



The Possibilities for Radical Humanism

Mihailo Marković

"The Possibilities for Radical Humanism," in: B. Landis and E. S. Tauber (Eds.), *In the Name of Life. Essays in Honor of Erich Fromm*, New York (Holt, Rinehart and Winston) 1971, pp. 275-287.

Professor of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade, Dean of the Faculty, and Director of the Institute of Philosophy, Dr. Mihailo Marković took part in the Yugoslav war of liberation, 1941-1945, as a captain in the partisan army. He has lectured in many European countries, and was visiting professor at the University of Michigan, 1969-1970. His book include *Formalism in Contemporary Logic*, *The Dialectical Theory of Meaning*, *Revision of Marxism in the USSR*, and *Humanism and Dialectics*.

I

Modern industrial civilization has increased man's possibilities to live a richer, freer, more creative life worthy of his potential. But man has not yet learned how to use them; slavery and poverty, both material and spiritual, still predominate in our age.

As the result of technological development, enormous social forces and controls over natural phenomena have been set in motion. Instead of being rationally directed by man, they govern him. States, parties, churches, armies, ideologies, nuclear institutions, have their own logic of functioning which, in a way that is still mostly unknown to man, generates processes whose outcomes are unpredictable and independent to the rational human mind. While these forces have enabled man to begin to conquer outer cosmic space, they have not yet been mobilized on earth to conquer misery, hunger, wars, most simple diseases, illiteracy, and infant mortality.

Paradoxically, although an ever-increasing number of people in the civilized world are now able to satisfy their basic needs, new artificial needs have been widely stimulated: in the first place, desires to possess useless objects largely for the sake of possession, a need for *having* more on account of *being* more. Another subtle yet crucial social change is that the old gap between intellectual and physical work is being gradually replaced by a new one, that be-

tween the creative work done by a few and the utterly dull, routine work done by a vast majority.

Thus, the standard of living has greatly increased but in most cases this has not made for more humane relationships between social groups. For example, while productivity increases rapidly, higher wages are still tied to [276] a higher degree of exploitation (defined as the usurpation of value produced by unpaid work). It does not make an essential difference to the worker whether the usurper is a capitalist or a bureaucrat.

Again, technical civilization has provided means to shrink distances among individuals both in space and time: big cities, fast transportation, highly efficient media of communication, etc. At the same time, this development tends to destroy, without providing substitutes, all the emotionally loaded links which connect an individual with his original natural milieu. That is why modern man is so uprooted, condemned to experience utter loneliness in the midst of a crowd. The more he belongs to a mass society the less he is a member of any genuine human community.

Ever since the Renaissance there has been a strong integrating trend in the civilized world: a spreading of the same technology, economic cooperation and exchange, a mixing of cultures, the creation of an international political organization, reciprocal influences in the arts, and sci-



entific collaboration. But simultaneously, strong disintegrative factors are at work: nationalism, racialism, ideological wars, religious intolerances, narrow specialization and excessive division of labor, sustaining of sharp boundaries between various spheres of social activity such as politics, law, science, philosophy, morality, and the arts—in general, an atomistic way of thinking and approaching things. The result is: far less solidarity among people and fewer connections between social institutions than is desirable and possible.

Due to modern technology and the development of democracy, human freedom has been greatly increased, at least insofar as we mean by freedom the possibility of choosing among alternatives. However, every choice depends on the criteria for choosing, and in our time these criteria are more successfully than ever pressed on individuals by highly elaborated and efficient propaganda and advertising techniques. It is tragic how often modern man is enslaved when he has the illusion of being free.

This discrepancy between illusion and fact is especially evident in the international political arena. Most nations like to cherish the illusion that their governments are striving for peace; nevertheless, we have been living on the brink of war during the last two decades. Most statesmen cherish the illusion that their decision-making is rational, and optimal under given circumstances. However, the result of so many "rational" decisions is a completely irrational situation: the collective suicide of mankind has become a real possibility and it can happen at any moment by pure accident. [277]

II

The idea of making the world more humane presupposes definite anthropological conceptions as to what is man, what is his nature, what does it mean to exist in an authentic way and to live a true, human life.

Any analysis of human behavior in history would lead to the conclusion that, as a matter of fact, man has given evidence of very different and even *contradictory* features. To illustrate: man has always tended to enlarge his *freedom*,

to overcome historically set technological, political, and social limits. However, slavery is the invention of man. And even to a liberally minded person, a vision of complete individual freedom has always been unbearable, both because of the fear of the irresponsibility of others and the reluctance to accept responsibility himself. That is why he sets limits and establishes various kinds of *order* of all forms and at all levels of social life: morality, law, discipline at home, at school, at work, in political organization, strict rules in art, methodological principles in science, etc.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of man is his *creativity*. In contrast to other living beings man constantly evolves his tools, his methods of work, his needs and objectives, his criteria of evaluation. That is why human history, in spite of its retrogressions and oscillations, can, on the whole, be considered as a rather rapid process. Still, in contradiction to this, there is also a tendency in man to resist work and to avoid the effort of creating new things and new forms. The majority of people have always dreamed of happiness as a state of affairs without work and without change. Even more of a contradiction, no other creature in the world can compete with man in destructiveness. The exceptionally great endeavors in developing this side of his being have in our time given notable fruit: man's capacity today for destruction by far exceeds his capacity for creation.

Man is a *social being* not only in the sense that he prefers to live in a community but also in a more profound sense: all the features by which he is constituted are social products—language, forms of thought, habits and tastes, education, values, and so forth. Nevertheless, there is also a strong tendency in most individuals to behave occasionally in an *antisocial* way, to pursue selfish private ends, to isolate themselves from others, to break links with people without any discernible reason, to be possessive, power [278] hungry, and, even in the arts and philosophy, to get rid of all socially established rules, to make their thoughts and feeling hermetic and minimize communication with others.

Man is surely a *rational* being. He is able to analyze things and situations, to weigh alternatives, and to derive consequences. He can pre-



dict the outcome of a chosen course of action and adjust his behavior to achieve desired goals. But his goals are too often *irrational*—they correspond to his immediate interests, urges, drives. And even when his long-term goals are rather rational in the sense that they have been selected after careful deliberation over his genuine needs and real possibilities of the given situation, his short-term goals and his actual behavior may greatly deviate from them. As a matter of fact, man frequently acts in complete disregard of his knowledge, even knowing that his course of action is self-destructive. It should be noted that this basic irrationality of human behavior is only partly the consequence of atavistic impulses, primitive passions, deeply rooted egotistic impulses, or even mental disorders. Partly it is the effect of a fundamental human need for an immediate, spontaneous reaction, a need which is in obvious peril in an age of science, technology, and overplanning in which those who are not able to calculate and reason coldly look unfit and unlikely to survive.

One could go on expounding such antinomies.¹ They are obviously statistical middle values of very large populations in different times. What seems to be essential about them is the fact that one or the other pole of each antinomy may predominate, depending on the given historical conditions. But historical conditions are not something simply given and predetermined; they are the result of practical human actions taken in partly different previous conditions. The question, then, arises: *which are the constitutive characteristics of human nature that we should prefer and whose predominance in the future we should secure by our practical action in the present?*

First, we must differentiate two concepts of human nature. When we analyze history to establish certain general tendencies of human behavior, we arrive at a *descriptive* notion of man that can be expressed by a series of factual empirical statements. But when we prefer some

¹ For example: Man is both peace-loving and belligerent; he tends to belong to a movement and to have a common cause, but also he often prefers to be left alone; he is very conservative and reluctant to modify traditional patterns of life, but on the other hand, no pattern of life satisfies him permanently.

human features over others—such as being social, productive, creative, rational, free, and [279] peaceful—and when we classify these characteristics as "truly human," "genuine," "authentic," "essential," "natural," etc., we arrive at a *value* concept of man, indicating that man is essentially a being of praxis, which can be described by a set of value statements.

These two concepts of human nature have to be justified in different ways, and are open to different types of criticism. The descriptive notion of man has to be supported by factual evidence. Someone who wants to challenge it can try to show that there is no evidence to support it, or that the evidence is too meager for such an inductive generalization, or that facts at our disposal lead to an entirely different inductive conclusion. In other words, this is an issue that can be settled by applying scientific method.

The value concept of man, on the other hand, can, at best, be supported by factual information only to the extent that 1) the human traits entering it must correspond to at least *some* observed general tendencies in the past and that 2) their realization in the future must not be incompatible with the social forces acting in the present. These conditions, however, can also be met by alternative value concepts: these can express the preference for *some other* tendencies in the past, and can correspond to some other real possibility in the present. The choice among such alternative value concepts cannot be made in a purely theoretical or purely scientific way. We must make our decision on the basis of our fundamental, long-term practical orientation to life, which obviously depends not only on knowledge but also on interests and needs, and on a willingness to act in a certain direction. The crucial problem here is: whose interests and needs are here in question—those of an individual, of a particular social group, or of mankind in general?

A value concept can be justified by showing that it not only expresses certain private needs but also general social needs and interests. This can be done, first, by establishing that the vast majority of people really have preferences conveyed by the value concept in question, and second, by showing that this concept corresponds to a humanist tradition, expressed by the



best minds in the past.

Nothing will be proven in this way; it is impossible to convince someone that he ought to accept a value simply because it has been accepted by others. However, this could be a sufficient basis for *rational* discrimination among various proposed solutions.

Taking into account the great humanist tradition during the last twenty-five centuries as well as the actual contemporary preferences that [280] underlie all moral judgment, there can be little doubt that, *other conditions being equal*, and with all necessary qualifications and exceptions, there is a strong tendency to prefer: freedom to slavery, creative action to destruction and passivity, consideration for general social needs to egotism, rationality to any behavior governed by blind emotional forces, peacefulness to belligerency. It would be dogmatic and incorrect to say that only these desirable qualities constitute human *nature* and human *essence* or human *being*, as against another ontological level of human appearance to which all evil in man would be relegated. In order to establish a sense of direction and a general criterion of evaluation in a humanist philosophy and practice, it is sufficient to claim that these qualities constitute what is most valuable in man and what can be considered the *optimal real potentiality* of human being. To fulfill these potentialities is to live a "true," "genuine," "authentic," "humane" life. Failure to fulfill them leads to what is often called *alienation*.

III

The characterization of modern civilization given at the outset of this essay indicates that the vast majority of people, in spite of all achievements, still live a rather alienated and inhumane life.

Unfortunately, the process of developing a more humanistic approach to life is often construed in a superficial way, as simply a greater consideration for the weak, the backward, and the helpless. Humanism is then reduced to a program of aid to overcome material misery, eliminate hunger and illiteracy, and bar the brutal forces of political oppression. All this cer-

tainly constitutes a part of such a broad concept but a rather nonessential part. For this idea of "humanization" does not challenge the very roots of contemporary society; it is acceptable by all those who are interested in preserving its status quo. The best spokesmen of the great powers, interested in keeping certain smaller countries in a subordinate position, do not urge excessive and brutal forms of exploitation; they recognize that sooner or later such behavior inevitably leads to violent revolts of the oppressed. In advocating small liberal reforms and humanitarian programs of aid in terms of consumer goods, they are far more rational and efficient defenders of a basically inhuman system.

If we are really dissatisfied with the human condition today, if we are ready to search for the deepest causes of human degradation, if we are convinced that a much more fundamental change is needed than the [281] growth of concern for the poor and underdeveloped, then we must further qualify the broad and rather vague concept of "humanism," and would do better to speak in terms of *radical humanism*.

Marx once said that: "To be radical means to take things from the root. And the root of man is man." This sentence is not a tautology if we interpret the term "man" as a descriptive concept in the first case and as a value concept in the second.

To be radical means, then: to take care of what is most valuable to man, to create conditions in which man would become increasingly a creative, social, free, rational being. The main problem, however, is: what are those conditions, and what is their order of importance?

It is true that contemporary man is enslaved by alienated social forces such as states, political organizations, armies, and churches. But the question is: what factors produced these forces and what keeps them so powerful?

It is true that contemporary man leads a poor life even when he is materially rich, because his needs are irrational, focused on an urge to possess as many objects as possible. But what is the social mechanism that creates such irrelevant, artificial needs?

It is true that modern man feels more isolated than ever, even in a crowd. But the question is: what is there in society which frustrates



his desires for friendship, love, and membership in a genuine human community? Also, what are the objective social causes of all other disintegrative and regressive processes, such as growth of nationalism and racialism, atomization of society into professional groups, hegemony in politics, and monopoly of the mass media?

I believe that almost all contemporary forms of alienation are rooted in the existence of social groups that have a monopoly on economic and political power. This kind of monopoly is based either on the private ownership of the means of production (in the case of capitalism) or on the privileged position in the political organization of society (as in the case of a bureaucracy), or both.

To be sure, monopoly implies various kinds of usurpation. The usurpation of the unpaid work of other people is usually called *exploitation*. The usurpation of other people's rights in social decision-making is *political hegemony*.

Contrary to common assumptions, according to which it does not make sense to speak about exploitation when workers' wages and the standard of living have reached certain levels, exploitation is the function of two [282] additional factors. One is the productivity of work; if productivity increases faster than wages, the degree of exploitation may also increase. The second is the social distribution of surplus value; if in society there are individuals and groups whose income exceeds the value of their (past and present) work, the greater part of surplus value goes to such groups for their surplus income and the greater is the degree of exploitation. This means that one has the right to speak of more or less concealed forms of exploitation not only in an advanced country where the material misery has been greatly reduced, but also in a postcapitalist society to the extent that it contains strong bureaucratic tendencies.

Contrary to the claims of professional politicians in both capitalist and socialist countries, there is very little democracy in the contemporary world (if this excessively misused term still means anything). The fact is that almost nowhere do the vast majority of people have any real possibility to influence decision-making on essential matters. The representatives of people in higher-level social institutions are elected ei-

ther because of very large financial investments and the support of powerful party machines or the election itself is so formalized to be simply a ritual. In both cases the situation is clearly one of the political hegemony of certain privileged groups over the rest of the people who feel powerless and sometimes directly oppressed.

The existence of any such group—which usurps the position of the political and economic *subjects* and leaves all other individuals and groups in the position of *objects* to be manipulated—is the basis of all other contemporary forms of dehumanization.

State, army, political organization, and so forth are the instruments of such manipulations. The function of most ideologies is both to conceal this process and justify it.

As public opinion is the opinion of the ruling elite, and as power over people and things is the fundamental value of every exploiting group, the consequence is that ordinary people tend to follow and base their needs on a hunger for power and things.

Ideological and commercial propaganda plays a great role in molding human souls, attitudes, tastes, preferences, making freedom of choice an illusion, especially when the criteria of choice are widely determined by those who possess the mass media of communication. Monopolistic control of mass media is one of the essential means of preserving and perpetuating all other monopolies.

Once a particular group with a special interest in acquiring a [283] monopoly of power starts speaking in the name of the whole society (and that is what has always happened with ruling groups, including bureaucracies in the post-capitalist society), it stops pursuing general social goals, values, and interests: these very concepts arouse strong suspicion. Accordingly, the society loses integrity and its sense of wholeness. This trend, together with the trend in increased division of labor, gives rise to innumerable sharp boundaries where links would be desirable: for example, among nations, races, professions, and spheres of social consciousness (morality, law, politics, science, philosophy).

Therefore, to *humanize radically* the contemporary world means to create conditions in which each individual could be an historical sub-



ject, able to participate in the control of enormous social and natural forces that have so far been produced. An essential condition of such fundamental human liberation is the *abolition of any concentration of political and economic power in the hands of any particular social group*.

The supersession (*Aufhebung*) of private ownership of the means of production and the abolition of capitalists as a class is the decisive first step in this direction. The supersession of politics as a profession which enables a social group permanently to monopolize all accumulated work, and the abolition of bureaucracy as a privileged elite—is the second decisive step.

Each is a *necessary* condition of a radical humanization but only both taken together constitute its *sufficient* condition.

IV

What are the historical possibilities of such a radical humanization in our epoch? First, what is meant in stating that an event or trend is *historically possible*?

We should distinguish between an a priori and an a posteriori concept of historical possibility. The former is our *hypothesis* about the future based on our theoretical analysis of observed general tendencies in the past. The latter is our *knowledge* about the present based on practical experience.

In both cases, to say that a course of events is *historically possible* means that it is compatible with actually given features of an historical situation. There are three essential components of a given situation that are relevant for the concept of historical possibility.

The first is made up of the objective social facts of the system under [284] consideration. Many future events are excluded by the present state of affairs—e.g., the level of technological and scientific development, the state of the economy, the nature of existing political institutions, the level of education, prevailing traditions, etc. Simply on the basis of these factors one can, for example, speak about the possibility of a peaceful socialist revolution in Italy, a violent one in South America, and the impossi-

bility of revolution in the United States in the near future, which does not preclude the possibility of important social changes there, especially in connection with a much wider introduction of automation, and the growing revolt in the universities.

The second factor relevant for the concept of historical possibility is the observation of past trends. Since these trends are not as simple and strict as laws, even those statistical laws evident in comparatively simple systems of nature, exact prediction of future events is not possible. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to speak about *social determinism* in the weaker, more flexible sense of *excluding certain alternatives and allowing certain others*, with a greater or lesser degree of probability. For example, taking into account the trend since 1937, one can say that no economic crises in the capitalist world comparable with those up to 1929 are possible. At the same time, one can say that regular recessions are highly probable and even inevitable. Also, the trend in the socialist world since 1953 makes a return to Stalinism very improbable, if not impossible.

To be sure, in all such estimates both previously mentioned moments must be taken into account: only when the initial conditions of the system are given (by the description of relevant facts), can a set of future possible states of the system be determined.

The third factor is unknown, or only partly known and predictable: human behavior. History is full of events which would have been thought highly improbable, in the light of objective conditions and past trends. However, unexpected outbursts of energy, the unpredictable action of many people, as well as the sudden occurrence of mass irrationality, fantastic blunders or genial solutions of the most difficult problems—have caused almost impossible things to happen.

Both the Russian and Chinese revolutions had little chance to succeed, in view of existing technology and economic conditions, social structure, and the power of foreign intervention. Still they came true. It would have been easy to prevent Hitler's coming to power. However, Nazism was sadly underestimated, and up to his final takeover German social democrats



and communists saw the enemy in each other instead of Hitler. The [285] antifascist coalition during the Second World War was a considerable deviation from the logic of international politics between two world wars. It was due, in the first place, to a substantial blunder in the Anglo-American estimate of Russian ability to resist German attack.

Recent Yugoslav history is full of events whose realization—from the point of view of objective conditions—was rather improbable. The overthrow on March 27, 1941, of Cvetkovic's government (which signed the pact with the Nazis), was clearly a choice of war against a formidable enemy without a glimmer of hope to survive as a state. The new government thereupon surprised many by acting in a completely confused and cowardly way, and lost the war in a few days. Whereas such a collapse usually leads to a general demoralization, in this case it was followed instead by a mass uprising. In the context of our discussion, two things about this uprising should be noted: first, it cannot be explained by objective conditions, which resembled those in other occupied European countries; second, a cold, scientific analysis of all objective factors would have demonstrated that the uprising was doomed. Nevertheless, it succeeded, due to the extraordinary behavior of the thousands of individuals who took part in it.

True, history, tradition, social character, and prevailing moral beliefs provide clues as to the future behavior of a specific people or nation. Nevertheless, this is insufficient to make very reliable forecasts. An essential quality of man is that he is able to rise above every norm and habit and to deviate from any predetermined pattern of behavior. Only in these terms can man be considered a free being, and history an open process.

The unexpected role of subjective factors is the main reason why we cannot draw a sharp boundary line between historical possibility and impossibility. Between those human projects which are clearly possible (although in individual cases they might fail) and those which are clearly impossible (being incompatible with existing natural and social laws in a historical moment) there is an area of vagueness that includes

cases where we cannot know if a project is possible until we try it. From this it follows that the two extreme views as to the epistemological and ontological status of possibilities should be rejected: 1) the positivist one that the possibilities are *given* and can be known *before* practical action, and 2) the other, characteristic of existentialists like Sartre, that man's future is quite *open* and independent of the past, that we are absolutely free to choose, and only *at the end* do we come to know what really was or was not possible. While, in every historical moment, the objective features in a given system of [286] social phenomena do allow us to project a set of possible future states of the system, the boundaries of this set are vague. Such is the a priori concept of historical possibility. After action is taken, practical experience helps us make the necessary revisions and build up the a posteriori concept which is more precise and whose boundaries are sharper.

V

When we think about the actual possibilities of overcoming any existing concentration of economic and political power, we may make into account general historical trends as well as the practical experience of various social movements in the recent past.

A scientific study of capitalist society in our century shows clearly that the role of the capitalist class, in the organization and management of production (let alone other spheres of social life), has been decreasing steadily. There can be little doubt that the very institution of private ownership of the means of production—which has played such a great role in the creation of modern industrial society—has now become redundant, especially in the most developed capitalist countries, and can be successfully replaced by various forms of collective ownership. The experience of successful socialist revolutions demonstrates that modern society (in spite of difficulties where social preconditions are not yet ripe) can still be organized to develop a comparatively high rate of technological and economic development.

Nevertheless, alienation (in many forms)



survives in present-day, post-capitalist societies to the degree to which power is concentrated in the hands of a bureaucracy. By "bureaucracy" is meant a coherent and closed social group of professional politicians, that keeps all decision-making in its hands and enjoys considerable political and economic privileges. The growth of bureaucratic tendencies is related to a number of regressive processes such as: the decrease of initiative in the basic cells of economic life, formalization of political activities, followed by the induction of passivity in the people, subordination of all kinds of creative work to politics, growth of careerism, and moral disintegration.

There is a certain historical justification for the existence of a political elite in an underdeveloped country, especially in the initial period in which foundations for a new social order have to be laid down. When this has been done, however, there is no historical need for its survival as a particular social entity. This does not imply either a denial of every kind [287] of elite or a Utopian belief that no rulers or social organizations exerting a certain amount of power in directing and coordinating social processes are needed.

The existence of a moral and intellectual elite is *conditio sine qua non* of a progressive and humanist social process. But it must not lead to the creation of a closed social group with special rights. There is a vast difference between a ruler who considers himself indispensable and uses force to make his subjects happier against their will, and an ordinary competent man who, having *temporarily* left his profession to perform certain political functions, considers his office nothing more than an honor, and uses force only against those who break democratically established norms of social behavior. Likewise

there is a fundamental distinction between the institution called *state* which has always been the coercive instrument of a particular social group whose interest it was supposed to protect and promote by force, and a truly democratic social organization which needs force only to secure the general interests of the given community against antisocial behavior of certain individuals. This model might be better named *self-management*.

There is no historical need for a special social group of professional politicians in a developed postcapitalist society with a high level of technological development, productivity, and culture. Among a large number of gifted people of various professions who have acquired a certain political experience and skill, it would not be difficult to elect excellent people to political office for a limited amount of time. Strict responsibility to their voters, observance of democratic procedures in all decision-making, obligatory rotation, lack of any material privileges (salaries for political functions should not exceed those for any other creative work), and various other measures should discourage any excessive political ambitions, and effectively prevent their realization.

Time is perhaps not yet ripe for a complete deprofessionalization of politics and for a rapid replacement of the organs of the state by those of self-management, both at the *micro* and the *macro* levels. However, the first experiences demonstrate clearly that even in a semideveloped country (like Yugoslavia) it is possible to move in this direction, and the result is a large-scale liberation of initiative, and creativity even among those people in the most degraded social layers who have traditionally been kept in utter ignorance and passivity.