

The editor of the most widely read German-émigré weekly attacks the Marxist theory of historical materialism on the ground that the triumph of Hitler has demonstrated its practical deficiency.

Historical Mysticism

By LEOPOLD SCHWARZSCHILD

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DURING the past five years both in Germany and abroad one question has loomed larger and larger in the minds of thousands of educated and thoughtful people. Confronted with the events of these years they ask themselves with growing anxiety, 'What do the historical materialists have to say?'

If the doctrine of historical materialism can be expressed in simple form, it means that definite economic developments must give rise to definite and parallel political developments, but recent history seems to contradict this principle flagrantly. Three-quarters of all our educated people believed in historical materialism before the War, and it was not until after 1918 that they gradually began to have doubts. Since the beginning of the economic crisis, how-

ever, almost everything has seemed to run counter to this theory.

Let me take two examples. Does n't the growth and victory of Hitlerism fundamentally contradict the historical-materialist doctrine that during the declining period of capitalism the class consciousness of the proletariat increases? And does n't the submissive acceptance of Germany's military revival by the victors of 1918 fundamentally contradict all the historical-materialist doctrines concerning the eternal, relentless struggle for domination among the various imperialist Powers? How do the advocates of integral historical materialism, now known as Marxism, still justify their beliefs? How do their professional interpreters and orthodox advocates hold their ground?

This is a question to which in-

numerable enlightened people have been awaiting an answer for many months with growing anxiety, and they have waited in vain. For, although the weight of this question is overpowering and although it is on everybody's lips, no one has yet even attempted a serious and definitive reply. The Third International has adopted a few hasty, superficial resolutions, and the organs of the Second International have published a few empty articles, but that is all. We are therefore driven to conclude that scientific socialism, which was once so highly productive, has not preserved its intellectual vitality during the months and years that have subjected it to crucial tests. Whether its philosophers have entirely vanished or whether they do not dare to put themselves to the test in public is another story. The fact remains that no analysis has appeared.

It is for that reason that I seized with such eagerness on a book by Fritz Sternberg entitled *Der Faschismus an der Macht*, which has just been published by the Contact-Verlag of Amsterdam. Its author is not only known as an orthodox Marxist but also as one of the few members of that school, at least of those who write in German, who have preserved their scientific zeal. In general, the German successors of Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Bernstein, Mehring, and Luxemburg have given a poor account of themselves. Theoretical literature virtually threw up the sponge. All that remained was journalistic propaganda, most of which was hopelessly bad. Sternberg was almost the only man who attempted to delve more deeply. We therefore had reason to hope that his first book after the collapse would

attempt to meet the fundamental question that this event raised.

This expectation seems not to have been entirely disappointed. Sternberg entitles the first part of his book, 'How It Happened,' and at the outset states the problem, which is 'to analyze a contradiction.' What contradiction? The contradiction between the fact that, economically, everything in Germany was proceeding as Marx had prophesied eighty years ago but that, politically, everything was occurring quite differently.

Sternberg does not express it in exactly these terms. He quotes only certain famous prophecies by Marx on the economic prospects of the capitalist system and the necessary conclusion that some day the 'united and organized working class' would 'expropriate the expropriators.' Although this is the root and quintessence of the whole problem of historical materialism, he does not emphasize sharply enough that Marx's analysis of the future fell into two different and completely distinct parts, to wit, a prognosis of a certain economic development and, second, a prognosis of exactly how long the resultant political consequences would take to develop.

The Marxist thesis, or any historical-materialist thesis, for that matter, actually contains two elements—first, that economically things will develop in a certain fashion and, second, that this economic occurrence will tend to produce certain political consequences. This double content of Marx's historical-materialist theory Sternberg does not emphasize and thus fails to clarify the reader's mind and perhaps his own as well. He cites Marx's theory only to put the ques-

tion, why it has not been completely confirmed. How has the economic aspect of Marx's analysis developed and how, on the other hand, was it possible for his political prophecies to encounter such a terrible denial?

Sternberg writes, 'We have the constantly growing centralization of the means of production, we have the constantly decreasing number of capitalist magnates. We have the growth of "mass misery, oppression, expropriation, exploitation.'" But we also have the victory of Fascism in Germany. We have the severest defeat that the German working class has ever suffered. This contradiction needs to be analyzed.'

It does indeed, and we encounter here the decisive question that historical materialism faces, the question concerning the connection between economic and political occurrences. The whole historical-materialist philosophy rests on the silent assumption that there is an invisible transformer station, a commutation of energy that turns certain economic factors into the suitable political factors. For instance, the complete centralization of the means of production brings about the expropriation of the expropriators. The case for historical materialism stands or falls with the existence of such a transformer. For, if it does not exist, that is, if economic factors do not at least have the tendency to produce certain preordained political consequences, if various consequences of different kinds may occur, the whole principle has no value. It no longer serves as a guide to future events and therefore no longer can be used as a means of action.

By using the word 'contradiction' in referring to Germany's recent past,

Sternberg admits that contradictions are at least possible. But, if one was possible this time, is not another one always possible? That, it seems to me, is the fundamental question involved in the use of the word 'contradiction.' But Sternberg passes this by with the aid of a significant fallacy. He includes with the past all those factors that in his opinion have prevented reality from corresponding to his theories. But, when he considers the future, he says nothing to indicate that events will develop as his theories prescribe.

Up to now, for a few years, things have developed in an 'un-Marxist' fashion. That is admitted, and the causes are explained. Later, however, things will again run true to Marxist form. This he implies but does not explain. But why should n't more contradictions appear next year? Or ten years or fifty years hence? And what practical value has a theory, even if it is theoretically correct, if it can always be thwarted by 'contradictions?' Here is a difficulty that even this author evades. What were the individual factors that, according to Sternberg, produced the 'contradiction?' There are two of them.

II

First, the middle classes, both in the city and the country districts, who always found themselves 'caught between the two decisive classes—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat,' this time decided for the bourgeoisie. Why did n't they decide the opposite way? Ultimately, according to Sternberg, because they 'believed' the Nazis, because they 'wanted to be conquered' by them, because they 'were

glad' on this occasion 'merely to have to obey.' They were also moved by will and emotion. Economically, they might just as logically have made the opposite choice; indeed, according to Sternberg, from an economic standpoint the opposite choice would have been the correct one.

If they had taken this course every historical materialist would have said, 'You see, how our theory works? The economic situation was so and so, and therefore politically such and such followed.' But we see that the opposite can also follow. The individual can subjectively comprehend the economic situation in a different form from the one it objectively assumes. Or is he obeying the impulses of his will and his emotions, ignoring economics or remaining unconscious of them? In this case, too, the 'contradiction' arises.

Second, the working class was divided into two parties, the Socialists and the Communists, whose policies Sternberg calls 'catastrophic' and 'calamitous.' Both suffered from complete 'ideological corruption.' They did not 'understand,' they did not 'perceive' anything. Their tactics were false. They 'compromised,' they 'constantly abdicated.' Victory in Germany was possible, 'but the objective situation was not exploited.' Here, too, for the second time, the economic situation did not produce the political results it had to produce but the very opposite because the active, subjective individual comprehended it differently or was motivated by different desires or emotions that were either non-economic or economically 'false.'

This is no new discovery. When the historical-materialist theory is not

vulgarized, it does not deny—and here we escape from the atmosphere of oversimplification—that subjective factors also have an influence, factors of the conscious or unconscious, of understanding, desire, emotion, instinct. But its Alpha and Omega is that these conscious and unconscious factors tend to develop in accordance with economic circumstances and to take a definite preordained direction. Here is the transformer station between the categories of economics and politics that I have already mentioned. Certain economic conditions give rise to certain perceptions, desires, emotions. And on the basis of these economic factors, which affect people's souls and minds, political consequences arise.

III

But, in the light of what we have experienced and what we are now experiencing, can we still subscribe to this theory? Do our spiritual and intellectual reactions to certain economic situations tend to follow logical lines? Sternberg does not settle the matter when he says that in Germany, up to 1933, three decisive classes, or at least their leaders, did not use their understanding or their emotions to draw the correct political consequences from the economic situation.

The capitalist class also acted contrary to theory. It is a really un-Marxist occurrence that the different national capitalisms, engaged in the bitterest kind of struggle for markets, did not turn their weapons against each other in order to win new markets but instead began to retreat into the snailshell of autarky while France actually helped Germany to arm.

What remains of a principle that can be contradicted at every step? What, at most, but a subsequent explanation for historical events that have already occurred? For, if we attempt to apply the principle to the future and say, 'Economic X has appeared, therefore political Y must follow,' we find ourselves compelled to add, 'Provided that this and that and the other thing and still another thing, all of a non-economic nature, do not prevent the appearance of Y.'

The historical materialists say that politics are impelled by economics in a certain direction, always provided that certain non-economic factors permit. Their opponents say that politics are moved by different forces, including economic ones, in every possible direction. Is there really any difference between these two views? Do they not both agree that all kinds of non-economic forces may take effect? Is n't the only difference that what one group calls causes the other calls disturbances or deviations of the historical-materialist process that would assert itself if these disturbances did not exist? Nevertheless, they do exist and may always exist.

The Saar plebiscite offers a concrete example. In the local elections of 1932 about 35 per cent of the inhabitants voted for the Marxist parties, eighty-four thousand for the Communists and forty-four thousand for the Social Democrats and smaller Socialist groups. In the plebiscite only forty-six thousand votes were registered against Hitler, and undoubtedly these included many non-Marxists. It cannot be denied that this represents a striking contradiction of the historical-materialist theory of the economic interests of the

working class and of its class consciousness. At a time when everything pertaining to class consciousness seemed to be quite clear, why was a proletariat that had been made class conscious for a decade outvoted ten to one?

IV

I read an article in a Czechoslovak newspaper by Professor Radl of the University of Prague who stated, 'It is clear that materialism is mistaken. National emotion is stronger.' I read an answer to this statement in a Communist organ, which declared, 'How could you assert that materialism was mistaken? Materialism, of course, does not deny that people can be hypnotized and terrorized to such an extent that they fail to recognize their economic and class interests. That and nothing more happened here.'

But, if one said that national feeling is actually a stronger psychological factor than economic interest or if one said, 'No, it is not a stronger psychological factor, but the human psyche can be led astray,' in either case something quite non-economic remains determining, to wit, the psychological factor, whether it is inherent or created. One group calls the psychological factor the cause of the materialist defeat, another calls the psychological factor an obstruction to materialist progress. But even the latter group can hardly deny that it was precisely for non-economic reasons that an economic situation was not transformed into its necessary political consequences. And we have seen that it is possible; indeed, it is always possible.

I have said that Sternberg lists a

number of non-material factors that held true in the past and that upset the materialist progress or that undermined the materialist position. I also said that he again outlines the future on an exact, historical-materialist chart. He clings to the classical theory that capitalism can remain only capitalism, and, since it must go harder and harder with capitalism from an economic point of view, only two points of view are conceivable, either revolution or decline into barbarism.

But must capitalism remain completely capitalistic? Sternberg clearly perceives that a number of fundamentally counter-capitalistic developments have occurred, especially in Germany. The inescapable conclusion is that capitalism, or rather its leading figures, are theoretically in a position to adapt the system to every necessity until it has been transformed by purely economic means into complete State Communism. That, however, does not suit the Marxist chart, and Sternberg therefore saves himself with the explanation that 'within the framework of capitalism only those measures are possible that damage individual capitalist classes and even destroy them completely for the benefit of the system as a whole.'

V

Yet the growing interference of the state in every sphere of capitalist activity, in foreign trade, in price-fixing, and many other fields does more than damage individual groups, for these are profound attacks on the whole mechanism of economic progress, and I do not see why it is impossible for them to go further. I do

not say that this will happen, but I say it can very well happen and that without any real proletarian revolution Schacht's Germany may become just as thoroughly socialized as Soviet Russia. By this I mean that there is no sign that the way out of the agony of capitalism is either Communism through proletarian revolution or barbarism. There is the third theoretical possibility that the bourgeois régime itself, with the aid of its state power, will carry through the transformation and that, to all practical purposes, everything will be done as in a Communist state except that the top layer will remain the same and perhaps will receive from three thousand to thirty thousand marks a month instead of from three hundred to three thousand rubles.

Prophesying the future would be an abstract game if it did not yield results for practical activity. The historical materialists have always drawn these practical consequences, and some of the rules they have arrived at have assumed the character of axioms. Here is a final example showing the dubious basis on which these axioms rest.

During the World War Lenin declared that every nation must reverse its arms, that is, turn to revolution. It was the famous 'transformation of war into civil war.' Eager to make a law, a scientific axiom, out of every practical piece of advice given in a single situation, the orthodox historical materialists have since then clung firmly to the principle that this proletarian watchword and this watchword alone holds good in any future war. But, now that the phenomenon of Hitler has appeared on the horizon and now that the orthodox Marxists

cannot deny that there are certain important differences between life in a democracy and life under Hitler's rule, non-German workers ask, 'Could we, if war broke out between Hitler and France or Czechoslovakia, still act in accordance with the formula of transforming the war into civil war? Is n't there the danger that Hitler will conquer, which we do not want at all? Might n't we consider this war as our war and, as long as it lasts, refrain from any attempt to transform it?'

Sternberg belongs with the majority of strict Marxists who still assert that even in the present situation the workers should follow the advice Lenin formulated during the World War. To justify this position he is forced to assert that a revolution in the countries waging war on Hitler would prolong the war but would not lead to defeat. Here is what he says. 'If the possibility arises to organize the civil war successfully, it unquestionably means a temporary military weakening of France. It would be senseless to have any illusions on this score. The temporary weakening must be included in the bargain.' Why only temporary? Why not complete enough to enable Hitler to win a real victory? One can say only that the attempt to establish a realistic basis for this procedure gets nowhere. The supposedly

scientific analysis terminates in mysticism and religion. The working class will be strong enough first to win the civil war while at the same time holding off Hitler with their little finger and then strong enough to defeat him with redoubled energy.

The fact is that the political half of the Marxist doctrine, as applied in actual practice, often comes closer to mysticism than to the science that it pretends to be. This instance reveals it, and it is not an unimportant but a cardinal question. I do not even raise the question of what Moscow would say to such rigid logic or whether, in the event of war and with all its alliances, Moscow would announce that its allies must be overthrown by civil war. Indeed, who can even dream of such a thing? I also shall not discuss at length what Lenin himself would say to this 'scientific' application of what he said in 1914 to the year 1935. He himself changed his position in 1917 on a famous occasion when the monarchist General Kornilov was marching against his opponent Kerenski. Then Lenin issued the slogan, 'Now, side by side with Kerenski against Kornilov.' He was, if the comparison be permitted, a church father, not the interpreter of a theory. Too often the tendency of interpreters is to take their texts far more axiomatically than the author himself did.

German Story

Adolf Cohen went to the appropriate office in a German town and asked permission to change his name. The official, outraged at this open attempt by a Jew to escape the proper consequences of his name and race, severely rebuked Cohen. Adolf Cohen replied: 'You have misunderstood my application to change my name. I have no wish at all to change the "Cohen." I want to change the "Adolf."'

—*New Statesman and Nation*, London

Here is an honest self-portrait by a representative middle-class Englishman of the present day, followed by a humorous short essay from the French satirizing the literature of the future.

English FACT *and* French Fiction

TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

I. ENGLAND'S MIDDLE CLASS COMES HOME

By RUPERT CROFT-COOKE

From the *Adelphi*, London Literary Monthly

OF ALL the catchwords that were shouted at the War's end to us, who were then approaching adolescence, there was none more popular than 'the brotherhood of mankind.' We were exhorted to remember that our elder brothers had died for this ideal and that we could not do better than to live for it.

In our own country we were to become 'one great happy family.' The phrase was coined, one cannot help feeling, by an only son who was, if not actually an orphan, at least bereaved of uncles and aunts. However, his meaning was clear enough, if

only by antithesis, and we left our public schools determined, no doubt, not to feel superior to such of our contemporaries as had been educated at less expensive institutions. 'Practical democracy' was a term almost as popularly used as 'world peace.'

And one cannot help finding it a little comic to reflect that we have, in our muddled way, done as our elders told us in this respect, have without effort succeeded in following their loud admonitions to be 'brothers,' and that it is precisely for this that they are most angry with us. Indeed, you may hear them every day speak-