

Historical Materialism

By T. A. JACKSON.

“Historical Materialism.” By N. Bukharin (Allen and Unwin 12s. 6d.)

FEW things have been more illuminating in modern political controversy than the unanimity with which all critics of Trotsky's “Where is Britain Going?” reacted to the scorn poured by him upon the customary “religiosity” of British Labour Leaders.

One and all they protested that “they weren't like that themselves”—it was the “other fellow”!—and that “religion” in Britain, particularly in the “Free churches,” meant something quite different from its connotation in the Greek Orthodox Church.

Even a critic of the attainments of H. N. Brailsford fell into the same pit and gave this comfortable theory its clearest and most precise expression :—

“His (Trotsky's) attitude to the religious beliefs of most of our readers is for me the test of his failure to understand us—and this I may say calmly, since I am myself an Agnostic. No Russian that I ever met, even when he had been long in England, ever grasped the fact that English religion, with its long tradition of open discussion, the democratic form of its “free” churches, its emphasis on conduct rather than ritual or belief, and its relative freedom from other-worldliness has literally nothing in common with the Eastern Church.”

We ought at any rate to be grateful for one thing: Nobody seems to have “remembered” that Trotsky was born a Jew, and is as such “utterly unable to comprehend” Christianity. Yet the fact that this omission is made is as revealing as the assertion that familiarity with the Orthodox Christianity of the Greek Church renders a man incapable of comprehending Protestant Christianity—especially in its English Nonconformist forms.

The episode forms a valuable means of testing and comparing the theoretical bases of Marxian-Communism and purely “British” Socialism, respectively. (And the publication of an

English translation of Bukharin's book comes most opportunely for our purpose.)

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The outstanding peculiarity of the "really-truly-British" Socialism of the I.L.P. is its repudiation of all "Marxian dogmatism." This, in practice, means much more than that the leaders of the I.L.P. (headed by MacDonal) dislike the concept of class-struggle, and shrink from the logical conclusion of that concept—a policy of class warfare culminating in social revolution.

It means that under cover of a repudiation of Marxism they propagate—more or less clearly, consciously and consistently—a counter-conception: that of class-conciliation, class collaboration, and "inevitable gradualness."

That this theory is completely hostile to the implications of the names "Labour," and, still more, "*Independent Labour*," they have accepted as Party names does not trouble these leaders one whit. They can always take refuge in the admission that while the workers have special grievances exacerbated by the policy of capitalism, these can be removed or ameliorated by proper "statesmanship," and this done, society will be freed from the perils of disintegration an intensification of class-strife must entail.

Two things are revealed by this process of reasoning. Against the Marxian theory of social development the I.L.P. must, in fact or by implication, develop a theory of its own; and, secondly, any consistent alternative to Marxism must be a theory that repudiates all possibility of a revolutionary future for the proletariat.

He who can see in the class-conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat no other logical outcome but the dissolution of society is, from his very pessimism towards the proletariat, necessarily converted sooner or later into an active defender of the bourgeois order and its institutions. And despair of the proletariat begets inevitably that optimism towards capitalist society which finds expression in a belief in the possibility of a progressive eradication of all needs for class strife and revolution.

It is only necessary to re-state the essentials of the Marxian sociology to prove that all the "Labour" critics of Trotsky have, in fact, sought to uphold the cardinal illusions of the Bourgeois order against a Realism made possible by the consistent application of a Proletarian method of criticism.

Two questions only need to be asked : Is a science of society possible at all? And, granted that it is—is it possible to isolate “Religion,” its creeds, formularies, concepts, and institutions from the scope of such a science?

He who answers either question in the negative abandons all hope of lifting politics from the bourgeois plane of Parliamentary quackery to the level of an intelligible science of Government.

Communism, to-day, is the consistent and thoroughgoing application of Marxism. Its theoretical basis is the Materialist Conception of History—or, more simply, Historical Materialism. Living as he did during a period of immense intellectual activity, during which the physical sciences achieved triumph after triumph in bewildering succession, it was to be expected that Marx should endeavour to work out a complete conception of human society and its development, one that would render positive and comprehensible the Communist politics to which he found himself driven.

This he did (as is well-known) in collaboration with his life-long friend and fellow worker, Engels. It is true that he left no single volume in which he elaborated a complete system of sociology, and that students must in consequence arrive at a grasp of his concept by a study of the brief formulation of his doctrine given in the Introduction to his (unfinished) “Critique of Political Economy,” and of the various works in which he applied his concepts to the analysis of existing society and the events of his time.

Possibly because of this the fundamental thought of Marx is more easily understood than it might otherwise have been—since his own practical applications are illuminative. But, since his work was unfinished, there is still room to draw all the conclusions that logically follow from them.

Bukharin’s work is, therefore, trebly welcome as the first attempt available in English to present a complete picture of the Marxian sociology as a whole. (It is ten thousand pities that its price is prohibitive to the class to whom it would be most welcome).

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Prior to Marx there had been many attempts at formulating a “law” that would do for the study of society, what the “laws” of Kepler and Newton had done for astronomy, what the Darwinian hypothesis was to do for biology, and the work of Dalton, Mendelieff and others had done and was doing for chemistry—

namely, provide a generalisation which would enable the complete unification of the whole field of phenomena under review.

Comte had coined the name "sociology" and sought to elaborate a system from the crude psychology then in vogue.

Hegel had attempted under the name of "Philosophy of History" to include society in the scope of his system—and his method of treating the universe as a self-contained whole, developing by means of internal polarisations, antagonisms, differentiations and re-combinations provided (for all its mystical-metaphysic) a starting point for a whole host of speculators.

Herbert Spencer in England was busy with his system of Synthetic Philosophy, which included Sociology as one of its main sub-divisions and treated it in terms of evolution with much use of the biological concept of the "survival of the fittest" (a term which in point of fact he was the first to use).

None of them had succeeded in explaining what was, after all, the root problem why periodically human societies and their institutions undergo a complete transformation (known to historians as a "Revolution") and why after an apparently chaotic upheaval the society concerned enters upon a new and enlarged process of development and expansion.

This was all the more noteworthy since such an upheaval—(that of the French Revolution of 1789 onwards)—had given the impetus to the whole study; and, what was even more important, the slogans of that Revolution were at the time becoming in the hands of an insurgent proletariat weapons of political warfare against even the States and institutions the Revolution had created.

Marx alone saw to the heart of the problem and made the fact of Social Revolution the pivot of his whole conception.

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First he had to clear away the lumber of the past.

Not having to live and work (at any rate in his earlier years) in Britain he was not forced to deal exhaustively with the cruder theological concepts which treat human society as the direct product of Divine Inspiration modified periodically by the intervention of the Devil.

It is only in Britain—and there only in the literature offered for the edification of the "lower orders"—that such an historical

cataclysm as the French Revolution could be disposed of as a temporary triumph of the Devil (operating through the agency of Atheism) over the rule and governance of a Benevolent Creator who had "ordained" the "powers that be."

This notwithstanding fundamentally the same conception existed in more refined and sophisticated forms—many of which still do duty in the hands of the various anti-Marxist schools. And one of them is the "intellectualist" theory that lies at the back of most if not all of the I.L.P. reasoning to this day.

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Working as he does from day to day with his own brain and will; determining as he must his conduct from occasion to occasion by the operation of his own apparent power of will and choice, it is easy for the plain "man in the street" to conclude that the Brain and Will of man were all that was necessary to account for the fact of human society and the phenomena of its history.

And as in real life he had with the best of intentions frequently produced the worst of results from pure ignorance, it was equally easy to account for the "irrationalities" of history in the same way.

Thus the sole problem of history is that of the spread of "enlightenment" and "education." Just as the Greeks divided the world into "Greeks and Barbarians," or the Mohammedans into "True Believers and Idolators" (a practice in which they were emulated and surpassed by their Christian rivals) so these intellectualists divided the world into "enlightened" and "ignorant"; and such revolutionary epochs as the Reformation or the French Revolution were explained as due to the success of "enlightenment" in overcoming the obstacles set in the path of Progress by Ignorance, inherited Superstition and interested Malice.

In the face of facts this comfortable theory has been modified in details but its essence is retained as the basis of the commonly accepted bourgeois orthodoxy to this day. The I.L.P., for instance, abounds with deluded souls who imagine that the human race might have escaped capitalism altogether if only Socialism had been "discovered" in time; and who fondly cherish the belief that the most hardened of capitalist sinners would repent and join the I.L.P. if only the matter could be explained to him properly.

Naturally to these any conception of the necessity of Revolution is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of Enlightenment. To

them the transformations of the past have been all in the right line of progress. Feudalism was a bungling attempt which capitalism improved upon just as Feudalism itself had improved upon Classic Antiquity. The basic institutions of capitalism—"democracy," "parliament," "cabinet government" and so on—all embody "discoveries" of permanent value which need only to be co-ordinated and rationally developed to become free from reproach. Religion needs only to be purged of superstition to enable its Eternal Truth to become everywhere apparent. In short bourgeois society is right in principle and only wants progressive rectification in detail to bring it "up-to-date."

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Faced with the fact that other States and peoples have, in fact, undergone revolutionary crises and have not, in fact, developed the same institutions, the answer of the Intellectualists is that the "character" of these nations is different—in short, they do differently because they are different ("for God hath made them so"!). This is only a roundabout way of saying that the poor "foreigner" cannot be expected to attain to the intellectual clarity and exaltation of one of "God's Englishmen."

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One has only to take a glance at Bukharin's exposition of the Marxian sociology to see how worse than worthless all this is.

It is notorious for example (as against the Enlightenment theory) that every revolutionary advance in history has included among its opponents some of the most cultured men of its age—(a fact which the pioneer Christians erected into a positive virtue).

As for the "race" theory it should be the last possible weapon for a Briton to use. The most superficial acquaintance with history should be enough to remind these critics that the last possible people on earth to claim "purity" of race are just precisely those English-speaking inhabitants of the British islands who lay the loudest claims to their racial "superiority."

The Marxian sociology bases itself upon no such relative and provisional concepts as those of "race" "nationality" or "culture."

It recognises that human society is born out of the needs of man (as a concrete biological fact) to make a living by action upon external nature. Man's dependence upon Nature, his need

to struggle to subdue it to the satisfaction of his needs, constitutes the basic fact from which all historical development proceeds.

To conquer Nature he must deploy his greatest available forces and to achieve this end he early learns the need for the division, re-division and sub-division of the total work of natural conquest and subjugation. Only when a beginning is made by regarding social organisation as basically a sub-division of productive labour is the possibility created for an intelligible explanation of society and its history. Given this starting point it is easy to see that the development of man's productive power of command over the forces of Nature has made possible, and has determined the whole form and content of the intellectual, moral and ideological history of each succeeding epoch.

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But given the theory that the intellectual life of society both in direction and substance—in quantity and quality—is determined by the mode of material production prevailing and the social organisation following thencefrom—or, in few words, that man's ideas, beliefs and opinions depend upon his social relations with his fellow men and that these relations in turn depend upon the degree of their collective command over the forces of Nature and their relations in the scheme of social production prevailing—given this theory how does one account for epochs of social-revolution?

Progressively mankind embodies its experiences in the struggle against Nature in the manufacture and re-adaptation of tools, methods and processes. These in turn, when they grow sufficiently important, compel more or less fundamental re-adjustments in the whole organisation of society.

Broadly speaking, every revolution represents a re-organisation of society compelled by the accumulated development of productive forces and methods—but that it should take the form of a revolution requires the consideration of an indispensable connecting link.

Between the individual man and Nature as a whole interposes the whole organisation of society. A man is not, for instance, a farmer or a seaman, simply "by" or "because of" Nature. He farms with a social end to serve—the market in which he sells and buys, and his condition of well-being or otherwise depend more upon the state of the market than upon the state of the weather. So, too, the farrier does not practise a craft that grew spontaneously "like a tree." His craft presupposes human society

and its history—presupposes the domestication of animals and the cultivation of horses as beasts of burden; presupposes the invention of roads and their wear and tear upon horse's hoofs; presupposes the discovery of the art of working iron, its existence in commercial quantities and sufficient demand for the farrier's craft to make it feasible for a man to live by its practice. Still more the seaman depends upon the needs and demands, and upon the technological developments, of human society than upon the elements with which he grapples daily in the practice of his craft.

Moreover men's opinions and beliefs are in great measure determined by their available stocks of knowledge and these in turn depend upon the degree and quality of their contact, of their access to the available stocks of common information. There is little learning and no philosophy possible without language and language is obviously a social product. Hence the ideas, beliefs and opinions of an individual depend far more upon his social relations than upon any individual peculiarity of brain power, desire or whim.

Hence it is that while the economic development of society proceeds by the accumulation of an infinitude of minor detail, modifications of tools and technique, their effects only appear in the modifications they induce in the relations of interdependence between men.

Chief among these relations are the class divisions based upon the prime social institution of "private property." Given these divisions and economic development determines the degree and intensity of their antagonism or acquiescence—giving to one the victory and dominance to-day and determining its overthrow on the morrow.

Hence it is that while economic development proceeds by the accumulation of infinitesimal modifications (and may, therefore, as Marx says, "be properly called an evolution,") with regard to ideas, opinions and institutions, men fight out all questions of change "as class struggles conscious of their opposing interests."

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It is fundamentally necessary to bourgeois society (and its chief institution the State) that all consciousness of a common class interest in antagonism to the bourgeoisie and its State apparatus should be prevented from developing among the proletariat. Hence its active hostility to Marxism in any shape or form, and hence its patronage or toleration for any idea or movement that will antagonise Marxism in the interest of a theory in which classes, and concepts of class struggle, have no place.

Mr. Brailsford (as an "Agnostic") may not like the Protestant "free" churches any more than he likes the Greek Orthodox Church, but as a good I.L.P'er he cannot help but be drawn to bodies which have this much in common with him that they preach "democratic" methods (in church only), "equality" (in the sight of God, just as we are all "equal" in the eyes of the law) and an insistence upon "conduct rather than ritual or belief." Similarly the Liberal and Tory Parties do not care much what you believe—even to the point of "Socialism"—so long as you do not believe in attacking the bourgeois order enough to organise a political party to lead a proletarian assault upon it.

In short, Mr. Brailsford can only attack Trotsky and his Marxism by throwing himself (agnosticism and all) head over heels into the arms of the defenders of capitalism.

The conclusion is obvious. Either ideas and opinions have an origin independent of social relations, and a development undetermined by earthly circumstances or the reverse is true.

If the former is true a scientific sociology is impossible and Socialism is an idle dream. If the latter is true, the transformation of religion can be explained by the transformations of human society and the persistence of the "religiosity" of British Labour leaders can be explained by the same circumstances which have also prevented them from divesting themselves of Liberalism and the rest of the petty bourgeois superstitions which mark the British Labour Party as the grotesque hybrid that it is.

Religion everywhere is camouflaged politics—and the history of no religion proves it so well as Christianity.

