

Karl Marx and Value

BY F. J. McNEY.

Poor old Marx, he certainly does catch hell from all sides these days. As a prophet and philosopher he was a fizzle. His theory of the class struggle was a fallacy, and he never did know anything about economics. He copied his dialectics from Hegel, and Hegel was a humbug. And the materialistic conception of history, well, it does not amount to anything anyhow. We are assured, however, that in spite of all his fallacies and failures, it is no more than fair to state that Marx was an honest and sincere, even if deluded, champion of the working class. That is all.

The foregoing paragraph represents the conclusions a man must arrive at if he credits everything that has appeared concerning Marx and his theories in all kinds of publications during the last few years, and up to the present time.

Now I am not a hero worshipper, and I never did hold that Marx was infallible; consequently, I have a hunch that he did make quite a few mistakes and peddle a lot of bunk in the course of his lifetime; everybody does that, but there is no reason to assume that because a man makes some mistakes and peddles a certain amount of bunk that everything he says is bunk, and all his theories are fallacies. Many of the critics of Marx appear to have the idea that if they can just get the old man down, and keep him down, they will have abolished for all time, not only his theories, but also the material facts upon which those theories are based. In other words, they seem to ignore the possibility that at least some of his theories may be based on material facts, and that is where they make their little mistake.

To illustrate what I mean let us take the heliocentric theory. That is, the theory that the sun is the centre of the solar system, and that the earth and the other planets revolve in orbits around the sun, not the sun around the earth, as was supposed at one time. When Copernicus published his book announcing this theory he was an old man, and he croaked before his critics could get him, but they collected every copy of the book they could find and burned them. That should have stopped the planets from gadding around through space, but it seems it did not, because a little later Bruno noted that they were still at it. So they tied Bruno up to a stake and burned him to death. They thought that would put a stop to the capers of the earth, at least, if it had any sense of decency at all, but a little later Galileo announced that the earth was still jazzing around the sun. Then they grabbed Galileo and made him swear on a stack of Bibles that the earth never moved an inch in its life. Nevertheless in spite of everything that was done to stop it in the interests of priestcraft, everybody with as much sense as a jack-rabbit knows that the earth is still revolving in its orbit around the sun, and that the theory of Copernicus was a statement of fact. All of which is good and sufficient proof that a theory is not necessarily a fallacy just because it is opposed by certain interests.

Our first question then, is, are all the theories of Marx fallacies? Or, as value is the subject of interest here, are his theories concerning value fallacies? No doubt the old boy talked through his bonnet at times, so I am not moved by the argument that a thing must be true just because Marx said so, but if his theories concerning value are in accordance with facts, then it is possible to prove that such is the case regardless of what he himself has said or left unsaid, and that is the correct method of dealing with any subject. Instead of talking about what Marx said, and what he meant regarding his theories, let us take up the theories themselves, analyze them, compare them with known facts, judge them on their merits and explain the conclusions we arrive at in our own words. What modern astronomer would attempt to describe the solar system merely by telling what Copernicus said about it?

Well, to make a long story short, I hold that the

theories of Marx concerning value are correct, and in accordance with facts, and that no other theory is necessary even as a supplement, but I claim that he made a rotten job of explaining his theories. He solved all the problems connected with the labor theory that had puzzled the classical economists, but his method of presentation was so vague and complicated that he made a profound mystery of a comparatively simple proposition. He wrote three large volumes for the purpose of applying his theories to the capitalist system as a whole, and he buried them so deep in a deluge of words that it requires an expert diver to bring one of them to the surface, and many a good man has died, figuratively speaking, in an attempt to salvage one or two.

If this is not so, why is it that there is so much confusion concerning the works of Marx? Why is it that the best the average exponent of Marx can do is to quote him, tell what he said, and speculate as to what he meant? Why is it that his opponents do not understand him well enough to criticize him intelligently? In my opinion, if Marx had stated his theories concerning value in a clear and concise manner and in the least possible number of words, and had published them in one small volume, leaving the details and particulars to others, he would have accomplished far more than he did by writing "Capital." Then his work would have been easier to understand, easier to explain and these would have been less to criticize, and if his theories are in accordance with facts, as I have a hunch they are, they would have taken care of themselves just as the theory of Copernicus took care of itself. To show the vague and complicated method Marx had of explaining a point at times, I will quote one passage from "Value, Price and Profit." In chapter seven dealing with "Laboring Power," in which he points out that it is labor power, and not labor, that the worker sells, the first paragraph reads thus:

"Having now, as far as it could be done in such a cursory manner, analyzed the nature of value, of the value of any commodity whatever, we must turn our attention to the specific value of labor. And here, again, I must startle you by a seeming paradox. All of you feel sure that what they daily sell is their labor; that, therefore, labor has a price, and that, the price of a commodity being only the monetary expression of its value, there must certainly exist such a thing as the value of labor. However, there exists no such thing as the value of labor in the common acceptance of the word. We have seen that the amount of necessary labor crystallized in a commodity constitutes its value. Now, applying this notion of value, how could we define, say, the value of a ten hours' working day? How much labor is contained in that day? Ten hours' labor. To say that the value of a ten hours working day is equal to ten hours' labor, or the quantity of labor contained in it, would be tautological and, moreover, a nonsensical expression. Of course, having once found out the true but hidden sense of the expression 'value of labor,' we shall be able to interpret this irrational and seemingly impossible application of value, in the same way that, having once made sure of the real movement of the celestial bodies, we shall be able to explain their apparent or merely phenomenal movements."

What Marx means to say in that long complicated passage, and what he does say in his own obscure way, is, that it is nonsensical to speak of the value of labor, because value and labor are one and the same thing. And that is all he says. But I doubt if one out of twenty readers arrive at that conclusion after reading it. True enough, that conclusion is implied whenever the labor theory is dealt with, but it is seldom definitely stated. The idea that the average reader gets from the above quoted passage, is that Marx said labor had no value, and therefore, labor is valueless, but labor power possesses value. I have heard several argue to that effect. Now it is obvious that if labor is not itself value, and possesses no value, it cannot possibly confer value on anything else, and note, that it is labor, and not labor power, that is crystallized in commodities. This shows how easy it is to misunderstand Marx unless

a person reasons a little for himself. And there are many passages in the works of Marx that are more difficult to understand than the one just quoted.

As this article is something in the nature of what Bernard Shaw would call "First Aid to Critics," that is, a kind of introduction to a few remarks I intend to make later, if I find it convenient, it might be well to adjourn for the present.

TREATIES AND MURDERS

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smudge on one's hand? Was it shaking hands with murder to recognize Kolshak? This—specimen, shall we say—was quite intimate with Britain. With the help of British gold and troops, it seems, he upset the elected assembly of Western Siberia, and organized a new one, on the basis of real "democracy." Was that minding one's own business? And when Kolshak promised immunity to the members of the assembly he had destroyed, if they gave themselves up, and shot eight of them who did so, on the spot—was that shaking hands with murder? When Britain and France and Japan, those gallant defenders of the small nations, controlled the elections in Vladivostok—was that minding one's own business? When Siberian prisons were groaning with the victims of Czarist "freedom," when bloody Sundays, red squares and strike massacres were the commons of the day, when even the members of the Duma were arrested—who then shook hands with murder, and sacrificed for democracy? When British gold—and probably French—and German bayonets raised and supported the treacherous Rada against the choice of the people,—was that leaving others to mind their own business? When British and German troops marched into the Baltic Provinces in support of the most reactionary gang of landlords in the world, and forced the people to accept their tyranny was that the lesson of one's own business? When Finland lay prostrate to the "White Terror," who recognized that "government"? Who shook hands with murder? When Britain and France and Germany ringed Soviet Russia with "fire and death," when the poisoned propaganda of capital ravished the mind of the nations; when churches poured those tainted millions into the service of Czarist generals, all of them free by Soviet clemency, all of them dishonored with broken faith; when Britain—and the shame of it lies black as ink on the shield of her vaunted "honor"—prevented even necessary medical supplies into Russia in her dire distress, and closed her ports in the days of her famine; when she sailed into the Baltic and prohibited neutral trade with Russia—who then left others to mind their affairs? Who then shook hands with murder, or with things more deadly than murder?

We have no brief for the labor government. We like it as little as the "Colonist" does. Still, inept and clumsy and unimaginative as it is, torn asunder with confusions! and the barren restrictions of bourgeois responsibility; nevertheless, somewhere in the remote future, its hope is the emancipation of humanity. While all other governments with their dissembled leagues, and crafty diplomacy, and poisoned news, stand for the eternal slavery of man. And while we do not rejoice in calamity, we are still glad that it is a government of the iron heel that is now faced with the impossible task of reconciling intensive exploitation with a market forever vanished. In the depths of the struggle there shall be wee and death. But there shall also be a mighty harvest of experience. And out of it shall come the new government of the proletariat, clear with the issues of reality, unwavering in the deliberateness of its design. A government that shall no longer hold carnival with Korah, and go no more smaying with Cain and Tago. A government dallying no more with expediency, but conscious and aroused, sweeping away with the strong arm of fructifying labor, the guile of a privilege, and the ethos of a property that stand, amidst the seeming treasures of our socialized life, like a puff-ball amongst autumn corn.