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*“A Principle of Universal Strife”:
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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to address two lacunae of the literature about French political theory in the second half of the twentieth century. The first (*A*, below) concerns the origins of the great Foucauldian thesis of the autonomy of power, and the second (*B*) concerns the conceptual implications of the events of the 1950s surrounding the politics of communism on both sides of the Iron Curtain. There are many apparent responses to these questions in the existing literature. However, they are rendered insufficient by their refusal to address the need for a specifically *intellectual* history. With regard to Foucault’s thesis of the autonomy of power, philosophers seem happy to abstract Foucault’s insight from its context, resting on the implication that his insight may have come out of nowhere. Conversely, when it comes to the impact of historical developments on political philosophy, historians seem to satisfy themselves with wordplay: before so many histories of the intellectuals, who needs intellectual history? It is however rather obvious that both history and philosophy are set to benefit from a specifically intellectual history, that is to say, from an account neither of an idea nor of a context, but of how the historical context of the early fifties made the Foucauldian idea conceivable.

A. The History of Foucault's Thesis of the Autonomy of Power

The formulation, clarification, and legitimation of the thesis of the autonomy of power is undoubtedly one of the great advances of political theory in the last decades. In its Foucauldian version, the thesis states that power is creative and not created. It is not derived either, especially not derived from any subject or object of power. This means that power is the only universal¹ or, as Foucault claims, that “power is everywhere”² and “anonymous.”³ Traditionally, this highly sophisticated view is at best regarded as Foucault’s creative reworking of Nietzsche’s ontology of power, but most generally as the substance of Foucault’s break with the tradition. This is largely because this tradition is too often considered, within the field of political thought in the French context, as largely Marxist. Mark Kelly for example, commits himself to such an oversimplification when he describes the substance of Foucault’s originality in exclusive contrast to French Marxism:

Foucault, for his part, takes power as a radically distinct domain of its own. . . . On this front, there is no Marxist, even Althusser, who anticipates Foucault’s position. . . . It is the autonomy of power, both from other areas of social existence, and from the individuals who are traditionally supposed to wield it, that distinguishes Foucault’s approach.⁴

Although Kelly is correct in suggesting that the idea of the autonomy of power is incompatible with Marxism, the implication that this makes Foucault’s view radically new in the French landscape as a whole is too hasty. Although this view is widespread among philosophers these days, historians of ideas have challenged it for a while. As early as 1981, Peter Deli’s *De Budapest à Prague* disputed the idea that French political thought remained determined by communism after the early 1950s.

One of this paper’s goals will be to add some philosophical substance to Deli’s historical insight. It will uncover how, thirty years before Foucault,

¹ Lawrence Hass, “Beheading the King: Foucault on the Limits of Juridical Thought,” in *Reinterpreting the Political: Continental Philosophy and Political Theory*, ed. L. Langsdorf, S. H. Watson, and K. A. Smith (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994), 23.

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (N.Y.: Vintage, 1978), 121.

³ *Ibid.*, 95

⁴ Mark Kelly, *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 37.

the thesis of the autonomy of power became inaugurated in the works of Paul Ricoeur and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who formulated it as “a principle of universal strife.”⁵ I argue that this thesis became conceivable through a philosophical elaboration on the historical events of 1953–56. Foucault himself paid homage to Merleau-Ponty for having broken out of the strait-jacket of the so-called Marxist evidence. He called this “the lesson of Merleau-Ponty” which was to “achieve the renunciation of the empty form of a universal revolution” and to come to terms with a “morals of discomfort” which he implicitly recognized as his bond with Merleau-Ponty.⁶ What the events of 1953–56 showed was that communism needed to be re-examined not only politically, strategically, or tactically (such accounts have been provided by historians from Deli to Judt), but also conceptually. It would yield a new universal (power itself), to replace the universal that was the heart and soul of communism: the proletariat. In turn, this would allow us to regard Foucault as an inheritor of the previous generation, and not only as its undoer.

B. Conceptual Problems of the Early Fifties in France

The early fifties were a period of reckoning for the French left-leaning intelligentsia. The brutal imperialism displayed (according to Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur) by the USSR in Korea (allegedly if not visibly)⁷ and in Budapest as well as Khrushchev's Secret Speech at the twentieth Congress of the

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Aventures de la Dialectique* (AD) (Gallimard: Paris, 1955), 88.

⁶ See Michel Foucault, “Pour une morale de l'inconfort,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 754 (1979): 82–83. Foucault devotes this short review of Jean Daniel's *L'ère des ruptures* to an analysis of the position of the left-wing intellectual in the fifties. He closes by presenting Jean Daniel as a follower of Merleau-Ponty's “lesson” which was to find a ground between the ready-made universal and pragmatic case-by-case tactics. He concludes: “Impossible, au fil de ces pages, de ne pas penser à la leçon de Merleau-Ponty et à ce qui constituait pour lui la tâche philosophique essentielle: ne jamais consentir à être tout à fait à l'aise avec ses propres évidences. Ne jamais les laisser dormir, mais ne pas croire non plus qu'un fait nouveau suffira à les renverser; ne pas imaginer qu'on peut les changer comme des axiomes arbitraires, se souvenir que, pour leur donner l'indispensable mobilité, il faut regarder au loin, mais aussi tout près et tout autour de soi. Bien sentir que tout ce qu'on perçoit n'est évident qu'entouré d'un horizon familier et mal connu, que chaque certitude n'est sûre que par l'appui d'un sol jamais exploré. Le plus fragile instant a des racines. Il y a là toute une éthique de l'évidence sans sommeil qui n'exclut pas, tant s'en faut, une économie rigoureuse du Vrai et du Faux; mais elle ne s'y résume pas.”

⁷ Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the invasion of South Korea as an expression of Soviet *Realpolitik* (in spite of the indirect character of the USSR's involvement) is a widely documented fact. Besides Merleau-Ponty's own *Aventures of the Dialectic*, see Raymond Aron, *Mémoires* (Paris: Laffont, 2010), 415: “Maurice Merleau-Ponty grew weary of

Communist Party of the Soviet Union constituted a triple deflagration that revealed a wide gulf between the communist intention and the practical behavior of communist regimes, a behavior dictated not by ideology but by the timeless laws of power strife and Realpolitik.

As early as the year 1947, Merleau-Ponty justified the interest of an intellectual in such historical events in the following terms:

Our time possesses the incomparable advantage over all others, that it offers the public a peek into the dressing rooms of history and sheds some light on some of its rough ruses. It befalls us to defend this privilege.⁸

Taking up this privilege meant that one must do *philosophy* and not just history about such events. The major philosophical question that was forced upon the left was that of the relations of power with ideology: which is the puppet of the other? If it is true that historians examined these events closely, they failed to “defend the privilege” invoked by Merleau-Ponty: the privilege to draw philosophy from history. The closest the literature comes to intellectual history, namely the history of intellectuals, still falls short. Tony Judt, one of the most strident of such historians, explicitly rejects this “privilege.” According to him, in order to “grasp the rather particular circumstances of intellectual production in France” one had to avoid moving from the “politics” to “the political” and from “theory” to “academic research,”⁹ and he cautions us against “attributing the intensity of feeling aroused by the Parisian *maîtres à penser* to an originality and power of pure thought, to the identifying of which they have since devoted many thousands of pages.” Even as he comes very close to a technical engagement with the conceptual implications of the defeat of Marxism, Judt makes every effort to reduce the post-war left-wing intelligentsia in France to an activist, not a philosophical force (he even confesses to “making no claim to treat each or any of these [philosophers] in any depth”).¹⁰ This even leads

waiting for the harmony between real history and the Marxist vision. The aggression of North Korea led him to revise his diagnosis about the situation.” See also Jon Stewart, “Introduction,” in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Stewart (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), xxiii: “The outbreak of the Korean War with the invasion of South Korea in 1950 caused a crisis of faith for Merleau-Ponty. He regarded the Soviet Union quite straightforwardly as the aggressor and the cause of the war.”

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 524. Hereafter *Signes*.

⁹ Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 169.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

him into outright misreadings, collapsing, for example, Merleau-Ponty's attacks on the fundamentals of communism in *The Adventures of the Dialectic* of 1955 onto his earlier more sympathetic analyses in 1947's *Humanism and Terror*.¹¹

In his landmark *The Passing of an Illusion*, François Furet likewise implicitly excludes the philosophers from the scope of his account of Sovietism. Indeed, for Furet, the "passing" of the Soviet "illusion" involved the passing of another: that of the dependence of history on thought. In spite of all his differences from Judt, Furet concurs with him in his assumption that philosophers are either political forces whose place is in political and not philosophical history, or they are external observers and fall outside of the scope of history altogether. In Furet, the likes of Nizan, Gide, Breton, Romain-Rolland, and Aragon, are only ever mentioned in long enumerations that overlook their massive differences, and Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty, Castoriadis, and even Sartre, whose name only appears in one footnote, are all but ignored.

As the cases of Judt and Furet (among several others) indicate, when it comes to a doctrine (Marxism-Leninism) whose essence lies in its ambition to overcome the opposition of action and theory, the traditional methods of political history and philosophical history and their careful avoidance of each other all but open up a grave lacuna: the work that still remains to be done is to assess the consequences of the bankruptcy of the Soviet model for political ontology. This is a criticism implicit in Peter Deli's own attempts to bring to light the importance of a sober, conceptual analysis of the philosophical implications of the grand-scale defeat of a political model that was also a philosophical theory. He justifies his different approach in these terms:

The reaction of French left-wing journals to the Russian invasion of Hungary and Czechoslovakia were more than a reflection of these events outside France. France had its own revolutionary tradition and its own self-consciously French Communist Party. Hungary, Czechoslovakia and de-Stalinization were therefore to become part and parcel of a peculiar French crisis of ideas and politics. . . . How did these crises affect the way in which the attitudes of the French intelligentsia were evolving and changing?¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 198.

¹² Peter Deli, *De Budapest à Prague, les Sursauts de la Gauche Française* (Paris: Anthropos, 1981), 39.

It is this crisis that we intend to examine in this paper. For if Deli has heard the Merleau-Pontian challenge, he has also shown that the existing literature (by which he means the canonical accounts such as those of Judt, Furet, David Caute¹³ and Annie Kriegel¹⁴) lacked the awareness of the fact that the intellectuals who are the protagonists of those histories “in fact used the events in Hungary to deepen their understanding of ‘Marxism’ and ‘Socialism.’”¹⁵

Like Deli, Martin Malia, in his magisterial *The Soviet Tragedy*, declares: “what should have been the great social-science case study of the modern age thus was botched, and will now (hopefully) prove to be a starting point for the re-examination of social-science premises.”¹⁶ He concludes that in recent “Western Sovietology,” “the debate was almost embarrassingly shallow.”¹⁷ Like Merleau-Ponty and Deli, he is calling for a truly intellectual history. But he goes further in pointing the way: the key starting point for whoever wishes to do more than history with the Soviet experiment: “it was the all-encompassing pretensions of the Soviet utopia that furnished what can be called the ‘genetic code’ of the tragedy.” These “all encompassing pretensions,” he declares further, lie in the “concern for the honor of universal socialism.”¹⁸

Unwittingly, Malia converges directly with the diagnosis formulated forty years prior by both Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur: the crisis of Soviet communism unfolding between 1953 and 1956 must be recognized as a crisis in its concept of universalism, which is found in the doctrine of the universal class.

Consider Merleau-Ponty:

If there is no “universal class,” and no exercise of power by this class, the revolutionary spirit returns to pure moral or moralistic radicalism. Revolutionary politics used to be a doing, a realism, the birth of a force. The non-communist left too often retains only its negations.¹⁹

¹³ David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals* (New York: McMillan, 1964); David Caute, *The Fellow Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973).

¹⁴ Annie Kriegel, *Les Communistes français: essai d'ethnographie politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1968); *Communismes au miroir français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

¹⁵ Peter Deli, *De Budapest à Prague*, 43.

¹⁶ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ *Signes*, 528.

And Ricoeur:

Proletarian universalism is in principle and fundamentally liberating compared to fascistic provincialism. But the seizure of power, in any given province of the earth, by the men of the dialectic reactivates all the authoritarian consequences attached to a philosophy of history that lays claim to a monopoly of orthodoxy.²⁰

It can now be seen more clearly how the two lacunae with which we started—the one concerning the origins of the thesis of the autonomy of power, and the one concerning the philosophical implications of the events of the early fifties—are deeply interrelated and how they must be addressed in a unified way, namely through a critical analysis of the communist concept of universalism: the events of the early fifties led some French intellectuals philosophically to re-assess the Marxist and communist doctrine of universalism, thereby laying the ground for the Foucauldian thesis of the autonomy of power. I shall try to substantiate this claim by focusing on the figures of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur.

There are three reasons for this. Firstly, they both regarded current events as an opportunity for philosophy. Secondly, they both diagnosed the same weakness in the Marxist-Soviet soldering of metaphysics and action: the “genetic code of the tragedy” lies in the Marxist view of universality, one attached to the doctrine of the universal class. Thirdly, they shared the diagnosis that in engaging in repressive tactics at home (as revealed by the Secret speech) and colonialist ones abroad (in Korea and Hungary), the Soviet Union had failed in its intention to subject power to the logic of socialism and instead submitted itself to the logic of power. This supports the philosophical suggestion that power precedes ideology and constitutes it, not the reverse.

II. MARX AND THE ABSORPTION OF DIFFERENCE

Both Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur (and Malia later) regard the doctrine of the universal class as the key flaw in Marxism. In order to address universalism therefore, we need to understand exactly its place in the economy of Marxism. Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty's own texts do not provide enough information regarding the details of their critical readings of Marx. Rather,

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), 185.

they present potent allusions, but ones that cannot be fully elucidated immanently. It is wiser, therefore, to begin with a reading of Marx himself in order to gather the information necessary to connect the dots given by Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur's own texts. This will take an examination of Marx's thinking on the Hegelian concept of a universal class in the texts of the 1840s, in particular the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843), *The Holy Family* (1844), and *The German Ideology* (1846).

Marx's first elaboration of the concept of the proletariat takes place in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. There, Marx's main concern is to refute the alleged Hegelian idea that the Prussian state constituted the culmination of Spirit and the ultimate political structure (that is to say, the full expression of rationality).²¹ Marx immediately notes that this is a claim that relies on Hegel's definition of the bureaucracy as the universal class. If a future is to be reopened and a revolution made possible again, Marx believes, it is the question of the universal class that must be reconsidered. Marx's criticism of Hegel is fundamental: doing the bureaucracy the honor of representing the universal class involves a reversal of the order of priority of the actual and the potential; it involves placing the current situation as the standard for all possible situations. For as Marx notes in his analysis of paragraph 262 of Hegel's text (the paragraph which, according to Marx, contains "the entire mystery of the *Philosophy of Right* and of Hegelian philosophy in general"²²), for Hegel, "the actual becomes phenomenon, but the Idea has no other content than this phenomenon"²³ so that all becomes quietistically folded up into an identity of the Idea (that regulates the potential) and a phenomenal realm ("actuality") that constitutes the core of what Marx calls Hegel's "logical, pantheistic mysticism."²⁴ It is in this perspective that one may understand why the entire text presents itself as an attack on "the German *status quo*" (an expression that recurs eight times in the short introduction to the text and would become famous as the title of an 1847 text by Engels²⁵). The *status quo* is a situation that relies on the

²¹ On Marx's reading of Hegel's position, see David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 58–63; and Norman Levine, *Marx's Discourse with Hegel* (Stoke-on-Trent: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). On the history of the Pro-Prussian reception of Hegel, see Henning Ottmann, "Hegel und Die Politik: Zur Kritik der politischen Hegellegenden," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 26 (1979): 235–53.

²² Karl Marx, in *Marx-Engels Werke* Vol. I (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956–1990), 208. Hereafter *Werke*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁵ Friedrich Engels, "The Status Quo in Germany," in *Werke*, vol. IV, 40–57.

identification of the actual and the possible. Marx's enterprise, on the contrary, is to establish a ground where the potential regains its priority over the actual, laying the ground for the revolutionary project.

This leads Marx to insist on the paradoxical character of the idea of a universal class: if classes are defined in opposition to each other, any talk of universal classes becomes a contradiction.²⁶ This however, is not enough for Marx to discard the idea of a universal class altogether. To his mind, all it means is that only a self-determined class (a class whose definition does not rely on its opposition to any other class) can be truly called universal. The challenge is to find a class that remains itself even as it represents the members of all classes, that is to say, mankind. This is the class he calls the proletariat. For Marx, the proletariat is able to maintain itself as proletariat even as it brings about a classless society. That is to say: the proletariat is not, strictly speaking, a class. The consequence has its importance with reference to the later criticisms of Marxism: when Marx wishes to hold the revolutionary future open by re-establishing the precedence of the potential over the actual, he is led to identify the potential with a classless society.

We can now observe how the charge of essentialism becomes pressing: by undoing the Hegelian identity of the *actual* and the *potential*, Marx also undid Hegel's identification of fact and justification (*is* and *ought*), thereby relying on a transcendental horizon of justification. This is a horizon which he calls, at this stage of his career, "die Gemeinwesen, die kommunistische Wesen," "the ideal [or "universal concept"] of a commonwealth of the Free."²⁷ So it seems that there is a universal project carried by the universal class, that is to say, a project that fulfills the aspirations of all humans insofar as they are human. Marx's essentialism is doubled here as it involves an essentialization of the *Gemeinwesen* and of human nature. It even leads to a third, ethical essentialization of human aspirations viewed as a standard of value opposing something Marx calls the "wrong as such" based on an uncritical definition of mankind and of its natural aspirations. In fact, Marx explicitly refuses to historicize this concept of wrongness. This refusal, which essentializes moral values, explicitly leads Marx to essentialize the proletariat too, because he charges it with a moral mission. In his very first mention of the proletariat, he advocates a transcendental classless society brought about by a transcendental agent, the proletariat, which could also satisfy transcendental values. He writes:

²⁶ *Werke* I, 255 and 288.

²⁷ *Werke* I, 283.

Where, then, is the positive possibility [*Möglichkeit*] of a German emancipation?

Answer: In the formation of a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character [*universellen Charakter*] by its universal suffering [*universellen Leiden*] and claims no particular right because no particular wrong, but wrong as such [*Unrecht schlechthin*], is perpetrated against it; [a class] that can invoke not a historical, but only a human title; [a class] that does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipate all other spheres of society, [a class] which, in a word, is the complete loss of man and hence can win itself only through the complete rewinning [*Wiedergewinnung*] of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the proletariat.²⁸

The problem with Marx's essentialism is that it involves regarding political difference as inessential and indeed as purely negative, therefore as absorbable within a universal unity. In this sense, it does too little to oppose Hegel, for, if it does indeed provide a dialectical device to allow the potential to lead into the actual (the proletariat), it fails to break the Hegelian dogma upon which this identification of actual and potential rests, that is to say the dogma according to which the "labor of the negative" is meant to lead the potential into the actual. Indeed, Marx maintains the idea that reality is material and positive only. For him, the opposition that constitutes classes is nothing but an accidental and negative state of affairs that will attain positivity only once it is resolved within a universal *Gemeinwesen*. In 1844's *Holy Family*, a pamphlet ostensibly aimed at the neo-Hegelian Bruno Bauer, Marx and Engels write:

Private property as private property, as wealth, is compelled to maintain *itself*, and thereby its opposite, the proletariat, into *existence*. That is the *positive* side of the antithesis, self-satisfied private property. The proletariat, on the contrary, is compelled as

²⁸ Ibid., vol. I, 390.

proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property, which determines its existence, and which makes it the proletariat. It is the *negative* side of the antithesis, its restlessness within its very self, dissolved and self-dissolving private property.²⁹

This and other texts rely on the assumption inherited from Hegel that contradictions naturally absorb themselves. But it does nothing to solve the key tension between these two texts, which is to determine if a class can at once remain itself (as the “rewinning” of man) and “abolish itself” when instating a classless society. For Marx and Engels, as this passage makes clear, the answer is yes insofar as the only consistent position for any class is precisely to aim at a classless society, even though this universal project is brought to consciousness only in the proletariat. But as long as there is no argument for the self-overcoming of opposition, Marx’s dialectical position can only appear as dogmatic and essentialist. The problem becomes clearer for us however: the nerve of Marx’s doctrine of the universal class lies in his remaining Hegelian in considering strife and opposition as pure nothingness, negation, and accident (“caprice” says Hegel³⁰).

These weaknesses in Marx’s view of universalism can be summed up under the charge of essentialism. This essentialism determines three key Marxist views regarding the proletariat:

- a) The proletariat is a class that remains itself regardless of its relations with other classes (that is to say, it is not defined socio-economically);
- b) strife and conflict are mere accidents of the proletariat, an *intrinsically* peaceful class;
- c) a class can be universal even though it is not universal *now*: this universality relies not on observation but on a metaphysics of essences, according to which there is a privileged relation between the essence of mankind, the essence of the proletariat and the essence of “goodness.”

Note how these three aspects of the early Marxist essentialization of the proletariat all converge towards the idea of a dismissal of difference and conflict. Essentialism is dependent on a discourse on the intrinsic potentialities of the proletariat, leading to the understanding of the universal dimension of the proletariat as its destination. As pointed out earlier, such essentialism involves the possible encounter of the potential and the actual, and an end of history, that is to say, strictly speaking, the absorption of conflict into identity. As Hwa Yol Jung writes:

²⁹ Ibid., vol. II, 37.

³⁰ See for example, Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right*, § 262.

To presuppose beginning in a dyadic relationship is to privilege one element over the other. On the other hand, to posit an ending is to violate the very idea of multiplicity as webs of interdependent relationships. . . . The Hegelian and Marxian dialectic has an ending. In it, synthesis is the identity of identity and non-identity. . . . The Hegelian dialectic consummates the philosophical *telos* of, and scales the theoretical height of, modernity. Marx too, follows the footsteps of his “great teacher”: while the State is for Hegel the dialectical end of history, communism—the opposite of Hegel’s statism—is for Marx the dialectical end of history where the proletariat is crowned as universal class.³¹

Marxist essentialism, Hwa Yol writes, is correlative of the idea of an end of history and of the idea of the proletariat as universal class. Together, the three positions presented above (a, b, and c) conspire to repudiate any consequential idea of difference and conflict. For the “dyad” of conflict and peace is just the political name of the more fundamental dyad of difference and identity, and for Marx (and Hegel), difference comes out of identity and returns to it. We should now be in a better position to see the problem with essentialism: it tends to dissolve conflict and explain it away; it empties the political of its substance.

This may also begin to clarify the reaction of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur before the ideological debacle of the Soviet Union. In his 1961 eulogy to Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur contemplated the extent of his philosophical companionship with his late colleague on the question of universalism. Like Malia later, he and Merleau-Ponty recognized that “universalism” is the “genetic code of the tragedy” of Marxism. Ricoeur writes:

Merleau-Ponty could not believe that there was a universal class and that the proletariat was that class. This is why history was, according to him, without absolute point of view, without any true perspective.³²

Building a politics that took stock of the absence of “any true perspective” is what animates Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty’s critical examination of the proletariat. Their reaction to the intrusion of power politics within

³¹ Hwa Yol Jung, “Phenomenology, the Question of Rationality and the Basic Grammar of Intercultural Texts,” *Analecta Husserliana* 46 (1995): 181.

³² Paul Ricoeur, “Hommage à Merleau-Ponty,” *Esprit* 29 (1961): 1118.

the well-ordered Marxist doctrine therefore needed to be framed by the following two constraints:

1. It had to avoid collapsing difference into pure negativity.
2. Given the first requirement, the second was to recognize the necessity of difference in politics while avoiding essentialism, either anthropological (a discourse on human nature) socio-economical (a fetishization of any class as self-determinate) or ethical (a discourse on the nature of “right” and “wrong” “as such”).

In the remainder of this paper, I address Ricoeur's and Merleau-Ponty's respective efforts to respond to these two requirements. I will argue that even though Ricoeur's hermeneutical method succeeds in fulfilling the first requirement, it falls into the same trap as Marx with regard to the second one, although for opposite reasons: unlike Marx who hypostatizes the transitional device as proletariat, Ricoeur seems to emphasize difference so much that he makes the transition between the localized and the universal impossible, necessitating an appeal to the divine as a magical warrant of continuity. I will then turn to Merleau-Ponty's efforts that, I contend, make full use of the hermeneutic direction offered by Ricoeur but offer a more subtle reading of difference, one that succeeds in avoiding the charge of occultism.

III. RICOEUR ON THE ABSORPTION OF POSITIVE AND ACCIDENTAL DIFFERENCE

Generally speaking, one approach to Ricoeur's objections to the Marxist idea of universality is through the Kantian idea of universality (that which is relative to everyone) as determined in opposition to both subjectivity (that which is relative to a subject) and objectivity (that which is relative to no-one). Unlike Kantianism, the Marxist dogma brings universality over to the side of objectivity: there is an objective movement in history and the proletariat is both its own subject and its own object. Ricoeur claims, on the contrary, that universalism cannot be exhausted by objectivity, for objectivity misses the realm of meaning. Yet, meaning is specifically human and therefore it holds a central place within any account of universalism. For Marx, the destination of history is self-identity and the overcoming of difference, as well as the complete humanization of history. For Ricoeur, these two requirements are in conflict with each other because self-identity

expunges the realm of meaning and therefore prevents humanization. According to Ricoeur, events only hold a place in human history through their signification, and they only acquire signification by becoming subjective: by entering cultural discourses and practices. In order to reflect this fact, Ricoeur replaces the objectivistic “event” with his hermeneutic concept of “advent.” “Advents” arise from an encounter of objectivity and meaning. He writes:

The event becomes advent. In taking on time, it takes on meaning. By understanding itself indirectly, in terms of the transfer from the old to the new, the event presents itself as an understanding of relations.³³

That is to say, the notion of advent accounts for the fact that history is made of meanings, that meanings are the space of relations, and therefore, that human life strives in relation and not in identity. So, the Marxist essentialization of the human must be replaced by a hermeneutic of advents.

Ricoeur regards the stakes of replacing “events” with “advents” as ethical as well as political. He emphasizes the fact that only an understanding of history as “adventful” (and not eventful) can support a proper account of universality. For him, the encounter of ethics, history and freedom sets the scene for a few

very complex exchanges between the prophet and the proletarian, whose elucidation requires the collaboration of the historian and of the moralist. Should the prophet not coincide, at least through sympathy, with the historical condition of the exploited, he would not perceive the *universal* idea of justice; if the latter did not communicate, by way of his ethical conscience, with the *universal* word [*parole*] of the prophet, his condition as the exploited would only count as a simple economic fact and would not amount to any exploitation of the man in him; it would represent his limitation and would never make him the “*universal* man.” If we were to understand correctly this dialectic between a historical situation, a freedom that becomes sensitive to the good [*le bien*], and some a priori values that qualify morally both freedom and the situation, we could, ourselves too, become able to avoid the false dilemma

³³ Paul Ricoeur, preface to Bultmann’s *Jésus, mythologie et démythologization* (Paris: Seuil, 1968).

of the yogi and the commissar, and save the proletariat as a third term, but only in his dialogue with the prophet.³⁴

So it seems that according to Ricoeur, what is missing in Marxism is precisely what he has to offer: an elucidation of the signification of the proletarian experience which cannot be reduced to materialism, and which can attain universality only in the context of a "dialogue." What is missing in Marxism is a *hermeneutic*.

There is more: in the few years following this declaration, Ricoeur moved towards a more pragmatic view of politics. The hermeneutic in question must now be regarded as a hermeneutic of power: for signification (in politics at least) is the expression of power. This is because the abusive reduction of the universal into the objective, Ricoeur suggests, has been played out historically as the reduction of the realm of the political into the material realm on the basis of the early Marxist doctrine of historical materialism. If the Stalinist experiment has failed, Ricoeur suggests, it is precisely because it universalized economic laws to all the dimensions of human existence.³⁵ As we noted previously, the problem linked to the paradox of the concept of "universal class" for Marx, lies in the fact that it forces Marx to define classes *both* economically (relatively) *and* essentially (non-relatively), and to make these two definitions square with each other. Remember that Marx explicitly defines classes economically, according to the relationship that they entertain with the forces of production. This also means that a change in an individual or a group's relationship with the means of production involves a change of class. This means also that the revolution brings about a classless society, not a universal class. This directly contradicts the idea of a class that survives economic changes. Yet, such a class is precisely what the proletariat is meant to be. According to Ricoeur, this economization of politics dilutes moral freedom and human meaning and forcibly channels all human claims to expression and creation into an economic *expression*.

In the aftermath of Budapest, Ricoeur laments the fact that the Marxist thesis of the universal class involves the economization of politics. This, he contends, leaves the field of specifically political action (*qua* praxis of difference) unchecked, leading to the forgetting of the fact that power possesses its own autonomous logic, a logic which, if deprived of meaning (as

³⁴ Ibid., 842 (my emphasis).

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Etat et Violence," in Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1955); and Theodor Marius van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning: Ontology and Eschatology in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), 58.

the economization of politics implies), can only express itself as violence. In one of his most accomplished articles of the time, Ricoeur writes in decisive terms:

I believe that we must maintain, against Marx and Lenin, that political alienation cannot be reduced to another [i.e.: economic alienation] but on the contrary, it is constitutive of human existence and in this sense the political mode of existence comports the scission of the abstract life of the citizen and of the concrete life of the family man and of the worker . . . I need only point to the Khrushchev report as evidence of this fact. What seems to me fundamental, is that the critique of Stalin contained in it holds any meaning only if the alienation of the political is an autonomous alienation, irreducible to that of the economic society. Otherwise, how could anyone criticize Stalin whilst continuing to support socialist economics and the Soviet regime? The Khrushchev report is only possible alongside a critique of power and of the vices of power. But since Marxism makes no room for any autonomous critique of power, one retreats into anecdotal and moralizing criticisms.³⁶

Here, Ricoeur pleads for a separate analysis of power: the historical text that now needs analyzing has been written by power, and the weakness of Marxism is not that it led to horror; it is that it ignored that the political escapes and exceeds what any theory (including Marx's) could say about it. There is a realm of power, and reducing it to any other realm means ignoring it, refusing to regulate it, and inviting violence.³⁷

In 1967, Ricoeur's friend and colleague at *Esprit*, Jean-Marie Domenach, would express *Esprit's* position after Budapest in these terms:

The Stalinist delirium has a philosophical origin: the pretension to liquidate politics at the very moment that it attains an unheard-of extension, and the pretension to collapse power into the economical and the social when what is required is to institute and control it. Marxism ignored the fact that the fascination of power and its murderous greediness are given in all eternity. With Stalin, history rises to power, but it does so only in order to violate history.³⁸

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "Le Paradoxe Politique," *Esprit* 25 (1957): 734.

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), 265–67.

³⁸ Jean-Marie Domenach, *Le retour du tragique* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 143.

Like Domenach, Ricoeur recognizes that the realm of the political counts as the realm of "power," and that power is essentially an intersubjective phenomenon. Power cannot be "collapsed" into the objectivity of the measurement of production, and Materialism amounts to a reduction of the ethical dimension that constitutes the very substance of the concept of universalism. For Ricoeur, on the contrary, the political is independent from the economic and the social, and the political is universal because man is meaning, therefore sociability, by essence. In short, the proletariat, a class defined along economic and social lines, cannot be universal, only the "movement of advent" is.³⁹

The problem with Ricoeur's view, of course, is that insofar as it places the human as a subject of universal rights, it remains committed to an objectivist anthropology. As a result, it remains framed by the primacy of the objective (the intrinsic value of the human) and subjective poles (the "movement of advent" as free assignment of meaning to history by a given culture), leading into what phenomenology has seen as a phenomenological "blinking"⁴⁰: the series of advents does not reconcile the objective and the subjective, it just limps on, stepping only with one of its two legs at any given time. (Ricoeur, of course, finds virtue in this limp as it evades the fantasy of "total communication" and "truth" in history.) Ricoeur is therefore still unable to offer an account of universalism as power. This is because he regards the problem of universalism as ethical, whilst his critique of Marx has demonstrated that power was an autonomous and amoral principle. So, Ricoeur's ethics can no longer be based in history but strangely, in an objective, anthropological account of the human as dignity: "in the last analysis, what connects politics to ethics, order to charity, is respect of the person in its life and in its dignity."⁴¹ But, he adds, this value of "dignity" is supported by a providential principle which he even goes as far as to call "the Messiah"⁴² or a "god" seen as a "hidden" object of "faith" that would "bring history to its end"⁴³ and is revealed in phenomenal history and in "the mystery of eschatology" at the same time.⁴⁴ The theme of the mystery as the only possible reconciliation of history and meaning is developed in "Le Christianisme et le Sens de l'Histoire," especially in its fourth section entitled "Le Niveau de l'Espérance." He concludes that text with these words:

³⁹ Ibid., 54–57. See also 48–52.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁴¹ Ibid., 254.

⁴² Ibid., 95.

⁴³ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

Faith in a meaning, but in a hidden meaning of history, is thus both the courage to believe in a profound meaning of the most tragic history, and thus a mood of trust and abandon at the very heart of the struggle.⁴⁵

All of this suggests that history must be regarded as the parallel history of material events and of God. It is the encounter of these two orders that creates “meaning” and constitutes the series of advents, but it is an encounter which is only made possible by God himself. This is a widely recognized feature of Ricoeur’s early political thinking. As one commentator puts it, meaning is the domain of god’s promises, and this makes the parallelism between the material and the divine order asymmetric: the former depends on the latter for its very appearance in the guise of meaning.⁴⁶

So, Ricoeur’s critique of Marxism leads him to establish the externality of the principles of economics, power, and ethics, whose encounter in history can only be conceived as an occult mediation between incommensurables. This view renders any concept of universalism philosophically empty (even if theologically potent): universalism lies in the fact that we all have an ethical value (“dignity”), it is the wishing, or the magical hope of the forcible humanization of history, it is therefore already the jurisdiction of the divine. Ricoeur winds up collapsing the political into the theological at the very moment he argues in favor of the autonomy of the political. This is the danger Merleau-Ponty sought to avoid in his own criticism of Marxist universalism.

IV. MERLEAU-PONTY: NECESSARY AND POSITIVE DIFFERENCE

Like Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty notes that the dogma of the universality of the proletarian class relies on a faulty idea of universalism, and like him, he considers that the mistake is that Marxism-Leninism has used this concept to reduce the political (which is made of conflicts) to the material, and that this reduction reveals and relies on the Marxist dismissal of difference and its commitment to essentialism. Where Merleau-Ponty disagrees with Ricoeur, however, is on the status we must give to the now recovered autonomy of the political. For Ricoeur, this autonomy leaves the political and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 97–98.

⁴⁶ See Theodor Marius van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 119. See also 139ff.

material orders facing each other in awkward ways, and subsequently, it demands an occult intervention. Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty declares, a radical separation between power and economic circumstances condemns one to the same alternative as the Bolshevism it is meant to oppose:

If there is no "universal class," and no exercise of power by this class, the revolutionary spirit returns to pure moral or moralistic radicalism. Revolutionary politics used to be a doing, a realism, the birth of a force. The non-communist left too often retains only its negations.⁴⁷

In other words, the non-communist left (including Ricoeur) avoids reducing politics to economics, but it is guilty of reducing politics to morals. It fails to heed the fact that the deeper flaw of Marxism is its reliance on the supposed identity of thought and action: for this identity may lead to thoughtless acts (as in Stalinism), but it equally leads to thoughtful passivity: the refusal to "exercise power." Behind Merleau-Ponty's critique of some of his non-communist colleagues, we hear echoes of Charles Péguy's famous attack on Kant: "Kantianism's hands are pure, but it has no hands."⁴⁸ For Péguy too was concerned with the reduction of the political to the moral. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty suggests, genuine "revolutionary politics is a doing, a realism, the birth of a force." For Merleau-Ponty therefore, the autonomy of the political does not involve the impossibility of mediation, and it does not require any *deus ex machina* to explain the movement of history.

This agreement (about the necessity to replace objectivism with hermeneutics) combined with this disagreement (about the impossibility for mediation) is expressed clearly in Merleau-Ponty's use of Ricoeur's concept of advent. Merleau-Ponty writes in 1952:

On the contrary, we propose to recognize the order of culture or meaning as an original order of *advent*, which must neither be derived from the order of the pure events (if it exists), nor treated as a mere effect of extraordinary encounters.⁴⁹

The concept of advent, which he explicitly inherits from Ricoeur (as he acknowledges in a footnote), has two key features: the first is its opposition

⁴⁷ *Signes*, 528.

⁴⁸ Charles Péguy, *Oeuvres de Prose* (Paris: NRF, 1916), 1:495.

⁴⁹ *Signes*, 109.

to the objective order of events, and its involvement with “culture” and “meaning.” This is the Ricoeurian definition, and it is made in opposition to Marxist objectivism. The second, which is Merleau-Ponty’s own addition and his departure from Ricoeur, is the idea that advents are not the result of “extraordinary encounters” i.e.: divine mediation. It is worth noting how Merleau-Ponty’s criticism exploits the paradoxical kinship between the two opposite positions: they both negate agency, Marxism through determinism, and Ricoeurianism through messianism.

In a different context, but in the same years, Merleau-Ponty was led to clarify how, in his view, universalism may be reintroduced into history without any appeal to supernatural providence. The problem with some sorts of Christian political thinking, Merleau-Ponty complained, is that they confuse the “sense of reality with the respect for reality.”⁵⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, “the sense of reality” is the awareness that reality needs completion through action.⁵¹ The “respect for reality” on the other hand, reduces the real to the actual: it is fetishism and leads into inaction. It is not surprising therefore that Christian politics are essentially caught in the alternative of a capitulation before the facts of reality (as in the Christian conservative right), or a surrender to some divine, left-leaning providence (as in the Christian Socialists like Ricoeur). Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Christian politics is that their projection of ethics onto the outskirts of history amounts to subtracting ethics from the rigors of political analysis, and replacing the disappointing but necessary compromises of what he calls “live power” with “extraordinary encounters” and the “fulgurations of the Sinai.”⁵²

This is why Merleau-Ponty wishes to return to the original crossroad: if it is true that politics is independent from economics (a thesis which in itself suffices to dismantle Marxism), it does not follow that ethics too must be independent from politics or economics. In fact “politics is not the opposite of morals, and yet, it isn’t limited to morals.”⁵³ Entering politics, he writes, means “setting foot on the paths of relative morals” and this in turn requires that “we finally know what we want and that we made up our minds not to accept *just about anything*.”⁵⁴

Merleau-Ponty’s opposition with Ricoeur therefore is both radical and

⁵⁰ See *Signes*, 520.

⁵¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et Terreur: Essai sur le Problème Communiste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 65.

⁵² *Signes*, 561.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 527.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 521.

subtle: behind the impossibility for the dialectical movement of history to become mediated outside divine intervention, Merleau-Ponty places a univocal and immanent *structure* which organizes the possible and the impossible without determining them: the impossible is pure morality (and its passivity) and pure evil (and its thoughtlessness), but between the two and structurally determined by them, lies the realm of "relative morals," the realm of political action.⁵⁵

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty boldly cuts through any talk of universality as a stable, messianic and classless world of peace. The alternative to a universal class, he declares in the *Adventures of the Dialectic*, is "a principle of universal strife."⁵⁶ This is a clear anticipation of Foucault's thesis of the autonomy of power. Universality is not a value in an ethical realm that eludes history. It is a structure of power and of relative morals: what is universal is the human predicament (strife), not the state that lies outside of this predicament. Power does not *require* mediation (like Marxism imagined and failed to achieve) it *is* mediation. Indeed, power is this very mediation that Marxism sought in the proletariat but failed to discover, and that Ricoeur (and Kant) sought in a directing idea and equally failed to achieve. Furthermore, both failed for the same reasons: thinking of power as pure rejection for Ricoeur, and therefore as requiring the most radical (i.e.: impossible) form of mediation, and thinking of power as an epiphenomenon of class society in Marxism (and therefore thinking its distance-creating nature could be tamed within a universal class).

Merleau-Ponty's response is blunt: this taming of power corresponds to the taming of violence that we were promised as the result of the attainment of the universal class to its own universality. Yet, this promise of self-absorbing violence relies on the illusion that difference is secondary to identity, that violence is secondary to peace, and that victory (the Revolution), as the end of opposition, would inevitably involve the "end" of violence (in both senses of the word "end"). For Merleau-Ponty, however, power is the very *structure* of mediation that maintains both distance and proximity and is expressed—but not defined—by the dialectical movement of history. As a result, Merleau-Ponty notes, we can diagnose the problem of the Bolshevik understanding of universalism in more precise ways: an all-encompassing—that is to say objectivist—universalism, one that would simply expand to

⁵⁵ On Merleau-Ponty's use of the word structure as a network of impossibilities that loosely determines possibilities, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Notes de Lecture et Commentaires sur *Théorie du Champ de la Conscience* de Aron Gurwitsch," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 3 (1997): 332.

⁵⁶ AD, 88.

include all humans, classes, and times, can only lead to the repression of the true—and therefore irrepressible—universality. Remember, such objectivism seeks the end of strife, but in trying to end history through the advent of a universal proletariat, Marxism unwittingly revealed that the only universal is “a principle of universal strife.” Merleau-Ponty sees universalism not in an essence expressed univocally, but in a structure expressed dialectically, that is to say: the only universal is found to be power relations themselves.⁵⁷

So Merleau-Ponty’s power structuralism goes further than Ricoeur in overcoming essentialism. In doing so, it skips the level of values: they are produced by power. Power is independent from them but they are not independent from it. Drawing a distinction between the realm of the objective and the realm of power does not require that universality be relegated to pure virtuality and the quietism that goes with it. For Merleau-Ponty, a universalistic politics is most possible, for politics is more than the milieu in which our claims to universal recognition must be fitted by appeal to the divine. Indeed, this claim to universality itself is essentially political; universal recognition is essentially the recognition by all humans that all humans are political centers of force. Secondly, universalism is not political only in the sense that it translates itself spontaneously into the logic of power; it is also “political” in the sense of “pragmatic”: because the universal in the human is not essential (as in Ricoeur), but structural, it is naturally suited to the pragmatic nature of politics which is to reconcile the impossible of the present with the possible of the future. As Merleau-Ponty declares: “there are structures that are only a certain way of lasting through time.”⁵⁸ A structure, Merleau-Ponty declared later, is a network of impossibilities that frame the possible. In other words, a structure is the possibility of a politics.

V. CONCLUSION

Merleau-Ponty took the Korean War and Ricoeur took Khrushchev’s secret speech and the Budapest episode as signs that no class is universal, and that power has a logic that transcends economical and social conditions, not the reverse. But they did so in two different ways. For Merleau-Ponty what this means is that there is an internal and structural necessity in history, and it

⁵⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 300.

is the necessity that history is never definitive or objective. This leads Merleau-Ponty into a critique of objectivity which he opposes to universality: the universality of subjectivity replaces the universality of objectivity. For Ricoeur, on the other hand, what this meant was that we must return to the holiness of the human subject, for it becomes clear that no collective entity could be regarded as the guarantor of universal ethics.

This has, I think, three consequences (albeit modest ones) regarding the way we must regard the claim to universalism in particular and how it must be satisfied in concrete political institutions.

The first, I think, is a clarification of three ways to look at the claim to universality:

The first one (the Bolshevik one) is essentially socio-economic and tends for this reason to regard universality as objectivism. In doing so, it denies difference and regards it as both accidental and negative.

The second (Ricoeur's), seems, for opposite reasons, to propose a universal objectivism too: it is the universality of human nature that warrants universal claims, and the objective reality of the horizon of values (god) which warrants that such claims are legitimate. It presents difference as positive (it can only be overcome by divine means) but accidental too.

The third, Merleau-Ponty's, is the idea that universality cannot be objective and cannot draw its values (transcendentally) from outside itself. On the contrary, it relies on the unity of the logic of power and the logic of history and suggests that the universal is essentially a relational concept. Difference is not only positive, it is necessary, and it constitutes the structure of history. What is universal is power, and power is pure structural relationality. Being relational, it is never latent (and therefore it is identical with its expressions), and being structural, it produces advents that emerge only out of a limited (or more precisely, transfinite) range of possibilities, determined by the mass of past history and the necessity to maintain relationality through history.⁵⁹

The second consequence, therefore, has to do with the fact that the concept of universalism is essentially connected to the concept of power: it is how one thinks of power that determines how one thinks of universalism. For example, thinking of power as structural (i.e.: productive of advents) allows one to do away with a transcendent sense of universalism (i.e.: theological) which would regard valuation as well as materialistic determinations as universal.

⁵⁹ On Merleau-Ponty's view of history as a transfinite movement of determination, see Frank Chouraqui, *Ambiguity and the Absolute* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 205–19.

Thirdly, the intervention of Ricoeur and of Merleau-Ponty within this Marxist problematic offers a robust ontological grounding to the idea that true politics is always also hermeneutics: it results from a combination of the actual and the potential and this potential is presented within the actual through language, dialogue, and signification. Thanks to Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach, it becomes clear that the dialectic of Hegel and Marx now needs to be considered as a theory of dialogue in a stronger sense, for the dialectic is always structured by a form of communication, that is to say, it is always mediated by a whole and mysterious human, whether it be the dialectic of the material and the symbolic (or as Ricoeur writes, the "worker" and the "citizen"), or of the actual and the potential. If, with Merleau-Ponty, we refuse to place a mystical principle at the heart of history, the hermeneutic lesson remains nonetheless insofar as the *modus operandi* of power is expression and resistance against other expressions, and power struggles are always subjected to a hermeneutic logic. With Ricoeur, we learn to regard so-called events as advents, and with Merleau-Ponty we learn that advents are mediated by power itself. It is the two philosophers' encounter with the facts of the collapse of the Soviet ideology that allowed them to transform a series of historical events into a new and potent doctrine, one that would reach full maturity in Foucault's work, but that was already encapsulated in the establishment of "a principle of universal strife."

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