

Marxism In Social Theory

THIS article is the second one, following on the first in the September 16th issue, of my reply to Comrade J. A. McDonald's article, "Was Marx a Reformer?" in the "Clarion" of August 16th. Among other matters more or less related to it, our controversy centres, as chief point in dispute, on the anti-labor party position of the S. P. of C.—its determination "to wage war on all other political parties," including "so-called labor" parties, to quote the Party Manifesto. Comrade McDonald defends that position as a sound tactic and revolutionary principle, and claims it has the support of Marxian theory and of Marx, whose authority he regards as final and definitive. In regard to my stand on the party position, on the other hand, I challenge the soundness of it, disputing it, either on the grounds of Marxism, the experience of history, or on the grounds to be deduced from the findings of science since Marx on the nature of man and the development of his societies. My stand is that revolutionary socialist parties should recognize labor parties as representative institutions of an independent movement of the working class in the practical life of political interests and struggle. And that therefore, the socialist aim should not be to destroy labor parties, but to nurture and develop them through education and criticism, thus creating opinion which those parties would reflect and express in action as instrumentalities of working class well-being and progress in the class-struggle. I am to make a series of quotations from Marx supporting my position, but first I have to review the Marxian theory of history, in which, as an element class-struggles play so dominating a part. I have already quoted Marx in favor of my position, but Comrade McDonald asserts that I quote and interpret to suit myself. Hence this review, so that the reader's memory may be refreshed on the theory of Marx and thus be able better to test my use or anyone else's use of quotations from Marx. I am, of course, again open to a similar charge in respect of my presentment of the theory, presented, inevitably coloured by the processes of my own consciousness, as "Geordie" would say. It is left, then, for the reader to use his judgment, which is what is expected for all matter in the "Clarion." Most of this article is summarily lifted from the pages of Veblen and M. Beer, to add to my own knowledge, such as it is, of the history of the intellectual movements of Marx's time, and of his life and life's work, the weight of competent authorities on that as subject matter.

"No individual can overleap his time." "Even philosophy is its time grasped in thought." Thus spake Hegel, the great German philosopher whose thought was as yeast in the dough to the intellectual world of the early 19th century. In treating of Marx and his theoretical work, then, in the manner of a critical review, the "understanding" of a mere votary is not to our purpose, because we seek to "know," not to "believe" of him and his work. I doubt everything so that I may afterwards know, said Descartes. Taking that position as our point of departure, we should say our subsequent understanding would be the result of critical thought and enquiry. Taking Hegel as a guide in our quest of "knowing" our Marx, critical thought and enquiry would be turned on the time in which Marx lived and of which, boy and man, he was the child. Marx's response to the stimuli of the intellectual influences and social conditions of his time was not one of passive acceptance. Docile he was in his capacity to learn, in the sense of being sensitive to his world, but he was also a dynamic, creative personality. Something, as with all men, though more with him than most, something in the heart of his personality, in the centre of his periphery, as it were, escaped wholesale conformity and submission to any and all influences, German Hegelian or English School of Classical Economy or what else. Something there was of him that was free, anarchic, creative,

that was the Marx we know of in the completed comprehensive system of Marxism. It is just that uncaptured fraction of our individuality which enables humanity to break through the "crust" of custom. But here again, he was still the child of the time for he could only work and be creative with the materials that lay to his hand, and he must start out with—as Engels says of the early utopian socialists—he must start out with the intellectual stock-in-trade of his time, whatever his sceptical, restlessly enquiring, sensitive disposition and creative intelligence might do with it subsequently.

The intellectual stock-in-trade of Marx's time now, alas is it, somewhat shop-worn, since the world will persist in moving. Even the laggard hemisphere of ideas moves, creating and groaning in the universal trek. Since our study is of Marx's intellectual life and output, the question arises, what were the influences of an intellectual kind, in particular, what were the schools of thought that most influenced Marx in his social theorizing? And with what "inner light" of preconceptions, postulates and standards of belief and knowledge did those schools of thought approach the problems with which they occupied themselves?

Here let me digress a little into making a few remarks that may throw a light on those "inner lights" with which all men have gone to work in their thought upon their world since man fought with monsters in the prime down to our day of emancipation (!) Darwinism. I do this because in respect of that "inner light" of our preconceptions, I have been insisting that there has been a gradual shift from those of Marx's time in the sciences. That shift has become associated with the name of Darwin who, while he and his work had largely to do with it, as has been suggested, he may be taken as only one of the noises of civilization. Comrade McDonald was scornful in last issue at my insistence on this shift of ground, and at my poor efforts to describe it. Poor enough my efforts no doubt, the subject is difficult to explain and success depends on the reader meeting the writer more than half way in the enquiry. But the shift is a fact and an important one in its ramifications. As to the shift of inner light of preconceptions, as well as I can, I here illustrate what it is that shifts: The human race has travelled a long and tortuous intellectual course since our primitive ancestors worked out their conceptions of the world on the grounds of a full blown animism. All things to them, both animate and inanimate possessed life, spirit personality, likes and dislikes, purpose and will like their own. They saw things and natural elements through the eyes of their own personality, projecting it into objectivity, they dramatized the world in action. "There is little of impersonal or mechanical sequence visible to primitive men in their every-day life: and what there is of this kind in the processes of brute nature about them is in large part inexplicable and passes for inscrutable. It is accepted as malignant or beneficent, and is construed in terms of personality that are familiar to all men by first-hand knowledge of their own acts. The inscrutable movements of the seasons and of the natural forces are apprehended as actions guided by discretion, will power, or propensity, looking to an end, much as human actions are. The processes of inanimate nature are agencies whose habits of life are to be learned and who are to be coerced, outwitted, circumvented, and turned to account, much as the beasts are. At the same time the community is small, and the human contact of the individual is not wide. Neither the industrial life nor the non-industrial social life forces upon men's attention the ruthless impersonal sweep of events that no man can withstand or deflect, such as becomes visible in the more complex and comprehensive life process of the larger community of a later day. There is nothing decisive to hinder men's knowledge of facts and events being formulated in terms of personality

—in terms of habit and propensity and will power. . . . In modern times and particularly in the industrial countries, this coercive guidance (of the impersonal) of men's habits of thought in the realistic direction has been especially pronounced; and the effect shows itself in a somewhat reluctant but cumulative departure from the archaic point of view. . . . Of the sciences, those have wandered furthest on the way that have to do with mechanical sequence and process; and those have best and longest retained the archaic point of view intact which—like the moral, social and spiritual sciences—have to do with process and sequence that is less tangible, less traceable by the use of the senses, and therefore less immediately forces upon the attention the phenomena of sequence as contrasted with that of propensity." (Veblen).

And along comes "Geordie" with this example of "modernism" as a present to myself: "The days have gone forever when it was customary to refer any given effect to some antecedent as being its efficient cause, and when the verb 'to determine' was used more recklessly than it is today. It is probably more convenient to regard any given phenomena as being the resultant of a multiplicity of factors which form the medium in which it develops, conditioned by all co-existing phenomena and colored by the processes of consciousness." O, my good habit, O' lor! no longer it seems can I charge down the citadel of truth firmly astride one Pegasus, but must straddle a multitude. And that coloration business, does that mean that I shall be forever open to the charge of "interpreting to suit myself?" Dammit Geordie, this misery, what is out there anyway? Is Hegel, in this unintentional Pickwickian sense, is Hegel always to have the last word: "What is reasonable is real!" And does that mean, after all that whatever is reasonable from age to age "determines" what is real? I feel dizzy! At any rate, we plume ourselves to day opining that Darwinism is a mile ahead of Hegelianism on the way to an impersonal outlook on the world. Now to Marx.

Marx is of no single line of antecedents in respect of his aims, his postulates and preconceptions. . . . which afford the point of departure for all of his creative work in political and economic theory. By his earlier training he is Hegelian in his method and conception of the process (its scheme of causation) of social development. By his later training under the English classical school of economics he is an uncritical subscriber to the metaphysics of the system of Natural Rights and Natural Liberty.

"The comprehensive system of Marxism, is comprised within the scheme of the Materialistic Conception of History. This Materialistic Conception is essentially Hegelian, although it belongs to the Hegelian Left. . . . (Hegel was an idealist in philosophy) . . . The chief point of interest here, in identifying the Materialistic Conception with Hegelianism is that this identification throws it immediately and uncompromisingly into contrast with Darwinism and the post Darwinian conceptions of evolution. . . . the Materialistic Conception is worked out within a transmuted framework of Hegelian dialectic.

The Hegelian romantic standpoint was wholly personal, whereas the evolutionistic—it may be called Darwinian—standpoint is wholly impersonal.

The theory of progressive misery fits convincingly into the scheme of the Hegelian three phase dialectic. It stands for the antithesis that is to be merged into the ulterior synthesis, but it has no particular force on the grounds of an argument from cause to effect." (Veblen):

Those extracts, statements to be developed, are set down as indicating to the reader the point of view of this critical review and the place of Marxism in the history of social history, as it sees it.

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