

Preconceived Ideals or Material Conditions---Which?

The Driving Force Which Determines Social Changes and the Forms of the Social Structure.

A previous article in these columns dealt briefly with the question of the precise form which the Social Revolution is likely to take—as being the most immediate of those two issues over which Socialists and others do rage so furiously together to the great perplexity of the uninitiated. The second of these two issues—the form and character of that state of Society which is destined to succeed Capitalism—I shall endeavor to deal with here.

This question has its roots in that timeworn, threadbare, utterly discredited but persistent idea that Society can and should be reorganized in accordance with some preconceived plan. For this reason it should be very cautiously approached by the Scientific Socialist and with a proper understanding of the speculative nature of any discussion which may arise from it.

It would, perhaps, be a very excellent thing, if it were possible, for a number of the wisest and most virtuous men of all nations to convene and map out a plan of an ideal state of Society—a society in which all those things which are objectionable to us should be conspicuous by their absence, and all those things which are considered desirable by us should be present in abundance—and thereafter proceed to reorganize Society in accordance with that plan. Quite a number of objections might be urged against such a scheme even if it were possible. For instance, it is hardly likely that we would be able to agree upon what things were desirable and what were not. But the main objection to the whole thing—and quite a weighty objection too, when one considers it—is that it simply can not be done. The Social Process does not work that way. The attainment of any ideals which some of us—or all of us for that matter—may hold is strictly limited by the material conditions obtaining from time to time.

In spite of the fact that the human animal stands at the head of all forms of life; in spite of the enormous advance made by all branches of scientific research; in spite of the fact that man has developed the ability to use, to a certain extent, the forces of nature he is still but a pawn in the game, and a mighty insignificant pawn at that.

We may try at times to flatter ourselves that what we do we do of our own 'Free Will.' When we do that we are like the Irish carpenter who slipped and fell from his scaffold and, to cover his confusion, explained that he had come down for some nails. 'Free Will' is a delusion. All Sociologists are agreed upon that. At the best we are able to understand, to some extent, why we do what we do, but we are not able to determine our own actions much less the movements of Society. We act as we do not because we wish to but because we must.

The whole argument, in the final analysis, resolves itself into the difference between 'Idealism' and 'Materialism.' Idealism claims that the 'idea' is the only reality; that Ideals are the motive-force, as it were, of Society; that Society moves by striving after and working towards Ideals. Now, as a matter of plain fact, this theory is long since discredited. True it is still accepted, more or less unconsciously, by the great mass of unthinking people, but this is owing to the fact that they are deliberately and purposely kept in ignorance of the real facts of the case. And they are kept in ignorance for no other reason than that it serves the interests of the ruling class that they should be ignorant of such facts.

Religion, which has always been and still is the greatest bulwark of ruling class privilege, takes its final stand on the basis of 'Idealism.' Remove this prop and Religion falls of its own dead weight. It is many years now since Marx and Engels formulated the Materialist Interpretation of History

which drove the final nail in the coffin of 'Idealism,' but as the Holy Roman Church conspired to suppress the teachings of Copernicus, Bruno and Galileo—teachings which the whole world has long since acknowledged to be correct—so have all the churches conspired with the ruling class to suppress and ignore where they can not suppress the teachings of Marx and Engels—teachings which the scientific world knows to be correct in principle and which are yet destined to sweep religion and ruling classes into the discard together.

Materialism does not deny the existence of ideals in the minds of men, nor does it deny that these ideals exert considerable influence over their actions. But it does contend that ideals are but the reflexes of the material conditions under which we live and it is the material conditions and not the ideals which are the real driving force behind social movements.

This is one of those truths to realize which we must look below the surface. It is not apparent any more than it is apparent that the earth moves round the sun. It is a fact that Society does sometimes move in accordance with, or, rather, in the direction indicated by, certain widely held ideals. To the superficial observer this may suggest that these ideals constitute that force at the behest of which Society moves. Anyone who has seen a freight train 'backing up' might—if they were ignorant of such things—imagine, because the train moved in accordance with and in the same direction as the caboose, that therefore the caboose was pulling the train. To anyone informed on such subjects, however, it would be quite obvious that the real motive force was derived from the engine behind and that the movement of the caboose was but a reflex of the movement communicated by the engine to the body of the train.

So it is with the Social Process. Material conditions—the engine—are the real driving force. Ideals are but a reflex of that force. For instance; we live, and have lived for thousands of years, under different forms of society in which every man's hand is against his neighbor. None are free from the effects of this. Even the members of the ruling class are obliged to struggle with each other in order to maintain their position. What is the result? The most widely held Ideal for thousands of years has been 'The Brotherhood of Man,' an ideal condition where that state of affairs which has obtained for centuries, and which is becoming less and less tolerable, shall not exist. As far as striving after ideals is concerned we have been striving after that one for ages. Can any man honestly assert that we are any nearer to its attainment than we were, say, nineteen-hundred years ago?

The ideal of 'The Brotherhood of Man' is a beautiful one. It is certainly nothing to any man's discredit that he should hold it. But it should be understood that we can never attain to it or anything approaching it, so long as existing material conditions do not favor it. Wherefore, those who profess to aspire to and strive towards it would be better advised to devote their energies to the endeavor to modify, as far as is humanly possible, the material conditions under which Society exists. Our friends of the Cassock, the Cowl and the Surplice, and all those who are deluded by them, might give this a trial. They must expect, however, in such an event, to be very quickly taken in hand by their masters and ours and soundly spanked for their impudence. None know better than our masters how utterly futile is this striving after ideals, and none know better than they how much it is to their interests to keep us so deluded. What they do not seem to realize, however, is that in the grip of the evolutionary process they are as powerless as we.

The evolution of Society has been likened to an unhatched chicken. There comes a time when further development within the egg is impossible. The

shell, which at first formed a protective covering, has served its purpose. It is no longer necessary, in fact has become a menace, a bar to further progress. It has become reactionary. The shell must be broken, the chick must win through to liberty—or die. So it is with Society. Development within a certain form proceeds until a point is reached where further development along the lines imposed by that particular form is impossible. When that point is reached one of two things must happen—like the chicken, Society must break open and discard the shell which retards its further development—or die. The death of the Social Organism is a possibility of such exceeding remoteness that we are justified in contending that, when that point is reached, Society is going to break through its shell. That is Revolution.

The typesetter is requested to leave a gap here so that members of the 'Citizen's League' may have time to catch their breath.

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The chicken, however, does not break out of its shell because of any beautiful ideal it may have formed concerning what awaits it outside. It does not peck away at its hard covering because it chooses to do so of its own 'free will.' The chicken's beak is soft at first, and it probably hurts it to peck. But it does so because it must. Its existing condition has become intolerable.

And that, figuratively speaking, is the position in which Society finds itself today. Naturally, to we who realize how close at hand the Social Revolution is, the question of what the subsequent Society will be like is one of absorbing interest. Nevertheless, those of us who have a proper understanding of the principles involved will enter very cautiously upon any discussion of it. Assuming—for the sake of continuing the analogy—something which is highly improbable, namely, that the chicken has some conception of what the outside world is like it is quite obvious that whatever that concept might be it could not coincide with reality for the chicken has had no experience of any world but that within its shell. But even a chicken, under such circumstances, would, we must admit, be justified in assuming that, at least, once free of its shell, it would not be subjected to those same intolerable conditions which were hindering its development.

So it is with us. We can not say what characteristics will mark post-capitalist society. But we can say which will not. We are not justified in asserting that the future Society will be Communism, Collectivism, Individualism or any otherism. But we may be sure that it will not be Capitalism. We are adrift on the sea of speculation when we commence to paint beautiful word-pictures of the future society. But we are on solid ground when we contend that, after the Social Revolution is an accomplished fact, economic class divisions with antagonistic interests and all those intolerable conditions to which such class divisions give rise will not exist.

Meanwhile, it might be as well to remember that the Social Revolution is not yet accomplished and there is work to do. The future will provide for itself out of the exigencies of the moment. We live in today.

C. K.

A MANY-LANGUED LEGION.

All hands are showing great determination to force "self-determination" (!) on Russia. A despatch in the Daily Herald says, "that the 7th Polish Division, which is being sent to Lodz, is commanded by Frenchmen. It is made up of former German Poles, together with Polish, English, French and American volunteers. The artillery is served by Austrian Poles sent from Italy." Three cheers for Imperialistic Internationalism.