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TASKS OF CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY
Paper at the X. International Philosophical Congress
in Amsterdam, 11.–18. VIII. 1948
by *Arnošt Kolman*

Our current times call for the most responsible of decision-making. Never before in its thousand years of history has mankind stood at such a fateful crossroads as it stands today. For never before has Man had such a tremendous opportunity to subjugate the elements to his goals, and never before has there arisen the need to subordinate his society to the laws of reason.

Since the moment when Prometheus first accidentally turned the visible movement of rubbing sticks or striking flints into fire—the motion of invisible molecules—up to the time when, with the help of modern industrial engineering and science, the invisible movement of these nuclear particles have now themselves been transformed into such an explosion—into the movement of huge bodies, the development of our race has never before experienced such a dizzying rise above the animal realm. At the same time, as a result of the continued division of labour, the development of mankind has resulted in an ever larger and ever more severe rupture of its own society. Precisely because of this, the way to a happy life for all of us without exception to a social status, which was dreamed of by the brightest heads and noblest hearts of all ages

and nations, is now leading us today onto the edge of an abyss, wherefrom arises the real danger of the destruction of all the achievements of culture, and the death for hundreds of millions of lives.

How then to keep the world from slipping down this route instead of climbing to the heights of real humanity? And from not falling into complete barbarity and savagery? And how then to alert people today, who are indifferent to these real threats, or are intimidated by them, to take up united action against this horrific danger?

There are those of us who seek in vain not knowing how to get rid of the genie summoned by man: some would like to drive it back into its bottle—banish any further advances in science and technology; others however do not object that the world—for its salvation—must submit to the violence of those who declare of themselves that they are the monopolistic owners of the most powerful destructive means; and the third group are just deceiving themselves, expecting that it will be possible to overcome the relentless greed of the slave masters by calling on humanity—but all of these ways are helpless.

HOW DOES CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY REPLY

to these questioners and seekers? We now wonder whether the bourgeois philosophers have realized that between the First and Second World Wars it was the disruptive ideas of Spengler, Bergson and the like, which actually provided a vital service for the Fascists? For these very ideas have undermined confidence in man himself, and have swayed his confidence in the victory of humanism over the animal principles.

Alas, as is most evident by the current views represented at this International Congress, most of these philosophers have not discovered for themselves the lessons learnt from these cruel facts. The philosophy of capitalist countries—independent of political sympathies and of subjective [inclinations], and often done under the best intentions of their representatives—is today, as ever before, mostly just one component of Imperialist Ideology. This ideology returns back to the twilight [dusk] of human intellect and has created a new era of idolatry. In the name of Moloch, the all-devouring principle of greed, they adore, as in millennia ago, besides numerous second-rate demi-gods, two main idols.

One bares its teeth from a cave, carved deep under half the land. A cave illuminated by the deathly light of mercury lamps, filled with the infernal din of machines, the choking fumes of chemical furnaces and laboratories, producing toxic gases and breeding infectious microbes, it is penetrated by deadly radiation and the swarming of robots. Its stinking throat is spitting out atomic bombs, missiles and mountains of gold for its high priests. At the same time, it is releasing a mash of the powerlessness of man, the meaninglessness of existence, the hysteria of desperate orgies, the mockery of conscience, the despoiling of humanity.

SUCH IS EXISTENTIALISM

regardless of whether it is Catholic, as in Gabriel Marcel, or taken from Jaspers, or even atheistic as in Jean-Paul Sartre or that arising from Heidegger. This is a philosophy whose categories are “anxiety”, “loneliness”, “despair”, destroying Man by fear and awe. It is the philosophy of an “optimistic stubbornness” (*dureté optimiste*), of the conceited Titan or rather a snob who has deluded himself that he is “freely” creating the world. It is the optimism of the Existentialist Man, whether this man fulfills the mission of a social order that was spawned by existentialism, whether he believes in the strength of this order, whether he feels himself to be the master tyrant of the world that he envisaged. However, it is also the philosophy of the blackest pessimism, when such a person then begins to doubt the strength of this order and becomes convinced that he is unable to play in life, [and] in history the role of a Titan. When this point has been reached the Existentialist begins to bemoan, turns from his being to his nothingness, from his “être” to his “néant”, or he seeks solace in supernatural principles.

It is now quite clear that the ground from which this pessimism is being cultivated is the complete

ISOLATION OF MOST OF THE INTELLIGENTSIA
FROM THE WORKING-CLASS.

And one of the main stimuli is the political disenchantment of those who had hoped that the Second World War would have destroyed not only German Fascism, but also and first and foremost even the socialist lands and hereby have postponed establishing the socialist order of Europe for the whole century. Existentialism corresponds to the social conscience of certain strata of the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois intelligentsia, their fear of the “mob”, of “uniformity” which is said to be inevitably associated with socialism. This is in full accord with the cynical nihilistic “morality” of the Man-Monster, which has been ever since the time of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche instilled into nations by the apologists of predatory imperialism. For existentialism is only a variety of sly apology for capitalism, without denying the evil nature of its system, but on the other hand actually highlighting this evil as a general principle which justifies the entire capitalistic awe as being natural and eternal. And this perverted “heroism”, this radical “reevaluation of all values” makes this an apology attractive for those who find themselves amidst the righteous wrath of a storm against this wickedness of capitalism, but [who] however are still unable to tear the multiple threads with which they are tied with the ruling class.

The second idol is a huge, blindingly transparent tank taking the form of a kind of endlessly complex polyhedron, located somewhere beyond space and time. It is a tank filled with pure thought, symbols and without any form of judgment and devoid of any content. It is a tank into which their worshippers

plunge their eternally reproducing logical constructions and mathematical schemes of the world. And this game lures them, though it is able to give them their only consolation: that though it may not benefit anyone today, maybe sometime in the future people will find some pebbles in the tank which might become useful.

SUCH IS LOGICISM

regardless of whether it is called “Logical Analysis” as in Bertrand Russell, or “Scientific Empiricism” as in Rudolf Carnap; whether it attempts to reduce logic to mathematics, or vice versa mathematics to logic. It is the return of idealistic philosophy to Berkeley, but also back to Plato and the Pythagoreans, a return that is hiding under the gown of pseudoscience. This is the escape of philosophers into absolute logical truth, an escape not only from material existence but also from spiritual experiences as well, into a world which is said to be elevated over both subjectivity and objectivity.

This escape is caused by the conditions of Imperialism, by its own cataclysmic crises of wars and crises, where their ideologists stagger while seeking a calmer hiding place than that which the philosophy of Kant and Hegel can offer. In this state of the agony of Imperialism, the reactionary classes must endeavour, more than ever before, to prevent the working masses from realizing their invincibility. They are forced now to attempt to take over at any price, right now when mankind has come into a new era of its development, when it is more decisively integrated into the socialist camp, and when simultaneously the energy of atomic nuclei gives them the means whose social revolutionary meaning is proportional to the huge technical changes that they bring to our lives.

The earlier mythologies not only emphasized two opposing principles—Light and Darkness, Happiness and Unhappiness, Good and Evil for man—but placed these two principles up against each other, filled up life with their struggle and gave victory to Good and Justice, if not in this world, then at least in the world to come. However, the Imperialist creators of myths are cynics. They offer us both these idols side by side and each chosen according to one’s taste. So they care only on how they deflect man’s attention away from the struggle for a better, a truly more human world, whatever idolatry they make use of. And the philosophy of the “Third Power”, the eclectic patchwork of all those John Deweys, Léon Blums, Benedetto Croce assists this by acting as a smokescreen.

But neither does the suicidal fetishization of perishing, which the existentialists worship, nor the fetishization of “pure science”, which the “logical positivists” pray to (and which actually means the death of science), have any firm ground beneath them. They are the phantoms over a seething volcano which buries them along with the system of inhuman exploitation during its inevitable impending explosion. A whole half of mankind—the nations of the

Soviet Union, the new democracies of Eastern and Southern Europe, Greece, Spain, China, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Palestine—either have already been forever freed from the yoke of imperialism and its fetishes, or are in the heroic struggle for a better and happier life.

For nearly a third of this century, the axis of overall current events has been a struggle between two camps, into which the world has irretrievably fallen apart: the camp of Imperialism and the camp of Socialism. The Capitalist system has now become an unbearable shackles on humanity. People are today—more than ever before—coming to understand that the days of Capitalism are drawing to an end and that all roads now are leading towards Communism. This is the only social system that is able to guarantee to all nations and races the freedom, sovereignty, equality, rights, and material welfare and a high level of culture and moral standards for all people of physical or mental work.

Since the time that the last outpost of world imperialism in Europe, namely German Fascism, was destroyed by the forces of freedom-loving nations led by the Soviet Union, the role of usurious usurpers has now been taken by

AMERICAN IMPERIALISTS

that are trying to subdue other nations economically and politically. At the same time, they have managed to acquire the role of the major throttlers of the freedom of thought. These monopolists are ruthlessly continuing in their struggle for the domination of the world, by keeping humanity under their iron heels.

Conversely, the Soviet Union, which is the most powerful and now the only reliable pillar of the socialist camp, has never used any coercive means that are offensive to medium and small countries, but on the contrary has helped them to resist imperialist pressure so that they can preserve the right of their own people to freely decide their own matters. Having said this, it is clear that not only are the growing masses of the capitalist world now also gaining a deeper understanding of the messianic task of the Soviet Union, but also now even the best of today's western thinkers are increasingly realizing the importance of this revolutionary world outlook which has secured the Soviet Union its famous victory. It is dialectical materialism which forms the philosophical foundation of its internal and international politics, and of its sciences, arts and ethics. For the first time in history, philosophy has now been combined with this mass movement, and for the first time it [philosophy] has been transformed into the [content of the] daily lives of tens of millions in these countries. That is why world-famous scholars such as in France the late Paul Langevin, or those of Frédéric Joliot-Curie, Marcel Prénant, or in Britain J. D. Bernal, J. Needham, J. B. [S.] Haldane and many others in these and other capitalist countries claim allegiance to it.

This philosophy, which is proven from the numerous battles during its long

development, is today experiencing a new heyday. As from the experience of war and the subsequent deep social changes, so from the great achievements of contemporary science, this philosophy draws new arguments and new optimistic prospects for the final victory of humanism. And it is only this philosophy that most completely reflects the patterns of the development of the real picture of the world, this philosophy which is exempt from the distorting influences dictated by the class interests of the exploiters, and only this philosophy that may be promising for both science and life.

However, if true humanism is not to stay just as an illusory catch-phrase,

IT MUST FIRST BE FOUGHT FOR.

And the victorious battle for this new socialist humanism is only then possible if it is penetrated by the belief in the justice of the cause, if it is penetrated by the pathos of creative work which surmounts everything.

The great battle for humanism is far from being won yet, the world still has not ceased to be an arena for the preparation of a new world war, for blood still continues to flow into streams. This path is still long and arduous, but not at all insurmountable, because the nations do not want wars, their peoples are longing for peace and will not allow themselves to be injected with any more war psychosis. The more people, however, there are who take to this hopeful way, the more people there will be to understand its invincible strength, the easier it will be to overcome all the obstacles that we still have ahead of us, and fewer victims and less privation will be the cost to mankind.

Doesn't there then follow from this for us philosophers a direct obligation to join the ranks of the fighters for a new humanism, as

THE HERALDS OF A NEW OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK ON LIFE,

[who] are finding such convincing words as those coming from Alexander Fadeyev, Julius Fučík, Louis Aragon, Howard Fast, John Cornford, no matter how we justify our opinions—whether by positive Christianity, by transcendental moral ideals, by scientific socialism, or by any other doctrine?

Our time now requires with great force that all socially constructive people unite in solidarity as they did when they fought together against the German-fascist bandits. Compared to this requirement, everything else is of secondary importance, everything else divides, because today, just as back then, what we are dealing with is the very existence of humanity. Whilst defending all the opinions, which we consider to be true, but still being united in the fight against the common enemy, against the philosophy of extinction and escapism, we philosophers have the noble goal, to which everything else can be subordinated, of humanism which can be especially well summed up with the final sentence of *Ethics*, the main work of the great humanist of Amsterdam—Spinoza: “*Omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt!*”, “All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare!”
