Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie Politique et Sociale, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter/Hiver, 1978).

DOMINATION AND LIBERATORY POLITICS

Doug Torgerson

"What do we do now,
now that we are happy?"

— Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Alkis Kontos (ed.), *Domination* (Essays for the University League for Social Reform), Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1975, pp. ix, 228. $15.00 cloth, $5.95 paper.

Liberal theory links its cause with common sense. Freedom is conceived in terms of its opposite: the absence of overt oppression. A person is considered free to the extent that he can follow his felt desires. To suggest that doing what one wants may be a token of bondage rather than freedom is regarded not only as erroneous, but as morally suspect: for we verge on the absurdity of forcing men to be free.

Let us consider, however, the story which Camus tells of Spartacus and his revolt.[1] This slave rebellion occurred "as the ancient world was coming to an end"; beginning with a small group of gladiators, the uprising swelled into a massive slave army which eventually threatened Rome itself. But Camus emphasizes that, in revolt, the slaves failed to advance a "new principle": the vision of liberation mirrored the life and world of the masters. The aspiration of the slave was to become like his master. Rebellion became a reaffirmation of bondage, paying homage to the constraints on imagination that were forged by a world of oppression and servitude:

> Spartacus' army marches to lay siege to a Rome paralyzed with fear at the prospect of having to pay for its crimes. At the decisive moment, however, within sight of the sacred walls, the army halts and wavers, as if it were retreating before the principles, the institutions, the city of the gods. . . . The army retreated without having fought . . . .

The ancient distinction between freeman and slave reflected a manifest reality: slaves were different. Burdened with the cares of necessity, they lacked the capacity for freedom. As they purportedly exercised reason in the sole sense of understanding and following commands, their status was justly subordinate; they existed for the sake of the higher, to be ruled. But this ancient notion erred by viewing the historical mutilation of human potentialities as something essential in the being of a slave. Slighting the historical origins of slave mentality and behaviour, this view confused facticity with ontology, allotting the slave an inferior position in a cosmic hierarchy. Aristotle was aware, however, that some men were enslaved by virtue of historical contingency, not essence. And he glimpsed, as well, the true necessity for bondage: to provide others with the chance for freedom.[2]

The slave served others in a cosmos harmonized with their interests. Even in rebellion his actions reflected his bondage. In the tale told by Camus at least, the slave failed fully to shed the habits of servitude. His imagination could not transcend the boundaries of a social world founded on hierarchy and slavery. His quest for liberation remained haunted by phantoms which, today, reappear and are unveiled in psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology.[3] But the slave at least did not confound his own condition with freedom.

The volume *Domination* opens enigmatically in a brief, dramatic series of aphorisms. Composed by the editor, Alkis Kontos, these introductory passages stand in vivid contrast to the scholarly, systematic nature of the articles which follow. The aphoristic introduction and the essays of the volume thus together form a paradox.

One response to paradox is passive bewilderment. Another is an active search for the meaning which the paradox promises. As an ancient master of aphorism and paradox, Heraclitus gained a reputation for obscurity. He also received the condemnation of Aristotle, as Nietzsche ironically observed, for having sinned allegedly against the "law of contradiction".[4] But, for Heraclitus, truth did not reside in a correspondence between distinct objects and the discrete categories of thought and language. In a chaotic world of shifting, ambiguous phenomena, truth pertained to a hidden order, both immanent and transcendent, which was more concealed than revealed in the thought and language of common sense. The moving world, he believed, could be known only by what was in motion. Paradox was the device he employed to shatter the stable complacency of everyday appearances. What Heraclitus grapsed was the essence of dialectical thought, which denies the abstraction and reification of static categories — which conceives "one notion turning into another", revealing "contents which at first seem alien and even opposed to" itself.[5]

The aphorisms by Kontos open on a note of contradiction and paradox. We find an image of the modern scholar confronting an eternal riddle. In both form and substance here, Kontos is expressing the idea, also emphasized by

George Grant, that scholarship is not identical with thought. Kontos seems as well to suggest that scholarship can and does constrain insight. He does not reject the possible benefits of scholarship; nor does he ignore the importance of precise, rigorous, systematic thinking. But Kontos has emphasized the inevitability of poetry in political philosophy because he regards the imagination as central in the quest for truth: "The articulation of imaginative vision reveals the limitation and necessity of language and renders poetry inevitable".[6] And he has suggested that "the truth always speaks . . . in parables and metaphors". Perhaps he is exaggerating, but the very exaggeration pays tribute to what someone else has said: that truth resides in exaggeration. Only exaggeration can penetrate the haze of delusion to reveal what has been concealed.[7] Kontos challenges both the conventional wisdom of scholarship and the common sense notions of the man on the street. In doing so, he remains true to the issue at hand. For domination, as Kontos conceives it, is sustained largely through the medium of common sense.

The articles in *Domination* are striking in their diversity. Ranging in topic from the international to the individual, the psychological and literary to the economic and ethnic, embracing the levels of biography, history, and ontology, the essays seem to have no clear, common focus. The articles all deal with "domination" in some sense of the idea, and there are recurring themes. The topics, moreover, are not simply arbitrary; they exhibit an underlying coherence deliberately stemming from a concept of domination elaborated by the editor in a closing article. Still the range of topics and the variety of approaches render an easy summary of the book impossible.

A characteristic contrast is evident in the first two contributions.

O. Weininger's lead article "Dominance in Children" is based largely on clinical experience. For Weininger, the individual's effort to achieve dominance is initially aimed at creating coherence and stability in an otherwise inexplicable and threatening world:

> Children are not consciously trying to control others or to have "every action taken to be that which they suggest". Rather there is an air of survivial necessity in the young child's often frantic attempt to order a chaotic world, to make the behaviour of siblings and adults predictable, consistent, and safe for himself.

Weininger suggests that the "need to dominate" in later life is linked to a persistent failure to make sense of the world, to an underlying anxiety — "a basic insecurity".

Elizabeth Brady's "Towards a Happier History", which follows, deals with the issue of "women and domination" through an interpretation of three works by women in Canadian literary history. Brady suggests that the struggle of women against domination should not be focussed simply on gaining equality with men in the existing socio-economic framework. The fight against domination should, rather, be a fight for the humanity which is systematically denied by this order. Concluding with Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Brady emphasizes that the prevailing context of domination is contemporary capitalism and its consumer culture. She quotes Atwood's central character: "Production-consumption. You begin to wonder whether it isn't just a question of making one kind of garbage into another kind. The human mind was the last thing to be commercialized but they're doing a good job of it now . . . ." The title of the article is perhaps somewhat ironic. On one level, the idea of moving to a "happier history" reflects the positivist notion of historical progress. Indeed, Brady suggests that there has been progress for women in history, but she indicates that this progress has been a development of consciousness, as exemplified by Atwood's central character. From here, progress does not occur — as positivism would have it — within the prevailing order. A woman's realization of "her creative potential as a total person" is dependent on her economic situation. Similarly, the liberation of women as full human beings must be linked to the transformation and humanization of the economic order as a whole. Brady is perhaps also suggesting that the alleged happiness of our past and present history is less than believable.

The next scene shifts to R.T. Naylor's "Dominion of Capital", a masterful, succinct discussion of Canadian economic history in terms of international investment. Concern with the international sphere recurs in R. O. Matthews' "The Third World", which successfully contrasts the widespread, conflicting images of underdeveloped nations as either "powerful or powerless". Emphasizing the diversity of Third World nations, their differing weaknesses, strengths, and opportunities, Matthews formulates a perspective which suggests potential avenues for action in a world characterized by neither complete freedom nor absolute bondage.

C. B. Macpherson's "Liberalism and the Political Theory of Property" is a significant extension of the author's famous critique of liberal-democratic theory. As he has done in other works, Macpherson here emphasizes the contradictory images in liberal thought of man the consumer and man the creator. The development of the human creative potential, he argues, is not a universal possibility when property rights are defined entirely in terms of the individual's right to exclude others. Macpherson suggests, instead, a notion of property embracing the right of individuals *not* to be excluded from what is common. This expanded view of property, he contends, is necessary for the full realization of that vision, at the heart of liberal theory, which sees man as a creative being.

DOMINATION AND LIBERATORY POLITICS

If it is possible to identify a thematic core in the book, this is perhaps to be found in a series of interpretive articles, each dealing in turn with one of three phenomenological thinkers: Monika Langer's "Merleau-Ponty: The Ontological Limitations of Politics", Keith McCallum's "Domination and History: Notes on Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*", Ato Sekyi-Otu's "Form and Metaphor in Fanon's Critique of Racial and Colonial Domination". Each of these sensitive studies focuses in a different way on the tension between the individual and the collectivity in a world of violence. The critique of ideology advanced by Critical Theory informs two articles. In "Magic and Domination", Christian Lenhardt stresses the interpenetration and mutual reinforcement of the irrational and the rational. With reference particularly to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Lenhardt examines the relationship between instrumental rationality and myth in the rule of the magician king. He suggests that the liberatory potential of reason has been fatally marked in an association with irrationality and charisma, with the interests of domination. In conclusion, he re-states the central theme of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment:* "while freeing man from fear and uncertainty, reason has also served to perpetuate domination, thus being at once anti-magical and magical". This issue is pursued further in Ben Agger's "On Science as Domination". Defending Critical Theory against the challenge of "scientific" Marxism, Agger emphasizes the cultural dimension of domination in industrial civilization: the scientistic aversion to self reflection, the *rigor mortis* and amnesia of reification, the rigid gulf between individual and environment that arises in a will for universal mastery and penetrates to the deeper levels of psyche and sensibility. With its cultural focus, Critical Theory reaffirms the inextricable link between theory and practice; the prospect of a liberatory practice is tied to the realm of imagination, sensibility, the vision of liberation which underlies critical consciousness. Agger closes with a striking passage from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics:* "Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective context of delusion; it does not mean to have escaped from that context. Its objective goal is to break out from within".

Then in "Albert Camus' *Caligula:* The Metaphysics of an Emperor", David Cook suggests a link between the absurd and the tyrannical that is perhaps later illuminated in the remarks on tyranny which Kontos makes in the final essay, "Domination: Metaphor and Political Reality".

Domination is diverse in style as well as substance, ranging — for example — from the intriguing blend of systematic exposition and poetic imagery in Kontos to the measured precision of Macpherson, from Sekyi-Otu's powerful eloquence to Langer's patient and evocative subtlety. Though some are perhaps more sober than others, the various themes and voices may give the impression of a bacchanalian revel. It should be mentioned that this impression may be intentional. "Each essay", the editor writes in a preface, "stands as an individual

voice, a perspective, deriving its full strength from the orchestrated theme of the volume as a whole, for which I carry sole responsibility''. The book stems from a ''common concern with the dimensions and modalities of human bondage and, inevitably, the chances of freedom''. It is ''an exploratory exercise''.

The exploratory rather than definitive nature of the volume is suggested by the aphoristic form of the introduction and is echoed in the editor's concluding article. Here Kontos alludes to various themes in the book and sketches a general orientation to the problem of human bondage. But he refrains both from a systematic survey and from an attempt to create a false unity of perspectives. He advances no comprehensive, definitive conclusion arising from the whole. He orchestrates the voices, but does not constrain them. In this way, the book as a whole remains open-ended, inviting interpretation and reflection.

In his closing essay, Kontos distinguishes various forms of human bondage. What he offers is no mere typology, but an attempt to reveal the phenomenon in its depth and complexity. He centers initially on the idea of tyranny.

Arguing that tyranny is a form of oppression characterized by arbitrary rule, a disruption in the ''normal state of affairs'', Kontos seeks both to restore the term to its classical meaning and to underscore the limitations of the concept. He apparently also alludes to Cook's preceding essay on *Caligula*: for it is there that we confront the apotheosis of tyranny. In Camus' play and Cook's sensitive interpretation, a discordance between man and cosmos originates in the emperor's recognition of absurdity. Through the bizarre, apparently arbitrary character of his rule, this discord penetrates and disrupts the entire social order.

Tyranny, Kontos insists, is but one extraordinary form of oppression. To limit our notion of human bondage to the idea of tyranny would be to distort social reality and to deny the potentialities of freedom. Specifically, it would be to blunt social criticism by ignoring the phenomenon of domination as Kontos elaborates it:

> Domination, compared to all other modes of oppression, is unique in that the dominated remain oblivious to their domination. The establishment and maintenance of domination is effected on psychological grounds: the dominated internalize the external social structure, which achieves a reorientation of their energies, desires and perceptions. The world of the dominated is a falsified reality that has been granted the semblance of the natural, which in turn grants it an aura of rationality and legitimacy.

In this formulation, domination is a mode of oppression that is unfelt, invisible

to the victims. The restriction of human freedom fades into the background of accepted routine; chains are not seen as chains because they accord with the natural order.

Kontos implicitly rejects the liberal conception of freedom as the simple absence of restraint on felt desires. For such a conception masks the nature and complexity of human bondage. As a corollary to his view of domination, moreover, Kontos has written elsewhere on the issue of human essence:

> To evaluate what a society does and does not do to its members, a concept of human essence is needed as the external criterion. It is against such a concept that the quality of social existence can be measured. Only in the light of such a concept can a social critique be developed and social inadequacies be made visible.[8]

Drawing together these threads in his thinking, we can grasp his fundamental concern. Kontos is suggesting that at times — and especially in our time — the extent and very existence of unfreedom is hidden from view. Bondage becomes visible only against the backdrop of freedom, not conceived merely as a lack of restraint, but envisioned as a form of existence fulfilling the human essence. He thus exposes himself to a common liberal objection: To deny that freedom consists entirely in overtly unrestrained acts is to lend credence to the absurd and dangerous notion that men might be forced to be free. But unfortunately the issue is not as simple as liberal common sense suggests.[9]

Merleau-Ponty provides a starting point for an investigation into the full complexity of human freedom and unfreedom. As Monika Langer emphasized in her brilliant article, the central notion of his thought is that of the human being as incarnate subjectivity inhabiting the world, immersed in it, and sharing with it a common texture — the same "flesh". A constant, primordial communication flows between the subject and its world. In a word, the individual is *continuous* with this world, related to the shifting fabric of nature, human artifact, and other people — engaged now in mutual support, now in antagonism, but constantly involved in an on-going exchange of influence, in an interconnected pattern of formation and transformation. Being *of* the world, the subject can never step beyond it; he remains immersed, his bodily presence to the world echoed by the world's living presence to him. And society, the world of other people, the domain of intersubjectivity, is no exception. The continuity and communication of subject and world is accentuated in the social realm. Indeed, the world known to the subject is essentially a social one, grasped through the medium of shared understanding, through culture. These

considerations lead us to the heart of the problem of freedom. In her account of Merleau-Ponty, Langer formulates the central issue with precision:

> By virtue of being flesh, human beings are not self-enclosed units divided from one another and free in the isolation of that self-enclosed existence. Rather, the permeability of their texture dictates that human subjects inherently participate in an undivided existence, such that each influences, and is influenced, by the others. Freedom cannot exist in abstraction from this common life in which all share. . . .Only in such human coexistence can freedom or fulfillment be found.

Contained in a pattern of social life, human interaction is characterized by a ceaseless flow of influence among individuals. Self and other not only inhabit a common world, but inhabit each other through both "invasion" and "intimacy". The interaction, Langer stresses, may be an "*encroachment*" or an "*enrichment*". But freedom is conceivable only within this realm, not beyond it.

From Langer's account, the fate of the subject in Merleau-Ponty appears to be that of total immersion in the contingency of body and world. Freedom as autonomy seems to be an impossible notion. Paradoxically, however, Merleau-Ponty suggests not only the possibility, but the inevitability, of autonomy. He refers to the subject not as the product of physical and social determinants, but as "the absolute source"[10] which perceives the world and lends it meaning. He speaks of "the radical subjectivity of all our experience as inseparable from its truth-value".[11] Contingency is known only from the standpoint of a centering of awareness, a sense of identity, which cannot be reduced to any set of determinants, which is ultimately inexhaustible, miraculous.

Here, then, we come to the heart of the matter, a paradox of contingency and autonomy: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains".[12] To understand the paradox is to mediate consciously between the extremes of fatality and total licence, to grasp the limits and inescapable necessity of action. Indeed, as the "absolute source" of meaning, the subject is not fundamentally passive, but necessarily active, engaged in the world by virtue of his very existence. But this awareness is not necessarily shared by all. For the possibility of awareness is entwined in the individual's sense of his felt presence to the world. This sense of identity always contains a political element.

Central to the paradox of contingency and autonomy is the fact that an individual's sense of identity always reflects his social context. Societies typically

teach their members who and what they are, locating them in a cosmic order, inscribing their given identities in the very nature of things. The loyal and obediant individual knows his place and keeps it. To question one's identity is, depending on the situation, a mark of insanity, idiosyncracy, or rebellion.

A passive self image, a sense of subservience and dependence, the feeling that one is an insignificant thing in a world of things — these characteristics typify the identity of the oppressed. For the oppressed to question their identity is, at once, a political and philosophical act. The questioning itself assumes a measure of autonomy, signifies already a change in identity, and orients the individual to an active posture. At the philosophical level, moreover, the quest to redefine oneself involves a consideration of others who share one's predicament; it raises the question of human essence.

Kontos characterizes the world of domination as false and actively falsified. The dominated not only have a false sense of themselves and their real desires; they also are deluded concerning the structure of the social world and its past. For domination has a history. Being preceded by overt modes of oppression, domination advances gradually. As the past is forgotten and as a happy amalgamation is achieved between victim and master, domination comes to prevail.

While a measure of falsification may characterize various forms of human bondage, Kontos' conception of domination addresses a phenomenon which is historically specific. He refers to the contemporary period of industrial capitalism. Clearly, his discussion owes much to Marx and, especially, Marcuse. Suggesting that domination may originate, under scarcity, in the desire of some to shift the burden of toil onto others, Kontos refers to the idea of domination as "an expansive transformation of Marx's concept of alienation". In alienation, man's "ontological creativity" is disfigured, taking the form of a labourious existence sapped of vitality. A life of alienated labour is a life for others, relieving them of the necessity of toil and reinforcing their power. But Kontos carefully distinguishes between domination and alienation. While alienation is fundamentally an economic condition which underlies ideological falsification, "domination emphasizes the psychological-cultural features of social life which embrace the totality and cement its structural patterns". Domination cannot be isolated; it permeates the whole of social life:

> Domination is an all-pervasive condition which cannot be traced back to any single activity. The world and the images which sustain it *are* the constituent parts of domination. The distorted, falsified world *is* the context of domination and no mere byproduct of it.

He insists that domination embraces the whole of society but does not achieve a "systemic autonomy". "The masters", he argues, "act consciously, willingly, as power holders who know that they must procure obedience, docility, and active passivity and remain invisible as well". He does not claim that they are thus free and truly human; he does deny that they are simply trapped by "systemic forces". Here Kontos vacillates between two possible uses of the term domination. It is a vacillation rooted in the ambiguities of the present historical period.

In using the term domination, Kontos refers both to prevailing historical tendencies and to the nightmarish culmination of these tendencies. In a series of metaphors, he evokes images of the regulated body and mind thoroughly absorbed in a universe of duplicity and delusion. But Kontos warns us against taking these metaphors too literally as reality: he fears their "numbing finality". He emphasizes that his portrayal is of "ideal-types, vivid signals of ongoing tendencies, of a propensity but not a finalized crystallization". With the metaphor of "troubled sleep", Kontos suggests that the subjects of domination "are not fully convinced of their earthly paradise". There persists a tension, which can perhaps never be eliminated so long as true human freedom is denied.

In rejecting the idea that domination constitutes an impersonal, automatic system, Kontos agrees that a system exists; "but it has been brought into existence", he says, "by its masters". As he describes "the prevailing aura and texture of the dominant culture", however, these masters tend to fade into the background:

> It is an irony that the more vividly one criticizes domination the less political it appears; the less immediate, the more alien it becomes. Other forms of oppression concretize and personalize the enemy. Domination denies a visible figure; it offers only a systemic universe.

Yet by referring to the masters of the system, he does seek to identify, to visualize and personalize, an enemy. His ability to do so recalls the origins of domination in overt oppression, in the blatant antagonism of the oppressor and the oppressed. In pointing to domination as the successor to other forms of oppression, Kontos identifies its novel feature as the gradual dulling of this antagonism. In his most extreme formulations he envisions a depersonalized, "systemic universe", devoid of visible masters. But he does not go so far as to say that the masters could become invisible to themselves. This is, in fact, what he vigorously denies. His insistence on this point reflects a hesitancy to regard the present predicament as closed and finalized.

DOMINATION AND LIBERATORY POLITICS

The advent of domination as a new form of oppression reflects a change in the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. Awareness of the real situation is lost to the dominated, but not, according to Kontos, to those who dominate. Yet, with a shift in the overall relationship, we might reasonably expect a change in the consciousness of both. Kontos would no doubt agree that generally the dynamics of social life betray elements of regularity which are both automatic and conscious, unplanned as well as planned. As the overt antagonism between oppressor and oppressed diminishes, less vigilant control is required. As the condition of domination becomes progressively engrained in personal habit and social routine, in patterns of thought and behaviour, more and more can be left to automatic regularities. With overt oppression giving way to domination, the self awareness of the masters, as masters, can be less acute. No doubt their awareness remains acute in the present period, giving rise at times to problems of conscience and legitimation. But this is a token of the fact that — as Kontos insists — domination is not (yet) complete; the frightening metaphors expose our reality but do not accurately describe it. If we conceive domination as an ideal-type fully to be realized in the future (if ever), then we can see that our current situation remains a transition, perhaps, from overt forms of oppression to domination. In domination as an ideal-type, there are no rough edges; social relations are false but smooth, and every conscience is easy. The oppressors both look friendly and feel themselves to be friendly. Sleep is untroubled. The cosmos is complete.

Whether such a condition is conceivable as an historical possibility depends ultimately on our view of human essence. But conceived simply as an analytical ideal-type, this notion of domination leads to a significant consideration. The consciousness of the rulers and consciousness of the ruled are *both* subject to historical changes which need not alter the fact of subordination. Between our past and our present, in the transitition from oppression to domination, we can expect to find such changes.

Kontos emphasizes the role of the masters in order not to render them invisible. He fears that their invisibility would make the system of domination even less vulnerable to liberatory politics. He wishes to avoid the image of a thoroughly diffuse, impersonal system with no target for political action.

Political action does, indeed, require targets in the sense of precisely conceived means and ends that serve as a focus for effort. But to develop any strategy, it is necessary to identify weakness as well as strength, to determine what in the system is carefully controlled and what is left to take care of itself, to know what the dominant elements understand and what they fail to grasp, to decide how self conscious and united these elements actually are. The direction and very prospect of a liberatory politics turns on these issues.

Domination can be overcome, Kontos emphasizes, only through politics, through collective action guided by a thorough grasp of the forces which sustain

oppression and domination. He does not provide a program and does not believe that it is the role of political philosophy to do so. But he does raise considerations which should precede the formulation of any strategy. The feature of domination which distinguishes it from other forms of oppression renders the dimension of consciousness central to a liberatory politics. Kontos denies that an existence in bondage promotes consciousness of a liberatory vision; for, especially in domination, delusion and lack of imagination are themselves constituents of bondage. He questions, in particular, the Marxian reliance on the liberatory role of the proletariat: ". . . the fact that a particular condition mirrors the universal historical predicament of negated, damaged life does not necessarily imply that those who actually live it will recognize it as such". Freedom is not a motor reflex of unfreedom. Here Kontos' discussion parallels Sekyi-Otu's interpretation of Fanon: With respect to the colonial situation, Fanon denies that the history of bondage is a prelude and preparation for liberation. The politics of liberation does not emerge, immanently, from within the social order; rather, it springs, seemingly, from nothing — not welded from lingering vestiges of humanity, but asserted in the face of the denial, the masking of humanity.[13] For both the metropolis and the colony, these considerations raise the central problem: the source and identity of the agents of liberation. Kontos does not attempt to identify these agents, but he does not deny that they may emerge. He alludes only to the "troubled sleep" of the dominated, implying perhaps that a movement for liberation is always a possibility, that the quest for an essentially human existence can never completely be bought off. The emphasis on culture and consciousness is not unfounded, but it may be a cause for exasperation. Whatever its weaknesses, the strength of Marx's approach was in his attempt to identify structural instabilities in the system of oppression that could bring the system to a point of crisis. No one who has read a newspaper in the last decade could deny that crisis, of some sort, is a recurring feature of the present system. It is still important to consider the nature and possibility of crises,[14] especially with respect to how they might affect the sleep of the dominated.

The abolition of scarcity is, for Kontos, a prerequisite for the full actualization of the human essence. This does not imply an incessant acceleration of the motor of production in order to keep it in tune with desires that persistently expand into infinity. Indeed, Kontos regards the fervent consumerism of "the high intensity market setting" as a token of domination.[15] The desires promoted by the prevailing consumer culture are false because they keep individuals collectively bound to the productive machine, both as bored producers and as restless consumers. This effectively forecloses the social alternative of a limitation to both consumption and production which, while universally satisfying real needs, would loosen this bond and allow time and energy for other dimensions of experience and existence.

For a thorough discussion by Kontos of the issue of human essence, we must await his future writings. But he has indicated that he is not oblivious to the problems which the issue raises: "The most imperative aspect of any attempt to establish a valid perspective on human essence is the need to distinguish ontology from history." But to state this does not overcome a remaining "paradox" and "challenge": "to differentiate ontology from history within the flow of history itself".[16] As a starting point, Kontos has suggested a focus on the aesthetic dimension of human existence, emphasized in Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and elaborated in the work of Marcuse. Some would see this as a highly depoliticized vision. Whatever the validity of such an interpretation, we can acknowledge this as a possible tendency. But Kontos emphasizes time and again the centrality of the political, not only as a necessity for the transformation of society, but also as an essential dimension in the relationship between individual and collectivity in any conceivable society. The private and public realms are simultaneously, paradoxically both separate and joined together:

> Social change aiming at the humanization of the world must presuppose and demand the possibility of a dimension where the individual and the collective are so joined together in common destiny and inpenetrable solidarity as to safeguard them without the one asphyxiating the other.[17]

Politics has historically been practised in the context of oppressive social structures. Unable to imagine politics in any other setting, liberal theory has sought to differentiate clearly between the public and the private, to erect protective fences for the individual. But, in doing so, liberalism left an oppressive social structure untouched; the boundaries were a faint thread in the fabric of social life. Kontos is aware of this mistake; he knows that freedom is possible only within society, in a realm where others simultaneously enroach upon the individual and enrich his existence. One lives with other people; the relationship can be a stifling bondage or a bond that promotes fulfillment. The difference resides in the texture of the relationship between self and other, a problem that is political as well as personal. But upon what possible basis does one pronounce the desires of another to be false, a violation of what is essentially human? Kontos has, as yet, not satisfactorily answered this question. Let us consider briefly what is at stake. Liberalism fears a relentless encroachment, a social movement which would deny freedom in the name of freedom, both in its quest for power and in the new order it would construct. But Kontos would

reply that the existing order is one of domination, which *does* deny freedom in the name of freedom, which *is* a relentless encroachment. Only a notion of human essence can cut through this web of delusion and call it by its real name.

To speak of a human essence, true humanity, the truth and falsity of needs and desires — this presupposes epistemological judgments. The problems of illusion and delusion and the corresponding quest for certainty have always been at the heart of philosophy. The idealist solution has been to identify a locus of absolute certainty which, as an autonomous subject, transcends all contingency. In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, however, we have noted a paradox of autonomy within contingency. He refers to the incarnate subject as the "absolute source". Beset by a welter of phenomena, incessant and ambiguous, the subject cannot escape from giving meaning to the world; he is, in Merleau-Ponty's phrase, "*condemned to meaning*".[18] Yet the world he knows and attempts to understand contains an ambiguity which is not peripheral, but central. The objects of perception are always partial, shifting, somewhat indistinct; self and world are inexhaustible, and the past does not guarantee the future. Faith and risk, then, are ultimately central to all knowing, to all judgment.[19] Herein lies a basis for both confidence and humility:

> It means two things to say that our experience is our own: both that it is not the measure of all imaginable being in itself and that it is nonetheless co-extensive with all being of which we can form a notion.[20]

Merleau-Ponty rejects any "[r]ecourse to an absolute foundation" beyond the incarnate subject: ". . . my own opinions, which remain capable of error no matter how rigorously I examine them, are still my only equipment for judging". To try to make my truth into an absolute truth is to "drop the prey to catch its shadow".[21]

> If, on the other hand, I have understood that truth and value can be for us nothing but the result of the verifications or evaluations which we make in contact with the world, before other people and in given situations of knowledge and action, that even these notions lose all meaning outside of human perspectives, then the world recovers its texture, the particular acts of vertification and evaluation through which I grasp a dispersed experience resume their decisive importance, and knowledge and ac-

> tion, true and false, good and evil have something unquestionable about them precisely because I do not claim to find them in absolute evidence.[22]

As we shall see, these epistemological considerations have an immediate relevance for politics.

We are, as Merleau-Ponty says, "*condemned to meaning*". Out of the welter of non-sense, a sense necessarily emerges, dissolves perhaps, and re-emerges. But the sense, the meaning, to which we are all initially condemned is common sense. The catechism of the journalist reflects the commonsensical, political lesson which all societies teach their members: who, what, when, where, why and how they are. The significance of this lesson becomes obvious when we recall Kontos' notion of domination. All evaluation of social life is grounded, moreover, implicitly or explicitly, in a notion of human essence. There is no escape through feigned agnosticism; this merely signals a victory of common sense. Liberal fears would, indeed, blunt a serious critique of common sense. Still, it is important how we understand the idea of essence.

Politics is inevitable to the extent that a difference, a certain tension, persists between self and others, the individual and the collectivity. Kontos envisions political life beyond the domain of oppression. He conceives a politics which would not only allocate values but which would be valued for itself — a realm of action necessary, perhaps, for the actualization of what we take to be essentially human. Characterized by an egalitarian norm of reciprocity, political relationships would mirror the mode of human interaction typical of a non-oppressive social structure. But the creation of such a politics and such a society is itself a political act, executed in a world of oppression. Here the mutual respect, the reciprocity of person to person, is peripheral if it exists at all. The other is reified, reduced to a thing to be manipulated or destroyed in a struggle for power. In this context, everything is subject to manipulation, including philosophy. The notion of human essence can be used as a tool of oppression, both by oppressors and would-be liberators. But such manipulation would violate the spirit of a liberated or liberatory politics.

The quest for liberation is both collective and individual. Similarily, the philosophical attempt to grasp a human essence necessarily involves a human subject seeking to understand its identity. Common sense has no quarrel with a search for personal identity, but here the search necessarily ends in the relativism of unique individuals. Personal insight does not reveal a collective predicament. Hence a condition of domination necessarily remains veiled.

Still, caution at this point is not without foundation. Here we might recall the earlier remarks on Merleau-Ponty's epistemology. We noted his rejection of the idealist attempt to lodge human understanding in an absolute foundation

transcending the incarnate subject. For Merleau-Ponty, this epistemological judgement contained implications for political practice. He glimpsed an Orwellian prospect in the quest for absolute certainty: If I claim knowledge with a foundation beyond myself, "my judgments take on a sacred character"; indeed, in the realm of practical affairs I become immune to the criticism of others because I have the means to transfigure my actions: "the suffering I create turns into happiness, ruse becomes reason, and I piously cause my adversaries to perish".[23] Thus, in rejecting an absolute, transcendent ground to knowledge, Merleau-Ponty also denounced the theocratic elements of religious and secular crusades. But we can accept this view without being condemned to relativism.

The incarnate subject remains the ground of judgment, but he is also immersed in a world which he actively and necessarily endows with meaning. Self reflection is not the sole source of his understanding. Kontos has stressed the central role of the imagination in grasping the human essence, but the imagination is nurtured by the whole range of human experience. The individual's world is a world populated by others as well as himself. He experiences their presence and, with some of them, achieves communication, a sense of mutual understanding. It is partly out of the interpretation of such experience that he can fashion a notion not only of his own identity, but of the identity, the nature, the essence of his kind. Surely, there remains ambiguity; self and other are inexhustible; the vision of the whole is predicated on fragments. But while the pattern may be somewhat indistinct — a faint image on the horizon — it is not beyond sight.

Through communication, moreover, individual insights may coalesce in a collective understanding. The vision may become shared, public, cultural — and, as such, political. Indeed, within the context of domination, a notion of human essence must inform a liberatory politics. This is not to deny all risk. Bondage often persists after the day of alledged liberation; the tyranny of dubious liberators is well known. In this regard, Kontos approves of Camus' attempt to moderate, without destroying, the impulse of rebellion. A liberatory politics is indeed a fragile affair because it must look not only to the present, but also to the future it seeks to create. The present means must somehow embody the distant ends. Those who would liberate humanity, according to Merleau-Ponty, must be "capable of recognizing other men as such and being recognized in turn".[24] It is not absurd, philosophically or politically, to tell another in discussion that what he takes for freedom is actually bondage. Such an act may promote a mutual understanding of a common predicament, a shared vision of liberation. Yet it may not. Discussion must sometimes end; often, perhaps, it cannot even begin. At these times, a liberatory politics must find its way in a political realm founded on oppression. Not everything is acceptable, but in this context, no serious politics can renounce coercion and

manipulation in all forms. And one need not equate coercion with freedom in order to claim that coercive measures are sometimes taken for the sake of freedom. Surely, this involves risk, but it is not absurd. The means must embody the ends, but means and ends cannot suddenly be collapsed as one.

Liberatory politics seeks the liberation of political life from the domain of oppression. This prospect is linked to the possibility of absolishing both coercion and the pressure of scarcity as prevalent features of social organization. But the domain of oppression is an infernal quagmire. In its struggle to escape, liberatory practice risks sinking deeper and, in any case, cannot avoid being soiled. The solution, if there is one, is a balance which promotes effective action but does not undermine the goal of liberation. To achieve this balance is a practical task that requires theoretical reflection. An ethical code may aid the endeavor, but the practical balance of liberatory politics cannot be created or maintained sheerly through a code. Liberatory practice is necessarily tied to a corresponding vision. More fundamentally, both practice and vision must be rooted in liberatory impulses. Political action has to be entwined with the development of a liberatory culture, involving both aesthetic sensibility and a mode of human interaction founded upon reciprocity.

The domain of oppression makes a mockery of liberatory vision. The exigencies of practical politics threaten to engulf and pervert liberatory impulses. Not only is there a danger of dehumanizing the enemy; in a realm of scarcity and oppression, the potential liberators may dehumanize their allies and themselves. This is the nightmare which concerns Sartre and which Keith McCallum emphasizes in his discussion of the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*. McCallum suggests that "the possibility of abolishing the inhuman in human history once and for all remains almost inconceivable under present-day conditions". He may be right. In an earlier period, Machiavelli emphasized the difficulties and dangers in simply bringing about a new order of things — not to mention in abolishing the reign of violence. He conceived politics largely on the model of warfare and praised the prince who was always ready to do battle. Still, Machiavelli may contain a lesson for our present predicament. He was attuned to the sudden shifts of Fortune and taught that if men could not control this force, they could, with preparation, be able to guide it. Domination appears as a closed universe, and this is part of its power. It is not simply a desperate hope, however, to believe that Fortune may offer opportunities for which a liberatory politics should be prepared.

Since antiquity, a central current of Western thought has identified the *telos* of the human being with fulfillment, true satisfaction, happiness. The way may be twisted and uneven, marked by delay, detour, perversion, and sinful error; the end may slip from sight, but a fulfilled existence still remains the ultimate aspiration and, as such, renders the human predicament both comprehensible and communicable.

A desperate, restless, unbelievable happiness pervades the world of domination. The limits of this happiness are revealed in an underlying discontent, the psychopathology of everyday life, the troubled sleep of the dominated. Upon awakening, domination is exposed as a punishing reality, and one is faced with the irresistable question: What is to be done? Even if it does not become conscious, this question echoes in the dreams and day dreams of the dominated individual.

In the context of domination, the impulse for liberation tends to remain scattered, isolated, individual. But inasmuch as domination is a collective reality above and beyond the individual, there is no chance for a private escape. Liberation is fundamentally a political, collective task.

With these considerations, it may be tempting to suggest an identity between freedom and happiness. But this equation has frightening political implications. Here we glimpse an essential limit to any collective solution of the human predicament.

An element of tension must persist if there is to remain a distinction between self and others.[25] This tension is the source of politics. The dream of a liberated politics envisions a tension among individuals which, guided by mutual recognition and respect, remains limited, contained — which does not normally degenerate into coercion or violent conflict.

The reciprocity characteristic of a liberated politics would require a tolerance of the other. We may view other people as misguided, confused, or ignorant, and we may be right. Still, the texture of human interaction must be founded on an overall sense that each individual is capable of judging his best interest, of ultimately choosing his own path to happiness. A liberated politics would thus distinguish between freedom and happiness, establishing a range of individual choice and risk as a cultural norm. The individual may be coaxed, but he cannot be compelled to be happy. Such compulsion would threaten the very foundation of collective liberation, the spirit of reciprocity. Others may accompany the individual, but at certain points he must also stand alone and choose.[26] Liberal theory errs by assuming that this individual already exists in the common man. A liberatory politics would be founded on the belief simply that this individual wants to be born.

Environmental and Resource Studies
Trent University

Notes

1. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower, New York: Vintage, 1956, pp. 108-110.

2. Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, Bk. I, Chps. III-VII, XIII. Also see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, pp. 27-37.

3. See e.g., Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, New York: Vintage, 1955, ch. 4; Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, ch. 10.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962, p. 52. The relevant passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is included in the section on Heraclitus in Philip Wheelwright (ed.) *The Presocratics*, New York: Odyssey Press, p. 80. Also see, generally, Wheelwright's *Heraclitus*, New York: Atheneum, 1964.

5. The quoted material is from a brief exposition of Hegel given in Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*, New York: Vintage, 1961, p. 124.

6. "Between Memory and Dream" in David P. Shugarman (ed.) *Thinking About Change*, Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1974, p. 54.

7. On truth, exaggeration, and common sense, see Theodor W. Adorno's contributions to Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Ady and David Frisby, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976, esp. pp. 33, 35, 82, 110. On common sense, see Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New York: Seabury Press, 1974, pp. 24-30. Despite everything, cf. Martin Heidegger, "The Essence of Truth" in Heidegger and Warner Brock, *Existence and Being*, Chicago: Henry Regnergy, 1949.

8. "Between Memory and Dream", p. 55. Cf. Herbert Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence" in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

9. Liberal thought should be viewed within the wider context of bourgeois thought as a whole. As C.B. Macpherson has emphasized, liberalism developed two contrasting images of man: as the "possessive individual" and as the active creator. Liberal freedom was designed initially to protect the possessive individual. This conception prevailed until after Bentham. In the nineteenth century, however, the image of man the creator was strongly asserted. In J. S. Mill, liberal freedom is designed both to protect the possessive individual and to promote the creative dimension of the human spirit. It is to this dual end that the individual becomes "sovereign" over himself. Macpherson has suggested two reasons for this shift: (1) a reaction of sensitive intellectuals against the crass image of the possessive individual, and (2) the necessity of a moral vision to defend the bourgeois order against the emerging strength of the working class. With T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, British neo-Hegelianism followed Mill in the assertion of a new vision of man but demolished his fiction of the insular individual. Even Mill had his doubts about this fiction, but common sense liberalism still clings

to it. On a more sophisticated level, Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" defends the more plausible assertion that only negative liberty, the freedom from overt restraint, deserves the name of *political* freedom. This contention is not without some foundation. (See the conclusion to the present essay.) But his attempt to draw a clear distinction between forms of freedom is unsettled when he confronts the problem of totalitarian brainwashing. Though he does not recognize it, the whole structure of his argument here verges on collapse. Failing utterly to grasp the phenomenon of domination, his perspective accords with the end of bourgeois legitimation. (See his *Four Essays on Liberty*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, esp. the second part of the introduction.) My interpretation of liberalism is influenced by Macpherson, particularly *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrival*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, Essays I-V. Also see Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, the first part of the Conclusion.

10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London: Routeledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, p. ix.

11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Metaphysical in Man" in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 93.

12. Paradox is at the heart of Rousseau — reflected in his most famous propositions and underlying the very structure of his thought. The parallels between Merleau-Ponty and Rousseau on the issue of contingency and autonomy could form the basis of a separate article. This possibility is suggested by the interpretation in Ernst Cassirer's *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. Peter Gay, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963. On the issue of forcing men to be free, see Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 22-27.

13. This view of Fanon is, according to Sekyi-Otu, what the Marxian conception rejects. (There is a serious discrepancy between the original of his article and the published version. A phrase at the bottom of p. 157 incorrectly reads that this is "precisely what the Marxian conception suggests". *Suggests* should read *rejects*.

14. In this regard, there have been a few significant attempts to come to terms with the implications of ecology and energy questions. See Hans Magnus Enzenberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology", *New Left Review*, No. 84, March-April, 1974; Colin Stoneman, "The Unviability of Capitalism" in Malcolm Caldwell et al., *Socialism and the Environment*, Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1972. Also see Vincent Di Norica, "From Critical Theory to Critical Ecology", *Telos*, No. 22, Winter, 1974-75; Murray Bookchin, "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought" in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1971.

15. See William Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities*, Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1976; the Review by Kontos, this *Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter, 1977; and the Reply by Leiss, this *Journal*, Spring-Summer, 1977, Vol. 1, No.2.

16. "Between Memory and Dream", p. 56.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

18. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xix.

19. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Faith and Good Faith" in *Sense and Non-Sense*. Also see his "The Primacy of Perception" in *The Primacy of Perception* (ed.) James M. Edie, Northwestern University Press, 1964.

20. "The Metaphysical in Man", p. 93.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Humanism and Terror*, trans. John O'Neill, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 154.

25. See the exchange between Herbert Marcuse and N. O. Brown in Marcuse's *Negations*.

26. The relationship between freedom and happiness is not exhausted by these remarks. In a strict sense, we could say that, in the fully "enlightened" individual, a unity of freedom and happiness has been attained. We could also argue that, inasmuch as happiness constitutes a basic aspiration of all, "enlightenment" is a prerequisite for true freedom. But this merely reaffirms a necessary distinction between the individual and the collective. A liberated collective life would abolish ideology in the sense of socially imposed delusion. Liberation could encourage enlightenment. But collective liberation could not ensure or enforce enlightenment. A mutual respect in the texture of collective life demands that the notions of enlightenment and happiness remain somewhat ambiguous, open-ended, left to the individual.