

# SOCIALIST HOPE IN THE SHADOW OF CATASTROPHE

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In his last book Ralph **Miliband** identifies as one of a number of crucial problems socialists need to address – problems putting in question the credibility of the socialist project itself – the massive evidence we have, particularly from the present century, of atrocious human cruelty, murderous division and conflict, the seeming aptitude of our species for large-scale organized blood-letting. The sceptical question as to whether with such 'human material' a radical re-ordering of society toward cooperative harmony and altruism is not merely a utopian illusion has, **Miliband** suggests, to be confronted seriously. He urges us, nevertheless, against the pessimistic answer to that question, judging it 'a counsel of despair to say . . . that evil on a huge scale is part of the human condition, that its conquest is impossible!' In this essay, written in tribute to a life's work of unwavering socialist advocacy and consistent, level-headed clarity, I support Miliband's general standpoint, but by way of examining more closely some of the assumptions about human nature that he reviews or himself deploys in articulating it.

The challenge posed by history, **Miliband** begins by saying, is to 'the fundamental optimism about human capabilities which pervades the socialist enterprise – a belief, inherited from the Enlightenment, in the infinite perfectibility of human beings'. I take this as one distinctive view of human nature and shall identify it for the time being as assumption (1). Having so expressed it, **Miliband** then goes on to put it, as he says, 'in more contemporary terms', as if only expressing the same thing in another way. In fact, however, he presents in the reformulation, or at least he licenses, a second, different view. For he speaks now just of 'the belief that human beings are perfectly capable of organizing themselves into cooperative, democratic, egalitarian and self-governing communities, in which all conflict would certainly not have been eliminated, but where it would become less and less frequent and, acute.' I shall call this for now assumption (2), and I differentiate it from (1) on the grounds that where (1) asserts that human beings are perfectible, (2) requires no such ambitious

claim. It requires only that, whatever imperfections human beings may have, these are not so great as to exclude the possibility of creating communities with the specified characteristics, communities of a socialist kind. And (2) even permits, via the reference to continuing although rarer and more moderate conflicts, the inference that there might be enduring human faults: tendencies perhaps to selfishness, to indifference toward the misfortunes of others, to undue pride or vanity, needless aggression or whatever else. Along with the run of better human qualities, such tendencies would also be, on this assumption, a permanent part of the constitution of humankind.

In any case, whether on the grounds of the more or of the less ambitious claim, because human beings are perfectible or because the weaknesses in their nature are not so **vitiating** as to be bound always to defeat the collective efforts conceivable from their virtues, 'socialism's essential point of departure', **Miliband** says, 'is - has to be - that there is no implacable curse which dooms humankind to perpetual division and strife.' By negating this last proposition we will get, of course, the source of the original sceptical question; we will get a view of human nature according to which there is such an implacable curse. Let us call this, then, assumption (3). It is the assumption, as we have already seen it expressed, 'that evil on a huge scale is part of the human condition'. It is the assumption that 'humanity . . . cannot escape from the slaughterhouse, and is doomed to add, generation upon generation to the end of time, to the catalogue of collective cruelty.' It is the assumption that, as to the many smaller-scale 'individual acts of cruelty perpetrated by men and women upon each other, or upon children, or for that matter upon animals', these too 'are to be explained by traits ineradicably embedded in human nature'.

One further passage will complete the set of views I want to distinguish from one another for consideration. **Miliband** for his part asserts that more plausible than this last pessimistic view is the idea that:

such acts [of cruelty] . . . are mainly produced by the insecurities, frustrations, anxieties and alienations that form an intrinsic part of class societies based on domination and exploitation. The 'injuries of class', allied to injuries of race, gender, religion and many others, readily lend themselves to pathological and morbid deformations which deeply and adversely affect human relations. This can only be effectively tackled in societies where conditions are created which foster solidarity, cooperation, security and respect, and where these values are given substance by a variety of grassroots institutions in all areas of life. It is these conditions which socialism seeks to advance.

Now, I take the precaution of saying that, so far as **Miliband's** own intended meaning is concerned, his argument here, of a kind common in socialist and other radical discourses, probably does not yield a further and quite separate view of human nature. This argument is construable, in particular, as being consistent with assumption (2). For the notion we have seen to be contained in (2) that human **beings** are characterized by a **combi-**

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nation of virtues and vices, or (otherwise expressed) that human nature embodies different and even opposed kinds of inner potentiality or tendency, is perfectly compatible with the idea that it is the social conditions in which people live that, loosely speaking, shape those people, bringing out some qualities, blocking or frustrating others, and so on. There are aspects of Miliband's text which indicate just such a line of thought. I shall come back to this.

I propose to wring another meaning from the passage just quoted all the same. This meaning is that the social conditions people inhabit do not merely bring out or frustrate, encourage or deform, the various qualities generally present within human beings; rather, they create them. Or, formulated differently: the social conditions, or relations or institutions, fully determine the traits borne by any given group of social agents. Human nature, in other words, is neither like this nor like that, for there is no human nature. There are just socially, culturally, historically produced specificities and differences. I call that assumption (4) and I permit myself forcibly to extract it from what **Miliband** says for two reasons. One is that it remains a standard position upon this general terrain of problems and so needs some consideration here. The other is that though Miliband's views do not, strictly speaking, entail it, there are nevertheless aspects of his text also – so I shall later argue – that evince a certain over-socializing or **over-historicizing** tendency on his part. It seems reasonable therefore as a procedure of discussion to include the limit position of this tendency for the sake of greater comprehensiveness.

I now collect up and re-order the four different views I have elicited, giving each one a brief and standardized formula.

From (3)  $\Rightarrow$  (a) Human nature is intrinsically evil.

From (1)  $\Rightarrow$  (b) Human nature is intrinsically good.

From (4)  $\Rightarrow$  (c) Human nature is intrinsically blank.

From (2)  $\Rightarrow$  (d) Human nature is intrinsically mixed.

This formulaic listing is for convenience only, and is consciously made at the cost of two over-simplifications which I at once try to undo.

The pessimistic assumption – (a) – need not require that people are by nature wholly, or even that they are all inordinately, evil. It could just take the form, and it is perhaps more likely to, that impulses towards evil are **sufficiently** strong and extensive in humankind that they can never be lastingly pacified, and must continue to produce horrors of one sort and another on both a small and a large scale. Equally, the optimistic assumption – (b) – that human beings are intrinsically good does not have to exclude that these beings are capable of nastiness, even nastiness of a serious kind. Indeed the derivation of assumption (b) from a formula of perfectibility implies that human beings precisely are so capable. It is just that, under (b), this capability is to be seen as less typical of, or less

powerful within, the species, as adventitious and removable, as due possibly to the corrupting influence of bad circumstances or inadequate education; where the potentiality for good is more integral, more deeply laid. Both (a) and (b), in other words, can be construed in ways allowing that human nature is, as I have put it in formula (d), mixed. However, (a) and (b) take a position on the weight of, respectively, evil and good within the 'mixture', so as especially to insist on the long-range centrality of one of them. My simplified formula in each case merely accentuates the viewpoint in order to distinguish it sharply from (d), in which the balance between good and evil within humankind is left more open.

It is perhaps prudent also to point out that the view of human nature as expressed in (c), human nature as a blank, is not so much simplified in that formula as purified. By which I mean that this view is hardly ever held by anybody in pure form, but rather in conjunction with other propositions with which it is inconsistent. There is no good reason for taking it other than freed of the inconsistencies. In any event, (c) shares with (b) a belief that human evil is eradicable; but the belief is differently based in the two cases. Proponents of (b) think that evil is not intrinsic in human nature because good is; whereas proponents of (c) think that evil is not intrinsic in human nature because nothing is.

Finally (d), given what has already been said, is obviously to be entertained here in a form that makes it genuinely, and not only apparently, distinct from (a) and (b). This is to say that, with the balance between potentialities for good and potentialities for evil being taken as more open than in those formulas, neither kind of potentiality is held to bulk so large as to be overwhelming or to render the other, whether now or at any time, inconsequential or null. Base or egregious human impulses, under assumption (d), are not so all-consuming as to make pervasive and enormous evil forever inevitable, but nor are they so weak or insignificant that they might be conceived as entirely eliminable, as one day gone, as even now 'really' something else than they appear, not human impulses after all, but alienated, capitalist, class-oppressive or class-oppressed, patriarchal, corrupted ones. Conversely, benign and admirable tendencies, under assumption (d), are not so dominant as to make the possibility of serious human evil only a temporary, albeit long, historical phase which may one day pass, nor so feeble or so sparsely distributed as to make attempts to limit and counteract that baleful possibility a pointless quest. Both sorts of impulse or tendency are conceived under (d) as being permanent features of our nature, realities to be negotiated, lived with, if possible understood – and if possible tilted toward the more benign and admirable, and tilted as far that way as possible.

In completing my clarification of the four assumptions, I anticipate the argument that follows. The socialist enterprise, along with other ideas of

radical human progress, generally presupposes, as **Miliband** says, rejecting assumption (a). I want to argue that seriously confronting even so – as he suggests we must – the sceptical question which is raised by the sponsors of assumption (a) amounts to this: that socialists henceforth should not allow themselves the easy convenience of assumption (b) or assumption (c). To adopt either of these is precisely not to take the mass of evidence to which **Miliband** alludes *seriously*. It is to make light of it. The hope of socialism has to be sustained on the basis of assumption (d). The goal of a much better and a more just society is to be fought for not because human beings are by nature overwhelmingly or essentially good, nor because they do not have an intrinsic nature; but because and in spite of the combination in their nature of bad impulses with good ones. Because of the bad impulses, this struggle is necessary. In spite of them, it is to be hoped, a socialist society may yet be possible.

Socialist advocacy is too often and too much informed by the kind of thinking I encapsulate in assumptions (b) and (c). Now, I repeat, the two assumptions are not the same in the way they ground an optimistic outlook: to the suggested permanence of great evil the first opposes the claim that there are deep, massively preponderant tendencies towards good inherent in humankind, whereas the second just opposes the notion of an infinite human plasticity. This difference is not immaterial. The first view has the significant advantage of being willing to deal in *some* conception of a common human nature, such as the second view for its part rejects. And I call this an advantage, because the claim that there is no human nature at all is at best a thoughtless exaggeration, one that it is impossible to uphold with any genuine lucidity of mind; which is why its advocates so freely propose or assume what they also deny, here say what they there take back, as the need of the moment may be. I have argued this case already at some length twice, once in relation to historicist and structuralist positions within Marxism, more lately in criticism of a 'post-modern' variant of the same thing. So I shall not go into it here **again**.<sup>2</sup>

I concentrate instead on what I perceive to be the shared weakness of viewpoints (b) and (c). This is their common unwillingness to accept, as significant realities in their own right with some independent explanatory weight in human affairs, dispositions in the make-up of human beings that are less than beneficent – whether of selfishness and envy, malicious glee, the enjoyment of power or advantage over others, a certain passion to exclude, cruelty, destructiveness, and a good number of other things. So far as some such dispositions may appear to leave a rather large mark on the historical record, these are always really (so the suggestion is) a product or expression of something *else*. Rendered in one conception overwhelmingly benign, and in the other entirely empty of fixed content, human nature does not autonomously contribute anything of its own to how things can go

badly, the apparent human capacity for evil becoming mere epiphenomenon par *excellence*. Can this way of thinking withstand a sober look at how grim the historical record in fact is?

Let us now bring into relation with the more easily optimistic assumptions about human nature to be found in the arguments of many socialists, some views about it emerging from an experience *in* that record: of all the events of the twentieth century mentioned in the present connection by Ralph **Miliband** himself, the one that has perhaps done most to instil a general melancholy about future human possibilities. The Holocaust as I shall be referring to it here, some now well-known reservations about the term notwithstanding, has come to occupy a prominent place in contemporary consciousness. It has given rise to an extensive literature, coming from survivors, from historians and theologians, from most kinds of social scientist, from psychoanalysts, novelists, poets, dramatists, literary critics. But it has not left much of a mark, it has to be said, on the moral and political philosophy of socialism, and this reflects a broader state of affairs, in which the **Holocaust** has not figured very conspicuously amongst the concerns of moral or political philosophers in general.

It was a human catastrophe which may be thought, for all that, to pose some troubling questions for anyone committed to radical and progressive change, and it is certainly not a good reason for ignoring these questions that troubling is what they are. The words of the Polish sociologist Anna Pawelczynska, herself a former prisoner at Auschwitz, are to the point here:

People living within the orbit of European civilization today defend themselves from the naturalistic eloquence of facts which have no analogy in their experience by a failure of the imagination . . . Such people, as members of that same human species to which the murderers and their victims belong, resist identifying with either murderer or victim . . . [They] protect their view of the world, their optimistic philosophy of life, from the consequences of understanding the concentration camp as a dimension of the evil man can do and of the depth of contempt to which he can sink.'

A socialist philosophy worthy of being taken seriously cannot afford such a 'protected' optimism, shut off against the brutal realities beyond just by virtue of declining to look at them.

In 'The Visit' by Tadeusz Borowski – a survivor of Auschwitz who transmuted his experiences there into a series of unflinching, terrible stories, before later taking his own life – the narrator details some of the wretched human sights he has witnessed in the camp, and goes on:

And every one of the people who, because of eczema, **phlegmon** or typhoid fever, or simply because they were too emaciated, were taken to the gas chamber, begged the orderlies loading them into the crematorium trucks to remember what they saw. And to tell the truth about mankind to those who do not know it'

Irene W., another survivor, speaking of how she has had over the years to

attend to the needs of daily life without allowing her memories to overwhelm her and prevent her from functioning normally, reports:

Yet it's always there; it's more a view of the world, a total world-view . . . of extreme pessimism, of sort of one feels. . . of really knowing the truth about people, human nature, about death, of really knowing the truth in a way that other people don't know it.'

The 'truth about mankind' and 'the truth about people, human nature' is what they call it; a truth, they both say, that others do not know. What is this truth?

There are doubtless different facets of it, but in the more theoretical literature on the Holocaust it looks, with some writers, rather like our assumption (a). Thus, according to the theologian Richard Rubenstein, 'just as depth psychology was able to expose the ineradicable dark side of human personality', so the world of the death camps has shown it to be 'an error to imagine that civilization and savage cruelty are antitheses . . . Mankind never emerged out of savagery into **civilization**'.<sup>6</sup> Another theologian, Arthur Cohen – for whom the Holocaust is tremendous, a kind of unfathomable abyss of evil, 'orgiastic celebration of death' – has written in like vein:

Liberalism (and in its radicalization, Marxism) may well be the fallen messianism of the Jews, the familiar secular inversion of Jewish utopian hope, but liberalism is predicated upon assumptions regarding the nature of man and his educable potentiality which the tremendous destroyed . . . In the holocaust is a configuration of evil; it writes large what should have been recognized all along – that the oppository, destructive character of evil drains of credibility every notion of an ongoing teleology of the good that was required by the rational optimisms . . . of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

Something similar can be expressed more indirectly, and I take as a case of this one of the few well-known contemporary political philosophers to have addressed himself, albeit briefly, to the subject of the Holocaust, namely Robert Nozick. Nozick lists the multiple and wanton barbarities, to read the details of which, as he puts it, 'stagger and numbs the mind'. He goes on to suggest that the Holocaust is an event 'that radically and drastically alters the situation and status of humanity'. He explains the suggestion so:

I do not claim to understand the full significance of this, but here is one piece, I think: It now would not be a special tragedy if humankind ended, if the human species were destroyed in atomic warfare or the earth passed through some cloud that made it impossible for the species to continue reproducing itself. . . Imagine beings from another galaxy looking at our history. It would not seem unfitting to them, I think, if that story came to an end, if the species they see with that history ended, destroying itself in nuclear warfare or otherwise failing to be able to continue.

Nozick, it is true, also qualifies his suggestion in a number of ways. He does not mean that human beings deserve this to happen; it would involve much suffering and individual loss; it would be wrong for anyone actually

to bring it about. Nor does he overlook other, earlier cruelties and calamities. Perhaps it is just the case, he says, 'that the Holocaust *sealed* the situation, and made it patently clear'. He wonders, too, whether we might be able to redeem ourselves as a species, were people to begin to take the suffering of others upon themselves by suffering whenever they did. As it strikes me, however, the point here is that, despite these various qualifications, the judgement which they qualify already concludes a balance sheet between the actual past of humankind and its possible futures. If 'its loss would now be no *special* loss above and beyond the losses to the individuals involved', if humanity has forfeited 'its claim to continue', as Nozick thinks it has, and if this is so, the talk even of an effort of redemption notwithstanding, does that not amount to fixing the nature of the species by the enormities of evil in its past, to the discount of any better possible futures? More than by whatever good we might still hope to bring about, not to speak of the good already done, we are characterized by the atrocities and iniquities that have been perpetrated, in a judgement of metaphysical resignation and *despair*.<sup>8</sup>

Looking into the depths of the experience on which Nozick here reflects, it can be hard not to share something of the same mood. What Elie Wiesel has to say in a related connection is apposite. 'Examine them', he writes – with reference, this, to 'snapshots' of the Holocaust, photographs of murder in progress which we have by courtesy of the murderers themselves or of the numerous spectators to murder – 'and you will forget who you are . . . Nothing will be important any more. You will have glimpsed an abyss you would rather not have uncovered. Too *late*.'<sup>9</sup> The person is perhaps unfortunate who does not know a like response to horrors of this magnitude. A mood of resignation or despair in the face of them is to be resisted, all the same, by those who can. We ought to resist the cosmic pessimism of Nozick's judgement; resist any unilateral definition of human nature in terms only or principally of its worst excesses; resist the identification we have seen made above, between the Nazi universe of death and *the* truth about humankind. So, anyway, I shall eventually get around to arguing.

We need, in resisting it, however, to respect what is *a* truth here and not just casually dismiss this as some would-be irrelevance to socialism and other utopian projects. I have in mind the sort of dismissal which is involved in claiming that an event like the Holocaust discloses nothing about the inner or natural propensities of human beings, because the behaviour patterns and personality traits it reveals to us are to be put down, either wholly or largely, to the historically determinate social and situational conditions of the event. Such a claim, it may even be thought, has a certain plausibility on account of the very extremity of the case. Why judge human nature, it could be asked, on the basis of conditions of life and death

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that were exceptional, on the basis of a hellish and in no way typical human situation?

An initial answer to this seemingly plausible question is that we are in possession of some considerable wisdom from and about that particular hell which emphasizes to us, warns us, that the actions, reactions, postures and personalities constitutive of it, exceptional and shocking in many ways as they obviously were, were also continuous with ones familiar in and to ordinary human beings in more ordinary circumstances. This was a world populated not by monsters and brutes – or not only by monsters and brutes, for in some necessary and still usable moral meaning there were more than enough of these – but by beings who were precisely human beings, with characteristics that are all too recognizable, human vices and weaknesses amongst them, common faults and frailties.

Most easily recognizable in that regard are the bystanders: those who, not directly active in the process of mass murder, did nothing to try to stop it either. These are the people who affect not to know, or who do not care to know and so do not find out; or who do know but do not care anyway, who are indifferent; or who are afraid, for themselves or for others, or who feel powerless; or who are weighed down, distracted or just occupied (as most of us) in pursuing the aims of their own lives. Such people formed the background to the tragedy of the European Jews and they continue everywhere to provide an enabling condition for other tragedies large and small, and for great but avoidable suffering. The ubiquity of the bystander surely testifies to a remarkable capacity in members of our species to live comfortably with the enormous sufferings of others.

It is not only the bystanders, however, who are recognizable here. It is also the perpetrators. The theme is a difficult one and must be treated with some care, since it comes otherwise to promote a glib and corrosive moral cynicism, actually encouraging what it purports only to observe. There is a need to understand; but without being too understanding. Yet the theme itself is inescapable. If amongst the perpetrators is to be found, as one would expect, an ample complement of sadists and thugs, there is now a large literature documenting for the more general run of them – that is, the camp personnel, the members of execution squads, the civilian users (which means users up) of slave labour, the planners and the bureaucrats and the doctors of death – that these bearers of Nazi genocide fell well within the range of psychological normality. They were not, for the most part, psychopaths. They were ordinary people.

And the same literature makes available to us a wide-ranging exploration of the mechanisms, psychological and social, by which such ordinary people could bring themselves, or be induced by others, to contribute their share to the evil. These mechanisms are many and I can only gesture towards them here: the fears and resentments focused on

people who are different, and the feelings of self-enhancement or even elation at the disaster brought upon them; the thought of being authorized to act by a legitimate higher source, or the thought that this, one's own 'segment' of the overall process is only one of a very large number and not the decisive one morally speaking; the idea of its being an impersonal role, a job, and thus not due in any strong sense to the particular individual filling it; self-serving, careerist motives; a simple bending to social pressures, not wanting not to conform with the opinions of one's peers. And being implicated gradually, incrementally; accustoming oneself, as to anything in the way of a routine; for many, not being able to see what finally happens to the victims of the process; regarding them as insignificant morally; dehumanizing them, first in thought, then by social and symbolic practices, in the end by physically demeaning and brutalizing ones. By a combination of these means the line is **crossed**.<sup>10</sup>

It is as necessary to insist upon what is not being said here as to emphasize what is. This is not offered in that style of knowing and generally satisfied pessimism which assures us that deep down we are all so badly flawed as to become, just given the appropriate circumstances, instigators of or accomplices in any moral crime. It is not true. There are always those who refuse and those who resist. There are people who risk everything, and others who, though they cannot find the strength to do this, still do what they feel they can to oppose or mitigate the consequences of the crime in question. To explore the motivational pathways toward participation in or compliance with great iniquity is not to say that these must inevitably be taken. Nor is it to deny the reality of the choice there is, restricted or dangerous as it can sometimes be: the choice to act **against** the habits of thought and the impulses just rehearsed, upon other motives, for better reasons.

The point, therefore, is not a cynical, but it is a realist one. It is that even this (as it is sometimes said) utterly demonic of twentieth-century horrors was the work of human beings such as we are acquainted with. It was compounded of well-known sorts of prejudice, ambition, temptation, taste of power, evasion, moral failure. When they are not doing philosophy or talking theoretical politics, socialists and other radicals know as well as anyone the motivational range here, comprising, with all the admirable qualities and the excellences, also elements which are less than admirable, and indeed some of them downright repugnant. This range is simply part of the stuff of ordinary existence. It is a form of practical experience taken from every area of life: every family, circle of friends and acquaintances, every neighbourhood; every milieu, social stratum, vocation, organization. It is an experience – again, together with what is generous, loving, courageous and so on – of jealousies and vanities, petty unkindnesses and hatreds, wilful deceptions, self-importance and self-promotion. It yields to us

a knowledge complementary to the one we have from the Holocaust itself: a knowledge of the ordinary raw materials of great evil, those common vices and human failings which can become, in another setting or combination, suddenly exorbitant.

Lastly in this connection, there is the victim group to be considered as well. With a share of the same common vices and failings distributed unevenly across it, it too becomes stained by the crimes of the perpetrators. Another difficult theme. To write about this **as** it were from the outside, however carefully, runs the risk of appearing to proffer a judgement on others, of which everyone **from** the outside ought to be cautious. 'It is a judgement', as Primo Levi has put it, 'that we would like to entrust only to those who found themselves in similar circumstances, and had the possibility to test on themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion.'" I shall let Levi himself represent what is a rather more general message from survivors of the Nazi concentration and death camps.

In some reflections on what he has called the 'grey zone', Levi for his part firmly casts aside any levelling cynicism in this matter, writing:

**I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer . . . and that to confuse [the murderers] with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affection or a sinister sign of complicity . . .**<sup>13</sup>

But Levi asserts, all the same, that '[i]t is naive, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism was, sanctifies its victims; on the contrary it degrades them'. The grey zone is one feature of what he has in mind. He refers by this to 'the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors':

**Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is; it is studded with obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously), whom it is indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory."**

The grey zone, Levi says, has 'ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants'. If it is never empty, that is because 'in the Lager and outside, there exist grey, ambiguous persons ready to **compromise**."<sup>14</sup>

It needs to be emphasized at this juncture that Primo Levi was not well disposed towards the too facile equation of the Nazi camps with other sites of hierarchical power: 'the comparison', he has said, 'arouses revulsion in us, those of us who have been "marked", "tattooed" . . . There's no gas chamber at Fiat.' The more notable therefore is his repeated allusion, in these reflections just quoted, to the existence of some similar elements 'in the Lager and outside'. The Nazi camps were not for him a microcosm or the mere 'condensation' of the world beyond them; but he **was** willing to

describe them as being 'a distorting mirror' of that world **nonetheless**.<sup>15</sup>

It is a not uncommon observation amongst the survivors. **Levi** again: 'the prisoner who gets ahead on the backs of his comrades exists everywhere'. Hanna Levy-Hass (in a diary written while she was imprisoned at Belsen): 'I shall keep firmly in my mind everything that I have seen, everything that I have experienced and learnt, everything that human nature has revealed to me . . . I shall judge each man according to the way he has behaved, or could have behaved, in these conditions that surround us.' Viktor Frankl: 'Is it surprising that in those depths we again found only human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil?' 'In the concentration camps . . . we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself. . . .'"

On the basis of her conversations with survivors of the death camps, Gitta Sereny has spoken of the 'fatalistic lack of vehemence of those who have come to terms with the inevitability of human failings in everyone, themselves included.'" In the attitude she thereby identifies is joined an ancient, indeed a common sense knowledge with the wisdom brought back – and at what a cost – from the places of Nazi barbarity.

Now, a standard socialist, and more broadly progressive, riposte exists to being presented with considerations of this kind. It would disqualify them at a stroke from being accepted as genuine wisdom. Common sense, it is often said, is a form of ideology; and, likewise, so-called practical experience is a bounded experience only. Both are the product of particular social forms, historically specific worlds. As such, neither common sense nor practical experience can be a reliable guide to the patterns of behaviour we may expect with other social forms, in future possible worlds. Whether inside the camps or beyond them, what we have knowledge of are people who grew up in a deforming social environment. Even if it is the case that the Holocaust universe is recognizable as having been populated by ordinary human beings, these were human beings who had been moulded by capitalism, class, patriarchy and the rest, by gross inequalities and differentials in power, with the profoundly limiting and corrupting effects upon their attitudes that all that must entail. Anything vouchsafed to us, consequently, out of the experience of the Holocaust is relevant only for the type of society which gave birth to, or at least accommodated, it. It is not relevant to the prospects and character of a future society which has been radically transformed.

As much weight as is bound to be given to arguments of this general kind by those of us who entertain the possibility of progressive revolutionary change, in such blanket form they are inadequate – in face both of the terrible enormities and of the more run-of-the-mill individual failings they purport to respond to, and with which the human story is in fact so

crowded. I shall now go on to offer three reasons why trying thus to 'neutralize' the negative features of this story, by just ascribing them to societal defects of a historically specific and remediable sort, is unconvincing. It is a poor basis for the hope of human progress.

First, one may bring to this domain an argument of **Marxian** pedigree but which ought to carry force also more widely, with anyone sceptical of grand projects of a speculative nature. This is the argument that the better society of the future is to be thought of, and fought for, as emerging out of real tendencies within the present, and not counterposed to the latter as a merely abstract ideal unanchored in existing empirical forces or in any proper grasp of them. That argument, much used (and not only by Marxists) in relation, for example, to what sort of political or economic goals are foreseeably feasible, and to the question of who are likely to be the agents for achieving them, is rather less often invoked by socialists in relation to the topic under discussion. When it comes to what kind of beings human beings are and might one day become, and more particularly to what limitations they have and how these might constrain the feasible shapes of an alternative future, it is not uncommon, then, for socialist advocacy to be couched in terms of a quite remarkable leap. This can take us from people as we know and have known them to beings wonderfully freed of the familiar human faults and vices, or saved at any rate from ever having to let these reveal their unpleasant outward effects; to people improved, in the well-known phrase, beyond recognition.

It seems, however, as appropriate to this area of reflection as to any other to hold that we have to start from where we are, therefore from the realities of human motivation, of moral weakness as much as moral strength, with which we are familiar, and not simply fly forward towards a speculative ideal. The least that one can say is that it ill befits socialists, whether of Marxist formation or of some other more or less realist cast of mind, to find easy refuge in such an insubstantial ideal.

But I want to take it further than this. For some will be tempted to minimize the weight of the point by treating it as a merely political one: intended, that is, to give some hope of proximate practical success, but having no deeper theoretical significance, no implication for the degree of changeability or fixedness in the human personality over the longer term. This temptation should be resisted. The point, I will maintain, does go deeper. It comes down to the need to show a proper – some would say materialist – regard for the continuities and the resistances of human history in the framing of any emancipatory project. This history certainly encompasses continuities as well as discontinuities, some of the continuities are long ones, and some of these long continuities are long precisely because they are due to nature, both external and human (a circumstance of which Marx, incidentally, was well aware, for all the emphasis he gave

in his work to historical particularity and change).

Let us take a range of common human emotions, say, anger, desire, love, fear, pride, shame, melancholy, disgust; and some familiar dispositions too, say, submissiveness and dominance – whether in a sexual context or outside it – and community, spontaneity, constancy, self-regard. Like the more basic human needs and the most common human capacities, such emotions and dispositions plainly have a general, transhistorical basis. Whatever cultural variation their forms might display, it would not be plausible to propose that they are all wholly social constructs, and the idea of some future society in which they would be no more gives meaning, well and truly, to the phrase 'beyond recognition'. This is a world virtually unimaginable by us. It is hard to say whether it would be, for the new kind of 'people' within it, a utopia, but it scarcely looks desirable from here.

Let us now take in turn – and as is not the same thing – a range of some of the less attractive human qualities and tendencies: say (in a list loosely paralleling the one just given), hatred or vengefulness, greed, covetousness and envy, overbearing attachment, moral cowardice, vanity, self-abasement, destructiveness; and then servility, love of power, cruelty; and ethnic prejudice, lawlessness, fanaticism, uncaring privilege. We should like to believe in the possibility of a world with much less of this sort of thing, much less of it, especially, that is accorded public space and the means of advancement or growth through hierarchies of great privilege, sites of tyrannical power, bouts of collective violence, and so on. But how much more plausible or imaginable is a world, even, from which these uglier human attributes have disappeared? They seem generally to bear connections of one kind and another to the common emotions and dispositions by way of which I came to them: as exaggerated or aggravated forms of those, fixations of them, deteriorations, imbalances. It suggests that they too have, in some sort, a durable natural foundation, capable as they are of being brought out by a very wide variety of interpersonal circumstances and relationships – such as there is also bound always to be in any society of more or less equitably distributed freedoms. It seems more realistic to reckon that humankind will have to go on living with these less salutary human attributes in some proportion. If socialism, at any rate, will still be a society of human beings, much about them will be recognizably the same. We have nothing at present but the emptiest of speculations to tell us that the common faults and vices might disappear or all but disappear; that everything that is productive of grave mischief belongs with the discontinuities of history, with the societally generated, and nothing of it with our underlying human nature.

This brings me directly to the second of my three reasons. For there is in any case an odd feature, rarely remarked upon, of arguments of this sociologizing type which assert that nothing or very little is to be attributed

to human nature. It is an assumption of, so to say, fixed explanatory quantity, such that the relation between (for short) sociological and naturalist explanation of human behaviour must vary inversely: if human behaviour has much to do with social conditions, it has little to do with natural traits; if very much, then very little; and so on. Or, expressed in qualitative terms, if the social is very important in explaining human behaviour, then human nature (if it is allowed that it exists at all) is very unimportant. This is not the only way of thinking about the issue, however, and it is not the most persuasive way. One might observe, instead, that whatever the explanatory weight here – and it is undeniably immense – of social structure and cultural mores, there is, as well, a weight that is due to our natural make-up and of its own considerable magnitude. There is, because as much as the particularities of society and culture may influence the forms of conduct and the run of inclinations and values within human populations, such particularities can only work, to put this baldly, on what it is in people to do or be. They can only work on the potentialities, and within certain limits, that are set by the nature of our species.

You can train a horse, and you can accustom a cat, to various things. But you cannot teach a horse to read or get a cat to live on vegetables, and you will not get either to be forever stationary, like an object. There are, by the same token, natural limits to what human beings can do and can sustain, and there are material needs, capacities and impulses which will find expression in one social form or another. Nothing about the rich diversity of social forms, or about the irrepressible freedom of the human will and creativity of the imagination, subtracts by so much as a single scintilla from the contribution to human affairs which is made by natural determinants of that kind.

I want to explore the relevance of this point to our subject by coming back to Ralph Miliband's reflections. There are aspects of these, I said earlier, that can be read as affirming a hope in progress on the basis of assumption (d): the assumption of a mixed human nature, with potentialities for both good and evil. I noted his formulation envisaging socialism together with some persisting, albeit very much diminished, human conflict. This formulation would allow the possibility of some continued wrong-doing also, though it does not itself necessarily entail it. In fact, **Miliband** writes in the same connection of a situation 'where collective and individual *misdeds* can be turned into increasingly marginal phenomena'. And he writes, as well, of 'a context in which collective cruelty would be . . . made impossible by the resistance which it would *evoke*'.<sup>18</sup> Both anticipations suggest a continuing space, as this may be put, of potential evil.

For what has been pressed back to the margins of social life still has its place at the margins, and presumably therefore also its living sources; and we know well enough how the marginal can often find its way, whether

creeping or irrupting, towards the centre. Likewise, a thing (collective cruelty) made impossible by the resistance 'it would evoke', sounds to have some impulses sustaining it still, to be a live capacity and not merely a historical memory of what was there once but is no longer, having been eradicated or smoothed away. I propose, in the light of these inferences, one kind of interpretation of the long passage ■ earlier quoted from Miliband, referring to 'conditions . . . which foster solidarity, cooperation, security and respect, and where these values are given substance by a variety of grassroots institutions in all areas of life.'" It is an interpretation in which the said conditions and institutions are conceived as being, at least in part, externally blocking or obstructing, and simultaneously accommodating and facilitating. That is to say, they put up barriers against certain types of human tendency or impulse, while at the same time leaving room to certain other types. Such a conception of them precisely concedes the existence of what I have just called a space of potential evil. It does so in the metaphor of blocking, which presupposes something there needing to be blocked, troublesome tendencies and impulses of a durable sort, not entirely removable by education, acculturation or whatever.

A competing conception would make the human person, or else the miscreant human person, more entirely the product of the conditions and institutions which envelope it. It is a conception of these conditions and institutions as 'possessing' the innermost core of the individual self, or as disfiguring it; so that, once given a good social environment, we would have only good individuals, without significant residue of ill-will or viciousness. Now, of course, any adequate notion of the person will need some pretty large element, as it were, of this latter kind of conception. For social structure and culture do certainly 'enter' the make-up of the person, shaping its very identity, as much as they can be thought of also as external barriers, or channels, against and along which the human-natural dispositions of individuals have to make their way. The overall balance of any viewpoint is therefore everything here. Some other aspects of Miliband's reflections than those I have focused upon so far situate him closer, I believe, to the extreme limit of this possessing or disfiguring conception of social conditions than is warranted.

One indication is his use of the metaphor of pathology. Adverting again to the long passage quoted towards the beginning of this essay, we find **Miliband** referring there to the 'injuries' of class, race, gender and religion – as though acts of cruelty or other misdeeds were the result of damage from without and not inner possibilities of the normal organism. Equally, his talk in the same place of 'pathological and morbid deformations' may evoke an image of diseases foreign to the healthy body, so of external provenance once more. It is true that in thus counterposing as he does explanation of cruelty in terms of the psychological byproducts of

'societies based on exploitation and domination' to explanation of it in terms of 'traits ineradicably embedded in human nature', **Miliband** speaks of cruelty as being produced 'mainly' by the former.<sup>21</sup> However – and it is the crux of the point being pursued – this is a unilateral and misleading formula. How does one adjudicate what is 'main' in this context? It might be replied that, since we can imagine other social conditions in which human beings would behave cruelly very much less than they do now or perhaps hardly at all, this suffices to validate the judgement that cruelty is principally due to adverse social conditions. But one could imagine, too, other beings: beings who, even in adverse conditions, would not be provoked to the amount and to the extremes of cruelty, oppression, venality, violence and so forth, of which human beings have shown themselves to be so richly capable. The point is that adverse social conditions have the effects that they do only upon a certain configuration of naturally delimited potentialities and dispositions; and, this being the case, those potentialities and dispositions merit the distinction, for their part also, of being accounted 'main'.

The issue may be further elucidated by considering another aspect of Miliband's argument. Self-consciously and explicitly, to 'the attribution of guilt to human nature' he opposes what he sees as 'the crucially significant fact that it was from above that have almost always come the initiation and the organization of mass killings'. The 'mass of "ordinary people"', he says, have seldom been responsible for the decisions producing wholesale slaughter. 'Most such collective actions have been initiated and organized by people of power in pursuit of whatever purposes and fantasies moved them.' **Miliband** does at once go on to qualify any too easy optimism over this fact by adding that ordinary people have nevertheless often enough acquiesced to, cheered on or participated in the episodes of blood-letting initiated by people of power.<sup>22</sup> But the qualification does not go far enough. For it needs to be stated clearly also that these people of power are not from elsewhere, they are from amongst us. They are members of our species, a species in which there have ever been candidates aplenty, not just for being acquiescent and obedient to the powerful, but for occupying places of power and privilege themselves. Human beings have shown themselves very available for this and rather good at it, and it is a vain recourse to believe that it has nothing whatever to do with their intrinsic nature that they have.

A would-be Marxist (or just sociological) argument generally comes in here to say that our nature is the effect of class, power, privilege and so on, and not any of these the effect of our nature. But a different Marxism (and sociology) is possible in response. It says that human beings would not have been open, open so long and so geographically universally – and not only open, but so *very* available – to the class option of social organization

and the benefits of power and privilege, if these things did not meet any impulse in their make-up. Why have they not, unanimously or in large enough numbers to be effective, simply refused the chance of enjoying huge power or advantage over others – as being intolerable to them, humanly unliveable? It is as if a single individual, having been presented over a lifetime with many opportunities to behave badly, and having taken them, betraying people, profiting unjustly at their expense, openly harming them, losing no sleep over any of it, were then to plead that this reflected nothing at all about his inner character, but was the result of external circumstances only. How widely would he be believed? Even allowing for there having been other, neglected possibilities in his nature which could have produced a different kind of life, one would be unwise to let them obscure the traits of character which he had actually seen fit to give free rein.

By way of another observation on this ill-doing individual, I come now to the third reason for thinking it unconvincing to try to ascribe all bad features of the human story to the influence of defective but remediable social conditions. There is a charitable impulse that explains why we are often reluctant to see wickedness as in a person's character. We give her the benefit of her moral freedom: that she might be able, even with a record behind her of misdeeds, to prevail over whatever it was that led her to them, by making different and better choices from now on. Envisaging this possibility, we treat the ill of which we know she has been capable as being something extraneous to her actual character, in a sort of wager that she may prove it to be so. The strong desire evident in progressive political discourses and the social sciences and humanities more generally – and formalized earlier in what I designated assumptions (b) and (c) – to deny any malignity intrinsic to human nature itself might perhaps be seen, then, as a methodological generalization of this generous impulse. It represents a wager on the good character of humanity within the more favourable enveloping conditions and institutions of a future utopia.

There is no question but that this does describe something of the nature of the socialist hypothesis, taken by *and* large. Unless, in a different institutional and cultural setting, humankind in its generality can prove itself of very much better character (to speak in such terms) than it has shown itself hitherto, the hope of socialism would have to be reckoned a delusion. Taken, however, as anything more than this broad expectation of improvement, taken as the hope of a world all but free from significant human nastiness, the suggestion is self-defeating. For if it is asked in the spirit of this suggestion why people enfolded, raised, in good and supportive conditions, and leading lives as unthreatened by the more frightening or debilitating of social ills as can be envisaged, and reinforced in all their attitudes by cultures of a humane and tolerant kind, why they

still might, some of them, find it in themselves to perpetrate continued mischiefs – the simple answer to this question is that they might because they can. Like the opportunity of better patterns of behaviour, the mischiefs are just a possible product of their freedom.

It is, indeed, an anomaly of one common way of thinking about a socialist future to see this future as populated by beings with a freedom enormously expanded and enhanced, and simultaneously to envisage those beings as so much the creatures of their now benign social conditions that they could not be the authors of any evil choice. They could be. It is an implication of their freedom, *ex hypothesi* greater than ever before, that they would not be exhaustively delimited by the conditions that surround them. And this is more especially the case when one considers, as I have already in passing invited readers to do, what the range and variety of interpersonal relationships must continue to be. Of mothers and fathers to children, brothers to sisters, lovers to each other and to possible or actual other lovers; of friends, neighbours, collaborators, colleagues, workmates, passing strangers and acquaintances of every degree; of carers to cared for, doctors to patients, public officers to members of the public; of the bold to the cautious, the orderly to the chaotic, the exuberant to the pensive or the weary; of those agreeing to those dissenting, 'insiders' to 'outsiders'; and then with a multitude of differences within every imaginable category – it would be an endlessly shifting picture of human contacts and situations. Within this multiplicity of forms, a freedom of putatively unprecedented scope renders the image of the socialist person as mere benign 'effect' (effect, that is, of *generally* benign circumstances) an unpersuasive one.

A shadow stretches across the vision at the heart of the socialist project. It reaches there from what may seem to be the remotest distance, from the very depths of the concentrationary universe. Socialism is often thought of as a world of almost infinite potentiality. With good reason is it, since who could now foresee or estimate the further wealth of creativity that would be opened up by extending to everyone on the planet the chances of even a moderately secure existence. If that wealth could be but glimpsed, it would astonish any person living. We touch here on an idea of unlimited human possibility. Over and over again, however, those who have survived incarceration at Auschwitz and the other sites of Nazi murder and enslavement articulate something learned there in exactly such terms. 'Normal men do not know', David Rousset has written, 'that everything is possible. Even if the evidence forces their intelligence to admit it, their muscles do not believe it. The concentrationees do know ...' Livia E. Bitton Jackson has written, similarly, of the time 'before [she] knew that there are no limits to human cruelty'. And Charlotte Delbo also: 'Did you know that suffering is **limitless**/that horror cannot be circumscribed'. And Primo Levi: 'I know that in the Lager, and more generally on the human

stage, everything happens . . . ' And Elie Wiesel: 'Evil, more than good, suggests **infinity**.'<sup>22</sup>

Can it be an accident how many who say this present it, confidently but not in accents of dogmatism, with that lack of vehemence referred to by Gitta Sereny, in the mode of what is *known*? They tell in any event of a particle which the vision of socialism shares with the experience of the Holocaust. It is, to be sure, a 'small' particle only, since we compare here a hope of the best for humankind with the very worst, the most infernal product of the human spirit. But small as it is, it is highly fertile: the capacity for imagination and choice, for reaching beyond the given, whether time, circumstance or boundary. It may be a mistake to expect that great evil could not continue to threaten once there was no longer any great (social) cause of it. It could come, like acts of great goodness, like any masterpiece, from a concatenation of small causes magnified or transmuted in the medium of the imagination and the will.

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It has become a common theme in discussion of the Holocaust that this tragedy now puts in serious question what have been, over the last two centuries, some cherished assumptions of Western civilization and modernity. As Henry Friedlander has written, 'Since the eighteenth century we have largely accepted the ideas of the Enlightenment, including the idea of progress . . . [A] serious consideration of the Holocaust would necessitate a re-evaluation.' Or as it has been expressed more recently by another writer, 'Auschwitz decisively closed the Enlightenment era of faith in the coordinated growth of reason, moral betterment, and **happiness**.'<sup>23</sup> I conclude the present essay by agreeing that some re-evaluation in this matter is indeed called for and faith in human progress not appropriate; but by arguing that hope in human progress, and more particularly in the possibility of socialism, is tenable and necessary nevertheless, and the alternative to this hope extremely unappealing.

In so far as they were haunted by assumptions of teleology, inevitability, perfection or paradise, the notions of progress that have characterized socialist and, more generally, democratic and radical political traditions certainly need to be moderated. There is no necessity at all of steady forward movement without possibility of regression and catastrophe, and even 'modest' utopia, never mind perfection or paradise, is not only not the pre-written truth or destiny of humankind, it is not even its prevailing tendency. All it is (we have to hope) is one of its possibilities, and this forever shadowed from within by other darker possibilities. Democrats, liberals and socialists of the last century would not have anticipated the horrifying and, as it has now proved, endless killing grounds of this one. That in itself is testimony to what their shared ideas about progress lacked, the shadow of potential disaster, the threat of forms of evil which challenge

the best resources of our understanding.

Neither as beckoning truth or end-point nor as linear, uninterrupted forward advance should we think about human progress today. We have to think about it simply as an enduring battle – an open process – to try to create societies from which the gravest social and political evils familiar to us have been removed; and to try to prevent, drive back or put right, as the case may be, any resurgence of these evils where or once they have been removed, any fresh emergence of unmerited inequalities and privileges, all episodes of persecution, sporadic or not so sporadic injustices, tyrannies large and small, crimes by some persons against others, hitherto unrecognized forms of wrong. We would do well to substitute for every image of progress as a course being travelled, a road, a journey, or as an unfolding, a line of development, the spirit of it being rather a struggle without end<sup>24</sup> – which is what it is for all practical purposes anyway.

In the light of what has gone before here, I think we would do well also to substitute a working hypothesis of, precisely, modest or minimum utopia for all visions more ambitious, whether an end to alienation, unpoliced social harmony, the elimination of serious wrong-doing, the absence of new political menaces or of old but renewable ones. By modest or minimum utopia I mean a form of society which could generally provide for its members the material and social bases of a tolerably contented existence or, as I have already put this, from which the gravest social and political evils familiar to us have been removed. The point of this substitution is not, as such, to reject more ambitious visions: universal and all-round individual development, perpetual peace, ubiquitous altruism, and so on. It is only to highlight the following: we do not need to know – and in fact we do not know – that any of these visions is a real possibility for humankind in order to know that it is a matter or crying need that certain ills, for their part all too well-known, should be finally remedied if this at least is possible.

We surely require no ideal of perfection, near perfection or even breathtaking excellence – and whether as an outward state of affairs or as the inner character of the human being – to recognize the need for radical institutional change. It is enough that without such change relations of injustice, sometimes terrible injustice, and conditions of life of a wretched and awful kind, are allowed to persist. Let these be attended to and the more maximalist dreams of socialist utopia may take care of themselves. Or they may not. Or they may await another day. It is of less moment. I have myself offered a speculation as to the likely creative consequences of extending to everyone on the planet just a moderately secure existence. The case for doing this, however, is quite strong enough irrespective of what may be thought of the strength of the speculation.

I support, then, a limited notion of progress and of socialist utopia. Two

other points need, briefly, to be made about this. First, limited, modest or minimal as the proposed conception is, it is not to be confused with the idea that the objectives in view are attainable through merely small modifications to the prevailing economic and social order, the order of world capitalism. The conception is modest or minimal only vis-a-vis some of those more far-reaching aspirations typically associated with notions of utopia. Vis-a-vis the world we actually inhabit, the programme of providing everyone with the material and social bases of a tolerably contented existence, of trying to get rid of the gravest social and political evils familiar to us, remains revolutionary through and through. It is incompatible with the extremes of wealth and need, the patterns of effort and reward, the structures of economic power and social powerlessness, which capitalism goes on reproducing.

It is the more necessary, perhaps, to insist on this first point in view of the second one here: which is that it follows from the argument I have put forward above about the 'mixed' potentialities in human nature that a limited socialist utopia would have to be limited as well in the specific sense of being a liberal political order. Opposing the idea of perfectibility or intrinsic goodness, accepting the threat of evil as a permanent human possibility, we cannot entertain any confidence in some would-be universal benevolence and harmony, or in the prospect of an end to the rule of law. On the contrary, in the light of what human beings can do and have done to one another, we have every reason to want to continue setting limits around the more harmful and menacing types of human potentiality. All the paraphernalia of the rule of law – of secure, enforceable individual rights, democratically based legislation, checks on power, independent judicial processes, the means of redressing injustice, the means of defending the polity and the community against attack, and so on – follow. The realm of freedom is restricted, then, not only on account of the unpassable boundaries of the realm of material necessity. It is restricted also on account of another, inner limitation; one that we have, by now, more than enough grounds for not taking too lightly.

Still, when all this has been said, we cannot give up on socialist utopian hope and on the hope of progress. To advise resigned acceptance of the world as it is – life-and-death inequalities, universal exploitation, widespread political oppression, festering communal hatreds, genocide, recurring war – as well as being, as **Miliband** says, 'a counsel of despair', is to eschew a naive, optimistic teleology, only to speak the script of another, grimmer one. It is to risk making oneself, in a certain manner, the willing voice of ugly moral forces.

Some sense of situational perspective may not come amiss here. Even in the depths, in the most notorious of the humanly-created hells of our century, there were many who did not give up hope. Plenty of others did,

of course, and they cannot be blamed for it (as sometimes unfortunately they have been, in more and less round about ways). But many did not. It is a theme, with its own important place in the literature of the Holocaust, that I will not go into here other than to say that these many fought as they could to survive, and to preserve what they could of dignity and value in conditions of the most appalling barbarity." What part do the better situated have to make themselves the sponsors of discourses of human defeat?

If continued hope in the better possibilities of human nature can come, as it sometimes did 'down **there**', from an extra piece of bread, a small gratuitous act of kindness or solidarity, the recollection of a few words of poetry, then who can now say what might reasonably be hoped for if the great social and institutional causes of inequity and suffering, the great economic barriers to a more fulfilling existence for millions of people, could be levelled or lowered? To be sure, caution is today in order on the question of whether and how that objective can be achieved, as on the question of just what we could expect from its achievement in the way of the 'moral betterment' of individuals. It is every bit as much the case, however, that nobody can claim to *know*, with any degree of certainty, either that it could not be achieved, or that its effects of moral betterment would be negligible.

This cannot be known from where we stand. It is a speculation as empty as any more utopian. Although for obvious reasons not the focus of this essay, the fact is that the human record is replete also with acts of moral heroism and moral excellence, and with ordinary, unspectacular day-to-day decency. Countless human beings live their whole lives long without killing or maiming or torturing or otherwise severely harming their fellow beings. Mutual human sympathy and beneficence run both deep and wide. What the future balance might be between these better tendencies and the worse ones, in conditions putatively more encouraging to the former, cannot confidently be known. Given this, to add one's voice, whatever influence it may carry, to the chorus disparaging ideas of progress just contributes some small further weight to the many obstacles to progress, helping by a little more to ensure that it is not only not inevitable, but is, even as a possibility, more distant and more difficult.

To teach, for example, that **Auschwitz** gives us the truth about human nature – not merely a truth, the truth – simply serves to strengthen what truth it, unhappily, does have. At the limit the Holocaust then becomes, more than a tragic, ghastly event with its own historicity and conditions, the symbol of inexorable human fate, in a reversal of the very idea of progress. Humanity's accumulating crimes live on, not, and as they ought to, as a memory of the evil men and women can do, of what has to be guarded against, fought. They live on, in the minds of all those who

succumb to learning this as 'the truth', in the shape of the thought that such is what we are and have to be. This is an option, it has to be said, that is not only not appealing. It is repellent. We cannot give up on utopian hope or socialism. We cannot give up on progress. They are not *less* apt in light of what we know about the bad side of human nature. They are more necessary.

For one other thing may be added finally. To accept the world as it (more or less) is, is to help to prolong a state of grave danger. This world, accommodating and countenancing too much of what ought not to be tolerated – plain, persistent injustice, stark, avoidable human suffering – is a world very receptive to present and future atrocity, a world overpopulated with bystanders. It is one in which the idea is harder and harder to resist that just anything at all may be done to people while others look on; and there be no consequence. **As** long as the situation lasts, it degrades the moral culture of the planet. It poisons the conscience of humankind.

## NOTES

1. The arguments reported here and in the paragraphs immediately following are from Ralph Miliband, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 58-62. They are to be found also in an excerpt from the book, published as 'The Plausibility of Socialism', *New Left Review* 206, July/August 1994, at pp. 5-8.
2. See my *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, London 1983 (reprinted 1994), and *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty*, London 1995, especially chapter 2.
3. Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, Berkeley 1979, p. 4.
4. Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, London 1976, p. 175.
5. Cited in Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, New Haven 1991, p. 59.
6. Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future*, New York 1987, p. 92 (italics removed).
7. Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust*, New York 1993, pp. 15-21, 467. For an account of Cohen, see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Holocaust Theology*, London 1989, pp. 68-79.
8. Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life*, New York 1989, pp. 236-42.
9. Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After*, New York 1970, p. 46.
10. The theses of Hannah Arendt (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, London 1977) and, more lately, Zygmunt Bauman (*Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge 1989) are widely known. See also in this connection: Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, London 1991; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, New York 1993; John Sabini and Maury Silver, 'On Destroying the Innocent with a Clear Conscience', in Joel Dimsdale, ed., *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators*, Washington 1980, pp. 329-58 (and reprinted in their *Moralities of Everyday Life*, Oxford 1982, pp. 55-87); Herbert Kelman, 'Violence without Moral Restraint', *Journal of Social Issues* 29:14 (1973), pp. 25-61; and Henri Zukier, 'The Twisted Road to Genocide: On the Psychological Development of Evil During the Holocaust', *Social Research* 61 (1994), pp. 423-55.
11. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, London 1989, pp. 28-9.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-3.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 33.
15. See Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, Marlboro (Vermont) 1989, pp.

19–20.

16. Ibid., p. 20; Hanna Levy-Hass, *Inside Belsen*, Brighton 1982, p. 41; Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, London 1987, pp. 87, 136.
17. Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, p. 208.
18. *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*, p. 61 (and *New Left Review* 206, p. 7). Emphasis added.
19. Ibid. – and see above.
20. Ibid.
21. ibid., p. 60 (and *New Left Review* 206, p. 6).
22. David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*, New York 1947, p. 168; Livia E. Bitton Jackson, *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust*, London 1984, p. 120; Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, New Haven and London 1995, p. 11; Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 33; Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After*, p. 47.
23. Henry Friedlander, 'Postscript: Toward a Methodology of Teaching about the Holocaust', in Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, eds., *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy, and Genocide*, New York 1980, p. 324; and Henri Zukier, 'The Twisted Road to Genocide', p. 424.
24. Cf. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 27 – notwithstanding the 'sociological pessimism' there registered.
25. Outstanding in this connection is Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, New York 1976.