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by THOMAS LYNN

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Existentialism and Marxism: Tensions, Ambiguities, and Resolutions?

Marxism, broadly, is the tradition of thought which takes as a point of departure the analyses of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels which indicted the capitalist mode of production as underpinning the state of class divide in contemporary society. They identified that state, however, as somewhat uniquely distinguished from its predecessors, and this due to a variety of factors. Of especial note though was that the material productivity facilitated by capitalism was such that it could provide for a novel emancipation of humankind from the tyranny of nature. However, paradoxically, the terms for the realization of that abundance involved the exploitation of the general mass of people, and their deprivation from share in the fruits of their own labor. Yet this subjugation could also provide an opportunity for the emergence of a class consciousness of the exploited, of the proletariat, an opportunity for a consciousness that could precipitate a revolution which would dispossess the bourgeoisie of their ownership of the means of production. This would in effect dissolve the basis for class domination and in turn allow for a different kind of economy built on efforts in common.

These analyses sought to ground themselves in what would subsequently come to be known as dialectical materialism, really more a set of methodological rather than cosmological commitments aimed at refracting Hegel's efforts to overcome the sterility of discursive logic through a lens more amenable to the empirical pretensions of natural science. However, crucially appended to that grounding was a commitment to harness the insights born of reasoning to effect a better world. Hence, there is also in Marxism an

implicit normativity which stands in contrast with the reductive liabilities of some of its tropes, and, moreover, an awareness of freedom as a crucial element of the human condition. In noting this, we are granted occasion to remark as well that contemporaneous with the unfolding of Marxism in the twentieth century, there arose another distinct, but related tradition, that of Existentialism. Whereas Marxism's focus was levied on upon the stratum of society, thinking largely in terms of class and mass movement, Existentialism for the most part, was concerned with the challenges that confronted the individual subject in the face of a situation that was fundamentally alienating. As a result of these differential emphases, a tension became quickly apparent between them, despite that many displayed affiliation or commitment to both.

Existentialism's commitment to the significance of freedom is front and center, though its exponents frame the terms and import of that significance variously. Yet a common denominator throughout their different works is a keen sensitivity to the ambiguous character of existence itself. Simone de Beauvoir put the matter with exceptional eloquence in her extended essay, The Ethics of Ambiguity:

As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance. Those who have accepted the dualism have established a hierarchy between body and soul which permits of considering as negligible the part of the self which cannot be saved. They have denied death, either by integrating it with life or by promising to man immortality. Or, again they have denied life, considering as a veil of illusion beneath which is hidden the truth of Nirvana...

In spite of so many stubborn lies, at every moment, at every opportunity, the truth comes to light, the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my bond with the world, of my freedom and my servitude, of the insignificance and the sovereign importance of each man and all men. There was Stalingrad and there was Buchenwald, and neither of the two wipes out the other. Since we don't succeed in fleeing, let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting...

The renunciation of certitude that is entailed by the existentialist perspective is, to put it mildly, disconcerting, and led many to bridle. The Marxist tradition is widely marked by

exhortations to a conviction that could energize a revolution. Thus for some, the notion of an ineluctable ambiguity is itself unacceptable, seeming to imply that Existentialist and Marxist orientations are incompatible. Thus George Novak, in responding to the challenge of ambiguity, relays the following in his book Understanding History:

The materialist dialectician takes up where the baffled existentialist leaves off, proceeding from the premise that what can become definite in reality can find clear-cut formulation in thought. No matter how hidden, complicated, and devious the contradictions encountered in reality may be, they can with time and effort be unravelled. The dialectical essence of all processes consists precisely in the unfolding of their internal oppositions, the gradual exposure and greater determination of their polar aspects, until they arrive at their breaking point and ultimate resolution. As the contending forces and tendencies within things are pushed to the extreme, they become more and more sharply outlined and less and less ambiguous. The struggle of opposites is brought to a conclusion and maximum clarification through the victory of one irreconcilable alternative over the other. This is the logical course and final outcome of all evolutionary processes.

Marxists do not regard ambiguity as an impenetrable and unalterable property of things or thoughts but as a provisional state which further development will overcome. Any unsettled situation can give way to greater determination. Reality and our understanding of it need not be forever ambiguous, any more than water must remain fluid under all circumstances.

Novak further bases his skepticism regarding the commensurability of the two traditions by an appeal to a certain reading of materialism and its relation to science. The former, he puts forth, entails granting a primacy to physical matter as determinant of reality according to regularities which are ultimately discernible through the gradual application of systemic induction, that is, discernible through the scientific method. By harnessing our knowledge of such regularities, we can arrive at a greater mastery of nature, one that is ultimately emancipatory in character. This viewpoint, however, demands a stark subordination of the subjective as merely a derivative sphere, a rendering which grants consciousness a secondary character. Now, as Novak himself notes, this vantage point is by no means representative of Marxists altogether. Still, it is representative of an important tendency not only within Marxism, but even of contemporary society at large, a tendency to reductionism.

And indeed, he identifies this as an issue in its own right. For the existentialist does view the subjective as the ground from which being is most primarily to be engaged. For the

domain of the objectivity is ultimately but a construction. Its reality is contingent upon its emergence in the space of awareness, of consciousness, its disclosure to mind. So it is that the difference between universe devoid of sentient life and mere void is only an academic one.

Yet does this necessitate an incommensurability between the two traditions? Respectfully, I do not think so. And, in fact, the point of convergence can be realized in terms of appeal to a dialectical sensibility. At the heart of that sensibility is the insight that contraries, rather than excluding, actually involve each other. As such, a cognizance of ambiguity is fundamental. The differential, according to Novak, is the insistence upon a resolution of that ambiguity, and of a process which necessarily effects such resolution. But if that necessity has a merely objective aspect to it, than it becomes only a mechanical affair. And does this not denude any historical development of license to any qualification as progress or regress? If it's only a matter of "running the numbers" than the affairs of civilization are but so many faites accomplies already. This fatalism, it seems to me, actually robs Marxism of its original power and empowerment. For, at its origin, Marxism was a perspective to generate action, to forward transformation. As we remarked at the outset, the awareness of freedom as a crucial element of any just society is component to Marxism's essence. And thus, rather than being at odds with it, Existentialism, as an exploration and elaboration and exhortation to that theme of freedom in human terms, is complement, and contributor. Some might even offer that, from a certain vantage, Existentialism is even more fundamental.