

SOCIALIST DISCUSSION JOURNAL  
TOWARDS BETTER UNDERSTANDING

# FORUM

## Capitalism and Technical Progress

In last September's FORUM, F. Evans tells us how the competition of capitals compels an ever-greater raising of the organic composition of capital, which he says means taking on more machinery at a faster rate than the taking-on of hands. This, he adds, leads to greater labour productivity and hence to an increased rate of exploitation. Nevertheless, increased productivity via competition of capitals results also in cheapening commodities and allows an ever-increasing number of use-values to be embodied in the production and reproduction of labour-power; which, it seems, more than compensates for the extra intensity of effort on the part of workers so that their living standards are continuously being raised.

But this process of raising the organic composition of capital, *i.e.*, the increase of constant capital relative to the increase of variable capital, is the means by which capitalism brings into being an industrial

reserve army. Now, there is no ineluctable process in accordance with any law of progress which automatically brings an ever-rising organic composition of capital, although from Evans's remarks he plainly thinks there is.

In actual fact the introduction of labour-saving machinery—the type which has predominated in capitalism—as distinct from capital-saving machinery is dependent on a number of factors. The primary one is the level of wages existing at the time. If the level is high there will be an incentive to employers to invest in labour-saving machinery, which will again in part depend on the availability and the rate of interest on capital. In the case of an invention which enables machines to be more cheaply produced, the level of wages will be less of a factor. In short, where the reduction in labour costs is greater than the increase in plant costs, the tendency will be to encourage a larger proportion of investment in machine production. It was this which led Marx to make the general statement that the demand for labour-power did not increase proportionally with the accumulation of capital. It increases, but in a constantly diminishing ratio to the increase of capital.

It is, in short, this double action of the introduction of machinery and the appearance of an industrial reserve army that regulates the upper and lower limits of wage levels. It not only ensures that workers' wages will not increase to the point where the whole of surplus value is absorbed, but defines the limit of trade union activity. The history of capitalism shows that the increase in the organic composition of capital, by making workers surplus to existing requirements, increases the competition for jobs and acts as a downward pressure on wages. I am, of course, concerned here with the long-term trends of capitalism. Short-term trends gives a less clear picture, but to go into this would take us too far from the present subject-matter. If then the long-term trend in the raising of the organic composition of capital is to produce downward pressure on wages, how can it at the

same time be the means which ensures continuous upward pressure? Unfortunately Evans's purple patches of description have never been blended with the sombre grey of factual analysis.

It may be of interest to note that in England, two crises—the last one in the 19th century and the 1929 crisis—saw prices fall faster than wages. In 1929 prices fell by about 15 per cent. and wages by about 6 per cent.; thus the wage rates of those workers who were in employment rose by 9 per cent., although net earnings probably declined. This rise, however, was offset by the tremendous increase in unemployment and short-time working, so the general standard of living remained roughly the same. This increase in wage rates was not due, however, to increased productivity as the result of increased industrial activity, but to its very opposite.

Now the brief outline given above contains what are generally considered by Marxists to be the main factors which regulate wage levels. Evans does not accept them: instead he substitutes a piece of mechanism which he calls "capital's specific mode of existence." This mechanism is self-developing and self-regulating, and human activity is merely a cog in the process. It may help to retard or accelerate the process but its momentum and direction are given.

Its *modus operandi* is simplicity itself. Technical development via the agency of the competition of capitals turns out use-values in ever-greater mass and more and more cheaply. Workers get increasingly high standards of living, capitalists ever-greater profits. One can hardly resist saying in the light of this that capitalism takes on the aspect of "all this and Evans too." We are asked to believe that the present economy is one of almost unrestricted technical progress and unlimited markets. In Evans's empurpled language: "Through profusion of cheapening products . . . profit, property, power and politics dig their own grave." Or: "In proportion as productive power panting for profit showers indiscriminately

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on all an increasing deluge of cheap use-values . . . dissolving the power of persons to withhold or bestow . . . changing social relations fundamentally, universally, continuously in the direction of socialism."

To put this rodomontade in sober perspective, the question boils down to this: do increases in productive efficiency bring about a continuous fall in prices which results in an increase in purchasing power? If this is so, then some highly interesting implications are involved. It would seem that an automatic regulation of capitalism is involved. No matter how fast the introduction of labour-saving devices, it would cause no net displacement of workers apart from temporary and unavoidable displacements. The rate of consumption and the rate of industrial expansion would be synchronized. Capitalism—*vide* Evans—may be based on exploitation but it serves certain social ends. Evans's theory of progress looks suspiciously like the "hidden hand" of Adam Smith.

In actual fact Evans is asking us to believe that *laissez-faire* or cut-throat competition is the rule of capitalism. Such a theory might have had some justification in 1855, but it has none in 1955. The free play of the market which was the outstanding (though not exclusive) pattern of early capitalism was being replaced even before the turn of the twentieth century by varying monopolistic forms as the dominant pattern of market behaviour.

It may be asked, however, whether technical changes influence the price level. The answer is to be found not in facile theories but in actual observation. If we make the assumption—and it is a valid one—that all branches of production improve their productive efficiency (even if not at exactly the same rate), then workers may be sacked and the same output achieved at lower costs. In that case, profits would increase. Again, if an effective demand for those goods was still maintained there is no reason why prices should fall. It might be asked: but what happens if there is a fall in the volume of employment? The answer could be that as the result of increased profits more is spent on luxury goods and, as a consequence, more workers employed in such trades and employment restored to the old level.

Again, increases in productive efficiency mean increases in investment and consequently more employment in the machine-making industry. As a result the demand for other goods will increase and prices will rise. As I have pointed out in the series "Notes on Crises," during the revival phase of the business cycle, prices rise. Nevertheless when the building-up process is over workers may become increasingly redundant and this may well constitute downward pressure on wage levels. But, it may be said, will not prices fall? Yes, but so will the wage level. It can be seen then that there is no over-riding compulsion in capitalist society to bring about a continuous

fall in prices which ensures a permanent and increasing net gain to consumers.

The best way to test a theory is to find whether it fits the facts and phenomena of reality. Only people with the attributes of divinity can discover truth in the way Evans does. From my point of view, I can see only that any selected period of industrial activity fails to show any marked downward influence on the price level. Take 1924 to 1929, one of the most progressive phases of technical progress in capitalism: apart from the distortion induced by the return to the gold standard, it was a period of rising prices.

Again, in the U.S.A. productive efficiency during those years was increasing by 3 per cent. per annum, yet the price level remained practically stable. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics, based on the returns of 16,000 manufacturing concerns, wages paid out in 1926 were represented by 100. The total fluctuated but was again 100 in 1929. Interest and dividends represented by 100 in 1926 rose continuously to 173 in 1929. While we cannot have the controlled experiment in economics, we can apply certain tests, and the test applied here demolishes the airy assertions of Evans.

Another way is to take wages as a proportion of total income (here I am including only wages of industrial workers—in recent years salaried and professional sections have been included—but it will demonstrate the point). In 1890 the wage bill was 38 per cent. In 1925 it was 42 per cent., but fell to 39 per cent. in 1939. In 1944 it rose to 41 per cent. and in 1954 it was a little under 42 per cent. But, it may be argued, suppose production has continuously increased, then the workers will have got a bigger slice from a bigger cake. Here again, the evidence given in *Phases of Economic Depression* (published by the League of Nations) showed that productive efficiency in the advanced capitalist countries—including, of course, Britain—had increased by about 1 per cent. per annum. According to Colin Clark it is about the same now. Allowing for depreciation charges and some of the benefits of increased productive efficiency going to the capitalists, it can hardly be maintained that there have been sensational additions to the standard of living.

Capitalism remains a system of organized scarcity, and Evans has not offered the slightest evidence to the contrary. In the next article I propose to deal with monopolies and restrictive practices typical of capitalist society, and attempt to show the relation of capitalist investment to technical progress, which is far more fundamental than the preliminaries stated here.

E.W.

## Bound Volumes

of "FORUM" for 1954 will be available shortly at about 10s. Orders should be sent to the Literature Secretary at the Party's Head Office.

## From the Government's Economic Survey, 1955

The increase of 351,000 in civil employment . . . was made up of an increase of 267,000 in the working population, a reduction of 64,000 in unemployment and a reduction of 20,000 in the size of the Armed Forces. With the growing number of jobs available unoccupied people went out to work in greater numbers, and the campaign to encourage the employment of older workers may also have helped to swell the working population, which increased by more than in any year since the war.

Manufacturing industry alone took on 258,000 more workers. Most of them went into the metals, engineering and vehicles group, which absorbed 177,000, including about 50,000 in vehicle manufacture and 50,000 in the industries making electrical goods and equipment. There were also increases in the other groups of manufacturing industry, except for textiles and clothing.

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Now that nearly two million new permanent houses have been built since the war, local authorities will be increasingly concerned with slum clearance, and provision is made in the Housing Repairs and Rents Act, 1954, for the preparation of five-year slum clearance programmes.

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The trend in textile manufacture towards increasing use of rayon and other man-made fibres continued, and output of these fibres, and of fabrics made from them, reached record levels. The total labour force employed in textiles and clothing (excluding footwear) remained fairly steady throughout 1954 at about 1½ million, which was slightly below the peak reached in 1951. There was a further reduction in the number of unemployed from 17,000 in December, 1953 to 15,000 in December, 1954; the worst figure reached during the recession was 160,000.

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Personal incomes rose sharply in 1954, as in 1953 . . . Wages and salaries increased by 7½ per cent. Part of this increase was due to the higher level of employment and the rise in productivity, but most of it to higher rates of pay . . . Consumers' expenditure is estimated to have risen by almost the same amount, which suggests that there was little change in personal saving. In each of the last two years between 7 and 8 per cent. of total personal income after tax has been saved.

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The amount of short time worked in the manufacturing industries remained low throughout the year, affecting only one

operative in every 200. Overtime working on the other hand continued to increase, particularly in the metals, engineering and vehicles group, and in the last week in November 28½ per cent. of operatives were working overtime as against 27 per cent. a year before. Average hours worked in manufacturing industries rose from 45.9 a week in October, 1953, to 46.3 in October, 1954.

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Estimates relating to the financial position of companies are set out . . . The increase in gross profits (including stock appreciation, but before providing for depreciation) led to an increase of over £200 million in the total income of companies. Tax payments fell by about £80 million as a consequence of the abolition of the Excess Profits Levy and the reduction in the standard rate of income tax in 1953; on the other hand, dividends are estimated to have increased by about £80 million. Undistributed profits after tax therefore rose by over £200 million.

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. . . Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude from last year's experience that the rest of the world need no longer be concerned about the level of activity in North America. A recession in the United States more serious or prolonged than last year's could always have serious consequences for other countries, particularly if it were to start at a time when activity elsewhere was less buoyant, and the dollar position less favourable.

## CORRECTIONS.

In the article "The Socialist Movement" the following italicised words were not printed, spoiling the meaning of the sentences concerned:

Page 127, col. 1, line 27, "the change in the operation of *government has become big enough* to be given a name—Bureaucracy."

Page 127, col. 3, line 11, "but *also of providing creative and socially purposive exercise of the faculties.*"

Page 128, col. 1, line 23, "a social whole in which *the fine products of joyful labour nourish* faculties of men."

Contributions to "Forum" should be addressed to the Internal Party Journal Committee, at Head Office. If they cannot be typed, articles should be written in ink on one side of the paper only, and contributors are asked to give their addresses and the names of their Branches. Contributors intending series of articles should give an indication of the scope of their series, not send merely a first article.

# THE WORK OF LEWIS MUMFORD

## Historic Materialism and Modern Times

### (Part 2)

In recent controversies in the S.P.G.B. on Mass Production, the Materialist Conception of History and other subjects, there has, of course, been at least one nigger in the woodpile, or genius in the background (depending on your attitude to these discussions) that has influenced a number of members. He has shown himself rarely, though his influence appears to have been appreciable none the less. He is Lewis Mumford, the author of "Technics and Civilisation" and a number of other books, which have undoubtedly influenced a number of the "new look" Socialists.

For that reason alone his work is worth reviewing. Here however, we shall mainly be concerned with his contributions to the subject he calls Technics, and space will restrict consideration to his methods and the main framework of his studies in that field.

His method is to follow his teacher, Professor Patrick Geddes, and divide the last 1,000 years into successive, but overlapping and interpenetrating phases. He explains the significance of this classification as follows:—

"While each of these phases roughly represents a period of human history, it is characterized even more significantly by the fact that it forms a technological complex. Each phase, that is, has its origin in certain definite regions and tends to employ certain special resources and raw materials. Each phase has its specific means of utilising and generating energy, and its special forms of production. Finally, each phase brings into existence particular types of workers, trains them in particular ways, develops certain aptitudes and discourages others, and draws upon and further develops certain aspects of the social heritage."—Pps. 109 and 110, "Technics and Civilisation." (All refs. are to the 1947 edition made in Great Britain).

We see that he follows Marx (and he acknowledges his debt) in realising the importance of the techniques of the period. However he does not give it the pride of place found in the materialist conception of history, and he tends to describe and classify, while Marx analysed and searched for causes. Of course in that respect each was typical of his time.

He divided the last 1,000 years into 4 phases, calling these the eotechnic, paleotechnic, neotechnic, and biotechnic respectively. He has defined them as follows:—

"EOTECHNIC." Refers to the dawn age of modern technics and an economy based

upon the use of wind, water and wood as power, with wood as the principal material for construction. Dominant in Western Europe from the tenth to the eighteenth century. Marked by improvements in navigation, glass-making and the textile industries, from the thirteenth century on: by widespread canal-building and increased utilisation of power and power-machines in the later phase.

"PALEOTECHNIC." Refers to the coal and iron economy, which existed as a mutation in the eotechnic period (blast furnace and primitive railway) but began in the eighteenth century to displace the eotechnic complex, and became a dominant between 1850 and 1890. Key inventions: steam engine, railroad, steamship, Bessemer converter, various automatic devices in spinning and weaving. Up to the last quarter of the nineteenth century the eotechnic economy remained as a recessive.

"NEOTECHNIC." Refers to the new economy, which began to emerge in the eighties, based on the use of electricity, the lighter metals, like aluminum and copper, and rare metals and earths, like tungsten, platinum, thorium, et al. Vast improvements in utilisation of power, reaching its highest point in the water-turbine. Destructive distillation of coal: complete utilisation of scrap and by-products. Growing perfection and automatism in all machinery. Key inventions: electric transformer, electric motor, electric light, and electric communication by telegraph, telephone, and radio: likewise vulcanised rubber and internal combustion engine. At the present time, the eotechnic complex is a survival, the paleotechnic is recessive, and the neotechnic is a dominant.

"BIOTECHNIC." Refers to an emergent economy, already separating out more clearly from the neotechnic (purely mechanical) complex, and pointing to a civilisation in which the biological sciences will be freely applied to technology, and in which technology itself will be orientated towards the culture of life. The key inventions, on the mechanical side, are the airplane, the phonograph, the motion picture, and modern contraceptives, all derived directly, in part, from a study of living organisms. The application of bacteriology to medicine and sanitation, and of physiology to nutrition and daily regimen, are further marks of this order: parallel applications in psychology for the discipline of human behaviour in every department are plainly

indicated. In the biotechnic order the biological and social arts become dominant: agriculture, medicine, and education take precedence over engineering. Improvements, instead of depending solely upon mechanical manipulations of matter and energy will rest upon a more organic utilisation of the entire environment, in response to the needs of organisms and groups considered in their multifold relations: physical, biological, social, economic, æsthetic, psychological. Pages 495-6. *Culture of Cities*. (1944 Edition).

Aluminum, phonograph, and airplane are of course usually called aluminium, gramophone and aeroplane in England to-day.

By telescoping down his descriptions, or definitions as he terms them, something of the fuller exposition is lost, so the reader who desires a more accurate description of the technological complexes should read "*Technics and Civilisation*." However, this method has intrinsic limitations in the study of history. History is the dynamic of society. It is the study of the development of society. This classification method of looking at the past is only at best social statics and never social dynamics. It is like taking four still photographs, as against the record of a cine-camera. He describes each period, or technological complex, as if in equilibrium.

librium. His analogies come from static sciences like geology, where we consider the strata as results of biological evolution, rather than biology, where the mechanisms of evolution are considered. In fact though he predicts a biological age, biology appears to be rather a closed book to him.

He has also shown a partiality to writing of the need for an integrated view of society. An example is the passage quoted on the front page of *FORUM* of August, 1954, by S.R.P. Unfortunately he does not use the concept of integration effectively when he analyses society. He writes of considering society as an organism, but instead of using that approach, to get the best out of the classification method, and writing of each of his phases in turn, he writes as if it is sufficient to consider the evolution of each aspect of society in turn, and so rather in isolation. Thus he writes four histories on different subjects, or aspects of society, technology, cities, etc., in turn, calling the books: 1, *Technics and Civilisation*; 2, *The Culture of Cities*; 3, *The Condition of Man*; 4, *The Conduct of Life*; instead of writing a book on each "technological complex," considering each aspect of the complex in turn, and then showing the integrated view of the phase, as an organism, how the factors interact, how the era came into being, and

how it prepares the way for the next phase. For after all, as Plekhanov wrote:—

"Men do not make several distinct histories—the history of law, the history of morals, the history of philosophy, etc.—but only one history, the history of their own social relations, which are determined by the state of the productive forces in each particular period. What is known as ideologies is nothing but a multiform reflection in the minds of men of this single and indivisible history.—*The Material Conception of History*. New York (1940), Page 48.

It is important to consider the subject of our study, in this case society, in an integral fashion, but it is even more important not to merely pay lip service to the method, but to use it. It is not, in essence, novel, for it is the basis of the so-called "Synoptic" approach used in modern weather analysis, examples of synoptic weather charts being shown each evening on T.V. Also because they understand the need for an approach of this sort historians specialise in a certain period of history, and study the interaction and relevance of each aspect of society at that time, so obtaining a whole, or integral picture of a limited period of society.

(To be continued).

ROBERT.

## MARXISM and LITERATURE: 1

Historical materialism abhors a vacuum: that is, it does not accept that any aspect of man's development exists and can be studied except in relation to the mode of production—society's "real foundation." The institutions and ideas, the moralities, laws, concepts and knowledge held in any society are results of, basically, the way labour is organized and its products distributed. Thus the primitive measurement of land gave birth to geometry; the making of pots and baskets to the idea of capacity; the division of fields to the concept of justice, which is *nomos* in Greek that originally meant pasture.

Literature is one of man's oldest activities. From earliest times, man has recorded the impressions and ideals given him by social life, in plays, poetry and prose. The intention of these notes is to show the evolution of literature as something closely interwoven with the evolution of society. Beowulf and Bunyan, Juvenal and Joyce, Shakespeare and Damon Runyon show it; it is in the troubadours' songs, purveying the middle ages' new concept of romantic love, and in

the epics of Homer, where kings' divine rights are backed by the gods' divine retribution.

"Literature" had better be defined, as far as that is possible. In one sense, it means just printed matter: furniture shops and political parties distribute literature, but nobody places it with Shelley's poems. On the other hand, political speeches and factual writings can and have become literature in the other sense: Cicero's orations, or Herodotus' histories, or White's *Natural History of Selborne*. When reading matter has given pleasure and satisfaction to many people for a long time, it must be called literature. That does not mean all books of long-standing fame must be good; many hold their places in the histories because they mark new trends and phases. In this writer's view, there could be no other justification for those monuments to hack writing, Scott's works.

Prose literature is a comparatively recent development. The earliest literature was in verse and unwritten; our knowledge of it comes from present-day primitive peoples.

"In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch."  
MARX.

In their societies, the poet is not separated from his hearers by the barrier of literacy; poetry is generated spontaneously by everyday life and passed from mouth to mouth. The origins of speech itself are believed—see Malinowski, Ogden and Richards, and others—to lie in rhythmic sound-making as an aid to work. "The group worked together, like children in a kindergarten orchestra, and each movement of hand or foot, each stroke on stick or stone, was timed by a more or less inarticulate recitative uttered by all in unison. Without this vocal accompaniment the work could not be done."—(Geo. Thomson, *Marxism and Poetry*).

When speech and skill were better developed, that accompaniment became unnecessary. It went on, however, as a rehearsal of work before the work was done—in other words, as a piece of magic. It still happens: Frazer in *The Golden Bough* and Jane Harrison in *Ancient Art and Ritual* give numerous examples. In these rituals music, dancing and poetry had a common origin. Plenty of labour songs are still

known, in places where they have not been drowned by machinery: spinning songs, rowing songs, sea shanties and so on.

The incorporation of poetry in ritual meant its separation from ordinary speech and its association with magic. Thus, for barbarian peoples the poet is a prophet inspired by the gods (the status of the Old Testament psalm-singers). Said Plato: "All good poets are enabled to compose not by art but because they are divinely inspired or possessed. When they compose, they are no more sane than the Korybantes when they dance." The conception of poetry as magical, inspired and different from other speech has remained: that is why Shakespeare used verse for lofty sentiments and prose for commonplace talk, and why poets are still regarded as "weirdies" to-day.

The oldest written literature which is known is that of the Egyptians. From Memphis of more than four thousand years ago there are incised tablets with the folk-songs of peasants and fishermen, the precepts of rulers, the bitter testament of a king who had escaped from assassination. The great age of Egyptian literature was roughly between 2000 and 1800 B.C., when the nobles had broken the power of the Pyramid Age Pharaohs. There were temple libraries, extensive private libraries, and a goddess of books named Sefekh. The papyrus rolls include religious plays and pageants; there is "The Voyage of Sinuhe"—the original Sinbad—with stories of travel, exploration and military adventure, the earliest scientific writings and the earliest prophecies of a Messiah.

The growth of literature in this age—abruptly ended by the Hyksos' invasion of Egypt—is comparable with what happened in Britain in the Elizabethan era. A language had been perfected for writing. The boundaries of Egypt were extended, and Egyptian ships were going to every part of the known world. Navigation, irrigation to increase the agricultural yield, the building of huge cylindrical granaries—in a word, commerce—gave tremendous stimulus to the gaining of knowledge and to the imagination. There was another factor, too. As Ford Madox Ford puts it in *The March of Literature*: "You have to consider that all across Asia there was a continual, an unending, going and coming of merchants, of conquerors, of missionaries, of nomads, and that one body of men cannot come into contact with another body of men without maxims, practices, or merely material habits and knowledges getting transferred from one to the other."

The Babylonians, too, had their literature, and the immense flow of Chinese poetry began more than a thousand years B.C., long before the Emperor Shi Hwang Ti ordered the burning of books. The Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt at that time, assimilating the legends of the Creation and the Flood that had been carried from Babylonia and went with a dozen more Egyptian myths into the compendium of propaganda and

folklore that is the Old Testament. And, in the same period still, the man or men Homer gathered the folk-legends and hero-myths of barbarian Greece into the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The Greek epics were tales of past glories, composed when the first warlords had been driven out of Mycenae and Sparta by others like themselves. They began as extempore sung lays; for two centuries they existed in a dozen different forms, until an Athenian tyrant commissioned what would to-day be called a definitive edition; they were gone over again about 150 B.C. by Aristarchus of the library of Alexandria. Even the ancient world doubted that Homer had much to do with them, and even the ancient world doubted the stories: Herodotus, for example, thought it moonshire that a world should fight for a woman when virgins were cheap in the market place. The real fact is that the Greek epics were a popular heritage, passed on by countless bards, of mythology and tradition.

Yet they were great and skilful works. The historical conditions of early Greece made them so. Thus, they were not written for generations; when writing was widely practised in Greece, they were heard and not read—they thrived in and were moulded by the declamatory traditions of the Greek festival and the agora. When finally they were written down there were skilled hands to do it. Then there is the question—too wide to go into here—of the Greek conception of beauty in simplicity; it went into their epics as it did into their architecture and sculpture, and it derived mainly from the physical environment.

Greek epics were inspired by war. Drama was the product of agriculture. Beginning with magic ritual, it evolved as religious drama with the poet speaking as a god. In the growth of Greek democracy in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., tragedy became part of the great religious festivals. "It was employed from above," says Ford, "by the governing class to instil into more or less turbulent proletariats the lessons of discipline and of obedience to rulers who had behind them the divine beings of Olympus."

That is near enough to the truth. The ideas of retributive justice and retributive law are the core of Greek tragedy, as they are of the Homer epics. Of the latter, Kelsen says in *Society and Nature*: "Retribution is regarded—always and everywhere—as a kind of trade in which good is exchanged for good and bad for bad. Thus it is said at the beginning of the *Iliad*, 'Whoso obeys the gods, to him do they gladly give ear.' The whole character of the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles is the demand for obedience to the gods, who represent but an idealized human authority. Divine law is personified in Dike, the goddess of righteousness and punishment. In Euripides, third of the great tragic dramatists, the religious theme gives way to a national one, but authority suffers no loss.

Euripides' nationalism was a sign of the

times: the rivalry between Athens and Sparta was approaching its climax. When the walls of Athens were torn down and the Spartan hegemony established in 405 B.C., the curtain fell on Greek tragedy. The other celebrated dramatist, Aristophanes, was a political propagandist; an aristocrat, anti-democrat, pro-Spartan. His comedies aimed at sitting targets—the Athenian democracy, the philosophers and artists who got few chalks under the Spartans' Thirty Tyrants. *Lysistrata*, enjoyed nowadays for its bawdiness, was a plea for Athens to make peace with Sparta; *The Birds* and *Peace* clamoured for alliance with the Lacedaemonians.

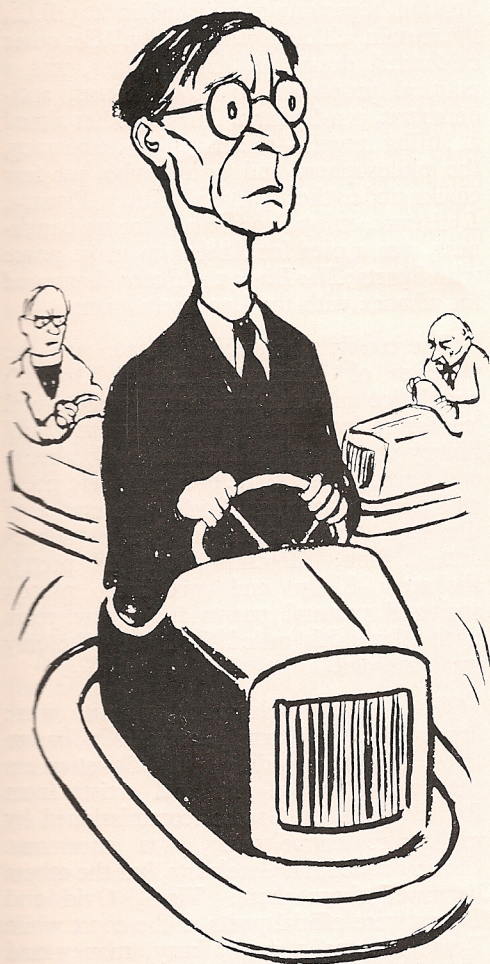
The conflicts between the states and the victories of Alexander reduced Greece's population and sent commercial and cultural leadership eastwards. The museum and library at Alexandria became a storehouse and a refuge, the home of second-rate poets and philosophers and finally the cradle of theology. A small colony of Greeks—Theocritus, Bion, Moschus—lived in pretty, sheltered Sicily and produced pretty, sheltered pastoral poems for a few years until Alexandria called them too. Ptolemy was generous.

When Greek epics and tragedies were flourishing, the Romans were a barbarian tribe. By the beginning of the Christian era the importation of arts and artists from Rome's province Greece, commissioned by millionaire connoisseurs, was enormous. Cicero decried the Greek arts, but the others borrowed from them. Virgil, Ovid and Lucan were official poets of the court while Rome became a great, busy, money-mad city, reflecting the manners and upper-class ideals but little of the real life of that time. Petronius and Apuleius saw to the last matter; the former, with his shrewd uproarious pictures of parvenu and low-life alike, one of the greatest realists ever.

The separation of everyday life from what is called literature must be evident, through all this. The sweated populace of Rome knew and cared nothing of bucolics or hexameters. All the same, they had something in the nature of a last word. Their language—Latin, but only coincidentally resembling the classic tongue of Seneca or Livy—spread over Europe. It became the language of the Romance period—that is, of Chaucer, Ronsard, and the others who stand at the beginning of modern European literature.

R. COSTER.

NOTE.—In addition to many other opinions, the writer thinks the provision of book lists with articles rather unctuous. However, for those who are interested, he recommends the works cited. Erman's *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* is the standard work on its subject, and Thomson's *Aeschylus and Athens* is worth anybody's time. There is also Lafargue's very good essay, "The Origin of Abstract Ideas," in *Social and Philosophical Studies*.



SIR RICHARD ACLAND, BT., cranky, churchy Don Quixote of the Labour Party. 15th Baronet, public school, began in Parliament as Liberal. Changed to Labour and supported Popular Front movement of 'thirties. Wrote Penguin bestseller *Unser Kampf* (Our Struggle), 1940, urging nationalization as moral principle. Formed and financed Common Wealth Party, 1942, breaking wartime "political truce" (successful candidate was cold-shouldered when he entered Parliament). Supported last war; refused commission, serving as a private. Decided ownership of estates not in accord with "socialism," so gave them to National Trust and told Common Wealth no more money to give them (the kybosh). Returned to Labour fold and elected to Allighan's seat for Gravesend in 1947. Now resigned in protest against Britain's labour-supported H-bomb measures; delights *New Statesman* and I.L.P.—latter invites him to join. Has written other books, pamphlets, helped found Socialist Christian Group of M.P's. Knows publicity; wartime Common Wealth campaigns were spectacular, and had hymn-singing miners on election platform at Gravesend.

Conclusion: tilts at windmills with one hand, supports them with the other.

## SUPER SCIENTIFIC

It takes all kinds of people, they say, to make a world. This is undoubtedly true and it is not always easy for us to understand one another's reasoning processes and why we think the way we do. Take, for example, even organizations like the World Socialist Party and its companion parties in other lands. One would imagine that a socialist party founded and built round a set of generalizations which describe the society we live in and the society we are attempting to help bring about—that a party of this type would find enough unanimity of understanding among its members to prevent it from getting bogged down from time to time with harmful internal bickering. Unfortunately this is not the case, and it has become apparent that there are at least three distinct types represented in our groups.

We have those, the large majority as yet, who hold to the position as expressed in our principles and policy, in our pamphlets and in the columns of the *Socialist Standard* and the *Western Socialist*. Then again we have those who are in basic opposition to these principles and ideas. The type and nature of the opposition may vary all the way from those who advocate, even if in an indirect or roundabout manner, a violent and bloody type of revolutionary act to those who argue that organization upon class lines and an appeal for socialism upon a class basis are all wrong.

Much as we deplore the fact that ideas such as these are permitted to involve the Party in internecine warfare and obstruct out vital work for Socialism, we must admit that those who represent such thinking have at least one thing to be said in their favour. *They take a position and stand upon it*—which is more than can be said for the third type, the individuals we wish to deal with in this effort, the comrades who are so "scientific" they see no basic difference in the debate, *who take no position whatsoever*.

"We accept the Declaration of Principles," these positionless members proclaim, "but we assert that we should not be dogmatic about them, that the main thing we want is understanding, not adherence. As long as one understands what socialism is all about and says he wants it he is a socialist and there is no reason to bar him from a socialist organization just because he is convinced that *the principles which we understand to be the basis of such an understanding are all wrong*;" This is characteristic of the

double-talk or Newspeak language found in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and among certain members of the Companion Parties.

On the other hand, while we cannot conceive of any other method than the ballot to effect a socialist revolution, they argue, we must also proclaim that not only do we advocate the ballot because it is the only possible weapon in our times, but that this only possible weapon may conceivably be replaced in some inconceivable manner at a future time with another type of revolutionary weapon! More Newspeak!

Let us examine this "reasoning." We have, of course, the Application for Membership blank which asserts that the applicant understands and also is willing to adhere to the principles of the organization. True enough, one has the right to change one's mind and question the validity of those principles after joining the organization. It is even conceivable to this writer that such members be permitted to remain members while they are making up their minds as to the correctness or incorrectness of the principles. However, it would seem that the only logical thing to do once one is convinced that the organization is banded together round a faulty set of premises and that the majority is determined to continue on its "mistaken" path is to get out. But no! These oppositionists seem to believe they have a right to remain in the Party despite its "mistaken" principles, while our positionless friends go on arguing that even though the principles are scientifically sound we should permit those who now disagree with us to go on disagreeing, within the organization.

If this attitude is scientifically sound there is something else which flows from it and must immediately be considered. Why is it in harmony with the democratic method and sound socialist logic to permit those who disagree with us to remain in the Party while we at the same time bar others from joining who have the same type of disagreement? The only sensible thing to do would seem to be to lower the bars and allow those who disagree with our principles, even if only in the manner that those we speak of disagree, to join if they wish. In which case those of us who are now in the majority and who are convinced that the principles are sound and constitute a basis of socialist understanding will be abandon-

ing the organization and will find ourselves overwhelmed if not convinced by those we disagree with. This may make sense to our positionless comrades. It does not to this writer.

And now let us look into this question of dogmatism a little farther. We should not be dogmatic, they tell us, about a proposition like the revolutionary weapon because history may "make liars of us." Or we should not be dogmatic about an adherence on the part of the membership to the principles or policy, because a dogmatic attitude, they say, is unscientific and one must always have an open mind. But such an idea betrays a sublime ignorance of science and scientific methods. It is fortunate indeed that science has been quite dogmatic in its approach to the problems which have confronted it and has barred and fought tooth and nail all those who would attempt in the name of "open-mindedness" or any other such shibboleth to foist disproved and untenable theories on society.

We find upon examination that something like the following takes place in any branch of science we wish to consider. First of all an assumption or a postulate, based upon factual evidence arising from past experience, is made. The scientist then goes to work and carries on his thinking and experimentation accordingly. It may well be that the future will prove him to have been wrong in certain of his theories, in which case he will be willing and eager to abandon his methods for new ones which fit the new discoveries. It must be emphatically pointed out, however, that until he is proved wrong by new findings he must be extremely opinionated about his methods and attitudes and does not have the time to spare for arguments about whether or not history may make him out a liar. In short he does what he must do—he uses the tools and the knowledge of to-day and leaves *conjecture* about the future to the future.

Would our super-scientific socialist want to reason, for example, that medical science should not be so dogmatic in its insistence that modern medical and surgical methods rather than faith-healing are the ways for treating disease? Certainly he cannot deny that the Christian Science practitioner would like to see a diseased disciple cured as earnestly as would a doctor of medicine or surgery. Does this mean that our comrade would insist that the faith healer has as much right as the M.D. to belong to a medical society if he wishes because he also wants to wipe out disease? That the doctors would be unscientifically dogmatic in refusing admission to their association of the faith healer just because he disagrees with the basis of the physician's reasoning and has one of his own?

For hundreds of years the stars were studied and explained by astrologers while alchemists laboured to discover a "universal solvent" and an elixir of youth. Does our super-scientific socialist believe that these people, some of whom are still around, should be given representation in our modern universities just in the event that

some unforeseen quirk or development should come about to prove that they had something on the ball after all? That the mere fact that alchemy and astrology were the forerunners of chemistry and astronomy should be sufficient cause to allow their voices to be heard in the same conclaves with the chemists and astronomers? No, there is no room in our modern scientific associations for people who represent in their thinking the dead hand of the past.

But if this is true of medicine and chemistry and physics and astronomy and all the other individual sciences, why is it also not true for Socialism? Has it not been pointed out time and time again, even by our super-scientific socialists, that Socialism is the queen of the sciences, that Socialism inter-relates all science?

If that is true—and we think it is—why is a socialist organization, a socialist political party which can be the only type of socialist organization that counts, any different? Why must we, in order to be democratic and scientific, permit the political alchemists, astrologers and faith healers membership? Radicals who hold to an ideology which emanated from former revolutions, who insist on applying the thinking of the 18th and 19th centuries to the as-yet-not-realized socialist revolution, do not really belong with us.

Are the "class-less" revolutionists of to-day any more sound in their thesis than were the early Utopian socialists like Fourier and Owen, who saw the job as one merely of appealing to the reason of people regardless of which economic class they happened to be in? Why would such an attitude be unscientific in the 19th century yet sound to-day? On the other hand, what has happened in the last fifty years that makes once more tenable a position based on the expectation if not the advocacy of a violent, bloody type of revolution? Or for that matter, what has happened since 1904 that has wiped out the validity of our principles as a sound socialist analysis? Is there actually any difference in the base or structure of capitalism to-day?

It is not as though there is anything new or different about the reasoning of our oppositionist comrades. It has all been done before and answered before. And the newest thing in the working-class movement is still the Declaration of Principles of the Companion Parties, flowery as some of the language may be. The comrades who in 1904 drew up those eight principles really contributed something new to the movement, something which has been tested and not found wanting in two world wars, "communist" revolutions and social-democratic revolutions, a multitude of small wars, depressions, recessions, disinflations and cold wars. For the first time in the history of the revolutionary movement, here was an organization which proclaimed by principles and propaganda that Socialism is a world-wide system of production for use which will be brought about by an overwhelming mass of *the workers of the world*,

after they have become convinced that such a course is necessary.

Furthermore that a democratic society such as Socialism cannot be ushered in in any other than a democratic manner, which eliminates from the propaganda such schemes as Vanguards (intellectual or otherwise), Dictatorships of the Proletariat, etc. That still further, before it becomes possible to effect such a transformation the central organ of power, the capitalist state, must be gained control of in the only way possible, by converting the ballot from a means of duping, as it now is, to the agency of emancipation. In short, by voting for Socialism, Socialism only and nothing short of Socialism. By not compromising in any way, shape or form the struggle for a new world.

That has been the understanding of this writer of the purpose of the W.S.P. and its companion parties. That is why I belong and should I feel at any time convinced that this is a basically wrong approach it will be time for me to find another group, if this is possible, that more nearly represents my thinking. Our positionless comrades notwithstanding, we must still proclaim as our purpose a position of non-compromise with what we consider non-socialist attitudes; that socialism as we understand it is explained and embodied in our principles and policy, and that we require not just adherence without understanding nor understanding without adherence, but a combination of both as the chief requirement for membership.

HARMO.

## Why I criticised the M.C.H.

Below are answers to the three critics of my article "A Critique of Historical Materialism." (August, 1954).

GILMAC (October).

Gilmac's main point is that I should show where M.C.H. does not fit, where it has failed to explain the changes and direction of social development. Let me point out at once that my article was mainly an attempt to show the inadequacy of the basis-superstructure theory of society—to obtain a more satisfactory explanation of social change, not to demolish the M.C.H. Cannot members see that it is possible to accept some points of a complex theory like the M.C.H., to reject others, and to have doubts about still others?

It is true that my article dealt with the theory of the M.C.H. rather than its application to past events—though I did apply it to Socialism. If the M.C.H. is a basis-superstructure conception, then my criticisms stand. However, Gilmac's own ideas deserve some comment. He says that in a society where the work is performed by slave labour "it is proper to state that that particular society is based upon slave labour, because without the slave labour that form of society

would not exist." If that is the criterion for calling slave labour the basis, then relationships between master and slave are also basic, since without them that form of society would not exist. The mental attitudes of masters and slaves cannot be left out of the basis, since slave society could not exist with a population of sub-human intelligence.

When we look at society we are looking at a social *organism*. None of its parts (though separable in analysis) can be isolated from the whole. That is why it is nonsensical to compare society to a building, in which at one stage the basis *can* exist without the superstructure. Ignoring this, Gilmac writes:—

"What is the basis upon which the new society will be built? *That everything that is in and on the earth will be the common possession of all mankind.* That will be the basis of the new society, and upon that basis there will be a superstructure of relations and performances in harmony with it. In other words, the most important factor of the new society will be the basis, because without it we cannot build up the superstructure we want, as it will determine, in the main, the nature of the superstructure."

My criticism is concerned with the reason for using this superstructure analogy. Could it be to show that revolutionary change means a change of basis, to be followed by a change of superstructure? Since Gilmac says that without the basis "we cannot build up the superstructure" we may take it that with the basis we *can* build up the superstructure.

Now let's apply this to Socialism. We have a "basic" situation in which everything will be the common possession of all mankind, on which we are going to build "relations and performances in harmony with it." But there seems to be something wrong here. How can we have "common possession" without relations of common possession and performances of common possession? The only way to make sense out of applying Gilmac's theory to Socialism is on the assumption that he imagines the socialist working class will capture Parliament on the "common possession" ticket, and will then introduce legislation to deal with relations and performances. It is the manifest absurdity of this position that encourages us to take a process view of the coming of Socialism.

It was unfortunate if my meaning was not made clear to Gilmac (and perhaps others): "It is inconceivable to me that the socialist idea will grow without a correlative development of material conditions approximating closer to Socialism." This simply means that as people get more socialist ideas so the world becomes more socialist. Even to-day, material conditions show embryonic socialist forms—otherwise how do we explain (M.C.H. fashion) our own few socialist ideas?

The following two passages make an interesting comparison. This is from Gilmac's May, 1947 S.S. article on the M.C.H.:—

"The confused social outlook of a period, including the present, is the resultant of the mixture of ideas thrown up by the different classes that together make up society, but the prevailing, or the most insistent, ideas are those backed by the dominant class; and they remain so until another class becomes sufficiently conscious of its interests and strong enough to challenge the supremacy of the dominant class."

S. Lowy holds no S.P. membership card. If he came to our meetings he would probably be called an opponent. Anyway, this is what he wrote in *Co-operation, Tolerance and Prejudice* (page 218):—

"Attempts at revolutionary changes... are not infrequently examined from the existing political or economic interests. This is the natural consequence of the fact that there does not yet exist a society where that which is common is more dynamic than the interests of particular groups."

The point of this comparison is that whereas movements to establish forms of class domination may have been of a class character, the movement to achieve harmonious and equalitarian society cannot be a class one. Gilmac's theory makes it appear that Socialism is another form of class society—which is all that class movements have ever achieved.

McHALE (December).

Any resemblance between what I wrote and the meaning McHale finds in what he says I wrote is purely coincidental, as readers can look up for themselves. But his "dialectics in a nutshell" is quite illuminating:—

"There are no causes which are not also effects, no effects which are not causes. An integrated philosophy must contain arguments in a circle, for everything turns back to itself. We may commence our argument from any part of the circle, in short, make ANY part of our circle our starting point, our THEORETICAL basis. Socialists choose the mode of production as a THEORETICAL basis because it lends itself best to scientific examination."

Apart from the last sentence, there is little to quarrel with in that. Certainly I have no objection to commencing a theoretical analysis of Capitalism from one part of the "circle," since it can be shown how one part fits in with another, and hence fits into the whole. Given capitalist techniques of production one can deduce capitalist ideology, the ideology throws light on the kind of institutions, the relations point to the performances, and so on.

Unfortunately, the mode of production is

more than a THEORETICAL basis to many members. It is their PRACTICAL basis—it sets limits to their activities as socialists. And here is the core of our disagreement. My view is that socialists are not just mode-of-production changers. We are changers of society as a whole.

RUSSELL (December).

Russell complains that I did not substantiate my claim that idealism and materialism are complementary. The claim is valid in the sense that the M.C.H. is as one-sided in its emphasis on matter and material conditions as idealism is in its emphasis on ideas. The one completes the other by transposing the roles of basis and superstructure, so that taken together the two assert that all factors are both basic and superstructural. Expressed as a new synthesis, this means that neither material nor ideological elements are basic, but that the two are in dialectical relationship. This brings us, by another route, to the conception of the organic unity of society.

Russell asks: if Marx is not correct in stating that "the ideal is nothing more than the material world reflected by the human mind" then what is the ideal? The point of my objection was that the ideal must be more than a mere reflection of something else. It is a mistake to think of the ideal as something apart from the material world. A reflection is passive, and cannot change unless that which it reflects changes. The progressive element in society is thus held to be the material world, with the world of ideas as a consequence. It is because I doubt that every change, movement, development and product of society can be shown to proceed exclusively from its material elements that I am critical of the M.C.H.

We are told that there is "abundant evidence that Marxists do not separate ideas from material conditions." That is good. But it is not quite as Russell states. What Venable did, in his excellent little book *Human Nature—The Marxian View*, was to bring together actual quotations from the works of Marx and Engels and to add his own connecting and explanatory comments. It is *he* who tells us how Marx and Engels saw mind and matter, not Marx and Engels themselves.

In my view, the Party has been wise in using the minimum of labels to distinguish its theories. "Marxist," "M.C.H.," etc., are tempting blankets to throw over one's ideas, but they do not avoid the ultimate necessity of getting down to cases.

In conclusion, I should like to thank my critics, especially Russell, for stating their views and for treating mine in a reasonable manner, on the whole.

S.R.P.