

# The "Economic Factor" in the Materialist Interpretation of History

Being a reply to a letter of enquiry arising out of a friendly controversy between two comrades concerning the "Economic Factor" as all comprehensive in the Marxian system, and concerning also "Race," "Natural Environment," "Cultural Influences," as directing influences in the march of events in history.

By C. STEPHENSON.

"In the middle of the century, (the 19th), two men sought to incorporate in their philosophy the physical basis which Hegel had ignored in his spiritism—recognising that life is conditioned by an environment and not an abstraction for metaphysics. H. T. Buckle in his "History of Civilisation in England" (1857), was the first to work out the influences of the material world upon history, developing through a wealth of illustration the importance of food, soil and the general aspect of nature upon the formation of society. Buckle did not as is generally believed make these three factors dominate all history. He distinctly stated that the advance of European civilization is characterised by a diminishing influence of physical laws and an increasing influence of mental laws, and 'the measure of civilization is the triumph of mind over external agents.' Yet his challenge not only to the theologian but to those historians whose indolence of thought or 'natural incapacity' prevented them from attempting more than the annalistic record of events, called out a storm of protest from almost every side. Now that the controversy has cleared away, we see that in spite of Buckle's too confident formulation of his laws, his pioneer work in a great field marks him out as the Augustine of the scientific age. Among historians, however, Buckle's theory received but little favor for another generation. Meanwhile the economists had themselves taken up the problem, and it was from them that the historians of today have learned it. Ten years before Buckle published his history, Karl Marx had already formulated the 'economic theory of history.' Accepting with reservation Feuerbach's attack on the Hegelian 'absolute idea' based on materialistic grounds (*Der Mensch ist, was er ist*), Marx was led to the conclusion that the causes of that process of growth which constitutes the history of society, are to be found in the economic conditions of existence. From this he went on to socialism, which based its militant philosophy upon this interpretation of history.

But the truth or falsity of Socialism does not affect the theory of history. In 1845 Marx wrote of the young Hegelians that to separate history from natural science and industry was like separating the soul from the body, and 'finding the birth place of history, not in the gross material production on earth, but in the misty cloud formation of heaven. (*Die Heilige Familie* p. 238). In his 'Miserere de la Philosophie' (1847), he lays down the principle that social relationships largely depend upon modes of production, and therefore the principles, ideas and categories which are thus evolved are no more eternal than the conditions they express but are historical and transitory products. In his famous 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' (1848), the theory was applied to show how the industrial revolution had replaced feudal with modern conditions. But it had little vogue except among Socialists, until the third volume of 'Das Kapital' was published in 1894 when its importance was borne in upon continental scholars. Since then the controversy has been almost as heated as in the days of the Reformation. It is an exaggeration of the theory which makes it an explanation of all human life, but the science of dynamic sociology rests upon the postulate of Marx."

Ency. Britannica (11th ed.)

Abstract from history article contributed by James Thomson Shotwell, P.H.D., Prof. Hist. in Columbia University, New York City.

Dear Comrade,—

Received your letter with pleasure. As well as I am able within the time at my disposal, I herein comply with your request for information on certain matters raised in a dispute between you and an opponent of yours, on the Marxian theory of history, i.e., the Materialist Interpretation. In compliance with your further request for the non-Marxian testimony of the "Britannica" on the Marxian theory it is also herewith.

You say your opponent considers any Socialist source of information on the Marxian theory of history as of no authority. The Materialistic Interpretation, then, is in bad case with him, if only the voices of its enemies are to be heard. What should we think of an administrator of the law who would only hear one side of a case? Instead of holding the

balance fair, I think he would be degrading his office to that of executioner

In the main, your opponent's objections are pointless and ineffectual because he appears to be unaware of the issue that divides the Materialistic and Idealistic schools of philosophy. Else how could he, for instance, raise the particularly pointless objections to materialism, "that the term 'material' does not allow for human thought as a factor," and 'that human thought is not material as material must partake of matter, and matter is only such as possesses weight or dimension.' No one has claimed that the mind, or thought or idea are material substances, any more than it has been claimed for nutrition. Are all our ideas, as claimed by the Materialists, images, formed by the mind, of experienced things of the material world? Or have we ideas as claimed by the idealists, which transcend experience, being innate in the constitution of our mind and independent of experience: principles of knowledge, the categories of time and space, and cause and effect, concepts whose truth we know beyond doubt intuitively; but which we can not know by reason and analysis? In like manner and to the same effect, it is claimed that the knowledge of moral principles, and of God, soul, immortality, free-will, etc., is knowledge which can only be arrived at intuitively and not by matter-of-fact reason and analysis. The dictionary has it: "Intuition, the power of the mind by which it immediately perceives the truth of things without reasoning or analysis." Thus to the Idealist there are two kinds of knowledge; to the Materialist only one. The point in dispute, is, as to the source and nature of such conceptions as named, and this gives occasion for the terms Materialism and Idealism being applied to the opposing schools. The dispute is not at all as to whether thought is a factor in the historical process. Both schools allow for thought as a factor, neither of them denying its influence, least of all the Materialists; for, are not they, everywhere, the hated who sap and mine against the citadels of entrenched orthodoxy, ignorance and that slavish apathy whose other name is mental indolence? And what purpose, indeed, could Marx, himself arch-materialist, have had in view in devoting his whole energies and great ability during his mature life up to his death in harness, to the increase of human knowledge of that very historical process? And whether your friend considers the influence of Marxian thought good or evil, he can hardly deny that it has influenced scientific enquiry and theory in the domains of history, economics, and politics, for, as the "Britannica" has it: "The science of dynamic sociology rests upon the postulate of Marx." As a further consequence of its influence on thought, there is involved the translation of thought into act and act into fact. It is thus with increasing measure that Marxian theory influences practical affairs in the life of our time.

In respect of what I have to say on the Materialistic Interpretation and in justice to that theory, I must call to your minds, what you will both realize, the inescapable limitations, the inadequacies inherent in all brief and summary definitions or explanations. The corollary to that is the dictum that the essence of any school or system of thought, religious or secular, is not to be found in any particular phrase, formula or part of the system, nor in any one man's contributions to it. Its essence is only to be found in the whole body of it. It is hardly necessary to point out, especially in respect of what is known as the Marxian School of Scientific Socialism, that that dictum has been grossly neglected, sometimes in a spirit of partizanship, sometimes in ignorance, though oftener through malice by reason that it takes issue with orthodox teachings and the old familiar ways of thinking to which we, however, have become habituated. The dictum, however, has received its most malicious abuse at hands inspired by private in-

terest, such as Marx spoke of when he spoke of the domain of political economy, that in that domain, "free scientific enquiry meets not merely the same enemies as in all other domains. The peculiar nature of the material it deals with summons as foes into the field of battle the most violent, mean and malignant passions of the human breast, the Furies of private interest."

On the point at issue between Materialism and Idealism, dictionary definitions, as I said, are inevitably inadequate because of their brevity; nevertheless, any dictionary will, I think, show that that dispute is as to which belongs priority, thought, or the world of material qualities and forces. The dictionary has it: "Idealism, is the doctrine that in external perceptions the objects immediately known are ideas, that all reality is in its nature psychological, i.e., mental." In other words, it asserts that there is a conceptual world of the mind that is independent of the race's life experiences.

Materialism rejects the doctrine of Idealism, by taking the position that ideas are the reflection of the material world in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought. Its attitude to the problem of man and his place in nature is a naturalistic one, based on the biological sciences. It asserts that the whole man, as evolved from lower forms of life, with the physical as well as the psychical traits native to him, his instinctive tendencies and aptitudes of whatever kind, emotional or mental, is an outcome of the interaction of organism and environment, natural and social. Thinking itself, it has been truly said, is but an outcome of the necessity for man of getting out of trouble. As his instinctive traits determine for him what is worth while he is thus driven to be an active factor in his environment. The materialist claims that intelligence is not the original shaper and final cause of things, but that thought is but man's mental response to the stimulus of his material environment. That mental response carries with it, however, as a further consequence, the translation of thought into action and action into the fact of an adaptive adjustment, either by conforming to the conditions of his environment or by changing the conditions for good or ill, as the outcome may be.

The question that hangs on the issue between Materialism and Idealism, is, are we to depend upon the supposed higher, innate ideas, the eternal and absolute truths of Idealism for our guidance in the affairs of life, or, are we to reject them and take experience for our guide? Materialism says the latter, and even says further, that the so-called eternal truths and verities of Idealism are, after all, but the mental reflections of humanity's experiences of the material world, distorted or sublimated by the imagination. Moral concepts are the product of human association, are the outcome of a generally felt necessity in any community for a rule of life and let life being lived up to in some sort of fashion. Those others, the concepts of God, the soul, of freedom and immortality, have also their causes in the material world. They are attempts to escape from the real world of bitter experience by idealizing it. It has been said, the mind needs system and abhors the unknown and the anarchic. Also, the insatiable heart of man longs for comfort, consolation and support amidst the evils, the oppressive conditions and frustrations incidental to life in a so largely alien world. Hitherto mankind has found what satisfactions and consolations it could by the fictitious way of belief in an independent world of spirit, much as the factory girl may fly to the fictitious world of the Duchess novelettes, or the "movie" show, in order to escape for a time the dullnesses and dread realities of life in a factory town. Materialism, however, calls for a rigorous facing of realities. So may we gain intelligence for re-creating the world.

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