

By the Way

SOME time ago, in the columns of the Clarion, Comrade Tamarkin and I engaged in controversy on the doctrine of violent overturn of the capitalist system. The occasion of our dispute was an article I wrote, published in the June 1st issue, part of which was given to an attack on that doctrine, mainly on the grounds that the chances now and in the future were against the success of the method of violence as a lever of change from capitalism towards a new social order.

I was concerned, myself, with the revolutionary class movement and its chances of success, partial or total, in the immediate future; therefore, I had in mind violence of the scope of civil war and not a mere affair of police. The social setting I had in view was such highly developed national communities as America, Great Britain, France and Germany.

Comrade Tamarkin wrote a letter to the editor, criticizing my stand. Without his intending it to be, the letter was published in the issue of July 16, in which issue I replied, reasoning on similar lines again with some additional considerations in support of my position. In the September 12th issue he came back at me again, amplifying his criticism and, incidentally, expressing some discontent at the form of my reply, which had failed to meet his contentions point by point. Much time has elapsed since then, unavoidably, without reply on my part. I now take the first opportunity to explain myself on the matter of his discontent.

As to the form of my reply, there is a general reason why I think it wise to avoid a point-by-point contest and prefer to set up my own position over against that of an opponent, thus letting the readers judge between us; i.e., that unless conducted by experts, such a close contest, involving a mass of quotations from the opposing arguments for rebuttal, ends in merely confusing the readers. That is my experience in reading many such debates. But in regard to Comrade Tamarkin's first criticism there was a special reason for replying in the fashion I did, which applies equally to his last one of September 1, in that he passed up unappreciated and unconsidered certain factors in the modern social situation which we shall carry with us into the future, and which I called attention to as having a vital bearing on the question of the feasibility of a violent revolutionary overturn.

I was the challenged party, and, having based my argument against the method of violence mainly, though not excluding the past, upon a consideration of the modern situation, it was up to him also, I thought, to give it some consideration. I had advanced the general principle as the thesis of my argument in my article on violence, and in previous ones, pleading for a study of the present for whatever of new there may be in it, that it is always the conditions and factors within any social situation at any time, that determine the nature and forms of change.

It follows from that principle that a study of the historic past and generalizations drawn therefrom can only serve as guides in the present, while they never, in the flux of life, absolve us from a study of it. But no; my critic seems to me to be obtuse to what I consider axiomatic; so much so that, in his last criticism, he devoted a paragraph to treating with almost levity my plea for a study of the present.

"I must confess," he says, "I did not at all think of the present. Excuse me for being unable to nail that evasive thing. To my mind, it appears rather an arbitrary detachment from the past to serve as a border line to the future."

As though Marxian philosophy, based as it is in evolutionary science, did not tell him that the present contains both the past and the future. Not the abstract concept of time, but the contents of time concern us. I ask him, Can we expect in the immediate future such a change in military technology as will again place the ill-equipped, ill-organ-

ized populace behind the barricades on an equal footing with regular military forces? Can we expect in the immediate future any such change in the technology of modern industry and world-wide economic relations based on a system of international credits as will enable any of the national communities mentioned (Great Britain, for instance, imports 70 per cent. of its food supply alone, besides depending on other communities for raw materials and markets for her products) to live on their own resources in the event of civil war? Other considerations point to an aggravation of even that state of chaos which we can assume would follow on the break of relations with foreign communities. Opinion as a force, swift to circulate and prevail more completely in modern life, counts for more than it ever did before; taking that fact in conjunction with another fact that the aims of proletarian revolution reach deeper down to the roots of all kinds of privileges and vested interests, great and small, run counter to all kinds of traditions, habitual ways of life, sentiments and loyalties, can we, as happened in other revolutions, expect to see the bulk of the community carrying on their customary occupations indifferent to the causes, leaving minority factions to fight it out? Rather, civil war in a modern community would disrupt also its eternal economy (the local municipal communities being even more dependent on the larger whole than it is to the world at large), entailing incalculable destruction of the huge city populations through starvation.

My critic was mainly content to assail me with historical generalizations out of the past and prophecies for the future based upon them. I feel that he is pre-occupied merely with the political aspect of social change. In highly developed communities, however, the Socialist does not relate the social problems to a tyrannical court influence or the maladministration of a bureaucratic government with whose removal, in a backward country, a whole population of every rank and status may feel itself relieved as from an incubus. Why does he say that while he regards a violent overthrow of the capitalist class from political power as inevitable, he asks me to note that he does not advocate violence for social and economic change. I call that a vicious evasion of the realities of a situation whose logic is that he who takes by the sword must keep by the sword. What is political power in the last resort, anyway, but military power? And why should we decide, or have forced upon us as a necessity to decide, to seize political power violently if not by means of it we may enforce our social programme, so far as force will avail us?

The politics of the modern state is not the politics of a village civilization of medieval times or of the city civilizations of Asia. Social necessity rather than class necessity under the pressure of the conditions brought on by the industrial revolution has driven the centralized state along lines of development transcending its former sole function of the coercive arm of a ruling and exploiting class. Committed to the status quo it is, and, as such, property interests largely monopolize its energies, but as production has become more social and the well-being of whole communities dependent on the continued operation of large scale industries and public services, the community interest is, perforce, occupying more and more of the state's attention. It has added to its original function other functions, economic and social, operating and organizing public services, subsidizing enterprises, regulating industrial disputes, extending its jurisdiction over financial institutions, controlling and organizing means of education, public hygiene and recreations; in a thousand ways, for good or ill, it is extending its influence down into the everyday life of the community. Matters that were at one time remote from politics are now, because of the vast intricate web of inter-relations that bind the inhabitants of a modern community together, matters concerning the

whole community, and as such are become political matters. A history of politics, rather than being thought of as that of one aspect of social life, must more than ever concern itself with the work-a-day lives of men. And whatever party controls the state finds itself, even under the capitalist system and bourgeois politics, deeply involved in a maze of social activities. The modern state is a socially evolved mechanism, co-ordinating and giving effect in more or less imperfect fashion, as is the way of human creations, to the community will. Without the cohesive influence of the state, under present conditions the community could not hold together. Those who would seize it for revolutionary purposes will find it a machine in operation, and must consider continuity of operation as vital to the life of the community. Custom, habit, usage and tacit understandings are its bones and sinews. Under modern conditions, as I see them, a violent catastrophic break in that continuity would spell irremediable social chaos, the grave of revolutionary hopes and ideals.

Among those I meet who reason on the problem of a change as Comrade Tamarkin does I find an unconcern at a loss of social control, a satisfaction in a multiplication of social calamities and working class miseries, an adherence to the negative policy of drift in the hope that a point will be reached where the blind instinctive urge of self-preservation will drive the desperate masses of men to violent upheaval of the system. But in our day we can not depend on the blind instinctive reactions, such as these might have been effective in communities where the life of men was involved in less complexities. In one hundred years the world has been transformed, has become vastly more complex, and we must look more than ever to the power of thought to guide us in the maze of complexities, to discipline irrational instinct into rational service, for, like fire, instinct is a good servant but a bad master. Let me quote from Graham Wallas' "The Great Society," an attempt to apply the conclusions to date of the social psychologists to the problems of present civilized life:

"During the last hundred years the external conditions of civilized life have been transformed by a series of inventions which have abolished the old limits to the creation of mechanical force, the carriage of men and goods, and communication by written and spoken words. One effect of this transformation is a general change of social scale. Men find themselves working and thinking and feeling in relation to an environment, which, both in its world-wide extensions and its intimate connections with all sides of human existence, is without precedent in the history of the world.

"Economists have invented the term, The Great Industry, for the special aspect of this change which is dealt with by their science, and sociologists may conveniently call the whole result The Great Society. In those countries where the transformation first began a majority of the inhabitants already live either in huge commercial cities, or in closely populated districts threaded by systems of mechanical traction and covering hundreds of square miles. Cities and districts are only parts of highly organized national states, each with fifty or a hundred million inhabitants; and these states are themselves every year drawn more effectively into a general system of international relationships.

"Every member of The Great Society, whether he be stupid or clever, whether he have the wide curiosity of the born politician and trader, or the concentration on what he can see and touch of the born craftsman, is affected by this ever-extending and ever-tightening nexus. A sudden decision by some financier whose name he has never heard may, at any moment, close the office or mine or factory in which he is employed, and he may either be left without a livelihood or be forced to move with his family to a new centre. He and his fellows can only maintain their standard wage or any measure of