

Book Review

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARX. By Harry Waton. New York, The Marx Institute. 268 pp.

IN the entire field of proletarian thought there is no more interesting phenomenon than that perversity which induces the most shameless reformers to claim Marx as their father and their God. It would not surprise us to find his name chanted in the Litany, or included in the convocation of the saints.

The book before us has a foreword by the publishers which does not mince matters,—“The perversions and misconceptions of the misinterpreters of Marx—the Kautskys, the Plechanoffs and the Hillquits—gave birth only to the cowardice of the Second International.”

It is somewhat disconcerting to find the first sentence of the book announce that the “cowardice” of an entire class should be attributed to a few men.

Particularly when the first two were, ten years at least before the outbreak of war, in the forefront of revolutionary activity, (see Lenin’s “Left Wing Communism,” and “Lessons of the Russian Revolution”) and, further, that Trotsky has particularized the reasons for the failure of the working class to hinder, much less prevent, the cataclysm—(“The Bolsheviks and World Peace,” pages 172-182, of which we take but a few sentences): “It would be futile to seek these causes in the mistakes of individuals, in the narrowness of the leaders and party committees. They must be sought in the conditions of the epoch in which the Socialist International first came into being and developed.”

“Comrade Waton,” the publishers tell us, “has in this book rendered an inestimable service to the Socialist movement by crystallizing the differences between revolutionary Socialism and the opportunism of the Second International.” We cannot too highly commend the considerateness which prompted a policy contrary to the practice of our school book problems, by getting the solution at the beginning instead of the end of the book. To us it is a sword and buckle, as we pass through the valley of the shadow of Bergson, Jesus, Kant, and Spinoza.

The introduction and the first chapter serve as a test—if the reader survives—the rest is simple. It is a teleological interpretation of life. Life uses the earth and particularly uses man to express itself.

Dr. Waton’s estimation of our intelligence is more modest than our own, and this may be of great value, because we do often, to our harm, overlook the most obvious fact; but surely it is superfluous to inform us that “in order to live and multiply their kind, living things must have the means of life.” (p. 21.)

However, between life and the means of life a struggle arises. Life increases faster than the means of life. “Professor Huxley,” we read, “tells us that if a protozoa—a mere microscopic creature—be given the opportunity to increase and multiply according to its capacity and tendency and a like opportunity be given to its progeny, in the course of six months the aggregate mass of their bodies would equal in size the mass of the earth—so infinitely great is their power and tendency to increase and multiply.” But this is nothing to the “power and tendency” of some people to “increase and multiply” words needlessly. And while Huxley viewed “the ravages of the terrible monster over-multiplication as the greatest of all riddles, we can say, as he says of the philosophers, why should our souls be greatly vexed! The majesty of the fact is on our side and the elemental forces of nature are working for us.

The fact is, neither the prolific protozoa nor the slow breeding elephant, which Darwin instances as capable of covering the world, will do so. Nor does life increase faster than the means of life, except in a schoolroom lesson, to impress the unsophisticated with the tremendous fecundity of nature. All life is the means of life to some other life form. Thus the limit is set to overpopulation, for practicable purposes at any rate.

Excuse all this “Life” because the book before

us carries the word in almost every line, for the first few chapters.

And such sentences as this appear page after page: “Life transcends not only the means of life, but also the living beings themselves.” At last, breaking loose from this whirlpool of transcending life our author scolds with vigor those who charge Socialists with irreligion—“Can these impudent blasphemers and conceited fools charge the Socialists with being irreligious? Does it lie in their mouths to charge the Socialists with the desire to dethrone God, repudiate religion?” etc.

But, as Dr. Waton says, “more of this anon.”

In the meanwhile we are told ere we discuss idealism, that “We must distinguish between the moral nature of man, that is, between his capacity and desire to attain an ideal, and the object of that ideal. This will reveal to us the significant fact, that, though striving after an ideal is not materialistic, the object of an ideal is always a material reality. This will require consideration.” We should say so. But the present reviewer is not “game” for that consideration, so let us proceed to Marx, (page 44) “Therefore human history can be understood and rationality interpreted only when read in the light of the history of human efforts to acquire the means of life—and in this manner Marx interpreted the past history of the human race and in accordance with this interpretation he formulated the future development and history of the human race. And to understand this interpretation is the task before us.” Following this we have the famous passage from the Preface to the “Critique.”

It is somewhat remarkable that anyone should have read that Preface and conceive that the history of man can be read in “the light of the history of human efforts to acquire the means of life.” It is the means whereby he produces his sustenance to which Marx attaches so much importance.

However, nothing daunted, Dr. Waton proceeds to go to the root of the matter, so in order to understand Marx we must start with Herbert Spencer. Hardly are we introduced to the synthetic philosopher, when Kant invades the chamber, and argument ensues as to how we acquire knowledge; after much juggling with the terms a priori and a posteriori, we are told Kant was right and Spencer was wrong.

Spencer maintains all knowledge is the result of experience, but after twenty pages, almost half a thousand words of chinwagging, between Spencer and Kant, we find they are both wrong. “That both views are fundamentally wrong and false, we shall adequately show later on. For the present we must proceed with the immediate task before us—to find an adequate theory of knowledge” (page 78.)

There now! It reminds us of the stage Irishman’s direction: “Do you see you church? Well, you turn south from there, walk a mile till you come to the river, and if you follow the river a mile east you won’t find the place you’re looking for!”

Having escaped from Spencer and Kant, no not quite, page 75, we find they are both right and both wrong, but if we take what is right from each we would have a philosophy which would be the philosophy of Marx. This “would be a tremendous and indispensable task.” Fortunately, such philosophy was already formulated by no less competent a man than Spinoza. The next step, therefore, is to consider Spinoza’s philosophy.

“Spinoza contemplates the universe as the manifestation of God—a being infinite in attributes each of which manifests itself in infinite modes.”

Thus we arrive at an understanding of knowledge. How? Ask of the winds that blow, etc. Or—read the book. We must however understand Spinoza (page 104). We have tried, and the pains we have suffered we are loth to inflict upon the readers of our Family Journal. But we are now within sight of Marx, so, courage! Quoting from “Capital,” “Poverty of Philosophy” and “Feuerbach,” Dr. Waton places before us views which he considers as proof that Marx and Engels regarded man as an active agent, influencing his environment, and not the poor creature that many so called Marxists would have him appear. The remarkable feature is that Engels’ words are actually quoted which prove

exactly the opposite to that which Dr. Waton tries to prove—“But on the one hand we have seen in history that the results of many individual wills produce effects, for the most part quite other than wished for—often in fact the very opposite—their motives of action, likewise, are only of subordinate significance with regard to universal results.”

This is the fact, that mankind always achieves something other than he strives for. And the explanation of that fact is to be found in the Marxian philosophy, that it is not man’s consciousness that determines his existence, but his existence that determines his consciousness. Dr. Watson considers this too abstract and comprehensive to be grasped readily, and this is the reason for the current misinterpretation of the theory of Marx. So to make it quite simple we are treated to a fanciful and poetic description of Marx and his family life, and this family life of Marx is then compared to Nature. As Marx treats his family and friends so Nature treats mankind. Nature now takes the place of life, and appears in every line. Some of this is to say the least peculiar—“Nature is not a perfect blank, upon which man can write what he pleases. Nature has a character of her own—a character which springs from her nature. And, in the material action between man and Nature, man must reckon with this character of Nature. Man therefore can use Nature for his purposes only as Nature can be used; in accordance with her ways and in accordance with the duration of time. It is for this reason that we call Marx’s philosophy, the historical materialism: It is the philosophy that takes cognizance of the historical order of Nature.”

Thus do we simplify Marx!

We have yet a few more doors to pass through ere we arrive at the Master’s Feet. Schopenhauer and his “will to live” for one, so “will” takes the place of Nature and again we refuse to drag ourselves over the barrens of idealism in the name of Marx. But behold, look whom we have here, Jesus Christ; actually our Lord and Savior, He comes to elucidate the Class Struggle. “It is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.” Therefore the propetyless alone can achieve the revolution. We won’t quarrel with that, nor quibble about the “rope.”

Something of greater interest awaits us. The proletariat are the bearers of virtue, and only with them can it come.

“Take the case of the Jews and Judaism,” mentally the equal, morally the superior of all nations. If you doubt it ye gentiles, bring forward your Moses, Jesus, Spinoza and Marx. “No matter what one may think about religion generally, he will have to admit—that Judaism is the most rational, the most humane, and the most free from superstition, than any religion that the human race produced. Only Judaism and among Jews could bring out a Jesus and a St. Paul.” (page 169-70.)

Here we have a fine disregard for grammar and historical fact that bespeaks genius. However, all these things are so “because both the Jews and Judaism were born out of the revolution of the Jewish proletarians against their masters.” We have not heard of this revolution, but then we are past quarreling with past or future history as laid down by Dr. Waton, past or future tense either. Neither will we quarrel with his opinion that no matter how one hates religion “nevertheless everyone cannot help perceive that Christianity is an ideal religion embodying a sublime conception of the universal brotherhood of man—a religion which can realize itself only in a state of Communism.”

Two hundred pages of this kind of stuff in a book dealing with The Philosophy of Marx, makes us long for the day—

“When the worm shall have writhed its last, and its last brother worm will have fled
From the dead fossil skull that is left in the rocks of an earth that is dead.”

The remaining fifty pages or so are devoted to proving that misery is decreasing, that the historic function of capitalism is not to concentrate wealth
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