

# The Materialist Conception of History

Gabriel Deville's preface to his "The People's Marx." This work was Deville's epitome of the first volume of Marx' "Capital," which as he states, was undertaken on the invitation and executed with the encouragement of Marx himself.

**B**y study, and by observation of the phenomena of ignorance and organic Nature, Man becomes conscious of their relations of cause and effect and becomes more and more the master of his own development.

"Before co-ordinating his ideas and grasping their different relations, man acts. This is true, both in the childhood of the individual and the race. But it is only from the time that it becomes subordinate to deliberate thought that his action ceases to be incoherent and becomes really and rapidly effective. And what is true of every other kind of action is true of revolutionary action. It must have science for its guide, or its puerile efforts will produce only abortive effects.

"No matter what the subject may be, to maintain that science is useless or that study has had its day, is only an idle pretext to avoid study or an attempt to excuse wilful, persistent ignorance.

"It is evident that the study of social life, alone and of itself, will not modify the social form and will not furnish, elaborated in the smallest details, the ground-plan and elevation of a new society; but it will disclose the constituent elements of the present society; their essential combinations and relations, their tendencies and the law which presides over their evolution. This knowledge will put us in a position, not 'to abolish by decrees the natural phases of the development of modern society, but to shorten the period of pregnancy and to mitigate the pangs of child-birth.'

"By preaching the thorough study of society, Karl Marx did not pretend to be the creator of a science unknown before him. This is proven by the numerous notes to his work, which is on the contrary, based on the labor of the economists who preceded him, and he had the courage and candor, in the case of every proposition, to cite the author who first formulated it. But no one has done more than Karl Marx to make plain by their analysis the true meaning and tendency of social phenomena. No one, therefore, has done more for the emancipation of the working-class, for the emancipation of humanity.

"Yes, without doubt, others, before him, felt the social injustices and grew righteously indignant. Many were those who dreamt of remedying these evils and drew up on paper admirable projects of reform. Inspired by a laudable generosity, having in most cases a very clear perception of the sufferings of the masses, they criticised with as much justice as eloquence the existing order of things. But as they had no exact conception of its causes and its evolution they constructed (on paper) model societies that were none the less chimerical because their architects had some correct intuitions. If they had the universal welfare as a motive, they did not have reality as a guide.

"In their projects of social renovation, they entirely disregarded facts, pretending to have recourse only to the pure light of reason, as if reason, which is only the co-ordination and generalization of the ideas furnished by experience, could be, in itself, a source of knowledge—knowledge external and superior to the cerebral modifications of external impressions.

"In a word, they were idealists, just as the anarchists are today. Instead of making reality the starting point of their reasoning, they attribute reality to the fictions born of their particular ideal of absolute justice.

"Finding, from the speculative point of view, that the most agreeable of all social regimes would be that which would permit the most unrestricted freedom to the blossoming of individuality, and which would have no law save the free will of individuals, the anarchists preach its realization without troubling themselves to enquire whether the economic necessities permit of its establishment. They do not suspect the retrograde character of the extreme individualism, the unlimited autonomy, which is the essence of anarchism.

"In the various order of facts, evolution is invariably accomplished by the transition from an incoherent form, from a state of diffusion to a state of concentration. And, as the concentration of the parts becomes greater, their reciprocal interde-

pendence increases, that is to say, that more and more they cannot extend the range of their own activity without the co-operation of the other parts. This is a general truth that the anarchists do not suspect. Poor fellows! They pretend to see further than anyone else, but they do not even perceive that they are marching backwards.

"For all these fanciful conceptions—although more or less well meant—Marx was the first to substitute the study of social phenomena based on the real conception—the materialist conception. He did not sing the praises of a system more or less perfect from the subjective point of view. He scrupulously examined the facts, methodically arranged the results of his examination and drew the conclusion, which was and is the scientific explanation of the historical progress of humanity, and, particularly, of the capitalist period through which we are passing.

"History, he has shown, is nothing but the history of class conflicts. The division of society into classes, which made its appearance with the same social life, of man, rests on economic relations—maintained by force—which enable some to succeed in shifting on to the shoulders of others the natural necessity of labor.

"Material interests have always been the inciting motives of the incessant struggles of the privileged classes, either with each other, or against the inferior classes at whose expense they live. Man is dominated by the material conditions of life, and these conditions, and therefore the mode of production, have determined and will determine human customs, ethics and institutions—social, economic, political, juridical, etc.

"As soon as one part of society has monopolized the means of production, the other part, upon whom the burden of labor falls, is obliged to add to the labor-time necessary for its own support, a certain surplus labor time, for which it receives no equivalent,—time that is devoted to supporting and enriching the possessors of the means of production. As an extractor of unpaid labor, which, by means of the increasing surplus-value whose source it is, accumulates every day, more and more, in the hands of the proprietary class the instruments of its dominion, the capitalist regime surpasses in power all the antecedent regimes founded on compulsory labor.

"But today, the economic conditions begotten by this regime, trammelled in their natural evolution by this very regime, inexorably tend to break the capitalist mold which can no longer contain them, and these destroying principles are the elements of the new society.

"The historic mission of the class at present exploited—the proletariat—which is being organized and disciplined by the very mechanism of capitalist production, is to complete the work of destruction begun by the development of social antagonisms. It must, first of all, definitely wrest from its class adversaries the political power—the command of the force devoted by them to preserving intact their economic monopolies and privileges.

"Once in control of the political power, it will be able, by proceeding to the socialization of the means of production through the expropriation of the usurpers of the fruits of other's toil, to suppress the present contradictions between collective production and private capitalist appropriation, and to realize the universalization of labor and the abolition of classes.

"Such is a summary sketch of the irrefutable theory taught by Marx. His constant aim is to enable every reader to judge of its truth and validity for himself.

"As thought is nothing but the intellectual reflex of the real movement of things, he has not for an instant departed from the material foundation of his thought, from external phenomena; he has not separated man from the conditions of his existence. He has observed, he has stated the result of his observation, and purely by the depth of his analysis he has complemented his positive conception of the present order by the knowledge of the inevitable dissolution of this order."

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# The Essence of Morality

**T**HE historian and ethnologist have uncovered the past sufficiently to reveal the fact that codes of morality have been, as varied and numerous as the different forms of society under which man has lived. We have only to compare the rules of conduct prevailing in different sections of the globe today to see that there is no eternal standard of morality, but on the contrary that ideas of morality vary according to time, place and conditions. A code of conduct only becomes necessary in group association, for, obviously, if man could live alone and apart from others of his race, it would not be necessary to respect or recognize anybody's desires but his own. Out of mutual dependence, however, grew the recognition of mutual needs.

Man's primal needs remain constant throughout the ages. The instinct of self-preservation demands a certain amount of food, clothing and shelter, and the needs of race preservation force man to seek sexual companionship. Where a state of society exists that is controlled by every member, and rights go hand in hand with obligation, there the individual needs of each man become the social needs, and there is no conflict between the social code of morality and the individual's requirements. We have an example of such a condition in a few savage and barbarian tribes still existing on the globe where private property has not come into existence; and in the researches of L. H. Morgan, it is clearly shown that most of the Indian tribes living on the American continent at the time of the white man's arrival lived in this state—which is termed primitive communism, the social unit being the gens, an association of kin.

Socialists do not look back upon the days of primitive communism with futile regret or wish to wipe out of existence all the material progress that has been made, and hark back to the days of primitive simplicity. The foundation stone of all slave societies (including capitalism) has been the right of private property, and while the time has come when private property is no longer essential to the needs of society in general and actually a clog in the wheels of economic progress, this advance in the means of supplying the necessities of life, could not have been accomplished without the private initiative and unrestrained greed for individual power obtaining in the past. When we understand the foregoing, then we are better able to inquire into the subject of morality, for the morals of any society reflect its point of economic development, and in class society are necessarily fashioned by the dominant interests in order that the existing social relationships may be maintained.

Perhaps no greater revolution in morals occurred in the world's history than at the inception of private property. The idea of the exclusive and permanent right of one man to one woman supplanted the sexual freedom that formerly prevailed, and by sexual freedom is not meant a state of chaotic sex relations, but of voluntary sexual association. The monogamic marriage was desired and instituted by the first property owners in order that their children (and their children only) might inherit their property, and religion, pliant servant of those in power, early incorporated the doctrine of womanly chastity, and monogamy then, as now, implied the faithfulness of the wife, but not necessarily of the husband.

Within the old gentile group, there was no law against stealing, as such a thing was impossible, owing to the fact that the wealth of the members was meagre and used in common. But when man reached the stage of the domestication of animals, an enormous addition of wealth was thereby added to the group, who at first owned the early herds in common. Private appropriation soon showed its avaricious head, and then a struggle took place which broke up the cohesion and unity of the group, and new associations based on property qualifications usurped the authority of the kindred group.