

Philosophy and the Communist Party

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It is well-known that the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) – the current ruling party in the USSR – is fighting not only on an economic and political front, but also on a cultural one: it is fighting against bourgeois culture in the name of proletarian culture.* This in particular concerns philosophy. In the view of the Party, only a materialist, Marxist philosophy can express the world view of the new ruling class and new culture, and every other philosophy is subject to destruction. It is also well known that this destruction is occurring not only or merely through ideological combat, but rather through administrative leverage: the closure of university departments, the exiling of philosophers, the banning of books, and so on.

What ought to be the non-materialist and non-Marxist philosopher's relationship to this aspect of the ruling party's politics? It would seem that the answer is given in the very question, that the relationship can be only negative. It seems to me, however, that the case here is not so simple.

Of course, there can be no doubt whatsoever that the 'philosophical politics' of the Party is having a detrimental impact on currently living Russian philosophers. It has deprived those remaining in the USSR of pupils and has severed readers forced to live beyond its borders from their home culture. Both of these undoubtedly harm philosophical work. If, however, we are somewhat inclined to scepticism toward the anti-Bolshevik pathos of a landlord whose property was expropriated, or a minister who lost his briefcase, then does it not follow that, in order to be consistent, one ought to extend this scepticism to any 'philosophical' aversion toward the events in Russia from those who have lost their role as either a real or imaginary ideological leader? After all, one

would hardly claim (at least openly) that the Soviet economic order was bad only because it deprives a number of people of their property status, or that the politics of the Party are no longer suitable because several political figures are not taking part. Yet are we not on the same level when we claim that its 'philosophical politics' are certainly bad since they prevent the activity of a number of philosophers?

It seems to me, if one is assessing the authentic manifestations of a people of 150 million (currently living through an intense historical period), that this cannot be based on the interests and views of particular individuals, no matter how significant or valuable they may be. Let us apply this general principle to philosophy, as well. Everything currently taking place in the USSR is so significant and *new* that any assessment of the Party's cultural or 'philosophical' politics cannot be founded on preconceived cultural values or preformed philosophical systems. We have significantly fewer chances for error if, given the prohibition of a given philosophical system, we affirm not the falsity of that prohibition but instead the uselessness of that system for the given moment in the cultural life of a people.

If, however, one cannot judge the new ruling class' fight for a new culture from the point of view of individual philosophical figures or systems, then one can nevertheless judge it based on the idea of culture generally and philosophy as such. Yet in just such a formulation the question of the Party's 'philosophical politics' can be assessed, it seems, not entirely negatively. Here is why.

After Hegel philosophy reached a stalemate. Not that since then nothing new has been founded, or that there no longer appears any major philosophical talent. Both have occurred, of course. Toward the end of the nine-

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teenth century Western thought effectively concluded its development: philosophy closed the circle formed by its own concepts and lost its unmediated link to reality, turning into a philosophical school of 'scholasticism' in the popular, negative sense of the term. If one takes as conclusive the major results already achieved by Western thought, then there is nothing negative to be seen about this situation. But if one thinks that philosophy, in its attempt to analyse reality, should always be based on only the unmediated given and on living material, rather than on already systematically-formulated and dead material, then the current condition of Western thought cannot be considered normal. Many thinkers admit this abnormality, including Heidegger, who in the strongest terms demands an exit from the framework of already founded systems, a refusal of already formed concepts that have lost any real sense, and who aims to once again gain the ability to see things without mediation. The path chosen by him leads through an analysis of the historical tradition: through an historical analysis of fundamental philosophical concepts he attempts to discover the forms of being expressed by them. In striving toward this goal, it seems to me that one can take another path. Alongside Western philosophy, for example, one could study Eastern (that is, Indian) philosophy, which operates on completely different concepts: comparing these two different forms of describing the world, one can attempt to penetrate into a reality completely independent from any form of description.

This is not the place to elaborate a method or produce a comparative assessment of these two means of shedding the blinders on the philosophical tradition. It is important for me now merely to note that alongside these there is another conceivable, more radical remedy: precisely the complete ignorance of the philosopher of this [Western] tradition. Though the means is perhaps radical, it is hardly applicable to the individual. A human life is seemingly too short that, starting truly from the beginning, one could create anything valuable not only for oneself but for one's contemporaries as well. Yet the situation changes completely if for a philosophising subject we mean not a concrete personality but rather an entire people. Nations are generally in no hurry, and a people deprived of a philosophical tradition has undoubtedly a better chance at developing a radically new and genuinely philosophical understanding of the world

than a people living in an already ideologically formed world.

After all that has been said, it may be clear why, being a philosopher, one can nevertheless welcome 'philosophical politics' leading to the complete prohibition of the study of philosophy.



The justification of such policies, however, does not yet mean the justification of the policies of the Party. After all, not all philosophy is prohibited in the USSR: materialist-Marxist philosophy is not only permitted but propagandised by the authorities. It seems to me however that such a form of administrative interference can be justified from the point of view of philosophy. Truthfully, no matter how trivial and elementary the permission of a 'united and singular' system in a country may seem, precisely due to its singularity it is unable to interfere with the appearance of real philosophy. Those whom this system does not satisfy – and only an unsatisfied person could attempt to found something truly new – will still be unable to succumb to the temptation all too available in the philosophically 'free' West: either to shift from the 'disliked' system to another one just as ossified, or to enjoy an empty, formalist, and eclectic game with concepts that say nothing. Besides, the official philosophy of the USSR is not so elementary. One can of course not be a Marxist, yet to claim that a doctrine which finds hundreds of thousands of followers the world over is nothing but an absurdity is nevertheless to run a risk. Hegelianism, even in its Marxist avatar, is undoubtedly neither trivial nor elementary: the study of Hegel himself is moreover permitted in the USSR, and

a translation of his collected works is even being prepared. True, it will be more difficult to escape from the great German philosopher than from Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature*, which for some reason considers itself a proletarian science: almost everyone is arguably stuck on Hegel, even if they succeed in freeing themselves from Marxism through him. Those who defeat and overcome Hegel however will no longer, thanks to the Party's policies, be able find comfort in any prepared philosophy but will rather be required themselves to analyse and formalise what they see. Having behind them Marx and Hegel, they will moreover not be entirely unarmed. Exposure therefore to a 'unique and singular' system will require for them a new approach to living reality.



Thus, not only the idealised but even factual philosophical politics of the Party can be justified by a philosopher. A philosopher who in no way desires confirmations of a Marxist-Hegelian understanding of the world in perpetuity can, for the time being, make peace with the philosophical politics of the Bolsheviks. He would simply

adopt Hegel's observation on the 'cunning of Reason,' which sometimes forces people not out of fear but out of conscience to work hard for the benefit of something he in no way desires.

Everything said about 'philosophical' politics is also applicable to cultural politics more broadly. The Party is fighting against bourgeois culture in the name of proletarian culture. Many find the word 'proletariat' not to their taste. This is after all only a word. The essence of the matter does not change, and the essence consists in the fact that a battle is raging with something old, already existing, in the name of something new, which has yet to be created. Anyone who will welcome the appearance of a truly new culture and philosophy – either because it will be neither Eastern nor Western, but Eurasian, or simply because it will be new and lively in contrast to the already crystallised and dead cultures of the West and East – should also accept everything that contributes to this appearance. It seems to me, for the time being of course, that the Party's policies directed against bourgeois (that is, ultimately Western) culture is really preparation for a new culture of the future.

Postscript. In conclusion, several words about foreign philosophy. Its circumstances, I think, are not nearly as hopeless as it may seem from the above. It too may prepare the construction of a new culture, or at least participate in it. This however is only under one indispensable condition: it must listen attentively to everything that is happening in Russia. If it does not want to perish, it must be – as it is now common to say – consonant with the times.

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Translated by Trevor Wilson