

Marx as Historian

SO much has been said and written about Marx as an economist and so fierce have been the storms of controversy that have raged around his theories of value, of surplus-value, and so forth, so violent the disputations as to the accuracy of his forecasts concerning the concentration and centralisation of capital, so intense the conflicting hatred and admiration which this mighty prophet of revolution has aroused, that his commanding genius as one of the world's most illustrious historians has scarcely been realised. To-day, his method—and to speak of Marx, the historian, is to speak also of Engels—is coming into almost universal use. Everyone adopts his method, but very, very few have the courage, the honesty, or the decency to acknowledge him as their master. Many, no doubt, do not realise that they are adopting the Marxian method. For my part, I read history for years in one of the most modern universities, under liberal-minded teachers, but I do not recollect that on a single occasion I was bidden or advised to take down *Capital* from the lofty shelf where the three great volumes reposed. It would surprise me if any student of Modern History was ever referred to the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, to *Revolution and Counter Revolution*, to the *Eastern Question*, or to the *Life of Lord Palmerston*. Yet these works are masterpieces of research and of criticism absolutely indispensable to anyone who would understand the great European changes between 1845 and 1865, which determined the present struggle and the tendencies leading up to it. One book is known, and is now being quoted more and more frequently, and that is Engels' *Condition of the English Working Class in 1844*. An interesting pastime in libraries where modern historical works abound is to scan through indexes and to find how many make allusion to Marx and Engels, and where such reference occurs to find what the author has to say about them. American writers make more frequent mention of Marx than do those of this country. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that so little mention is made of him by British writers, for there are few of them—very few until quite recently—who knew anything worth knowing about the economic history of this or any other country.

Now it seems incredible that one could go through College and take a high degree in Economic History without ever being introduced to the Marxian theory thereof. One does sometimes get as far from orthodoxy as to discuss the economic interpretation of history, generally to be warned against it, and against Thorold Rogers as not being "sound," just as one was warned against the pitfalls of "inductive" reasoning. But, "historical materialism"! However, Marx is coming into his own, and those who are least disposed to give him his due take good care to follow religiously in his footsteps. Book after book that one picks up to-day follows

the Marxian method and tacitly, or even openly, confirms the Marxian conclusions.

None does this more conspicuously or more overwhelmingly than that by J. L. and Barbara Hammond, entitled *The Town Labourer, 1760-1832*. Page by page and chapter by chapter, drawing on the records of the Home Office, these two moderns drive home with pitiless reiteration, the irrefutable evidence of the class struggle. Nothing written since Marx laid down his pen is so merciless, nothing has ever so completely borne out his contentions.

His, however, was the distinction of discovering seventy years ago what others are assuming to-day. In his time the evidence whereon his theories could be built was just becoming obvious to the more painstaking student who could free himself from preconceived views of social and political development. The world of industry and of government had just evolved through the earlier stages of the great technical revolution, and the middle-class, newly called to share in the guardianship of property, had shewn in England the workings of its mental processes in the legislation it projected. It was coming to a consciousness of its real interest in the preservation of all institutions defending property and privilege, and already began to show incipient signs of conservatism. Marx, who looked at facts and grubbed about in the British Museum comparing and contrasting the economic theories of successive class spokesmen, examining the merciless records of official documents, and having the invaluable aid of Engels, who had lived as a capitalist in Manchester, got behind and underneath the superficialities of the orthodox historians and, having no vested interest to defend and no patron to consider, recorded exactly what he discovered and what conclusions he arrived at.

To me, the most wonderful discovery that I have ever made, or, rather, to which I have ever been introduced, was this: "The method prevailing in any society of producing the material livelihood determines the social, political, and intellectual life of men in general." The class struggle had been a historical commonplace with me for years, something so obvious that I marvelled how anyone could conceivably be blind to it. But this conception of the tool and the machine as the essential determining factors—though I had seen it all so plainly in the development of armaments—made the whole world plain and comprehensible. Marxian Socialism, based on the realism of social development instead of the soulful aspirations of well-intentioned idealism, had drawn me irresistibly but tradition, training and a desire to prove its irrefutable truth held me back until it was impossible to hesitate another moment. With what exultation then did I proceed to work, knowing the immense treasury of evidence on which to draw, the power I had to bring to bear, like some pneumatic drill irresistibly tearing through every subterfuge and falsehood with which capitalism

concealed its hideous reality ! The joy of having learned their lore in the halls and libraries of their endowment, of ransacking their archives and revealing the substructure of their pretensions and their benefactions !

■ The materialist conception of history is a law to be applied, the theory of the class struggle is a standard of continuous reference. Marx and Engels worked out these laws and applied them to certain phases of the past and to the events of the hour. We must use them to revise the whole of social and political history and to explain the events of the present time. It is not enough to read and to teach what Marx and Engels wrote. It is imperative that we should apply their methods and that we should show the workers how to follow suit and to improve upon our efforts. Let us remember how Marx spurred on his companions, crying : " It is necessary to learn ! " We must know all that we can imbibe about capitalism, its institutions, laws, ideas, its every expression, and its every variation. We want an army of learners, of researchers, of workers, of teachers. Like a swarm of locusts, like an army of ants, we must sweep down upon the records of capitalism, written and unwritten, and strip everything that can be of use in exposing and scarifying the system. We want no copyright on our discoveries. We must train hundreds and thousands where to-day we have dozens and scores of writers and lecturers, and our printing presses must never cease to turn out leaflets, pamphlets, text-books and every propagandist and educational medium we can devise. Books like those of Connolly on *Labour and Irish History*, like Craik's and Starr's little digests, like Paul's *State*, like Gustavus Myers' deadly *History of Canadian Wealth*, *History of the American Fortunes*, and *History of the Supreme Court*, must be popularised and pushed, and similar works must be compiled in this country to interpret the history of the United Kingdom and the British Empire. There are dozens of themes in my mind as I write, all of which demand immediate attention by specialists, there are score of libraries, mountains of periodicals, documents, papers ; there are a thousand and one sources waiting to be tapped. There is the material. There are the methods. Let us do the supreme honour to Marx of finding the men and women to carry on !

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