

Factors in the Materialist Interpretation of History

Being a continuation of the article in last issue concerning the "Economic Factor," in the form of an explanatory letter, written in consideration of a controversy on the Materialist Interpretation.

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Dear Comrade,—I have no doubt I have drawn out this letter on the Materialist Interpretation to a wearisome length. These contents, and what has already gone before in the last issue could very conceivably have been stated better and more concisely. Partly, however, the length of my argument must be accredited to my desire to open out a subject which, while it has its difficulties for understanding, is yet important in respect that it has a bearing on the future of our precarious civilization, for, in the words of Professor Dewey, that future "depends upon the widening spread and deepening hold of the scientific habit of mind." Your argument centred around questions upon which discussion has pivoted down the ages since human beings began to speculate about the career of man, and as answer to which, as conviction was reached, one way or the other, the philosophers have built their systems of philosophy. The questions concern the standards that men are to employ in forming their beliefs. Though already stated in the first part of this letter I will here restate those questions in fresh terms: Have we to resort, for guidance in human affairs, to a super-human authority, to the so-called absolute and eternal truths of Idealism, which, it is claimed, transcend human experience and knowledge based upon analysis and reason? Or, on the other hand, must we organize human experience and depend on human reason and intelligence for authority and guidance?

The terms of those questions state the mental prepossessions which are the respective premises of the opposing schools in philosophy: Idealism and Materialism. Viewed with the Idealist prepossessions, history is seen as a record of good and evil deeds, a struggle between the upper and nether worlds of spirit and materiality; the idea is the starting point, the driving force of history, and great men the creators and initiators of social movements; progress is the progressive realization of the eternal and absolute truths. On the other hand, from the Materialist viewpoint, which is the scientific habit of mind, history is seen as a process of natural history. The process is a question of the inter-action of environmental forces, natural and social, and man as organism, individually and collectively. The environment, however, is the primary fact. To the materialist, the history of society is a process evolving in the cumulative sequence of material cause and effect. So, social movements and ideals are not born in the minds of great men, but arise out of material conditions of existence which impress themselves on the minds of men.

Your opponent contends that "any material factor is an economic factor." Rather, he should say, that any material factor is an economic factor when it functions to an economic end. Words and terms would cease to be of value as signs for things we are compelled to take note of in the business of life, unless we use them in some precise correspondence to those things. Turning to the dictionary we find the term "economy" is derived from the Ancient Greek —(oikos: a house; nomos, a law), or, the law of a household—the rules and regulations by which the management of a household is maintained, i.e., domestic economy. Later, the use of the term has been extended to cover all kinds of functional processes and structures. Thus we speak of the economy of the human body, of agricultural and industrial economy, the economy of a machine, and of a community, tribal, civic or national, also of the capitalist system of production as the world's economy of

production. Things have economic functions and become economic factors. We make reference to economic forces and economic conditions. The complex economy of modern social life, notably its productive and political processes, makes essential for our understanding of it that organized enquiry and knowledge which we know as science. So we have the science of Political Economy which treats of the production and distribution of wealth and its laws. (Note: Distribution in this connection does not mean the transferring of wealth from store houses to consumer. Distribution here means the sharing among a community of the wealth produced. The science enquires into the laws which determine the respective shares of the members and classes of the community).

It will be granted that any factor that is used or taken advantage of, or plays an active part in the production of wealth, and in that respect is instrumental in serving the needs and furthering the life process of individuals or of communities, is an economic factor. In that respect it is a question of economic function. So, sunlight, air, water, climate, geographical and physical features of a country, natural resources in minerals, timber, fertility of the soil, etc., the state of the industrial arts (technology), the material equipment of production and the apparatus of trade and commerce, are all economic factors.

There is, however, another aspect to these factors other than an economic. They have a cultural aspect, in so far as they mould the psychology of a people, in so far, that is, as they mould a people's temperament and habits of thought. In a near similar way, a book may be an article of merchandise and at the same time be an agent of culture for the mind. The torrid climate of the equatorial regions, and the temperate climate of the northern, enforce different experiences and habits of life and thought upon their respective inhabitants. So do diverse geographical and physical features. Mountainous regions and the plains, inland regions and the seaboard, each stamp their particular impression on the plastic psychology of man. In a rough approximate way, the cultural progress of a people corresponds to the state of its industrial arts. Here again, a certain bent of the mind and the nature of its ideas are given by the prevailing method of procuring a livelihood, as likewise by the institutional character of the social organization, to each factor its effect in the measure of its influence on the social life. The cultural effect of such factors is found to characterize the religion, philosophy, art, poetry, literature, folk-songs and stories of any people, though there may be incorporated much of foreign element. So typically, in succession of time, God is a great hunter to the primitive tribesmen, to the Children of Israel in the pastoral stage, he is a familiar patriarchal father; later, he is the law giver during the reorganization after the escape from Egyptian bondage, and the terrible God of War during the conquest of the promised land. And afterwards, when a stiff necked generation grew prosperous and perverse and, forgetting the "Lord thy God" did worship strange gods—and pay toll to strange priests—he became a jealous God, an utterer of blistering curses and a vengeful chastiser and dispenser into captivity of "my people, Israel." To the barbarian tribes of Northern Europe he was also a God of War. In feudal Europe of the middle ages he was "Overlord," "Almighty Suzerain," "Emperor of Heaven," as whim decreed. In the protestant Northern Europe of the beginnings of the great industry, he is an all-round handy artizan, the "Creator," the "Great Artificer." Since then, an economist in England has told the world that "Jesus Christ, he is free trade, free trade it is Jesus Christ!" Since then, he was seen in steel helmet, jack boots and spurs, at the call of a thousand pulpits, alternately acting as aide-de-camp to Jacky Fisher and Emperor Bill. Since

then, he is rumoured to have handed over the lines in disgust to old Nick—full name, Nick Lenin, residence, Moscow, on business day and night and then some, assassinated 3 times, escaped from Russia with a billion American dollars' worth of paper roubles, 500 times (see New York "Times," also Vancouver papers on allee samee stunt circuit). However, the rumor may be only the state of mind of the bourgeoisie, as in similar case, as when they tell us, that bad times are only a state of mind.

The twofold aspect of those material factors in the habit forming environment of man, the cultural and the strictly economic aspect, has been unnoticed by hasty and superficial critics of the Marxian theory. They see no more in Marx's formulation of his theory than a mere description of the historical process as solely the outcome of class interest. They do not see that a mode of production in social life also determines the relation of rulers and ruled, and that, to quote part of one of my quotations of Marx in last issue, "It is always the direct relation of the owners of the conditions of production to the . . . producers which reveal the innermost secret, the hidden foundation of the entire social construction, and with it the political form of the relations between sovereignty and dependence, in short, of the corresponding form of the State." A definite form of social organization to which must conform their habits of life is determined by the method of the exploitation of productive labor.

In a very sketchy way I have indicated the part played by the conditions of man's environment in the formation of thought, but there is still the fact of social change and progress to account for. Natural environment, climate, physical geography, are comparatively static factors and do not change appreciably during ages, have not, at least, during the historical period, and consequently can not be held accountable for social change. The determining factors of change must be changeable themselves. In the first part of this letter (in the last issue of the "Clarion") I pointed out that economic development, inventions, improvements, new discoveries in the ways and means of procuring a livelihood lay at the basis of social development. I here quote an application of the Materialist Interpretation to the fact of social change by one who is not a Marxian in politics, Prof. John Dewey, one of the foremost liberal publicists on this continent. In one of a series of lectures at the Imperial University of Japan, Tokyo, speaking concerning the factors that influenced the direction of that industrial, political and religious change upon which Europe was entering in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, based upon the increasing productivity which supervened the period of comparative stagnation of the middle ages, he has this to say, in part:

"Upon the industrial side, it is impossible to exaggerate the influence of travel, exploration and new commerce which fostered a romantic sense of adventure into novelty; loosened the hold of traditional beliefs; created a lively sense of new worlds to be investigated and subdued; produced new methods of manufacture, commerce, banking and finance; and then reacted everywhere to stimulate invention and active experimentation into science. The Crusades, the revival of the profane learning of antiquity and even more perhaps, the contact with the advanced learning of the Mohammedans, the increase of commerce with Asia and Africa, the introduction of the lense, compass and gunpowder, the finding and opening up of North and South America—most significantly called The New World—these are some of the obvious external facts. Contrast between peoples and races previously isolated is always, I think, most fruitful and influential for change when psychological and industrial changes coincide with and reinforce each other. Sometimes people undergo emotional change, what might be called a metaphysical change, through intercourse. The inner set of the mind, especially in religious matters, is altered. At other times there is a lively exchange of goods, an adoption of foreign tools and devices, an imitation of alien habits of clothing, habit and production of commodities. One of these changes

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