ETHICS AND POLITICS IN COMMUNISM
by Gerhart Niemeyer

Dr. Gerhart Niemeyer is an author and professor of government at the University of Notre Dame. He has taught at Princeton, Yale, Columbia and Vanderbilt universities, and has served as a Fulbright professor at Munich University. He delivered this presentation before students, faculty, and guests of Hillsdale College in the recent Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar which was titled Communism: Has the Protracted Conflict Ended?

For the past ten years, the big, mostly unspoken question behind our most important decisions on foreign policy has been: Do we now face a "Soviet threat" or a "communist threat"? Are we dealing with a normal government administering the interests of Russia, a supernation, or are we confronting an abnormal regime whose ultimate motives stem from an ideological thought system and must be considered basically irrational? Between 1946 and 1973, the latter assumption dictated U.S. foreign policy. Since then, we have been wavering, on the whole inclining more to look upon Moscow as a government like any other government. In coming to intellectual grips with this kind of choice, one wonders, of course, what "government like any other," or "normal government," might mean. It is obvious that these would be rule-of-thumb classifications, rather than hard and fast concepts. A distinction of this kind became necessary, though, when at the beginning of this century there were formed militant movements centering not on the impulses, issues, and problems of a nation's political life but rather on closed idea systems amounting to what Robert Musil has called "Second Reality," i.e. an imagined world unrelated to what actually exists.

A "normal" government, then, would be a group of rulers, in whatever state form, that have arisen in the legitimate fashion out of the concerns, complaints, hopes, and interests occurring in a people's political life. Without wishing to deny or ignore excesses of power that may develop in any kind of government either out of personal or national ambition and selfishness, one takes for granted that certain attitudes prevail in a "normal" type of government. The governing group would respect the political system in which they rose to power, including the vague but ultimate authority, usually attributed to "the people," the measure of a higher, unwritten law, be it named "equity," "principles of law," or "natural law," and the "common good" as the purpose for which rulers exist. Their policy decisions would seek to define what, in ever-changing political circumstances, would be that "common good," or the "national interest." They would distinguish policy from law, and look upon law as something not at the rulers' arbitrary disposal. They would, even if they do not personally share it, respect the religious belief and worship held among the people, defer to it and give it their protection. Even though they officiate as rulers, they would still largely consider themselves as ministers, i.e. servants of the whole into which people, tradition, religion, and law combine.

Those new types of movements, however, that came up first at the beginning of this century, envisage other worlds than the one in which they live. They cling to their visions as if they were religions, but they are not churches. Like churches, though, they transcend the boundaries of their states; they are not born from a people's loyalties and concerns, but from abstract and politically uncommitted intellection, closed idea systems having nothing to do with any particular nation. As they pursue these ideological goals, neither "common good" nor "national interest" appear to them of any relevance. They, these movements, form within a people as a kind of foreign body, disunited from their fellow-citizens and closed in on themselves, not just existentially but also intellectually and morally. When they come to power, they therefore do not constitute a "government like any other" but rather something like a regime of military occupation, strangers in their own land, citizens of a non-existing world, pursuers of unreal and therefore limitless goals.

As we wishfully assume that the Moscow regime might have evolved from an ideological regime to something more resembling an ordinary government,
we are looking for signs of a turn to ordinary, commonsense morality. In this paper, I should like to trace the inner difficulties which Communists would encounter even if they might desire to return to morality. If I mentioned “commonsense morality” it is because that is how all of us first encounter moral obligation and moral standards. As small children, we grow into them as something that “is done,” that we absorb from our parents, teachers, friends, and acquaintances, something that we practice without being too much aware of it, in most cases. The habits and customs that characterize those around us become something like a second nature to us, clothing us almost like a skin, and only occasionally being felt in a painful conflict with our differing desires. In addition, however, we may draw inspiration from illustrious men and women, whose lives radiate a holy fellowship with all that bears a human face, who wake us to an awareness which we call “human nature,” “the dignity of man,” “absolute right,” or some such name. Let us now look at how all of this appears in communist ideology.

According to his premise that class rule was the vicious and inhuman root of all social order in history, Marx, of course, dismissed the customary and traditional morality as so many “bourgeois prejudices,” irrelevant to the workers who “have no country.” But Marx seems to have had some notion of human nature not altogether unlike that of Aristotle. Aristotle defined as nature “whatever something is when fully developed,” coining for men, and other substances capable of development the concept “entelechy,” i.e. a being that carries its own end within itself. Marx also seems to be envisioning a development by which man would become that of which he is capable of becoming. This is a controversial point. Many doubt that there is any concept of human nature even in the early Marx. For the sake of argument, however, let us assume that there are at least traces of such a notion there. We would still have to say that Marx’s notion of human nature differs in one point radically from that of Aristotle. While Aristotle sees development toward full maturity as the destiny inherent in each human person, in each individual life, Marx speaks of this development as a process of history, to be consummated only through the future socialist revolution. Thus, if he does entertain a notion of human nature, this appears to him as a potential that could become actuality only at a certain point of history, which would doom all the countless generations before that point to never even having seen something like a human being. If no full humanity has ever been actualized so far, one wonders how Marx could arrive at his notion of human nature. Furthermore, however, the socialist revolution that Marx envisages is essentially a business of overthrowing, tearing down, radical destruction to the point where not even one “pillar of the house” would be “left standing.” The actualization of human nature, then, could not be the purpose of the revolutionary forces, it would be expected to evolve by itself after the radical demolition job has been accomplished.

This being so, Marx does not and cannot profess knowledge of the structure of social order which he considers pertinent to a fully humanized man. One recalls Plato’s Republic which does precisely that: tracing, outlining what kind of social order would befit the fully matured, the good human being. This is Plato’s sketch of a “natural” order, one germaine to human nature at its fullest. Another sketch of a natural order is found in books seven and eight of Aristotle’s Politics. Plato and Aristotle, then, do tell us in what social structure a fully matured human being would have to live. The fact that Marx rejects the very concept of such knowledge tells us of his ultimate faith in history in which the fullness of human life will emerge after the socialist revolution. It also tells us that Marx is presently ignorant of both human nature and the good social order.

Marx’s followers, therefore, have to carry on the revolutionary struggle in essential ignorance of what it is that will eventually emerge from it. They are told it will be good, but never what it will be like. They must therefore of necessity concentrate wholly on the destructive aspects of the struggle, elevating the struggle itself to the rank of a dogma and leaving the fruit of the struggle to tacit implication. We see this conclusion quite clearly formulated in Lenin: Everything is relative, the struggle alone is absolute. As a result communism moves intellectually and practically entirely in the framework of reference of the “period of transition,” where everything supposedly is in flux toward the eventual communist order, where political rule is exercised through a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” and a centralized,
militant Communist Party wields power by "force, unlimited by law," conducting a "protracted struggle" against remnants of the past.

Ethics Bear Eternity's Stamp

When we contemplate our morality, we do not imagine it to be different tomorrow from what it is today, and, with minor exceptions, look for the same morality in the past. This is why we can read, with empathy and identification, Homer's Iliad, Dante's Divine Comedy, and Cervantes' Don Quixote. Our ideas of human nature are not designed to change with the historical situations. Ethics, oriented towards human nature and divine commandments, essentially bear the stamp of eternity. They do this notwithstanding the fact that some changes have occurred in moral judgment and ethical practice.

Communist ideology is cast wholly in the mould of history, all aspects of eternity being rigorously eliminated. History can be understood in a number of ways, one of which is futurism, the idea that man is coming to be only at some future date, and that neither full humanity nor actual goodness can exist until then. Another aspect of the idea of history is the dialectic of the class struggle. Marx saw the class struggle as running, like a red thread, through "all hitherto existing society," leading to the overthrow of one and the setting up of another social order, the succession eventually culminating in the "final battle" between bourgeoisie and the proletariat which would bring about socialism. In this view, history consists of successive phases of which each later phase is also a higher one, the last one being supreme perfection. One may call this the escalator view of history. Still another aspect of history, closely related to the other two, is the annihilation of the past, seeing the past as that paradigm of imperfection and falsehood that must be destroyed, not only by smashing its institutions, but also the erasing of any trace of lingering influence in men's minds and hearts. When Hegel developed his notion of historical dialectic, a key concept of his was aufheben, which can be translated as "removing," "transcending," and also "preserving." That which would be "transcended" and thus "removed" would nevertheless also be "preserved." The intent to destroy all traces of the past is characteristic of Marx and Lenin rather than Hegel.

The Marxist-Leninist view of history has certain decisive consequences for a concept of ethics, the most important one in the distinction between two kinds of men. That distinction appears in Lenin's works when he contrasts "spontaneity" with "consciousness," the latter meaning essentially Marxist-Leninist thought, the former meaning living in the present, oriented toward present-day concerns and interests. Communists characterize this orientation as reactionary, because they believe that confining oneself to the present actually amounts to being turned toward the past. This is the attitude found among "the masses," while "consciousness," Marxist orientation toward the future, characterizes the relatively few party members. As a result, the party is called "advanced," i.e. further along on the path of history than the rest of mankind. The masses, whom Lenin called capable of "only trade-union consciousness," are by comparison backward. Between those who essentially live in the future and those who, living in the present, are looking toward the past, no community is possible. Motives, values, principles of action, aspirations are radically different, those of the party belonging to another world than those of the masses. The party and the ordinary people thus do not share morality, hopes, or beliefs as a common patrimony.

There are thus two human levels, that of the advanced party and that of the ordinary masses. True, the party cannot have any meaning without the masses, but the masses essentially are capable of nothing more than supporting the party, and must be manipulated, cajoled, pressured into that kind of position. Hence vis-a-vis the party nobody can have any rights. The party, more advanced, is infallible, in the sense that it knows the concrete path of history, whereas nobody else can see this far. This knowledge gives to the party the rank of an authority over all other authorities, — in science, philosophy, literature, art, religion — so that even the highest ranking competences in all kind of fields must remain subject to the higher competence of the party. The party does expect to educate men to the level of eventual "consciousness," but this is a long-time political operation that has the character of a "protracted struggle" (Lenin). In other words, a man under communist rule enjoys not the hope of personal development to the fullness of his own nature, but has before him only the prospect of advancing up the ladder of history toward a general human type determined by party requirements. It is of some interest to note that colonial powers have often applied a similar notion to the education and development of the subject indigenous population, allowing them forward and upward movement only in the direction of a human type suited to the rulers' culture and the rulers' needs. In both cases, one finds underlying this practice the notion of an ontic inequality between rulers and ruled: in the sense in which the rulers look on themselves as human beings, the ruled are sub-standard, so that the only sense-making endeavor of the rulers is to raise the ruled to the rulers' own mold of life.

Total Critique of Society

When all is said and done, however, there is no denying that a strong moral element is present in communism. A Communist draws his strength from a vision essentially moral, and the strong appeal of communism to outsiders again is chiefly moral. In view of the preceding remarks one wonders where this moral appeal comes from, what in communism makes it possible.

Its source seems to be the "total critique of society," that sweeping and comprehensive indictment
condemning an entire social system for "wrong in general." The burden of the accusation could not be graver: essentially it amounts to attributing all evil in human life to the institutional structure of society. The tone of the indictment reminds one of the prophets of Israel, and thus a moral standpoint is strongly implied. It is implied, but it is never explicitly formulated. In the case of Israel's prophets, their starting point was the Covenant between Yahweh and the people, and Yahweh's commandments and laws, no mere implication but a clearly outlined way of life. We remember that Marx professed he was presently ignorant of the eventually unfolding human nature and the corresponding order, that he merely hoped to discover these in the course of history's advance. In terms of the present, communism is agnostic regarding human nature. The implied moral standpoint, therefore, has no other basis besides the strong negation in the form of total critique of society. Nothing is known about the good except that it be totally different than that which now exists. The one explicit statement to this effect came not from Marx but from Bakunin, in his notorious formula of the "creative force of destruction." If nothing is known about the future good except that it will be good, and utterly different from that which now is, the total critique of society nevertheless provides a moral justification for the struggle. We remember that all hope concentrates in the struggle as such, and the total critique of society implies that this struggle is directed against the totally unrighteous, the living representatives of evil who rule that society. To the Communist the revolutionary struggle thus has the character of a crusade against human wickedness. We are strongly reminded of the French terror which was conducted in the name of virtue, against those whose lack of virtue stood in the way of a perfectly good order.

The struggle itself, set in terms of white against black, or light against darkness, enjoys exemption from all moral limitations and restrictions. To evil belongs no right; wickedness is not on the same plane with good, thus all methods are justified. Lenin said so explicitly, recommending violence as well as trickery, dissimulation as well as sheer force, concessions as well as deception. As far as the relation between states are concerned, the Communists look on international politics as a struggle in class terms, and thus governed by the notion of the total wickedness of the class enemy. One may say that communist operations are characterized by moral immorality, immoral concrete practice that is moral in its ultimate justification. The immorality is real, though, while the moral justification is implied. Moreover, this justification must be called spurious, since it refers to no historical human experience of goodness or any known norm. Communist "moral immorality," then, is combined of a moral element amounting to a begged question, and an immoral element that is consummated practice. In view of the great deal of thought that has been given to the communist phenomenon, one wonders why the moral *petitio principii* is still socially effective and appealing. One can only guess at an answer, and my guess is that it is so because we live in an age that tends to deify humanity and is looking for human perfection as the culmination of history, a human perfection attained by human efforts and without divine grace. The communist vision does suggest such a state of perfection and therefore touches the deepest hopes of many who themselves have no roots in communist ideology.

It may not be superfluous at this point to make some critical remarks about the merits of the communist implication of the good. The only feature of the future order that the Communist professes to know is its socialism, i.e. community ownership of the means of production. The implied expectation obviously looks for the overcoming of human egotism through the merging of each person into the collective whole, and through institutional arrangements designed to force that kind of merging. A recent book by Svetozar Stojanovic, *Between Ideals and Reality* (Oxford U.P., 1973) criticizes the communist expectation in terms of the way in which things have gone wrong in practice. The condition prevailing in the Soviet Union he calls "statism," rather than socialism, suggesting that socialism would have required self-management and self-determination by the workers. Essentially, he charges that a wrong kind of institutional arrangement has been chosen for the future society. One may ask, why? One possible explanation is that institutional arrangements were not, and could never be, entirely at the beck and call of social planners, that a society's institutions have a momentum of their own that can never be wholly brought under control. Another explanation
would suggest that the relation between institutions and their effects in every person's life, between organizational patterns and moral consequences are not known and possibly not knowable. This explanation is indicated by the fact that the critique of statism comes late, long after the fact, which suggests that no prediction of institutional developments and its human results was possible or could be socially effective at the beginning of the Soviet experiment, so that that experiment amounted to nothing more than a wager.

The other way in which things have gone wrong bears the name of opportunism, the persistence of petty self-seeking and self-advancement even in the framework of a socialist economy and cultural collectivism. It contains the recognition that, in spite of the prescribed institutional change, no moral transformation has occurred. This reinforces persistent doubts whether any moral regeneration of men may be effected by a reshuffling of institutions and their impulsion of human activities. Moreover, the Marxist focusing on the modes of production implies the suggestion that avarice is the root of all human evildoing. The persistence of selfishness even in a communist economy strongly suggests that there are other roots of evil in the human soul.

Finally, one must doubt the entire notion of the merging of human individuals with the social whole. That notion, we remember, was in modern times advanced by Rousseau, even before Marx. Rousseau brought up the idea that man's moral problems could be solved if he gave up his individuality to the collectivity, the social whole. Now we all are aware that self-centeredness is something to be overcome and that going out of ourselves and giving ourselves to something higher and better is the way of a good life. The question whether the collectivity is better than the individual person, however, is begged. A social whole is still a human whole. Self-centeredness can be collective as well as individual. There is no assurance that personal identification with a collective whole will redeem us from evil. For the collective whole, being human is also imperfect. Rousseau and Marx are wrong. Collectivism is no moral salvation.

Intertwining Ethics and Politics

So far we have mainly considered ethics. Ethics and politics are intertwined, as evidenced both by Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Politics, which is the sequel to his Nicomachean Ethics. Politics is social order in the realm of human action, and action is measured by the concept of the good. We have seen so far that communist ideology has not produced, and cannot produce norms, principles, and concepts regarding the good order of existence, chiefly because of its professed agnosis concerning human nature in view of its emphasis on the historical process of man's coming-to-be. With regard to human practice, communism has produced order only in the form of strategic principles, comprising revolutionary strategy, the dictatorship of the proletariat which is tantamount to strategy in the period of transition, and strategy of the socialist camp in the setting of world politics. Strategy, by definition, aims at victory, which also means that it aims at peace. The communist concept of peace underlying communist strategy is futuristic, vague, elusive, and at least partly speculative. Most definitely it is not a peace in the present setting, i.e. peace with the forces and units of present-day society.

If a Communist were to envisage peace with capitalist society, with imperialist forces, with the class enemy, he would have to eliminate from his mind and imagination every trace of the class struggle, the hope for a classless society, and the total critique of present society; in other words, he would have to divest himself of communism first. Thus for a Communist, the possibilities of peace are not given in the present, they are not available, let us say, to skillful diplomacy, a moderate arms policy, a conciliatory trade policy, or their domestic equivalents. Peace will come, in Communist eyes, not only through a skillful revolutionary strategy, but also, beyond that, through historical evolution, and that evolution is postulated rather than given. The coming of "the new Soviet man," for instance, is an event expected in the course of evolution rather than in the results of deliberate political action. The same thing is true of the waning of nationalism, the development of larger units of language and culture, the spread of communist allegiance. Peace is something for which a Communist typically waits, even while continuing the struggle which is his primary duty.

This vague waiting for peace has a domestic as well as an international aspect, since class is a concept transcending nations. The eventual fully harmonious society is also something waited for rather than deliberately built. Building there is, but always in the expectation of effects which no man can fully plan, which is why Soviet builders of communism never profess disappointment at the delay of utopia's arrival. Since the building occurs in the period of transition, one does not build in order to live in the present. All building is strategic. Therefore no state concept is possible for the present. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a concept of transition. A state concept would have to be founded in the notion of the common good in the present. All good, for Communists, lies still in the future, except, of course, the good of strategy. One might point to the welfare aspects of the Soviet system as a modicum of common good, but then one remembers that state administered welfare is not confined to Soviet rule and was in fact introduced by Bismarck, in the 1880's, when there was not even such a thing as a parliamentary government in Germany.
The political concept prevailing in Soviet Russia is really not the concept of a particular type of state, but rather that of party rule, the supremacy and highest authority of the party over the state, the people, all non-political authorities, and the entire Russian tradition. One does well to recall that the party looks on itself as a movement, implying the very opposite of the word “state” which is derived from status, i.e. a standing position. Nor is any concept of law available to communist thinking, for the same reason. Human law, as Boethius has perceived, imitates the unchanging order of nature, the eternal moral order. Laws are not conceived strategically but normatively. The Soviet notion of law is that of an instrument to help further the party’s strategic enterprise. Some remnants of traditional Russian law are still used, in the same way in which the Soviets still avail themselves of the pre-revolutionary culture of Russia in architecture and interior decor. In other words, there is no such thing as socialist law as pertaining to a socialist way of life, chiefly because that socialist, or communist way of life has not yet arrived. Terror remains indispensable, although the forms of terror are changeable and adjustable to changing circumstances.

One need to read only Zhores Medvedev’s *Ten Years After Ivan Denisovich* for an inventory of the current methods and tricks used to intimidate, pressurize, subdue and ultimately destroy individual personalities who seem not to fit into the Soviet way of things. That book closes with a remark made by a former member of the Novy Mir, the Soviet literary journal: “Many people think that we had democracy under Khrushchev. That is nonsense. There was no democracy. There was occasional liberalism, but in the conditions in which we live, that does not mean very much. It’s a human form of arbitrariness. And in any case, as we see, it’s a temporary phenomenon. There can be stable justice only where there is genuine, stable democracy.”

Soviet rule, then, labors under the absence of a concept of political order. There is no Marxist political theory. One does notice that this gap occasionally bothered Marxist thinkers and leaders. In some of his writings, Marx pushed in the direction of a concept of the state, even though quite unsuccessfully. Lenin’s *State and Revolution* attacked the same problem, equally without result. Lately, Stalin, in two pamphlets published in 1950 and 1953, sought to provide state concepts for the continuing Soviet rule. Again it became clear that with the materials provided by communist ideology no such concept could be fashioned. It is on the basis of a firmly and validly planted state theory that something like limitations to government can be elaborated. Since the Soviets have no political theory, it has turned out impossible to conceive of persuasive principles setting limits to state action. Whatever limitations appear must remain, in the words above quoted, “humane forms of arbitrariness.”

As long as communist ideology continues as the inspiration of Russia’s rulers, the idea of government as a servant of present human good, common good, will remain a dream. For the same reason, an effective and realistic notion of peace will elude Soviet leaders. One may say that they are doomed to continue, until the day of the great conversion, in the peaceless and restless prison of their own ideology.

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