

Use and Capacity in Criticism

ONE function of a socialist is to act as critic of working class organizations in the matter of their acts, methods, measures and policies of serving the interests of the working class because criticism is an indispensable educational force—when it is of the right kind. The criticism even of the enemies of the working class may on occasion be of that kind despite the malignant intent, but it has value by accident as it were. For criticism that has the good intent of the progress of the working class, the class must in the main depend on itself, it must be self-critical. But how to do it, that is the question? Particular occasions for criticism need to be studied on their own merits, of course, but we may take it as a guiding principle in all cases that criticism has value in the ratio as it is informed. It also goes without saying that it must be honest. Since the term working-class is a mechanical classification of a social group that is something more than a mere aggregation of individuals, being in fact a group containing within itself individuals having varying affiliations of one sort or another with many other groups, occupational, party, union, religious, sport, fraternal, etc., have varying dispositions, interests, traditions, aptitudes, etc.—since that is so, there are many points of view. Also, since the emotions are engaged, there are emotional basis to give partizan attitudes. The possession of an informed mind, an acquired habit of self-criticism and intellectual honesty, will go far to discipline emotional bias, however, and the point of view may be of value as throwing a light from a particular angle on the many faced truth of any subject, of which it is given to no man to know the whole. We need then informed criticism and void of dishonest practices. It is said that one way of knowing a thing, is by way of knowing what it is not. If, then, we take Comrade McDonald's article in last issue criticising the British Labor Party, it seems to me that we might learn something about how working class self-criticism should be carried on, by examining his criticism as an example of how it should not be done.

Comrade McDonald has his own point of view on all and any labor reform parties which leads him to the conclusion that, in the interests of the working class, labor parties ought to be destroyed. However, in this article I am not concerning myself with his point of view, for my present purpose granting that informed and much honest reasoning may be advanced on its behalf. I do think, however, that the criticism of his in question is not characterized by those attributes of sound educative criticism. And I think the paragraph near the end of his article which sums up his criticism of the British Labor Party displays that itself. I here quote it. Says Comrade McDonald:

"As we have seen, the appellation—labor—does not signify that the party is carrying on propaganda on behalf of the working class in opposition to those who own and rule. It is merely a fascinating title made use of by political adventurers to secure the continued enslavement of the workers and consequently maintain intact the present mode of exploitation."

So says Comrade McDonald, and Comrade McDonald has been a leader among teaching Socialists since some years before the war; that is how he accounts for the British Labor Party. Think of the conditions under which the Labor Party fought the last elections, of the extremely adverse circumstances of a world-wide mood of reaction, of the solid opposition of the bourgeois press, of the extension of the franchise to an inexperienced section of the electorate, of the springing of the Russian letter and, for the first time in British party politics, the co-operation by arrangement of the liberal and conservative parties to defeat a labor party in an election.

Take a look at that paragraph again: you students of the historical method, you scientific socialists trained in the way of looking at history of His-

torical Materialism, as a way of accounting for political movements and parties, and think of your attitude towards other opposing theories of history! I ask, does Comrade McDonald give a satisfactory accounting? Did you ever read or hear of a crasser application of the "great man" theory? Would even a working class "scissor-bill" consider it satisfactory, or a paid advocate of the philistine press or pulpit dare to advance it for fear of ridicule? Comrade McDonald has been a leader in the scientific socialist movement on this coast for some fifteen years, education is his general formula for working class emancipation, a knowledge of history and the ways of history his special specific. Vancouver socialists says he, have wasted too much time on economics. Are we asked to believe then, that he thinks his accounting for the Labor Party is a satisfactory one?

Even a bushman of the hinterland of South Africa would know better. Edward Clodd opens up his "Pioneers of Evolution" with this remark of a Basuto chief, addressed to a traveller two or three generations ago: "Yesterday was the father of today and we must never forget the parentage." Considering the Basuto's circumstances of life, his thought might be called an intellectual tour de force. By way of contrast, consider our superior advantages for reasoning on a problem. Our social environment pulsates with change, every school child is inducted into written histories recording thousands of years of change, the evolutionary idea is a commonplace with us and has a history reaching back to the thinkers of remote antiquity, material cause and effect as a working hypothesis of science is with us, one of those self-evident truths. It is a commonplace procedure to treat a thing, event or institution as an effect, to make it a problem, to enquire, what is it? What are its antecedents? What its life-history? what the general conditions out of which it emerged? what the relevant factors which determined its emergence, growth and development?

Students of history know that the members of social groups tend to develop, in common, mental attitudes on life and social ideals; that the British wage-working class is a long established class dating from the opening up of the era of handicraft in the middle ages; that the class has a long history of independent struggle with its ruling and exploiting classes, containing many attempts to permanently establish a representative political party of its own; that its trade union movement has been and is a powerful cultural influence on working class sentiment, and that the movement has been a means of giving the class a standing in the country; that for several generations there has been a labor movement in Britain with political aspirations, capable of influencing the policies of governments and parties, distinguishable even within the folds of the bourgeois parties as one or the other bargained for its support; that there have been social ideals, challenging the conditions of capitalism or the system itself, acting as a ferment in the country ever since capitalism came into being; that the people of Britain are distinguished by comparison for political mindedness; that they have the traditions of some hundreds of years of representative political institutions as a cultural factor in the formation of the political habit of mind; that our great aggregations of peoples long ago, by necessity of their great numbers, have acquired the habits of delegating authority and electing representative men in their interest or their conceived interest; that the majorities, midway between the Left and Right minorities have within their own ranks of moderate opinion, abundance of men like them in temperament, with as great a knowledge of the world, as great in idealism, as great in honesty, as great in capacity for leadership, and perhaps greater, as any that the Left or Right could produce; that they do not depend, for fighters and leaders in their cause, on political adventurers, in the bad meaning of the

term; that by and large their representative men are truly representative of the majorities who elect them. Some may be more advanced in ideas than their constituents and better informed, but by virtue of likeness of temperament have an instinctive sympathetic understanding of their constituents' capacity for change. Such men are not necessarily untrue to themselves, for they may have a philosophy reconciling the conflict of ideals and the practice of life, similar to wise old Aristotle's whose exhortation was to "teach the extreme and practice the mean," i.e., the possible.

I make the above observations to suggest there is a different background to the British Labor party than the one offered us by Comrade McDonald. Political adventurers! Thanks for the term! I see five and a half million people in Britain breaking the bonds of old customs, loyalties, habits of thought, old humilities, old fears, old illusions—political adventurers all. Here's luck to them.

Let me give an instance of out of what kind of reasoning Comrade McDonald develops his conclusion. Says he:

"No sooner, however, had (Premier) MacDonald and his cohorts kissed the hand of the king and settled down to the position of administering social affairs than the applause of the multitude resounded throughout the earth. In the opinion of many the millenium had arrived for British workers. The poverty stricken outcasts, who were formerly submerged socially and economically, were now to be placed on a basis of equality with the social elite."

Comrade McDonald offers that as fact to Clarion readers! Who, I ask, were the many who thought the millenium had arrived when the British Labor Party took office, and that the submerged would be placed on an equality with the elite? Surely they belong to the realm of fiction and not of fact. But if there were many who so believed, what in the Labor Party's political theory, its ideas on the modes of social change, or its program and declared policies would lead them so to believe? Nothing. Its whole philosophy stands in direct contradiction to that of millenium change. Always during its existence it has been at pains to declare itself a reform party, a step at a time party, a constitutional party, as a party of bargaining and compromise in the interests of peaceful and progressive change. It has earned the animosity of Comrade McDonald and such as are of his opinion, just because it is such a party.

He falls foul of Philip Snowden because he declared it his duty to maintain the national credits unimpaired. But what was Snowden to do when four-fifths of the food supply of a crowded population of forty-five millions come from abroad? Are we to suppose that a revolutionary government can, independent of international credits conjure sustenance for its people out of the air? He quotes Sidney Webb as saying that men of wealth had joined the Labor Party, and asks derisively, "Where could room be found for a class struggle in the midst of this motley crew?" He forgets what a motley crew of middle class minds have been the theoreticians and supporters of the socialist movement. He forgets what that movement owes to Marx and Engels, to name no further, one a doctor of philosophy and the other a wealthy manufacturer. The working class cause would be, in fact, lost, if its appeal did not spread abroad to individuals of all functions. He points the note of scorn at the conflict between the Labor Party's anti-militarist ideals and the Labor government's order for the building of cruisers. But he forgets the everlasting fate of ideals before the practice of life faced by implacable circumstances; that our doing, whether as private individuals or as a collectivity, is never what we ought to do, but what we can do, what we have the strength to do. "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone," is a saying containing a humbling truth of a pretty wide application. We have to broadcast our ideals so that we may recruit strength

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