxism permits one to explain social phenomena as historical processes, in as much as it can become a method for the socio-historical sciences.

Therefore, in rejecting the false conclusion of the elements of historicism into humanistic ethics of Marxism, this work sees a radical departure from what constitutes the qualitative difference between current Marxist humanism and ancient Marxist Humanism: an approach to the entire reality from the point of view of human history. Making an attempt to apply Marxist Humanism to the approach to nature as "a thing in itself" independently of human activity. The misinterpretation of qualitative difference between current and ancient Marxist Humanism consists in the fact that the ancient Marxist thoughts which were accepted as classical figures of Greek philosophy, constitute forms of a "reified" consciousness. This therefore implies rejection of the old notion of Marxist Historicism which is now replaced with the current formation of the qualitatively new structures of a reality and a changing of the forms of objectivity that are specific for the given thing and period.

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