

Fanaticism, prudence and faith

Raymond Aron

The centenary of Raymond Aron's birth on March 15, 1905 offered us the occasion to open this issue with one of his articles. It first appeared in the journal *Preuves* in May 1956, following publication of *L'Opium des intellectuels* (The Opium of the Intellectuals) in 1955, and is without question one of his best. Readers coming to it almost fifty years later will find that it has lost none of its force. The Soviet Union no longer exists and Communist parties no longer attract voters or intellectuals. But among both Christians and agnostics there persist many illusions about the meaning of history and the future of our societies. We still 'ignore prudence [...] and before projecting a rational future we remove human beings from it.' Ideological fanaticism has lost some of its sharpness and intensity, but it is more widespread. If a person sometimes talks nonsense, it is usually in order to demonstrate his finer feelings and to ensure that things remain as they are. Our review takes its inspiration from Raymond Aron's remark that 'political analysis benefits by shedding all traces of sentimentality'.

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ntaire

When we recall the political positions occupied by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty since 1945, we have the feeling that we are watching a kind of ballet or square-dance<sup>1</sup>. Merleau-Ponty's 'new left' of 1955 resembled Sartre's *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire* of 1948, and his Marxist 'waiting game' was closer to Sartre's current pro-Communist stance than to the 'non-Communism' he set out in *Les Aventures de la dialectique*.

As philosophers, both justify their opinions of the day by using arguments which, if they were valid, would hold good for centuries to come. They are all the more apt to give the phases of their lives eternal status because they are obsessed by the examples of Marx and Lenin. But existentialism, Sartre's or Merleau-Ponty's, is not an essentially historical philosophy.

From existentialism to doctrinaire ism

Before they turned to political speculation, the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty belonged to the tradition of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the tradition of revolt against Hegelianism. The individual and his fate are the central themes of their thought. They pay no attention to the totality, apprehension of which by the philosopher marks the attainment of wisdom. Unfinished history lays down no truth. Human liberty is the capacity for self-creation, although it may be hard to see (at least in *L'Être et le Néant*) what law this creation is supposed to obey, or toward what goal it is meant to strive.

Each person must find his own response to his situation without deriving it from books or receiving it from others, and at the same time this response is an obligation laid upon the agent, who is alone, and is responsible. Authenticity – the courage to come to terms with oneself, one's inheritance and one's intimates – and reciprocity – acknowledgement of the Other, a willingness to respect him and help him realise himself – these appear to be the two cardinal virtues of homo existentialis.

Existentialists describe human existence as it is lived, without giving this description a specific historical context. It emerges, of course, from experience, and is connected with it in the same way as the work of art is connected with the artist. Its validity is not limited to any particular time. Whether we are talking about liberty or authenticity, it remains true, for all human beings throughout the centuries, that consciousness realises itself by liberating itself and liberates itself by coming to terms with itself.

Alphonse de Waelhens<sup>2</sup> dismisses as a 'bad joke' the objection made by Karl Löwith<sup>3</sup>, quoting one of his students: 'I am resolved, but I don't know on what.' He writes, 'Philosophy, of whatever existential sort, would destroy itself if it abandoned the idea of forming consciousness and claimed to offer each person maxims that would solve all his problems in living. The Sein-zum-Tode<sup>4</sup>, whatever else one may think of it, can be no more than an inspiration, a source of illumination in whose light each of us, placed face to face with his own situation, will have the duty and the privilege of deciding freely, while still running the risk of being wrong or even of being unfaithful<sup>5</sup>.' His objection seems to me much more than a bad joke. No philosophy would be able to supply 'formulas' to solve the problems posed by circumstances. But a philosophy that refers to an ideal of virtue or wisdom, to the categorical imperative or to benevolence, offers 'inspiration and illumination' in a different way from a philosophy that emphasises liberty, choice and inventiveness. If the philosopher does not know what virtue is, and enjoins his disciples to be themselves, are they so very mistaken if they conclude that resolution is more important than what is resolved?

Having ruled out a moral law that would govern intentions, and determined to ignore the virtues or the inner self-improvement offered as an ideal by the Greeks and by Christians, the existentialists suggest that each person find his salvation by following his own law, and they avoid anarchy only through the idea of a community in which individuals would mutually acknowledge their common humanity.

The idea of the authentic community, while it springs from generous impulses, is scarcely enlightening. Within a philosophy that emphasises the creation of values and each person's moulding of his own fate, it seems like an appeal for concord against the reality of the struggle between one consciousness and another, a dream of universality within a phenomenology of individual destinies. It should in any case be obvious that this entirely formal concept is a concept of Reason (to use Kantian language), and that it is not and cannot be the object of a single will, or the next stage in the historical process.

On the basis of these ideas, should philosophers favour a western-style democracy or a Soviet-style one? They should in any case not give either one absolute value, because neither leads to full mutual acknowledgement among individuals. As for knowing which of them comes closer to it (or misses it by less) that is a political or historical question that neither *L'Être et le Néant* nor the *Phénoménologie de la perception* helps us answer. When it comes to questions like ownership of property or the workings of the economy, to single- or multi-party systems, sociological description is more helpful than transcendental phenomenology.

The Marxism of the two philosophers was partly accidental in its origins. Both of them, living west of the iron curtain, were hostile to bourgeois democracy but incapable of identifying with Communism, whose orthodoxy they rejected. But this political preference would not have been expressed in philosophical texts if Marxism had not been attractive to the descendants of Kierkegaard, and if the existentialists, starting from a position of transcendental consciousness, anguish and anxiety, had not felt the need to reincorporate into a philosophy of the non-system fragments of the historical Hegelian-Marxist totality.

In his *Droit naturel et Histoire*<sup>6</sup>, at the end of his chapter on Burke, Leo Strauss writes: 'Political theory became the intelligence of what has been engendered by practice, the intelligence of the here-and-now, and ceased to be the search for what should be; practical theory ceased to be "theoretically practical" (that is, deliberation at one remove) and became purely theoretical in the sense that metaphysics (and physics) were traditionally understood as purely theoretical. This is the point at which there emerged a new type of theory, and of metaphysics, which took as its major theme human activity and what it produces, rather than the totality, which is in no sense the object of human activity. Within the totality and within metaphysics, which is based on it, human activity occupies an elevated but secondary position. When metaphysics came, as it then did, to consider human actions and their results the goal toward which all beings and all processes strive, metaphysics turned into the philosophy of history. The philosophy of history was essentially theory, in other words, contemplation of the practice of human beings and necessarily, therefore, of the totality of past human practice; it presupposed that History, the privileged human activity, belonged to the past. In becoming the dominant theme of philosophy, practice ceased to be practice properly speaking, that is, a concern with agendas. Revolts against Hegelianism by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to the extent that today they exert a powerful influence on opinion, thus present themselves as attempts to re-establish the possibilities of a practice, a human life that has a meaningful, if indeterminate future. But these attempts added to the confusion, since they destroyed as far as they could the very possibility of theory. "Doctrinairism" and "existentialism" appear to us to be two extremes equally tainted by error.'

In a curious way, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty combine the two attitudes that Leo Strauss calls 'extremes'. Like all doctrinaires, Merleau-Ponty (in 1948) and J.-P. Sartre (today) incline towards the single truth (or the universality) of mutual acknowledgement, or the classless society; they extol the revolution in the manner of the theorists attacked by Burke, because they seem unaware of historical diversity, the gradual creations, the unforeseeable accidents, the countless variations on the same themes. But at the same time, they are part of Kierkegaard's legacy and not Hegel's, since they take the individual consciousness as the primary reality, the source of every philosophy, and since historical totality – total, complete human practice – appears incompatible with their mode of thinking, Marx and Nietzsche are, in certain respects, 'opposite extremes'; taking many different routes, their descendants converge.

Marx had restored the concern with agendas, in other words, a 'meaningful future', without relinquishing the advantages offered by 'total, consciously willed human practice'. It was enough for him to declare both that the future is unpredictable, since to act in negation is the essence of humanity, and that the proletarian revolution will mark a fundamental rupture in the course of human affairs. We do not know what Communist society will be like, but we know that the advent of the proletariat as the ruling class will mean the end of prehistory. Marx thus positions himself both before and after the point at which 'human practice' will be something in the past.

He also follows Hegel in seeing 'human actions and their outcomes as the goal to which all beings and all processes strive'. Not that he considers human history the goal to which the cosmos strives, or Communism as the stage to which previous societies aspired. Marx, in the latter half of his life especially, claims to embrace a strict determinism, but if one turns to Engels's dialectic of nature, it is clear that the orders of the real are arranged in a qualitative hierarchy. Likewise, the moments of history are oriented toward the full development of human nature and the humanisation of society, although that result was not intended by any individual or collective mind, and did not awaken in men's consciousness the desire that was ultimately

satisfied.

The notion that history is the creator of truth, despite the fact that no-one thought of it that way in advance, is not the original feature of Marx's philosophy. The idea that the collective good might be the necessary though not the intended result of non-virtuous conduct is common to most modern political and economic theorists. It is a key concept in Machiavelli's philosophy, and the foundation of political economy; liberal and classical economists adopt it with no less conviction than do Marxists. 'Doctrinairisms' lie in wait for all of them, friend and foe alike.

In fact, both groups have created a mechanism of human conduct that would infallibly lead to prosperity and peace. The one described by the liberals is the price mechanism; some liberals do not even shrink from predicting the imminent arrival of slavery if state intervention compromises its operation. This same mechanism – competition and private property – leads infallibly, says Marx, to its own paralysis. We need only add that the unavoidable transition from one regime to another obeys a form of determinism, comparable with the notion of equilibrium (according to the classical economists) or of progressive paralysis (according to the Marxists), leading to the dialectic of capitalism's self-destruction.

Knowledge of the laws by which capitalism functions and evolves enables Marxism to claim simultaneously the privileges of accomplished history and the obligations of history yet to be accomplished. For Marxists, the future is meaningful, since it will bring the solution of conflicts, and it is partially indeterminate, in the sense that the moment and the modalities of this achievement are unforeseeable, and perhaps not strictly determined.

Its ambiguity lays this philosophy open to multiple interpretations, some of which are not unacceptable to existentialists. They shun a theory in the sense of a contemplative metaphysics that would embrace all humanity and the whole cosmos, but within the French school, at least, they come close to the Marxists in their anthropological concepts. They have an aversion to contemplative thought and the inner life, and see man as essentially someone who works, who transforms his environment and tames the forces of nature. Why, then, should they not accept the Marxist vision of historical development, governed by the growth of the forces of production and leading to man's mastery over nature?

Marxists and existentialists clash at the point where the Kierkegaardian tradition is irreconcilable with the Hegelian: no social or economic regime is able to resolve the conundrum of history; individual destiny transcends the collective life<sup>7</sup>. Each person's consciousness remains isolated in the face of the mystery of life and death, no matter how well organised the common exploitation of the planet. The ultimate meaning of human experience is not provided by the classless society, even if such a society must inevitably come into being.

The existentialists were reconciled with Marxism through Marx's early writings. They borrowed from them the dialectic of alienation and reconquest of the self, the very processes by which the proletariat (which is totally alienated) acquires authentic intersubjectivity. But at the same time, they fell unwittingly into 'doctrinairism'; they made specific societies fit a supposedly universal model and, applying an arbitrary double standard, condemned some and extolled others, under the pretext that the latter represented the model elevated to a supra-historical truth.

Marxism carries within itself the potential for doctrinairism. In calling the Revolution to come the end of prehistory, Marx endows an action fraught with the uncertainties proper to the evolving condition of man with the status of a theoretical truth, one which presents itself to the philosopher who embraces the whole – cosmos and past history. Since he attributes to a specific class the function of ending class divisions, he gives permission to turn a group of men into the agents of common salvation. Contradictions are inseparable from capitalism, and violence alone

makes it possible to resolve contradictions. Thus one arrives at a strange philosophy in which peace will emerge from war pushed to its limit, and in which exacerbation of class struggle will act as a prelude to reconciliation or even the elimination of classes.

And there is more. Marx's thought was affected by a basic error: that of referring all forms of alienation to a single origin, and postulating that the end of economic alienation would be the end of all forms of alienation. In his Introduction to Hegel's Critique of the Philosophy of Right, Marx specifically contrasts liberty and equality, which the citizen enjoys in the ethereal political realm, and the subservience he endures in bourgeois society, that is, in his working life. It is a profound truth that, for a working man driven to accept starvation wages, formal civil rights are illusory. But this profound truth becomes a formidable illusion if one supposes that the liberation of labour brings with it political liberties and is confused with a particular form of property relations.

It was historical determinism, as formulated by the theoreticians of the Second International, that suppressed Marxism's hidden potential for doctrinairism. Insofar as it was agreed that development of the forces of production, the state of relations of production, and the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat were directly related, action was attributed to circumstances that were not arbitrary, to a predetermined path of evolution. An underdeveloped country could not achieve socialism, and socialism without democracy was not socialism.

The French existentialists did not accept this 'objective historical determinism'. From the first, they broadened the scope of doctrinairism and multiplied the confusions between universal and particular that are the besetting sin of political thought, and to which all theorists are prone.

By doctrinairism we mean the attribution of universal value to a specific doctrine. Today it operates in two ways. In the first, abstract principles are confused with particular institutions. For example, we confuse the democratic principle – rulers are legitimate only to the extent that they are willingly accepted by those ruled – with free elections on the British or French pattern, and instead of looking to see in a particular case whether or how elections could be held (in the Gold Coast or New Guinea, for example) we dogmatically demand that the electoral or parliamentary customs of one country are replicated everywhere, without taking time and place into account..

In this instance, doctrinairism contains two errors: the democratic principle of consent is elevated to the rank of sole political principle<sup>8</sup>, and a single civilisation's institutional expression – western electoral and parliamentary institutions – is taken to be the equivalent of the principle itself and endowed with an equal validity.

Doctrinairism's second modality is the historicist one. The ideal order of the city now depends not so much on reason or the human will, but on the inevitable evolution of history. The flux of ideas and events will of itself bring the human community into being. Now, the philosopher cannot proclaim history's providential character if he does not know or has no premonition of the distinctive features of the regime that is supposed to mark its end. But how are we to know that the next phase of history will be its end, if we grasp historical truth only with hindsight? And again, if history is not finished, how are we to state that it will come to an end, if, by definition, the future is unforeseeable? In Hegel's philosophy, this contradiction is mitigated, if not resolved, by the circularity of the system: the fact that the end takes us back to the beginning, and that the contradictions that have set the system in motion are ultimately surpassed, gives meaning to, if not proof of, the culmination of history.

A coarsening of Hegelian ideas exacerbates the doctrinairism implicit in this way of thinking. If the end of history is confused with the universal, homogeneous state, then the

negation of particularities, and collective rights, are, or are liable to be, the results. An economic and political regime, identified in law with the universal, homogeneous state, is clothed in universal dignity. Montesquieu's wise insight that the same laws are not good everywhere vanishes, because historical contingency is subjugated to the alleged logic of evolution. A philosophy of history of this kind, which I propose to call historicist doctrinairism, presents features that are apparently contradictory. Insofar as it is historicist, it observes the diversity of customs and morality, of political regimes, and of values; it denies that a political truth may be arrived at by conscious thought, or that one may apply to customs and morality a standard that is valid at all times and in all places. But at the same time, it assumes that historical contingency obeys a rational law and of itself leads to the solution of the problems facing humanity.

Western democracies tend towards a moralistic doctrinairism, restricted to the political sphere. Regimes are legitimate to the extent that they approximate to the only one that conforms to the ideal, namely democracy, that is, free elections and representative institutions. It is a doctrinairism that is usually not so much explicitly asserted as confusedly apprehended, and goes with an explicit rejection of any hierarchy of values between the way of life of Hottentots or Pygmies and that of modern Americans or French people. Soviet doctrinairism is historicist; it is the historical dialectic that will bring about the ideal regime, applied universally.

Both forms of doctrinairism implicitly contain a philosophy of progress: at a given moment in history, man became capable of grasping the truth about himself and of mastering the forces of nature. Moralism does not strictly define the stages involved in this process of discovery and taking possession, while historicism lays down a precise sequence, even, if need be, missing out one stage or adding another. Moralism does not look for the conditions necessary for this moment, which is absolute, always possible. Historicism, in theory, makes the benign rupture dependent on circumstances, but in fact, both forms of doctrinairism are driven by the same confidence in the power of the human will and in unlimited technological resources.

The doctrinairism of the existentialists is especially revealing. It presents all the intellectual errors that paralyse political thinking, exaggerated to the point of caricature. The existentialists start with a negation, verging on nihilism, of any human or social fixity; they end with a dogmatic assertion of a 'sole truth', on a subject on which there cannot be one sole truth. A critique of dogmatism is at the same time a critique of nihilism. At the very least, that was the intention of a book people saw as no more than an expression of scepticism.

### Economic progress and political consistency

Many critics, even some of those well-disposed towards it<sup>9</sup>, took issue with *L'Opium des intellectuels* for being negative, for piling on refutations while offering nothing constructive<sup>10</sup>. I deserved that criticism when I wrote the final sentence – 'Let us hope and pray that the sceptics come, if they are to snuff out fanaticism' – even though the whole of the last page means precisely the opposite of what hasty readers saw there. In fact, I was expressing the fear, not the hope, that the loss of supposedly absolute truths would lead intellectuals toward scepticism: 'Nevertheless, the man who awaits no miraculous change, no revolution and no grand plan, is not obliged to resign himself to what is unjustifiable. He does not offer up his soul to an abstract humanity, a tyrannical party, or a meaningless scholasticism, because he loves individuals, is a member of living communities, and respects the truth.'

Much writing that is described as 'constructive' is as insignificant as plans for a world government or a new company law. Projects that are actually unfeasible are called 'constructive',

while people describe as ‘negative’ those studies that try to define what is possible and to develop political judgement – a judgement that is in essence historical and which must focus on what is real or find a goal that is attainable. One is sometimes tempted to reverse the hierarchy of values and take the word ‘negative’ as a compliment.

The only critique deserving the description of negative is one which, while dispelling illusions, does not help us discover and judge reality, present or permanent.

Until 1917, no Marxist<sup>11</sup> believed that a socialist revolution was possible in a country in which the industrial proletariat numbered no more than three million and represented a tiny minority of the population. They probably never excluded the possibility of reconciling interpretation and reality by introducing an additional hypothesis: because its economic development was retarded, Russia was the weakest link in the capitalist chain; its industry was concentrated, and largely reliant on foreign capital, and it therefore provoked a revolt of the masses more readily than was the case in west-European countries, even though they were industrially more advanced.

These hypotheses do not eliminate some salient facts which would not be worth recalling if left-leaning intellectuals did not go out of their way to forget them: successful revolutions claiming allegiance to Marxism have taken place only in countries where capitalism did not develop typically. The strength of western Communist parties has an inverse relationship with capitalist development; in France or Italy it is not the dynamism of capitalism that swells the ranks of the revolutionary parties, but paralysis of that dynamism.

Two conclusions may immediately be drawn from these facts. The first, which is theoretical, concerns one of the classic versions of historical materialism, found in Marx’s introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. It is manifestly false to say that humanity poses only those problems it is capable of solving, that the relations of production mirror the development of the forces of production, that ownership of property mirrors the state of the forces of production, or that economic activity is autonomous or obeys its own form of determinism. Owing to exceptional circumstances – war, supply problems and the collapse of the old regime – the strength of the Bolshevik party pre-dated the expansion of the proletariat and of capitalism. It was able to seize power and demonstrate that the nature of the state and the thinking of its rulers it could equally well determine economic organisation as reflect it.

The second conclusion, which is historical, is that there is no parallelism or correspondence between the development of the forces of production and the transition from capitalism to socialism. It is impossible to assert dogmatically that countries with a ‘capitalist’ regime (private ownership of the means of production and market mechanisms) will not some day have a ‘socialist’ regime (collective ownership and the restriction or abolition of market mechanisms). In this sense, a non-Stalinist Marxist could say that General Motors is not privately owned, since its shares are spread among hundreds of thousands of people. All that would be needed in order to achieve a situation that some Marxists would not hesitate to call socialist, would be to make the oligarchy of its managers subject to the state or to a meeting of shareholders and manual and salaried employees. Similar things could be said of the mechanisms of the market, whose sphere of action is shrinking, and of planning, which is gradually expanding.

Whatever these long-term perspectives, if by socialism we understand the Soviet regime and by capitalism the regime of western countries, the current rivalry between socialism and capitalism has nothing in common with the struggle between the present and the past, or between two stages of development of industrial society. For the time being, it is a rivalry between two

methods of industrialisation, and it is not clear why the most effective method for managing the American economy should necessarily be the best one to initiate or accelerate industrialisation in India or China.

In other words, there is a Marxist critique of the Stalinist interpretation of the world today. If we look at the phases of economic growth, Soviet-style planning would be a crude device for joining the more advanced countries, even if populations were to endure even harsher sacrifices than those imposed by industrialisation in western Europe in the early nineteenth century.

A Marxist critique of this kind, reasserting the primacy of the forces of production, would arrange the various socio-economic regimes so that they culminated in one of the western type, nineteenth-century European liberalism and the twentieth-century Soviet system being two modes of a stage that has been superseded. Even if we do not subscribe to this critique, it remains true that we cannot treat a socialism that has built a vast industrial system while reducing the standard of living of the masses, and a capitalism that has raised the standard of living, reduced working hours and allowed trade unions to establish themselves, as if they were part of the same conditions as those Marx contemplated a century ago, or foresaw on the basis of a model since invalidated by events.

It is important, then, to distinguish between the two pairs of alternatives, 'socialism/capitalism' and 'Soviet system/western society', and to pose separately the question of reforms needed in western societies with rapid growth (the United States), societies with slow growth (France) and in the various underdeveloped societies. To force the Chinese, Russian, North Korean and Czech systems into the single category of socialism, and the French, American, Egyptian and Indian systems into that of capitalism, is to ensure that we will understand nothing and will muddle everything up. Using the theory of economic growth and its phases means at least avoiding the error that we reactionaries have been attacking for ten years, and which Merleau-Ponty now condemns: defining the Soviet Union by the criterion of state enterprise and the United States by that of free enterprise.

In criticising this historical error, we thereby remove the philosophical error that consisted in giving supra-historical value to the Marxist dialectic of alienation, which was confused with that of capitalism/socialism. Not that the dialectic of alienation contains no supra-historical truth. Man creates institutions and loses himself in his creations. The questioning of institutions by man, who feels alienated from himself in his own existence, is the motivator of historical change. The origin of doctrinairism is the implicit or explicit assertion that economic alienation is the primary form of alienation, and private ownership of the means of production the primary form of economic alienation. Once this monism is removed, we can make rational comparisons between the economic, social and political advantages and disadvantages of various regimes, in their own right and according to the different phases of growth.

The two economic values most often invoked in our day are, on the one hand, growth of national production, and on the other, egalitarian distribution of income. There is no certainty that a concern for growth inspires the same measures as a concern for equality, nor that industrial societies can achieve the same degree of equality of income at different stages in their development. It is possible that an increase in wage differentials may be favourable for productivity. We may say, broadly, that the two objectives – wealth and egalitarian justice – are not in conflict, since the facts suggest a reduction in inequalities concurrent with an increase in wealth. But, at any given moment, these two reference points may demand not a fundamental choice, but an ambiguous compromise.

There is more. The two criteria we have mentioned are not the only ones. Limitation of



the powers granted to those who manage collective labour seems to meet a basic political requirement. But rigorous discipline, and authority vested in the leaders of industry, may be conducive to productivity. Relative rates of productivity under private and collective ownership, and under public ownership in a dictatorship and in a democracy may reveal the contradictions between efficiency and a humanistic ideal.

This way of posing the problems clearly results from a two-fold critique: a sociological critique of a causal monism in which one element (the way property is owned, or equilibrium achieved) is thought to determine the main features of an economic regime, and a philosophical critique of the use made by the existentialists of the dialectic of alienation, a dialectic that assumes concrete value in the sociological version provided by Marx, but which, in the absence of such, is merely formal, applicable to all regimes.

This profusion of considerations does not prevent our grasping whole systems, or embracing a given politico-economic regime, Soviet or American, as a whole or in its essence. This approach, however precarious, is scientifically legitimate and politically unavoidable. It should come into play only after study has revealed the features common to all regimes, and the advantages or disadvantages of each of them.

All modern economic regimes include factory workers, and the ratio of skilled to unskilled workers depends more on technology than on the way property is owned. Factory workers may form part of a collective organisation, in respect both of administration and of work, without being capable of fully grasping the meaning of the task imposed on them in that organisation. The situation of workers varies according to rates of pay and wage differentials, to relations on the shop-floor or in the company, and between unions and bosses, in private or public enterprises. It also varies according to feelings of participation or alienation that are determined by the ideology to which the workers subscribe and their concept of society, as well as by other factors. To claim that a worker in a capitalist factory in France or the United States is, by definition, exploited, and that his counterpart in a Soviet factory is not, reflects, not analytical thinking, but inanity. It is simply an easy way of verbally 'downing tools' instead of undertaking a difficult investigation of reality.

### From critique to rational action

Politics is action and political theory involves either understanding action as crystallised in events, or determining what action is possible or appropriate in a given situation. Since to my way of thinking, completed action has not obeyed laws or a dialectic, I cannot apply the equivalent of the Marxist doctrine in which past and future, knowledge and practice are united in a single system. Since the present state of the world, thought of in economic terms, provokes different problems in underdeveloped countries, western countries with slow rates of growth, and those with accelerated growth<sup>12</sup>, the true doctrine can only be the one which shows the diversity of possible solutions.

It is true that I have explicitly mentioned neither desirable goals nor how they should be ranked (I have deliberately refrained from discussing goals), but in fact, they are suggested authoritatively by any modern civilisation. They are those of the left, which is now triumphant and in danger of being vanquished by its own victory. I have not called into question the values of the left, because if all these values are clearly delineated, their possible contradictions will emerge, as will, by the same token, the partial truth of those on the right and of their doctrines.

The overarching phenomenon of our times is not socialism, nor capitalism, nor state

intervention, nor free enterprise; it is the massive development of industry and technology, and the factories of Detroit, Billancourt, Moscow and Coventry are its consequence and its symbol. Soviet and western societies are two species within the genus that is industrial society.

No nation, and no party, rejects or can consciously reject industrial civilisation, a necessary condition not only for mass standards of living, but also for military power. If needs must, the ruling classes of some Muslim or Asian countries would accept widespread poverty (even with western technology, they are not necessarily in a position to remedy it, if the birth-rate is too high), but they have no wish to accept the servitude to which the lack of industry would condemn them. The Indian governing class is impressed by the Soviet example – one that is far more an example of power than of plenty.

The imperative of economic progress forces right-wing thinkers to accept the variability of living conditions from one generation to the next<sup>13</sup>. The same imperative forces left-wing thinkers to reflect on the compatibility or incompatibility of their various goals.

It is now accepted that workers' standard of living depends far more on their productivity than on the way companies are owned, and that income distribution is not necessarily less egalitarian under a regime of private ownership and competition than in a planned economy. The left's two major economic objectives are growth and fair distribution, but experience has shown that they are not necessarily achieved through public ownership and planning. Socialist doctrinairism springs from an attachment to out-of-date ideologies. A critique of myths leads directly not to a choice, but to a rational consideration of the systems under which nations have to live.

And why, by the way, would I wish to discuss such a choice? Neither the Americans, nor the British, nor the French, nor the Soviets have to choose between systems. Americans and British people are content with the one they have, and will alter it as events dictate. If a crisis occurs, they will not hesitate to intervene, and even to move, without declaring or denying it, to a form of planning. All that is needed to dispel the glamour of the mythology of revolution and to encourage men to seek rational solutions for problems that are technological rather than ideological is to show that the economic objectives of the left can be met under a western system.

The case of France is exceptional. The French economy suffers<sup>14</sup> from a lack of dynamism. Its geography, and the feelings of its people, rule out imitation or importation of the Soviet system, not to speak of the revulsion the vast majority of French people (including most of those who vote for the Communist Party) would feel for Soviet practices the moment they experienced them. At that point, a critique that dispels a yearning for benign revolutionary change makes constructive effort possible.

In France, there are relatively few differences between an economist such as Alfred Sauvy, who is considered left-wing, and one like myself, thought of as belonging to the right. Sauvy is keen to suggest, of course, without saying it in so many words (he is too intelligent), that 'feudal elements' are those primarily, if not exclusively, responsible for stagnation. He pretends to be unaware that resistance to change comes at least as much from below as from above, and that unions of workers, salaried employees or farmers are as strongly drawn to Malthusianism as are employers' organisations. He encourages, without believing in it, the myth of an expansionist left in opposition to a Malthusian right, even though he has shown better than anyone the degree to which the Popular Front government of 1936 was unwittingly Malthusian.

For me, joining a political party has never been a crucial issue. To join the Communist party is to join a world historical movement. To join the Socialist party or the Mouvement Républicain Populaire, is to demonstrate loyalty to (or at least, sympathy with) a model of

society, a spiritual family. I do not believe in the validity of a system comparable with the Communist one; I feel detached from the preferences, or the *Weltanschauung*, of both left and right, Socialists and radicals, the MRP and the independents. Circumstances dictate whether I agree with the actions of a given movement or party; In 1941 and 1942, I did not like the vehemence with which the Gaullists, from outside the country, denounced its 'betrayal' by Vichy. In 1947, I thought a revision of the Constitution, or of constitutional practice, was desirable, a step which the *Rassemblement du Peuple Français* claimed to support. Once the RPF's attempt had failed, left-leaning Republicans exacerbated the government's failings, and I could not associate myself with their actions nor maintain silence on the harm they caused. Such an attitude may breach the morality (or immorality) of political action. It does not breach a writer's duty.

If my criticism seems directed predominantly against the left, this is perhaps because I am motivated by a strong desire to convince my friends. It may be a consequence of the attitude adopted by most of those on the left today, which seems to me a betrayal of the 'eternal' left.

The left is a product of the Enlightenment; it invokes the principle of free thought, it wishes to see more 'Bastilles' destroyed, it looks forward to a simultaneous increase in wealth, through the exploitation of natural resources, and in justice, through the elimination of superstition and the enthronement of Reason. As I see it, the bias that favours the tyranny of a single party and promotes a pseudo-rationalist superstition to the status of official ideology, brings shame on the intellectuals of the left. Not only are they sacrificing what is best in the legacy of the Enlightenment – respect for Reason, and liberalism – but they are doing so at a time when nothing justifies that sacrifice (in the west, at least), since economic growth in no way demands the abolition of parliament and political parties or the suppression of free debate.

Here again, a critique of myths has a directly positive function. What is it that leads intellectuals to repudiate those traditions<sup>15</sup>? It is the error of monism: Marxism has no time for politics; it decrees that the economically dominant class holds power by virtue of that fact. When the proletariat becomes the ruling class, it will mean the liberation of the masses. Since the origins of economic alienation have been located in private ownership of the means of production, we arrive, through a series of verbal equations (power of the party = power of the proletariat = abolition of private property = abolition of classes = human liberation), at the ludicrous notion that public ownership of the means of production, and the omnipotence of one party, will be the same as the classless society.

Economic growth, whether pursued by the Soviet or the western method, never guarantees respect for political values. An increase in overall wealth, or even a reduction in economic inequalities necessarily imply neither the protection of personal or intellectual freedom, nor the preservation of representative institutions. On the contrary, as Tocqueville and Burckhardt saw clearly a century ago, what lies in wait for societies lacking an aristocracy, and driven by the commercial spirit and a boundless appetite for wealth, is the conformist tyranny of majorities and concentration of power in a monstrously overgrown state. Whatever the tensions that are slowing economic progress in France, the most difficult task, in the longer historical perspective, is not to ensure an increase in collective resources, but to avoid sliding into the tyranny of mass society.

I am not against left-wing intellectuals who call for the acceleration of economic growth in France. I am probably more sensitive than they are to the costs of growth, and the fact they are not mesmerised by the Soviet model means I am no less in agreement with them on the essentials. I blame them for the bias that means they always take an anti-western position; they

are ready to accept Communism in underdeveloped countries in order to encourage industrialisation, and they are equally hostile to the United States, which could teach the whole world about industrialisation. When it comes to the Soviet Union, economic progress justifies the destruction of independent nations, in Asia or even in Europe, but when European colonies are in question, the right of peoples to self-determination is strictly enforced. The quasi-violent repression that the West exerts in Cyprus or in Africa is mercilessly condemned, while the extreme degree of repression found in the Soviet Union, involving the deportation of entire populations, is ignored or forgiven. Democratic liberties are invoked against western democracies, but their disappearance is excused when it is the work of a self-styled proletarian regime

It is true that I have not described in detail what needs to be done in France to reform the political system, or in Africa and Asia to contribute to growth without dictatorship. These current problems are not the province of political philosophy. But disputes among French people would be well on the way to being resolved if the problems were posed in concrete, rational terms, and if yesterday's myths did not stand in the way.

### Scepticism and faith

Have I fully explained why *L'Opium des intellectuels* is seen as a negative book? I am sure I have not, and I can see reasons why.

Many readers are irritated by what one of my opponents at the Centre des Intellectuels Catholiques has called my 'tragic dryness'. I must admit an extreme unwillingness to engage in arguments of that sort. Those who would have it that their feelings are noble and their opponents selfish or petty strike me as exhibitionists. I have never believed there was merit or difficulty in suffering, nor that sympathy for other people's pain was the privilege of the editors of *Le Monde*, *Les Temps modernes*, *Esprit* or *La Vie intellectuelle*. Political analysis benefits by shedding all forms of sentimentality. Lucidity is hard-won, but passion will out of its own accord.

I take issue with Merleau-Ponty, to whom in many respects I feel so close, for writing against Sartre, 'We have not paid our debt to misery and wretchedness by having hailed the Revolution from the sidelines'. Of course, we have not got off so lightly, but how are we, who are privileged, to pay our debt? I have known only one person prevented from living by human misery, and that was Simone Weil. She followed her own path and in the end sought sainthood. For the rest of us, while human misery does not prevent us living, let us at least hope it does not prevent us thinking. We should not think we are obliged to talk nonsense in order to demonstrate our finer feelings.

I therefore avoid making the kind of summary judgements that so many of my enemies and even my friends invite me to make. I refuse to say, as Maurice Duverger would wish, that 'the left is the party of the weak, the oppressed and of victims,' because that particular party, Simone Weil's party, is neither of the right nor of the left; it is, always, on the side of the defeated, and, as everyone knows, M. Duverger does not belong to it. I refuse to say that 'at the present moment Marxism provides the only general theory of social injustice,' because biologists would then be obliged to say that Darwinism provides the only general theory of evolution. I refuse to attack capitalism as such, or the bourgeoisie as such, or to make 'feudal elements' (who are they?) responsible for the errors committed in France over the past fifty years. Every society has a ruling class, and the party that offers to take over brings in a society worse than the present one. I am willing to condemn social injustices, not social injustice, of which private property is

alleged to be the major cause and Marxism the theory.

I am well aware that Étienne Borne<sup>16</sup>, who is entirely well-disposed towards me, criticises me in a friendly way for ‘deploying an immense talent to use irrefutable arguments to explain that things cannot be otherwise than they are.’ It is true that I argue against utopia more often than against conservatism. In France today, the critique of ideologies is a tool for accelerating reform. At the philosophical, rather than the journalistic level, Étienne Borne, and Père Leblond, accuse me of obscuring, in historical perspective, the potential reconciliation of values that are temporarily incompatible. It is a curious accusation on the part of Catholics who believe the world is corrupted by sin.

It seems to me vital to throw light on the profusion of considerations governing political or economic action. I do not see this profusion as incoherent. At the economic level, the need to maximise production and the need to share it equitably are neither permanently contradictory nor permanently compatible. Reconciliation of justice and growth requires a compromise between equality and due reward for merit. The economic goal of a higher standard of living is frequently in conflict with the political goal of power.

At the political level, the fundamental problem is, as I see it, to accommodate participation in the community by all its members, with the wide diversity of roles. People have looked in two directions for a solution to this conflict. On the one hand they have proclaimed social and political equality, despite the fact that different social functions do not enjoy equal prestige. Modern societies are probably the only ones to have extended the principle of equality to all; ancient cities restricted it to their citizens and even the Romans denied it to slaves and conquered peoples. But in complex societies, the more democracy seeks to restore the economic and social quality that small, non-literate populations struggled to maintain, the more striking the contrast between law and actuality. Both democratic and Soviet-style societies are condemned (though to different degrees) to be hypocritical, because the inertia of things prevents their actually putting their ideas fully into practice.

The alternative solution is to sanction inequality of status and make it acceptable, by convincing those who are not privileged that social hierarchy belongs to a higher order, cosmic or religious in nature, and does not detract from the individual’s dignity or opportunities. The caste system represents the extreme of inegalitarianism, and in its debased forms has had dire consequences, but its principle as such was not despicable. And while the inegalitarian solution is, as such, imperfect, the alternative is no better, at least insofar as circumstances do not allow it to be put fully into practice.

Throughout history, the doctrine of salvation itself has swung between two extremes; it has either sanctioned or accepted temporal inequalities by belittling them: what are worldly goods, wealth, or power, in comparison with the only thing that matters, the salvation of the soul? Or, in the name of the gospel, it has condemned social and economic inequality and has entreated people to reshape institutions to fit the precepts of Christ and the Church. Each of these two positions presents a danger for the integrity of religion. The first is liable to lead to a form of quietism, and a complacent acceptance of injustice, even sanctification of the established order. The second, pushed to its extreme, would feed the revolutionary impulse, societies having been, up until now, unable to provide citizens with the equality of status or opportunity that is solemnly accorded to souls.

Christian socialists – and progressives take their inspiration from the same tradition – are often convinced that they alone are capable of saving the Church from a compromise with entrenched injustice, and that they, and they alone, are faithful to Christ’s teaching. The churches,

even the Evangelical churches, never entirely avoid falling into what Bergson called ‘static religion’. They tend to justify the authorities who give them a monopoly (or, nowadays, certain privileges) over the administration of the sacraments or the education of the young. Christians, whose opinions are politically conservative, and the clergy, responsible for schools and convents, sometimes claim, in order to excuse their partial indifference toward social inequality, that the real issue is not played out in the public realm. At the other extreme, progressives take to its furthest limit historical – that is, temporal (in both senses) – hope.

I shall take care not to take either side: both positions, in their genuine expressions, have the right to call themselves Christian. The most profoundly Christian politics might be the one which at all times embodied the tension between these two demands; it would never feel that it striven hard enough for justice in human affairs, but would at the same time judge that the results of its tireless efforts were derisory, and must appear so in the light of the only important issue – to be neither resigned to poverty nor forgetful of sin.

In France today, the pendulum is swinging towards evangelical socialism, among Catholic intellectuals in Paris, at least. The ‘hierarchy’ is taken to task for paying excessive attention to schools, and for compromising itself with the ‘established disorder’, to quote Emmanuel Mounier, in the vain hope of obtaining state funding. I did not take sides in the debate and there was no reason for me to do so. It is of no matter to me whether Catholics vote for the left or for the right. What does concern me is that some Catholics are so strongly attracted to parties that promise the kingdom of God on earth that they forgive them their persecution of Christians in China and eastern Europe.

I was not a little surprised, at the Centre des Intellectuels Catholiques<sup>17</sup>, to hear a Jesuit priest, as far from being a progressive as could be imagined, presenting God’s kingdom on earth as a hope, if not a necessary belief. How, then, is that kingdom to be defined? I am amazed at the ease with which Catholic thinkers lay claim to the optimism of the Enlightenment, expanded and popularised by Marxism. The attempt to outflank the Communists on the left seems to me to be politically hopeless, and debatable in terms of doctrine, not to say dogma. And besides, that kind of technological optimism belongs to yesterday’s avant-garde, not today’s.

I have not even made a critique of this optimism as such; I have merely followed the steps by which we go from the classless society – the materialist version of the kingdom of God on earth – to a schema of historical evolution: to a class, and a party, that will be the agent of salvation. Lastly, the stages of profane history – the succession of social regimes – is confused with the moments of sacred history, the dialogue between man (and each individual man) and God. It is both necessary and easy to mark the separation between the two kinds of history and to remember that someone who believes totally in the former, thereby ceases to believe in the latter.

My friend Father Dubarle, in a nuanced article<sup>18</sup>, begins by agreeing with me, to the point of judging my argument so obvious as hardly to require proof. ‘Certainly, history – real, concrete history, which can be apprehended through human reason and experience – is not the secular substitute for the divinity that has been an entrancing dream for so many of our contemporaries. All this is very well said, and it is, when you think about it, something of a surprise (to Raymond Aron, too) to realise that it was so important to say it in this day and age...’ Then he suggests, by posing subtle questions, that rigid distinctions between temporal and eternal, sacred and profane, perhaps bring more apparent clarity than they shed real light. Let us nevertheless try to answer these questions, though we are not sure that we fully understand them.

‘A Christian,’ he writes, ‘would therefore put to Raymond Aron the question of whether he can accept that to proclaim the concept of eternity means, at the same time (but of course in a

subordinate and relative sense) to give human importance to the temporal evolution of the human race.' I have never dreamed of denying 'human importance' to the temporal evolution of the human race'. Not being a believer, in the accepted sense of the word, how could I have denied this importance without falling into pure nihilism? The debate is not about 'the importance of temporal evolution'; it is about the truth of an interpretation of history that shows humanity marching toward the classless society, with a class and a party playing the role of saviour in this adventure. Once this mythology is set aside, temporal evolution remains important, but it is governed neither by a pre-ordained determinism, nor by a dialectic; it imposes on mankind tasks that are constantly being renewed and are essentially permanent. Mankind will never cease subjecting institutional inertia to the demand for justice.

Let us leave aside the problems of clericalism and of the place of the Church in societies that reject an established religion; I have not addressed the problem to which Father Dubarle (I don't know why) alludes. In twentieth-century France, the Church accepts the fact that the state has declared religion a 'private matter'. It no longer demands the right to impose by force the universal truth to which it continues, legitimately from its own point of view, to lay claim; it agrees that civic and political equality should be granted to non-believers. On these points, I do not think Father Dubarle is any less a proponent than I am of the separation of church and state.

Separation of church and state does not reduce the Church to administering the sacraments, nor does it condemn it to silence on political or economic issues. The Church wishes to penetrate the organisation of civil life in a Christian spirit. In that sense, all Christians, and not only Christian progressives, wish to 'insert the eternal into the temporal'. But not all of them think that this insertion will lead, deterministically or dialectically, to the kingdom of God on earth. Now, when I deny that future evolution is pre-ordained, or that the insertion is ever complete, I am immediately suspected of denying any significance to that evolution and any traffic between the eternal and the temporal. How curious (or rather, how revealing) a misunderstanding that is! Those who understand human beings and societies know that 'Christianism' includes a secular impulse and in that respect, the acceptance of an historic contest. They also know that this contest is never conclusive or, at least, that secular history, or economic or social history will never achieve ultimate fulfilment. But for all that, neither Christians nor rationalists lose interest in the development of temporal affairs, because while they cannot foresee the future, they are not unaware of the principles of a human society. The fact that so many Catholics are afraid to abandon the dialectic of history, is because they, too, have lost sight of principles and like the existentialists, crave from myths the certainties they lack.

Among believers, progressive Christians play a role analogous to that of the existentialists among the non-believers. Existentialists add fragments of Marxism to a philosophy of extreme individualism and quasi-nihilism, while they deny that human nature is in any way constant, they alternate between unregulated voluntarism and doctrinairism based on myths. Progressive Christians refuse to judge regimes by the conditions they impose on churches, and are prepared to endow the class struggle, or a technique of economic management or an approach to action, with almost sacred value. When I attack Kierkegaard's heirs for turning to doctrinairism, or the progressives for oscillating between taking a 'revolutionist' stance against liberal societies, on the one hand, and 'secular clericalism' (to the benefit of Communist societies) on the other, I am accused of scepticism, as if scepticism was directed against genuine faith, while in fact it is directed against schemas and models, ideologies and utopias.

Scepticism is useful or damaging depending on whether fanaticism or indifference is the greater threat, and it is philosophically necessary to the extent that it puts an end to the harm done

by abstract passions and reminds people of the elementary distinction between principles and opportunistic judgements. Because they have lost sight of principles, existentialists and progressive Christians rely on a class or a dialectic of history to supply them with conviction. Existentialists are dogmatic when they ought to be wise, and have repudiated the things they ought to have affirmed. They pay no heed to prudence, the 'deity of this earthly life', and before projecting a rational future, they remove human beings from it. Progressives see in the Revolution the sacredness which they fear is lacking in the life of the Church and in the adventures of human souls.

Is it, then, really so difficult to see that I have less against the various forms of fanaticism than against scepticism, of which they are the ultimate expression?

Raymond Aron

1. See Preuves, January 1956.

2. Editor's note: Alphonse de Waehlens (1911-1981), professor at the University of Louvain. Author of the first substantial book in French on Heidegger, *La philosophie de Martin Heidegger* (Louvain, 1942).

3. Editor's note: Karl Löwith (1897-1973), one of Heidegger's students, left Germany when the Nazis came to power. His major works have been translated into French student and include *De Hegel à Nietzsche* (Gallimard, 1969), *Ma vie en Allemagne avant et après 1933* (Hachette, 1988), *Histoire et salut* (Gallimard, 2002).

4. Editor's note: 'l'être-pour-le-mort' ('being-for-death').

5. *Une philosophie de l'ambiguïté*, Louvain, 1951, p. 306, note.

6. Editor's note: During the 1950s, in the series he founded at Plon (*Recherches en sciences humaines*), Eric de Dampierre, a student and friend of Raymond Aron, published titles by Max Weber, F.A. von Hayek, Karl Popper and, in 1954, this book by Leo Strauss.

7. This formulation, which is certainly true of the author of *L'Être et le Néant* does not apply without qualification to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, author of the *Phénoménologie de la perception*.

8. Perhaps it is a mistake to make it even the primary principle, but this would need to be confirmed. In any case, it is an error to make it the sole principle.

9. Editor's note: In Chapter 12 of his *Mémoires* (1983), Raymond Aron returns to the debate surrounding *L'Opium des intellectuels*.

10. It is not worth responding to people like Maurice Nadeau, Jean-Marie Domenach or Maurice Duverger, who took issue with the author because they could not, or would not, understand the book. But special mention must be made of M. Duverger, who invented a para-Marxist past for me. If M. Duverger has been able so utterly to forget his own past, he may surely impute one to his enemies for polemical purposes. [Editor's note: in a 1955 article on *L'Opium des intellectuels*.in *Le Monde*.]

11. There is no shortage of texts in which Marx foresaw that the Revolution would break out in Russia, whose social and political structure was weaker than that of the west. But this idea does not fit the traditional model found in the introduction of the *Contribution à la critique de l'économie politique*.

12. It goes without saying that these three models are not the only ones. This is a simplified typology.

13. It would be worthwhile giving thought to the meaning of conservatism in an economically progressive society.



14. One should perhaps say, 'is said to suffer'.

15. I am ignoring the conscious or unconscious psychological motives to which I referred in *L'Opium* and whose inclusion drew so much criticism. A left-wing intellectual has the right to see all businessmen and all right-wing writers as either proponents of slavery or cynics. It is considered impertinent to suggest that not only one side is 'self-interested', and Maurice Duverger has no hesitation in painting a stereotypical portrait of the intellectual as uniquely anxious to defend the oppressed and to combat injustice. It is an edifying picture.

16. Editor's note: Étienne Borne (1907-1993) was a friend of Raymond Aron. He was a graduate of the *École Normale Supérieure*, a philosopher, and the father of Christian democracy in France. He was founding-editor of the journal *France-Forum*. See *Commentaire*, no. 63, Autumn 1993, pp. 627-643.

17. Editor's note: It had organised a meeting to discuss *L'Opium* with Raymond Aron.

18. Editor's note: In the Dominican journal *La Vie intellectuelle* (August-September 1955). Raymond Aron discusses Père Dubarle's article in his *Mémoires* (pp.323 ff.).

Translated by Imogen Forster

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