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THE EVOLUTION OF MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY'S VIEWS ON MARXISM – AN INSPIRATION FOR POLISH MARXISM REVISIONISTS

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The author, at the beginning of the paper, acknowledges that influence of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on Polish revisionists in the 1950s and 1960s was indirect. Then he introduces two views on social relations and history: first, phenomenological and existential one and, second, a dialectical and revolutionary one. Next he analyzes how the French philosopher turned towards Marxism under the influence of political life in France in the 1930s and during occupation, as well as due to theoretical inspirations (Hegel, young Marx). In the second part of the paper, the author discusses Merleau-Ponty's attitudes towards Marxism and communism. The first attitude, held by Merleau-Ponty till the year 1950, was the so called 'waiting for the right moment' (attentisme); the second attitude called 'double refusal' of communism and anti-communism was held till the end of 1950s and eventually evolved into position of acceptance of the social-democratic parliamentarism. In the conclusion of the paper, the author discusses a possible influence of Merleau-Ponty on Polish revisionists. He also emphasizes differences between living and political conditions of intellectuals behind the 'iron curtain' and those in liberal and democratic countries.

Key words: waiting for the right moment (attentisme), double refusal, social-democratic parliamentarism

It is difficult to say precisely to what degree the evolution of Merleau-Ponty's political views may have inspired at least some members of the so-called Warsaw school of historians of ideas to revise their position on Marxism, or whether there had existed any direct contacts in the matter. In fact, it is generally assumed that these revisionist trends were rather the effect of mounting social and political pressure in Poland between October 1956 and March 1968, as well as the theoretical evolution of the Warsaw school itself. As contemporary commentators often point out, however, a strong inspiration here were the writings of Gramsci, Lukacs, Mannheim, Garaudy and Goldmann, which indicates that the wind of theoretical change had indeed come from the West, and predominantly from France. Thus, Merleau-Ponty could have played a role, although today it is hard to say how strong his influence was, or for whom (if at all) he was a direct inspiration. Nonetheless, there exist some tangible traces of his presence –

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I mean here the inclusion in the then iconic anthology *Filozofia egzystencjalna*¹ [*Existential Philosophy*] of fragments of *Phenomenology of Perception* (in Pomian's translation) and an excerpt from *Signs*, a book that addresses political themes, in a translation completed during a seminar, which suggests that it was collective. (I have a personal reminiscence connected with this: at the turn of the 1960s and 70s Leszek Kołakowski's former assistant Tadeusz Mrówczyński presented me with a heavily pencil-marked copy of *Signs*). Also, a series of articles devoted to Merleau-Ponty by another Kołakowski associate, Jacek Syski, appeared between 1978 and 1984 in the periodical *Humanitas* edited by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences and published by the Ossolineum publishers. Two of them, *Fenomenologia genetyczna i historyczność*² [*Genetic phenomenology and historicity*], *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: fenomenologia, historia i polityka*³ [*Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenology, History and Politics*], specifically addressed the French philosopher's views on Marxism and communism, his dual vision of history and the influence on this vision of Marx's early writings. Assumedly, these reflections were the crop of earlier seminar debates.

Thus, I do not maintain that the maturation of Merleau-Ponty's political views had any direct impact on the theoretical positions of his then Polish readers, but I do claim that it was possible, and that from this perspective it might prove instructive to take a closer look at this process, if only in analogy to the evolution of the views of Polish Marxism revisionists. Especially in view of the fact that Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a philosopher of prime magnitude and stood in the foreground of a philosophical trend that raised much interest in his day.

As we know, Merleau-Ponty was an eminent French phenomenologist, whose writings like *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), *Eye and Mind* (1961), *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964, posthumous) or *The Prose of the World* (1969, posthumous) inspired many trends in French post-war philosophy, and today belong to the 20th-century philosophy's classical canon. However, alongside these phenomenological writings, Merleau-Ponty, practically throughout his post-war life, also published articles on the current themes of his day, and essays and books which directly addressed domestic and international politics or criticised the philosophical premises of his era's political ideologies. This direction in his pursuits is best reflected by works such as *Humanism and Terror* (1947), *Sense and Non-Sense* (1948), *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955) or *Signs* (1960), in which he evolved from consent with the Marxian vision of history and sympathy towards the communist movement to a critically distant stance. The question that immediately arises here is whether his political views and political philosophy stemmed from his original philosophy – phenomenology –

¹ *Filozofia egzystencjalna*, eds. Leszek Kołakowski, Krzysztof Pomian, (Warszawa: PWN, 1965).

² Jacek Syski, 'Fenomenologia genetyczna i historyczność', *Humanitas*, 4/1980, p. 113-143.

³ Jacek Syski, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty: fenomenologia, historia i polityka', *Humanitas*, 9/1984, p. 177-198.

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or were circumstantial, a response to the current political situation and not a product of philosophical reflection?

This is not the place to track down the sophisticated thought processes by which Merleau-Ponty arrived at his original phenomenology, therefore I will limit myself only to one of its aspects. The phenomenology he postulated and practiced was a genetic phenomenology⁴ particularly inclined to seek the 'genesis of sense', or the seeds of intelligence, in man's relations with the natural world and the world of human production – relations that were not only the effect of activity by the human subjects inhabiting these worlds but a process wherein both sides of the relation interacted. Seen this way, Merleau-Ponty wrote, 'It is impossible to superimpose on man a lower layer of behaviour which one chooses to call 'natural', followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world.'⁵ Nature turned into culture, which was the proper and universal environment for a fully human existence in the world, and culture in the course of its evolution acquired certain universal regularities which were sometimes referred to as 'the laws of history'. Not even the most individual and ideal human act could be separated from the historical context in which humans lived. It was impossible to determine where the influence of the external, historical determinants of human social life ceased and the sphere of individual spontaneity began, as history existed only for the subject that experienced it and the subject existed only in a historical context. This vision, which Merleau-Ponty called his 'existential conception of history', differed both from materialism (understood as objectivistic determinism) and historical spiritualism. 'History does not walk on its head, but it is also true that it does not think with its feet', he wrote citing Marx.⁶ According to Merleau-Ponty history was governed neither by absolute logic nor absolute contingency, and he concluded that, 'we confer upon history its significance, but not without its putting that significance forward itself.'⁷ In this context – and, under Sartre's influence, succumbing to the day's existentialist trends – he held the issue of freedom and responsibility for especially important. However, for Merleau-Ponty freedom was always freedom in a certain situation, a motivated freedom, which meant that where the initial situation was ambiguous, open and uncertain (as it was most of the time), what counted was what the human subject actually did and not what its intentions were. The issue here was responsibility – not for any abstract values that might motivate activity, but the effects of activity that caused the initial situation to change (for better or worse) although they were unforeseeable at the outset of the activity. If one felt responsible for the effects of one's activity, one had to keep abreast of certain common tendencies

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Taylor & Francis e-library, 2005).

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 170.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xviii.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 401.

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that appeared in collective life and were forwarded by history. One had to delve into the very flesh of history (*la chair de l'histoire*) – because although contingency could not be avoided, one could guide one's sense of responsibility by reason instead of leaving it to pure voluntarism.⁸

Of course this dialectical position shows a strong Hegelian influence. Merleau-Ponty belonged to a generation of French intellectuals touched by the so-called 'Hegelian bite', not least thanks to a several-year-long cycle of Paris lectures by the Russian-born French philosopher Alexandre Kojève, which he also attended. In these lectures, Kojève offered an interpretation of *Phenomenology of Spirit* that was by no means neutral or objective, but by all means 'revolutionary', as it was inspired by Marx's early writings. In this interpretation, the aggressive activity of specific people was elevated to the rank of a historical driving-force, and their relations were, in Kojève's opinion, best described by Hegel in his 'master and slave' construct, which belied the Enlightenment-typical liberal belief that human relations based on free and rational decisions which led to a social contract. This conception was based on the firm conviction that history acquired significance thanks to the 'slyness' of the applied means, because the historical effects of human activity were never that what had been intended, and therefore the whole historical process could not be based on the harmonious fulfillment of a rational plan. Kojève believed that violence was an inherent element of social life, and that the best tool with which to bring about a historical change of universal, pan-human significance was revolution. Merleau-Ponty came to share these views despite the fact that his phenomenologically-founded intersubjectivity conception contained the possibility of dialogue and coexistence, and was therefore somewhat distant from them. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on social relations and history offer a dual perspective: a phenomenological and existentialist one, where building community is seen as an opportunity for positive evolution, and a dialectical one, where it is a hotbed of conflict bred in 'master-slave' relations and the only hope for attaining human ideals is revolution. Doubtless these two intertwining perspectives were also enhanced by circumstances unrelated to Merleau-Ponty's work, like the demands of the social circles in which he moved, and the political situation of the day. Nonetheless, already in his major philosophical work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, he included an extensive footnote on historical materialism, where he argued that this doctrine could be expounded in 'another language' than that of economic determinism. This interpretation allowed Merleau-Ponty to identify historical materialism with the existential theory of history, which reached beyond the economism/spiritualism alternative because it included a 'constellation of psychological and moral motives' in the sphere of battling economic forces, thus making the doctrine somewhat ambiguous but better suited to the ontological structure of reality. It was only in times of revolution that things became clear and one could see the

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Introduction' in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. R. McCleary, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 20.

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fundamental meaning of production relations with greater precision. Generally, however, Merleau-Ponty concludes that historical materialism 'does not base history and ways of thinking on production and ways of working, but more generally on ways of existing and co-existing, on human relationships.'⁹ Already this positive view of one of Marxism's possible variants was a sign that the transition from philosophy to politics would be a natural step for the French thinker, but when he actually made it, it was also under the pressure of non-philosophical circumstances.

Without going into details, let us say that the academic community at the exclusive *École normale supérieure*, where Merleau-Ponty took a posting in 1935, harboured predominantly leftwing sympathies and eagerly read 'young' Marx and Lukács,¹⁰ and that in the latter half of the 1930s public opinion in France under Leon Blum's Popular Front strongly sided with communism and the Soviet Union on the crest of rapidly spreading pacifist and anti-fascist moods (expressed in declarations by A. Gide and R. Rolland). Also, many French intellectuals were becoming involved on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.¹¹ However, it was the experience of the war and occupation that cemented Merleau-Ponty's political viewpoint and made him decide to join the current political debate (in a theoretical dimension). Most of his experiences and observations came from his time as a soldier in the 1940 campaign, and his subsequent involvement (with Sartre) in the 'Socialism and Freedom' group, which was tied to the French Resistance. He wrote about this in several texts published shortly after the war, the most notable of which was the article *La guerre a eu lieu* [There was a war]. In this strongly emotional and very personal text, Merleau-Ponty clearly outlined the motives that drove his political choices and why he held these choices for the only right ones in the current historical situation. He sharply criticised the day's 'socialist professors' – whom he described as 'clerks' – for their optimism, which was far removed from the realities of war and the violence it brought, and declared that it was this critical stance towards them that allowed him to reach the truth contained in Marxism,¹² as the occupation of France could in a sense be seen as analogous to a Marxist revolution. However, he was not ready to accept every Marxist 'truth' without question, and openly admitted that the war had also changed his views on Marxism. What most needed correcting in Marxism, he wrote, was its simplistic and dogmatic belief that all history could be ultimately brought down to the economic logic of class struggle, in which ideological conflict was only a 'superstructure' of minor importance. Class struggle, Merleau-Ponty observed, was neither more important nor

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 153.

¹⁰ Raymond Aron, *Marxismes imaginaires. D'une sainte famille à l'autre*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 20.

¹¹ Herbert R. Lottman, *The Left Bank: Writers, Artists and Politics from the Popular Front to the Cold War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens*, 5th edition (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1966), p. 245-247, p. 249-261.

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more real than ideological, national or cultural conflict, which could not be reduced to the class dimension and which, as Marx himself had pointed out, had historical import and influenced the course of history. Another of Merleau-Ponty's texts from the same period (1946) suggests that it was precisely his awareness of the revolutionary character of the war and first post-war years that led him to conditional approval of Marxism alongside his own 'existentialist' vision of history.¹³ This pro-Marxist stance did not mean, he wrote, that the values of the pre-war era had lost importance, that we now had to reject human ideals like freedom, truth, happiness or transparency in human relations. However, the lesson of the war had brought the knowledge that without a certain economic and political foundation and involvement in the realities of human coexistence values and ideals were only words. Could these ideals be pursued without violence? Could tyranny be eliminated from political life? Could political and social relations resolve into personal relations between individuals? For Merleau-Ponty these questions still remained unanswered, but the experience of the war had made him sure of two things: that absurd forms of tyranny like anti-Semitism or fascism had to be utterly rooted out from social life, and that the introduction of real freedom to human social life did not stand in opposition to the highest values of culture.¹⁴ However, acceptance of violence as an inseparable element of true historical change could not be tied to explicit support for any institutional power, political party or state, because these pursued their own interests, which did not necessarily coincide with the pursuit of freedom. Here, Merleau-Ponty specifically suggested that one should not choose between the 'God of the East' and the 'God of the West', but instead adopt a kind of 'polytheism'.¹⁵ Because only such 'polytheism' was suited to the ambiguous nature of history, towards which one ought to display an attitude of caution in order to be able to interpret its general tendencies properly without succumbing to dogmatism, which petrified history and served the interests of particular forces, not those of humanity. This rather enigmatic position meant that Merleau-Ponty generally accepted the Marxian interpretation of history (enriched by his own existential vision), and simultaneously distanced himself from it. The fact remains that after the war he manifested himself as a politically active left-wing intellectual, co-founding with Sartre the influential periodical 'Les Temps Modernes', whose political strategy he then helped shape, among others in widely-read and influential political editorials and articles, in which he reflected on the applicability and appropriateness of 'Marxist politics'. From then, Merleau-Ponty's relations with Marxism divide into two phases: in the first, approximately until 1950, he showed approval for the Marxist tactic of waiting for the right moment (*attentisme*) and supported the 'realistic' policy of peace between the West and the Soviet Union, and was therefore seen as a communism sympathiser; in the second, which extended almost until the end of

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, trans. John O'Neill (Beacon Press: Boston), p. xlii.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens*.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. xlii.

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the 1950s, political developments in the world made him increasingly critical of the USSR, the countries of the 'Eastern Bloc' and the French Communist Party, this soon evolving into criticism of Marxism itself and declarations of support for the traditional values of Western culture.

Merleau-Ponty's political position during the first phase is best represented in his books *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, and *Sense and Non-Sense*. In the first, he starts out with a critical analysis of Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon*,¹⁶ which revolves around the 'Moscow trials' in the 1930s, during which the defendants, prominent Bolshevik executives, publicly admitted to crimes they had not committed (treason, sabotage, espionage). He then goes on to discuss 'the communism issue', i.e. the current condition and future prospects of Marxism, in the context of a victorious communist revolution in one country, and finally asks about the appropriate response to the communists' *realpolitik*. According to Merleau-Ponty, Koestler had failed to adequately portray the mentality of people like the Moscow trial victims, who thought in Marxist categories. Therefore, basing on a stenogram from the 1939 trial of Nikolai Bukharin, he presents his own interpretation of the event – and, more broadly, the Marxist vision of history and politics – which he holds for dialectic and in line with correctly-understood Marxism.

However, although Koestler may have not found the right formula to fittingly transmit the dramatism of the Moscow trials, may have not benefited much from Marxist theory despite having once been a communist, and may have failed to address the here-discussed issues extensively – he at least pointed to 'a problem of our times': the problem of the inevitability and possible legitimization of violence, both in the internal relations of societies reflected in their domestic politics, and on the international plane. And because Merleau-Ponty saw the situation in German-occupied France and the post-war reprisals against France's collaborators as rather analogous to a Marxist revolution, he believed that insight into the Moscow trials – an important episode of a Marxist revolution that had actually taken place – could prove helpful in clarifying the issue of violence, including the French communists's attitude to violence. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty claimed that neither exalted communism sympathisers with their glorification of violence employed in the name of revolutionary ideals, nor anti-communists with their disgust at what they learnt about the Moscow trials, saw the problem of violence in the right perspective. In their elation, the former were forgetting that violence brought terror, suffering and, ultimately, death, and was therefore neither 'good' nor 'beautiful' for the people who lived under its reign (unless, at most, as an element of a historiosophical or artistic vision); while the latter in their pursuit of the 'eternal principles of pure morality' were ignoring the fact that western liberalism had been founded on colonialism and forced labour in the newly-won territories, which bred suffering and death, and that it was not communism that had

¹⁶ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, trans. D. Hardy, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941).

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'invented' violence, which was a much earlier phenomenon. The problem rested not in deciding whether to accept or reject violence in contemporary world, but in determining if violence had a tendency towards permanence or whether there existed a kind of violence that culminated in its own self-annulment.¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, who believed that every crime must be judged not as an isolated event but in its historical and situational context, concluded that precisely Marxism was able to transgress Koestler's falsely outlined alternative between an 'oceanic state' and mechanistic sociological scientism founded upon the objective laws of history, and that it was Marxism that – no matter how uncertainly, tensely and dialectically – offered a vision of self-annulling violence. Of course, Merleau-Ponty did not mean Marxism in its official version, which functioned as the political ideology of the Soviet Union and its French representation (because it was this variant of Marxism that he criticised for its mechanistic scientism), but the Romantic-Promethean Marxism mainly present in its author's early writings.

It was this Marxism that embraced the 'existential logic of history' which underlaid 'the inseparability of objective necessity and *the spontaneous of the masses*', it was for this Marxism that history constituted 'the manifestation of human values'¹⁸ in a process which, despite its possible deviations, did not allow it to renounce its primary goals nor give up its role as an element of historical awareness. Thus, Marxism was 'a theory of concrete subjectivity and concrete action – of subjectivity and action committed within a historical situation.'¹⁹ Moreover, Merleau-Ponty held it for absolutely natural to accept the Marxist thesis that such a concrete, historically-involved subjectivity was the proletariat, which illuminated its historical *praxis* by 'theoretical discussion', and that the 'historical situation' was shaped by class struggle.²⁰ However, Merleau-Ponty did distinguish between the theoretical perspectives of Marxism and the realities of communism as evidenced by the Moscow trials, or the problem of the possible transgression of the alternative between the stance of a Commissioner, a representative of objective historical laws who treats people as tools for their effective implementation, and that of a Yogi, the personification of escape into inner life – an alternative between submission and betrayal.²¹

The distinction between Marxian theory and its then only practical application (in the USSR) is visible throughout the entire book and gives it an ultimately ambiguous sense. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty saw Marxism as the only theory or historiosophical vision that approached the problem of violence realistically and simultaneously remained faithful to universalistic and humanistic ideals. Unlike liberalism, which *de iure* removed violence from public life and human awareness in the name of humanistic ideals but was

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 49-50.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 15-16.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 22.

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 18.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 24.

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de facto founded upon it (colonialism, exploitative labour, unemployment), and without falling into anarchism, or mindless, confrontational and subjective voluntarism, Marxism with its focus on the necessary material needs of the human condition, which inevitably brought conflict and struggle into human relations, was based on the belief that the persecution of humans by humans and conflict (more precisely – class conflict) were permanent components of human history. This was, in fact, a rather pessimistic vision as it pre-assumed the constant presence of violence and terror in all civilizational change, and equally in the most open despotism and various forms of dictatorship exercised in the name of ‘the people’s good’ and ‘objective truth’, as in the naive-utopian mystifications of liberalism. However, Merleau-Ponty noted, the pessimism (realism?) of Marxism only referred to our ‘initial’ situation, because Marxism strove to resolve the problem of human coexistence ‘above the tyranny of absolute subjectivity, absolute objectivity, and the pseudo-solution of liberalism’. And Marxism held the key to this in its theory about the historical role of the proletariat.

It is at this point that Merleau-Ponty emphatically cites Marx’s Promethean theses about this role: the proletariat occupies a privileged position in human history because as a social class it is a conglomerate of human strivings and economic facts, a pan-historical class which, through its own activity, strives to abolish all classes and therefore carries a ‘promise’ of humanism which enables its ‘realisation’; the proletarian masses do not yet have a clear vision of global revolution, but they do possess a unique ‘instinct’ that can drive revolution, thanks to which they are already beginning to form a global community, a community of ‘workers of the world’ which marks the onset of truly human coexistence.

Of course revolution could not take place without violence, and in this sense, Merleau-Ponty wrote, violence gave the beginning to all systems. However, he noted, revolutionary violence should be the preferred kind because it led to humanism, because Marxist theory excluded violence at the conclusion of the revolutionary path similarly as ‘esthetes’ excluded it at its outset, and because the task of Marxism was to seek violence that transgressed itself to build humanity’s future. And such violence was the violence of the proletariat – people capable of mutual recognition above all differences in order to build humanity. Therefore, bloodshed and dictatorship were justified if they enabled proletarian rule – and only then; justified, because such dictatorship was one exercised by people of the ‘purest’ humanity. Merleau-Ponty agreed that this theory carried the traits of a totalitarian ideology, but noted that it differed from a truly totalitarian ideology like fascism, which glorified the violence of a particular race or nation, in that it addressed pan-human values. For Merleau-Ponty, Marxism’s claim that the proletariat was the carrier of historical sense represented its humanitarian side.²²

In his reflections, Merleau-Ponty made no references to any existing economic surveys of the European and global situation of his day, instead, not wishing to remain

²² Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 113-114, 117, 128.

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only on an abstract and utopian level, he concentrated on Marxism's political meanders in the only country where it had become reality. Consequently, he based on those of Lenin's writings in which the author justified the doings of the Bolsheviks during and immediately after the revolution: the revolution had not automatically abolished class divisions, which remained in existence although the proletariat had long since come into power. This meant that the communist party had to maintain a state apparatus capable of keeping opponents of the new ruling class in check, and there could be no talk of freedom, democracy or rejecting violence. In a revolutionary situation it was necessary for there to be a party that instructed the proletariat as to its own nature and exercised dictatorial rule 'on its behalf' – whereby, as Lenin said, it had to be 'a party made of iron'. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty concluded, the 'violent intervention of subjectivity in history' was understandable and warranted.²³

Merleau-Ponty's references to Russia during and after the Bolshevik revolution may be seen as a search for argumentation behind his efforts to legitimise the then internal and foreign policy of the Soviet Union. Even bloody repressions against opposition within the party were understandable, as at a time of revolutionary tension or external threat there were no clear boundaries between political deviation and objective betrayal, humanism was suspended and government became terror. In borderline situations – and, as Merleau-Ponty observed, the USSR knew only borderline situations – opposition could be taken for treason because it really did weaken the state (which the German invasion in 1941 confirmed), and, although the Moscow trials were cruel, based solely on anticipation and a 'drama of subjective honesty and objective treason', they nonetheless contributed to a future victory.²⁴ Perhaps conducting war in the face of opposition could have been possible in a developed democracy, but in a country which was only just coming out of forced collectivisation and industrialisation the existence of an organised opposition which aimed to overthrow the revolutionary government was unacceptable. According to Merleau-Ponty, Stalin's policy differed in no significant way from Lenin's at the outset of the revolution, or the model proposed by Trotsky – each saw terror as an unavoidable instrument in overcoming historical contingency and the pursuit of 'humanity's future' because all revolutionaries believed that deception, trickery and violence were unavoidable elements of their cause. However, only revolutionary Marxists believed

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 117.

²⁴ Here Claude Lefort, in a sense a student of Merleau-Ponty, who in his commentaries showed full understanding for the French thinker's conclusions, posed two objections: 1) it was wrong to see Germany's invasion as an *a posteriori* justification of the Moscow trials, because currently available data showed that Stalin's purges did not strengthen the Soviet Union, but weakened it; 2) it was also wrong and purely arbitrary to assume that the party leadership and government were more concerned about 'the interests of the revolution' than their own as the ruling elite. Claude Lefort, *Sur une colonne absente. Ecrits autour de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 83, footnote.

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that this violence had any sense and could be exercised rationally and intelligibly, thus safeguarding them from falling into 'vulgar relativism'. Here, Stalinism distinguished itself only by its focus on one concrete situation and not the general historical perspective – revolution in one country, fascism and the stabilisation of capitalism in the West. Summing up the issue of his 'understanding' for Soviet policy, Merleau-Ponty concluded that political instinct suggested support for the USSR as it was – which, although it resorted to historical deception, was nonetheless able to uphold its existence and stop the Germans – rather than visions of an ideal revolutionary state that declined and perished in the war in the name of proletarian humanism, leaving future generations with reminiscences of heroism and fifty years of Nazi rule.²⁵

However, Merleau-Ponty's 'political realism' did not completely override his critical instinct, because he also saw – and condemned – the USSR's evident deviations from the principles of Marxism. Despite censorship, the facts about Soviet life that were known to the West presented a relatively comprehensive picture, and it was disturbing. Over the past few years, social divisions in the Soviet Union, instead of gradually waning, had 'considerably accentuated', the awareness and aspirations of the masses playing 'an insignificant' next to the dominating interests of the party leadership. Serious political dispute was 'never appears publicly', political contestation was considered a 'crime against common law' and punished by death. Dialectic had in fact been 'replaced by scientific rationalism', as if it had been found to 'leave too much scope for divergences'. Upon a general overview of the Soviet system, it was 'difficult to maintain that it is moving toward the recognition of man by man, internationalism, or the withering away of the State and the realization of proletarian power'. Generally speaking, communism 'is underwritten less and less by class spirit and revolutionary brotherhood', and 'more and more shows its dark side'. National communist parties 'struggle for power without a proletarian platform' and were succumbing to chauvinism, there was 'growing tension between intentions and action, between behavior and the thought behind it'. The revolution had 'come to halt', and was upholding and nurturing a 'dictatorial apparatus'.²⁶

Merleau-Ponty illustrated these general conclusions with diverse third-source statistics showing the many aberrations of Soviet social, economic and political life.²⁷ Instead of listing them here, I will only cite his sarcastic remark that, 'the U.S.S.R. is not the proletarian light of history Marx once described'²⁸, and that life in the Soviet Union 'is the opposite of proletarian humanism'. The 'objectivistic' theory which justified this phase of the revolution 'would not be a Marxist theory', while the revolution itself had become 'an

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 112-113.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. xx-xxi.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 118-120.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 141.

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almost purely voluntary enterprise'²⁹ All this led Merleau-Ponty to the resigned conclusion that 'the Marxist transition from formal liberty to actual liberty has not occurred and in the immediate future has no such chance.'³⁰ It also led him from basically rhetorical questions – whether the revolutionary struggle 'struggle is still a Marxist struggle' and if we 'still have the slightest reason to believe in a logic of history at a time when it is throwing overboard its dialectical rudder – the world proletariat'³¹ – to open doubt whether communism 'is on the path' to creating a classless society³² and the declared conviction that 'history has not taken this turn.'³³

As one can see, Merleau-Ponty was quite hesitant in his political views in the first post-war years. This was not only because he was watching the political developments of the day closely, but also because the resulting observations had led him to adopt the now prevailing approach to the Marxian theory, which differed from the doctrine's classical sources. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, the fundamental component of Marxism, class struggle, was now acquiring a new meaning, or losing its dominating position. Today there were no longer any 'workers of the world' to stand up against capitalism in all the world's countries, but a proletariat divided by 'national, geographical, psychological' characteristics and accustomed to 'class cooperation'. A proletariat too weak to play the part of an 'autonomous historical factor'. On the other hand, there existed a state founded on socialist production methods (the USSR), which, however, adhered to traditional strategies and diplomacy in its relations with other (capitalist) countries and made no moves to unite the world's dispersed proletariat against capitalism. This ran against the basic assumptions of the Marxist approach to history but, Merleau-Ponty insisted, was not tantamount with the rejection of Marxism. All it meant – as Marx himself admitted – was that chaos, barbarism and absurdity were possible effects of historical evolution, and that historical contingency did not necessarily have to give way to the monolinear influence of 'essential factors'. It did not, however, mean that the justifiably abandoned 'Kantian' political model, which paid no heed to effects but only intentions, should be replaced by a totally relativistic 'skeptical' model, nor that it was now still possible to pursue Marxist politics in the classical way. All that remained was to monitor current developments without pre-assuming that they carried any universal import, and even in readiness to accept that they signify chaos and non-sense.³⁴

In these reflections Merleau-Ponty also referred to concrete political examples. Admitting that his knowledge was too scant to allow any final conclusions about the

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 136-137.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. xxiii.

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 123.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. xviii.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 147.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens*, p. 287-288, 292-299.

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USSR's internal politics, he nonetheless agreed that by all indications the country had stepped on the traditional political path of imperialistic states, the only difference being its collective economy and resulting imposition of 'state socialism' on countries under its control. Consequently, he declared that history had separated what Marxism had once united – the humanistic ideal and collective production – and one could either stand on the side of abstract humanism and against the only country which had managed to introduce a collective economy, or on the side of collective production and the country that represented it.³⁵ 'The decline of proletarian humanism' exemplified by the case of the Soviet Union was not 'a crucial experience which invalidates the whole of Marxism',³⁶ Merleau-Ponty observed, pointing out that even if Marxism lacked the force to convince us that its path led to 'man will be the supreme being for man'³⁷, and even if it was incapable of shaping global history, it still remained important as 'as a critique of the present world and alternative humanisms'.³⁸ Without Marxism, the beautiful idea that 'man realizes himself within history'³⁹ would never have seen light of the day, and although it was perhaps true that 'no proletariat will arise to play the historical role', the reasons why Marxism found support were clear despite 'vicissitudes of experience'.⁴⁰ Therefore, Merleau-Ponty stated, 'it is impossible to be anti-Communist' – although 'it is impossible to be a Communist' who 'renounce liberty'⁴¹ for the Soviet model. Nonetheless, the troubles of communism at that time did not justify a bellicose stand towards it but called for 'a practical stance of comprehension without adherence',⁴² and without top-down justifications. 'Communism should be thought about and discussed as an attempt to solve the human problem and not be treated as an occasion for heated argument', Merleau-Ponty wrote.⁴³ It was necessary to adopt a wait-and-see approach to communism – without illusions about the purity of its intentions, but supportive of all signs of the proletarian movement's rebirth around the world – and work towards averting war between the US and USSR.⁴⁴ Hence also the 'provisional' character of the West's policy towards the Soviet Union, as suggested by Merleau-Ponty in 1946/47: 1) Despite the violence present in the USSR, all criticism of communism or the country based on facts isolated from the broad context of Soviet social life had to be regarded as an 'act of war', as it was in fact 'threaten the very existence of the U.S.S.R.: 2) Humanism

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 152.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 153.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 155.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 153.

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 156.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. xxi.

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 148.

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 177.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sense*, p. 302-303.

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excluded a preventive war against the USSR as this would not only be a war against a power that could perhaps threaten Europe, but would 'destroy the principle of a socialist economy', which were indisputably 'progressive' from the point of view of humanistic ideals. 3) World War Two was over and the Cold War did not automatically make the USSR an aggressor, hence the existence of the USSR was reconcilable with the independence of the Western states and the choice was not 'between war with the USSR or submission to it'; indeed, the case would be different 'if it happens tomorrow that the U.S.S.R. threatens to invade Europe and to set up in every country a government of its choice', but this was not the issue today.⁴⁵

In a brief commentary to the here-presented and, for us, especially important early phase in the evolution of Merleau-Ponty's political views, let us note that his ambiguous position at the time, his clear sympathies for communism on the one hand and reserved stance towards developments in the USSR on the other, probably stemmed in equal measure from his Promethean faith in the historically privileged (or ahistorical) position of the global proletariat, as his empirically unfounded conviction that collective economy stood above capitalism not only in the economic, but primarily in the axiological sense, as it led to the realisation of humanistic ideals – a belief he derived in *deus ex machina* fashion from dogmatic theory. Consequently, although Merleau-Ponty certainly lacked neither insight nor a critical instinct, his submission to the pathos of the Soviet revolution and his sense of social justice resulted in the appearance of metaphysical, messianic and dogmatic traits in his thought. As we know, however, his was not an isolated case among the leading intellectuals of the day, and besides, his criticism was soon awakened by a variety of developments in the world, beginning a new phase in the formation of his political beliefs.

These developments included the 1950-begun Korean War, in which the communist side was the aggressor, the October 1956 'thaw' in Poland and the Hungarian uprising in the same year, but also the disclosure in the West of the existence of concentration camps in the 'motherland of the revolution', or the break with Sartre in effect of a misunderstanding, supposedly around the editorial skills of the 'Les Temps Modernes' team. Moreover, in 1955 Merleau-Ponty came across an unpublished sociological work which minutely examined the daily life and economy of East Germany from 1945, and this led him to reflect on the future of the revolution in the 'people's democracies' after Stalin's death. This he analysed in greater or lesser detail in a series of published articles, later collected (with the exception of those concerning politics) in the volume *Signes*, and offered a more theoretical elaboration in the book *Les aventures de la dialectique* [Adventures of the Dialectic].

In January 1950 Merleau-Ponty wrote the article *L'U.R.S.S. et les camps*, in which he outlined his first conclusions about the existence of Soviet concentration camps – against

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, p. 179-185.

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the european radical left's still-prevailing insane belief that the reports were either lies or 'one of the Soviet régime's finest title to glory'. In the article, Merleau-Ponty stated outright that the Soviet repression apparatus was evolving into a separate supreme authority, estimated the number of camp prisoners at ten to fifteen million, and concluded that there could be no talk of a socialist system when one in twenty people were incarcerated in concentration camps. If there were so many 'saboteurs, spies and shiftless presons' thirty-two years after the revolution and after countless 'purges' that were to sanify the country, then it was the system itself that 'unceasingly recreates *its* opposition', and in which, to use Marxian terms, the 'mode of production' was stifling the 'force of production'. This meant that despite the nationalisation of production means and the disappearance of 'private exploitation of man by man', the social and economic gap between the ruling elite and the working population was so enormous, that one could on no account speak about socialism in this case. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty's earlier sympathies for Marxism led him to relativise his views on the application of such methods in the USSR and by other totalitarian regimes. Admittedly, he condemned as 'the height of cant and trickery' the Soviets' 'Corrective Labour Institutions', which were to mask the reality of the camps, 'where men are dying of work and hunger', but staunchly refused to level communism with fascism in this respect regardless of whether the latter appeared in a milder or radical version. A classless society built upon a 'miraculous' transformation of the 'economic base', which the communists had hoped for (and which was in fact being built by repression and imprisonment in concentration camps), was, of course, a crass illusion, but Nazi camps pursued no re-educational or correctional functions after the gas chambers appeared, while the Soviet ones did – at least in theory. Before the gas chambers, the German camps were similar to the Russian ones – but this did not justify the conclusion that communism was fascism, because the Nazis based their ideology on the values of German nationalism, Aryan racism and the cult of their Führer, whereas the communists were guided by 'the humane inspiration of Marxism', i.e. 'the recognition of man by man, internationalism, classless society'. And this meant that 'we have nothing in common with a Nazi and the same values as a Communist', Merleau-Ponty stressed, adding that criticism of repression in the USSR which ignored what was happening in Spain or Greece, or the forced labour in the colonies, only 'gives absolution to the' the capitalist system and therefore stood in exact opposition to communist values.⁴⁶

Merleau-Ponty's break with Sartre and the ultimate end of their friendship was evidently politically rooted. Sartre took a pro-communist stand towards the Korean War and the invasion of Laos, while Merleau-Ponty, who was for the peaceful coexistence of both political and economic systems, showed understanding for the US operation in Korea. This culminated in a 'family quarrel' at 'Les Temps Modernes', where in 1952 Sartre published the extensive article *Les Communistes et la paix* – in which he declared full support for the

⁴⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The U.S.S.R. and the Camps' in Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 264-269.

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French Communist Party – without consulting Merleau-Ponty, who ran the periodical at the time. In effect, when Merleau-Ponty submitted an article, Sartre rejected it and, after an exchange of letters, Merleau-Ponty left the editorial team, never to return. The incident is important insofar as Merleau-Ponty's rejected article was probably the nucleus of his *Les aventures de la dialectique*.⁴⁷

The earlier-mentioned sociological analysis of the situation in East Germany, authored by B. Sarel, came to Merleau-Ponty's attention after the publication of *Les aventures*, and also influenced his change of attitude towards communism and Marxism. It forced him to ask the (rhetorical?) question whether we were not at a stage where the alternative between revolution and counterrevolution, between the USSR and the rest of the world, had ceased to be valid, where the coexistence of both systems had to entail acceptance of pluralism and the rejection of communism's claims to be the one and only truth. Figures quoted by Merleau-Ponty concerning the management of East German state industry, the position of the country's employees, the role of trade unions and the communist party, and the earnings of executives, technical staff and workers in the said state industry clearly showed that society in the German Democratic Republic was not classless (nor even close to a classless model) and production relations were by no means harmonious. There were growing antagonisms between workers and senior technical staff, a widening wage gap between 'élite' and regular workers, mounting social divisions (masked by simulated political debate) – and in fact the true political sovereign was not the proletariat that was theoretically designated for this role, but party bureaucracy. Here, Merleau-Ponty concluded, we had a new system of proletarian exploitation and not 'proletarian rule', and 'the rest of the world' would do better to employ other forms of political and social emancipation than those the USSR had imposed on its subordinated 'peoples' democracies', which perhaps worked in poorly-developed countries but not in advanced ones like Germany.⁴⁸

Merleau-Ponty reacted to the Hungarian events with words full of empathy and pathos, but refused to abandon his axiological position. Indeed, he felt he had to 'pay homage' to the Hungarians and speak about their sacrifices in a 'full voice', so that their effort would not be wasted. And to speak in a full voice meant admitting that there could be no talk of communism when the communist authorities had the entire proletariat against them and used military force to crush resistance, that Stalinism had corrupted the very 'socialist' heart of the system, and that de-Stalinization could not be limited to a retouche or tactical manoeuvre, but had to be a radical transformation in which the system questioned itself. At the same time, however, he carefully and critically followed the main points of Khrushchev's address at the 20th Congress of the CPSU (in which

⁴⁷ François Ewald, 'Sartre, Merleau-Ponty – zerwanie', trans. J. Migasiński, *Sztuka i Filozofia*, 10/1995, p. 22-48.

⁴⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Future of Revolution' in Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 291-292.

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Khrushchev only pretended to lay bare the 'errors' of Stalinism), believed Togliatti's and Gomulka's assurances that de-Stalinization would entail a reform of the system, and hoped the defeat of communism would prove a historical experience enabling the left to fulfil its social ideals. Communist dictatorship suffered defeat because it did not want to be a historical trial but the end of history, a universal model for humanity's future. But it did not fail to leave its mark on history, which would now never reverse to its previous shape, just as it did not after the fall of the French Revolution, which also left lasting traces despite its downfall.⁴⁹

The evolution of Merleau-Ponty's political views found theoretical expression in his book *Les aventures de la dialectique*, which he wrote over July 1953 and throughout the following year. In its philosophical layer, it was an attempt to define the essence of dialectics in the light of chosen theoretical conceptions and his own analysis of the historical processes of the day. In the political layer, in which he tried to define his personal stance towards Marxism and communism, he examined the role of dialectics in Max Weber's writings, made approving, though somewhat reserved, reference to Lukács dialectical equilibristics in *History and Class Consciousness*, criticised Lenin's philosophical writings on dialectics, Bolshevik practices in this respect and the dialectic variant proposed by Trotsky, to wind up with a 140-page polemic with Sartre's essay *Les communistes et la paix*, titled, *Sartre et l'ultra-bolchevisme*. Here, I will leave aside Merleau-Ponty's lecture on his understanding of dialectics as well as his investigations into the application of dialectics by various theoretical schools, and focus specifically on his political views. For this aim, I will resort to an interpretative key provided by Raymond Aron, who suggested that Merleau-Ponty's book be read as three critiques: of orthodox communism and its theoretical base, dialectical materialism, of Sartre's 'ultra-Bolshevism', and of Merleau-Ponty's own earlier political position.⁵⁰

In the first of these critiques Merleau-Ponty reiterated his known views on naturalistic Marxism in the Leninist variant, but in his criticism of the Soviet revolution went so far as to question the very sense of the Marxist revolution concept. In his view, instead of seeking the answer to the 'riddle of history' in the dialectic of the mutual dependencies between human desires and activity and the inertia of things that took place from the level of the natural world to that of social institutions, Leninism, which in this respect went out from Engels and Plekhanov, simply set the world of things and the world of human relations alongside each other, situating in the first the dialectical driving-force of all progress, including social. This naturalisation of dialectics, its placing in the sphere of fundamental natural being and 'blind' social mechanisms – therefore, on the side of the 'object' and not the 'subject' – was why 'Lenin's gnosiology' had fallen behind not only the 'young Marx', but also Hegel (as in the so-called rebound effect theory). This version of Marxism,

⁴⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, 'On De-Stalinization' in Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, p. 293-308.

⁵⁰ Aron, *Marxismes imaginaires*, p. 64.

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which coupled dialectics with materialist metaphysics and Hegelian remnants with naive scientism, replaced living history, or interpersonal relations embedded in the world of things, with an 'ersatz nature' of economic and social mechanisms, as nontransparent as the 'first'-nature proper. However, 'objective' regulations needed interpretation and decisions about which of them to employ in the current activity, which only paved the way for inevitable necessity and effected in constant oscillation between the objectivism of the 'iron rules of history' and the pure voluntarism of politics. This led to the replacement of politics founded on comprehensive social praxis by technocracy and the proletariat by professional revolutionaries, as well as the recognition of the party apparatus as the source of historical advancement and an oracle in all spheres of life, including science and culture. Nonetheless, the replacement of dialectics by naturalism could not be seen as an 'error' by Marxism's epigones, as it was Marx himself who, in expounding his ('scientific') economic theory of historical progress in his later writings, had annulled his first, 'philosophical' period. Thus Marxism offered no solutions to the problem it itself posed, failed to reconcile the contrasts it itself had brought to light, and was unable to mount a revolution that would constantly put what it had created to critical assessment. Seen this way, communism's non-dialectic ambiguities put the very concept of revolution in question, and the contradictions of the Soviet revolution and Bolshevism in general appeared to be rooted in Marx's ontological realism.⁵¹ Consequently, also needed of revision were the basic concepts of Marxism, like the idea of the proletariat as a 'self-reductive' class, visions of a homogeneous society, or revolution based upon sufficient, 'mature' productive forces. A proletariat that 'reduced itself' was a myth if it had to have representatives in the form of the party and its leadership, which, moreover, ultimately turned against this proletariat. Revolution as constant self-criticism, as the negation of the *status quo*, had to resort to violence, but if this violence managed to institute anything worthwhile, it ceased to be self-criticism and the idea of a classless society would have to be suspended infinitely. Merleau-Ponty conceded that there were historical 'peaks' and 'glorious moments' in which one could really speak about revolution, as people in such times lived according to the theoretical prescriptions of dialectics, but reminded that such moments were extremely rare and brief. In reality, the only revolution according to the Marxian model we had had the chance to experience had brought economic, social and political immaturity and the destruction of order, which in turn posed the question whether all revolution was not tainted by inherent immaturity, and whether Marx's philosophical visions should not be abandoned in face of their defeat in reality. Marxism's proclaimed synthesis of the subjective and objective had dispersed into two extreme opposites: fierce objectivism, which belied the humanistic sense of revolution, and the concept of permanent revolution, which, by absolutising destruction and negativism, annihilated the positive sense of revolution and

⁵¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique*, (Paris: Gallimard 1955), p. 87-89, 98-99, 114-119.

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its very idea. Revolution that had room for freedom and necessity was a figment of the imagination, and in reality when revolution materialised, it betrayed itself. The experience of Bolshevism was so profound that it encouraged abandonment of the proletarian revolution conception and proletarian philosophy of history as means of achieving true, intersubjective human community in which humans recognise other humans.⁵²

To put it most concisely, in his critique of Sartre Merleau-Ponty undertook to show that, despite his non-membership in the communist party, Sartre's current political stance was in fact 'ultra-Bolshevistic' (unconditional approval of the policies pursued by the USSR and its acolytes in the West), and that the theory by which he legitimised Bolshevism conformed with his ontology, already contained in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's mistake was that he did not see the true nature of the Soviet regime, and held its justifications in Lenin's pre-revolutionary writings for an adequate description of the system. In other words, that he considered real communism, from which the dialectic of history had evaporated, as the proper heir and carrier of the revolutionary idea. Hence, on one hand, the utopianism of Sartre's analyses of communism, and, on another, his consent to a 'terroristic' vision of history. If Sartre had been right to (unknowingly) reveal the non-dialectical face of existing communism, then he was wrong to perceive it as the materialisation of Marxism's visions. Such communism, Merleau-Ponty wrote, had to be 'secularised', i.e. deprived of the positive prejudices about it, to which it would have been entitled if there had existed a philosophy of history, and humanity should seek other historical paths than communism. This absence of dialectics was, of course, something Sartre neither noticed nor criticised, because it was also absent in the deepest layers of his philosophy. Sartre's dichotomous ontology of being and nothingness, which based the sense of historical events on the intentions and arbitrary undertakings of isolated and aware subjects who related to the world of things as its negation and annihilation, enabled an understanding for and acceptance of Bolshevik practices. Regardless of how fair this critique of Sartre was, especially in its 'philosophical' part (there are some arguments against it), Merleau-Ponty considered Sartre's ontology to express 'extreme idealism', which, precisely owing to the absence of dialectics, was indistinguishable from its mirror image - 'extreme realism', which in turn was caught up in the 'unfathomable necessity' that ruled the world of things.⁵³

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique*, p. 121-129, 278-279, 300; Aron, *Marxismes imaginaires*, p. 78-89.

⁵³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique*, p. 131-271 (there is an excerpt in Polish: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Sartre i ultrabolszewizm', trans. Piotr Graff, Jacek Migasiński, *Krytyka*, 41-42/1993, p. 221-233 and Aron, *Marxismes imaginaires*, p. 98-116. See also: Małgorzata Kowalska, 'Merleau-Ponty vs. Sartre. L'existentialisme, le marxisme et le probleme de l'humanisme reel', in: *Histoire de la philosophie politique*, sous la direction de Alain Renaut, vol. 5, *Les philosophies politiques contemporaines (depuis 1945)*, (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1999), p. 57-72.

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These reflections led Merleau-Ponty to the book's backbone – a somewhat camouflaged critique of his own recent political views. Whereas in *Humanism and Terror* he described his position as 'attentism', which meant theoretical support for communism but without political involvement, he now proposed a stance which he called 'a-communism'. In the attentist variant, the left was to back the communists' activities, but refrain from violating the global 'truce' between communism and anti-communism. Now, this refusal to make an ultimate choice was to be replaced by 'the choice of double refusal' – refusal to choose communism as well as anti-communism. This was neither simple opportunism nor naive pacifism. Merleau-Ponty believed (another question is, if rightly), that anti-communism could not be the choice because that would lead to war. But neither could communism be the option today, because perceiving its actual development through the prism of a future classless society was an illusion, and because the revolution had been 'betrayed' not by Stalin's mistakes or human failure, but its own inner contradictions. And these contradictions we owed to Marx himself, who first betrayed his youthful dialectical philosophy. This was precisely why the non-communist left with which Merleau-Ponty identified himself could no longer put the stamp of liberalism on an essentially crypto-communist standpoint. Without abandoning its critique of capitalism, it should re-approach Marxist issues in other categories than a choice between proletarian rule and the free market, and – this is Merleau-Ponty's main conclusion – in doing so resort to the well-tested parliamentary game, as parliament was the only known institution that guaranteed a minimum on opposition and truth, which were so indispensable for the freedom cause.⁵⁴

Thus, Merleau-Ponty's political evolution led him to a European social-democratic position. In 1960,⁵⁵ several years after he proposed the 'a-communist' perspective, he described Marxism as a 'secondary truth' which retained 'considerable heuristic value' and was 'inspiring', but did not reveal what it said it would reveal, and therefore belonged to the category of 'classical' theories which one could not fully believe today, just as one could not be a pure Cartesian. Merleau-Ponty himself admitted in an interview that he believed not so much in the moral, as the *historical* superiority of Western civilisation's liberal values over the value systems that were emerging in the undeveloped countries, because only adherence to liberal values could, for example, cause all the world's people to have enough to eat.⁵⁶ In this way, Merleau-Ponty returned from the 'heavens' of ideology to the 'earth' of experience, which he was able to so creatively interpret in phenomenological terms.

And we, having thus forayed into the French thinker's political evolution, can now focus on the question about its possible inspirations for Polish revisionists – in recognition

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique*, p. 302-312 and R. Aron, *Marxismes imaginaires*, p. 66-77.

⁵⁵ In the *Introduction to Signs*: Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 9, 11.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, p. 335-336.

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of the impossibility to categorically confirm such direct influence, but in acceptance of its potential impact, and in full awareness of the evident differences in the empirical, psychological and theoretical situation of both milieus. Because the war Merleau-Ponty experienced in France had an incomparably milder course than the one underway in eastern Europe, and the choices he had to make, although decisive in their historical sense, were not as radical and self-involving as those the later Polish revisionists were confronted with at the time. They could not afford 'attentism' towards Marxism – if they chose it, it meant personal involvement (there were, of course, cases of opportunism), and this involvement was not merely ideological, but took on a real, political dimension. This is why their disenchantment with Marxism (both in face of the realities of 'socialist construction' and in effect of their own theoretical evolution) was more dramatic and 'vital'; and did not only concern the Marxian theory. When after the war Merleau-Ponty professed his views in a democratically-ruled country, he was able to do so openly and without being censored, and relied on second-hand information about the empirical verifiability of Marxist politics. In a reality ruled by ideological and political oppression, those Polish Marxists who evolved into revisionists in effect of their disappointment with the realities of the doctrine – whose corruption they could observe with their own eyes – were forced to express this disappointment in-between the lines of their reflections on other, unrelated issues. By the time they could speak openly, they were no longer able to adopt a 'double refusal' attitude as Merleau-Ponty did, and were removed, or removed themselves (ideologically and most often also personally) from circles that harboured even distant sympathies towards Marxism as a political doctrine of current import. Nonetheless, I believe that despite all these differences, and because it found such comprehensive and uncamouflaged expression in his writings, the evolution of Merleau-Ponty's political views constitutes a historically interesting example of settling accounts with Marxism – in a way that is also open to Polish revisionists.