

history & revolution

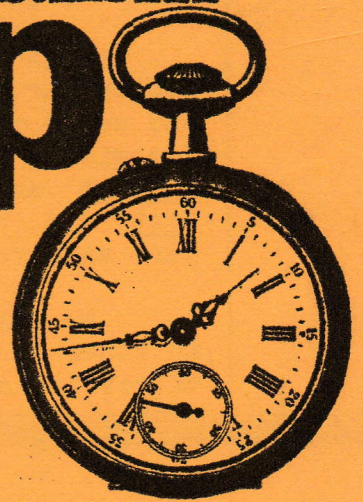


1. A Critique of Cardan's Critique
by B. Potter

2. On unhistorical materialism
by M. Brinton /

• Solidarity (London)

5p



Discussion Bulletin No. 1

In August 1971 'SOLIDARITY' (London) published a pamphlet called 'HISTORY AND REVOLUTION' (a revolutionary critique of historical materialism). It was a translation of a text by Paul Cardan which had first appeared in 1964 in issues 36 and 37 of the French journal SOCIALISME OU BARBARIE.

Our pamphlet (as both expected and intended) gave rise to considerable controversy. Rather than argue the matter at length in several issues of our paper - which would bore those not particularly interested in this sort of discussion - we have decided to produce a number of bulletins in which the problems could be gone into in depth. We hope all those suitably provoked will take part.

This first bulletin contains two articles. One is by Bob Potter, a comrade once closely associated with 'Solidarity' and now a regular contributor to 'Freedom'. Bob was author of two widely distributed 'Solidarity' pamphlets ('The Rape of Vietnam' and 'Greek Tragedy') and co-author of 'Busmen, What Next' and 'Mount Isa (the great Queensland strike)'. He is here answered by Maurice Brinton.

We hope many others will join in this discussion, and in other discussions on other themes. For us the development of revolutionary theory is intimately related to the development of revolutionary action.

'HISTORY AND REVOLUTION'

A CRITIQUE OF CARDAN'S CRITIQUE

by BOB POTTER

I don't like having to write this article for two reasons. Firstly because I lost interest many years ago in the kind of theoretical discussion that could be generally described as "interpreting the holy scriptures", discussions that are always barren because they are never related to 'activity' - in this very basic sense they are quite "un-marxist"! - and secondly because I find I am forced into the unfortunate position where I must defend Marx, whereas, in principle, I recognise that Marx, along with any other thinker very much bears the birthmarks of his age, and needs revision. But there is a difference between revision and misrepresentation, and this must be the subject of my remarks.

The object of the pamphlet is to examine the 'doctrine' of historical materialism as presented by Marx and Engels. It is emphasised that Cardan is to take up the argument with the 'founders of scientific socialism' themselves, and that contrary to Marx and Engels he will demonstrate that the mode of production is not a force 'outside' history and society.

'We begin our investigations by examining Marx's economic theory. Cardan's theories were, of course, developed in much greater detail in Modern Capitalism and Revolution, but we have them summarised again. In general, says Cardan, Marx predicted tendencies for an increase in the rate of exploitation, the rise in the organic composition of capital and a fall in the rate of profit.

Recent history has proven Marx to be wrong, says Cardan. In greater detail elsewhere he has shown how the State, by its intervention, can counteract these 'tendencies', how 'capitalists' themselves can 'intervene' in the historical process.

The contradiction in Cardan's assertions (and it is true, the ruling class does act intelligently against these tendencies) is that their very action, necessary as it is, demonstrates the in-built tendencies to which Marx referred. And this in spite of the fact that the terms of reference have changed against Marx anyway, for Marx was writing specifically of a laissez-faire economy.

"All the laws formulated by the political economists from Quesnay to Ricardo have been based upon the hypothesis that the trammels which still interfere with commercial freedom have disappeared. These laws are confirmed in proportion as free trade is adopted." (On the Question of Free Trade, 9th January, 1848.)

The tremendous state interference in today's economies has the effect of modifying not eliminating the general tendencies analysed by Marx. In fact, on a very simple level, the mere fact that more or less equalisation of the 'rate of exploitation' and so on has been achieved by the modern state is confirmation not refutation of Marx's economic 'tendencies'.

But the major Cardan criticism is directed at the Labour Theory of Value, a 'theme that recurs frequently throughout this book and the previously mentioned Modern Capitalism and Revolution. Marx's theory 'neglects' the actions of social classes, 'neglects' the effect of workers' struggles on the distribution of the social product and so on. These shortcomings stem from the theory's fundamental premise, namely, that men (proletarians and capitalists) are transformed into things, i.e. 'reified'. This is false, says Cardan, for reification, though basic to capitalism, can never fulfil itself. The factory in which the workers were really just cogs would stop in next to no time.

Cardan isn't very happy with Marx's concept of labour power as a commodity, the value of which is determined in exactly the same way as the value of any other commodity (e.g. a pound of sugar). Cardan believes that man can influence the value of his labour power, and that labour power is therefore unique among commodities. (Ironically it is Cardan who is always accusing others of mixing their 'categories'!)

In the preface to the first edition of Capital Marx warned that to understand the first chapter, especially the section containing the analysis of commodities, would present the greatest difficulty. But it is the foundation stone on which all else is constructed, so we must pause awhile to sort out Cardan's confusions.

Let us be quite clear that we are dealing in abstractions. When we talk of 'value' we talk of a 'relation', an exchange relation. A man is a real being, labour power is an abstraction. The sugar that we add to our tea is real, the 'commodity' sugar which has 'value' on the 'market' is an abstraction.

Marx himself explains this quite simply:

'Labour power, inasmuch as it is bought and sold, is a commodity like any other commodity, and has, in consequence, an exchange value. But the value of labour power, or labour power as a commodity, produces as little as the value of wheat, or wheat as a commodity, serves as food.' The Poverty of Philosophy.

It is true as Cardan claims that men can influence the value of 'their' labour power - join a union and withhold their labour power until a higher wage has been agreed - but only in the way in which they can influence the price of sugar - grow less, or dump some in the ocean. In both cases, the same action. Lessen the supply, demand stays constant, so up goes the price. Thus functions the capitalist market.

That modern industry wouldn't operate were all the workers automats is as true as it is irrelevant to this particular discussion of this particular category. (Incidentally, it is true, although to a lesser extent, of all previous societies.)

This 'non-reification' characteristic of labour power to which Cardan refers is indeed the integral part of labour power that gives it its market value. If robots were able to operate the factories of capitalism, the ruling class would take the obvious steps!

I must emphasize that for Marx the 'commodity' is the basis of his analysis of capitalism.

We approach the field of 'historical materialism'. The pamphlet correctly points out that Marx himself never used the term, and indeed, in the sense of it being a 'system' in the Hegelian sense, it would have been the antithesis to Marx's historical outlook. But more of this later. Engels used the term, as he explained in detail, only in the last years of his life, not to describe a 'system' but to attempt to popularize traditional empirical philosophy in the most bourgeois of all bourgeois lands, Victorian England.

We are given a small quotation from Marx's Preface to Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy to the effect that material productive forces come into conflict with existing relations of production. (In spite of the promise in the pamphlet's introduction to 'take up the argument with the founders of scientific socialism themselves' this is the only quotation Cardan gives us in the entire document - the critique is essentially attacking what Cardan says Marx said, or what Trotsky said, or what 'sophisticated' Marxists say, or what 'traditional' Marxists say, or what 'myopic' Marxists say.)

This 5½ line quotation from a document which Marx himself describes as being only a very general statement about social development is Cardan's foundation stone for constructing a picture of a Marxian theory of history which sees every society crudely producing its own 'contradiction' (a short pause for the familiar academic discussion about when is a conflict a contradiction) which 'represents an impermissible extrapolation applied to the whole of history as a process which only existed during a single period of history: the period of bourgeois revolution' and so on.

It is true that Marx was primarily interested in Capitalism, in its origins, its development past, and future. Indeed, unlike some of his followers, he deduced the 'necessity' of communism not from any 'Hegelian' kind of historical theory (as Cardan at times implies) but from his analysis of the 'capitalist mode of production'. But to argue that he tried to 'model' or 'rewrite' the past in terms of the bourgeois revolutions is not only to ignore the mass of material that can be found in the Grundrisse (section on Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations), in the third volume of Capital, in the section of Feuerbach in The German Ideology and in the

Marx-Engels Correspondence, but, in the case of Cardan, whom I know to be well-read in Marx, is just downright dishonesty.

Although Marx never devoted the time and energy to the origins of feudalism that he did to the origins of capitalism, he was quite specific as to its 'military' origins from 'outside' in marked contrast to the pseudo-dialectical growth from 'inside' that Cardan tries to impose upon him. I mention, in passing, his constant interest in Oriental and Asiatic society, which again he saw as quite different from anything that could be studied in Western Europe.

We return to the theme of 'economics'. 'Economic relations cannot be constructed into an autonomous system whose functioning would be governed by its own laws independently of the social relations' says Cardan, in a comment with which surely no-one, certainly not Marx or Engels would disagree.

But while on the mechanistic economic interpretation of Cardan, it does well to recall the letter of Engels to Joseph Bloch (21 September, 1890):

'If therefore someone twists this into a statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase.'

In this same letter, Engels parodies the sort of vulgarisations that could 'make one ridiculous' by 'explaining in terms of economics the existence of every small state in Germany past and present', etc. He adds that Marx and he were themselves responsible for this over-emphasis of the economic side, due to the opposition of the time.

(There are plenty of examples of these ridiculous vulgarisations scattered throughout the Cardan pamphlet, and I refer now to the illustrations and quotations added to the text by Solidarity. The principle adopted is to take a general proposition, apply it to a particular case, and rely on a superficial relation of the one to the other. Illustrations V, IX, XIII are the worst examples of this method.)

Cardan's presentation of Marx's historical materialism is very much a history propelled by the Hegelian 'idea', but the propelling force instead of being religious, philosophical, or political is technological. 'We cannot give ourselves in advance a finished dialectic of history . . . We cannot think of history as a unity . . . Nor can we think of history as a progressive dialectical unification. Plato is not absorbed in Kant, nor the Gothic in the Rococo . . .' and so on. Right on to the last page of his pamphlet, Cardan continues his windmill tilting.

For what does Marx himself say about 'history'?

'History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the

old circumstances with a completely changed activity. This can be speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history . . .' (German Ideology, p. 59.)
and further:

'Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the remembrance of independence. They have no history, no development, but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking.' (German Ideology, p. 38.)

To summarize and conclude. Cardan's document firstly misunderstands Marx's theory of the commodity, the cornerstone of his economic theory, and the labour theory of value, and his critique consequently becomes quite meaningless. Secondly he falsifies Marx's ideas on history by reducing them to the crudest possible interpretation, usually by offering 'popular' views on Marxism as opposed to the quite extensive published writings of Marx and Engels on the subject. He is aided in this by the additions of London Solidarity, whose illustrations and captions are often misleading, often irrelevant, and never designed to assist in an understanding of Marx's ideas.

In conclusion, Cardan offers us some general views on history and philosophy that are not basically at variance with Marx, although the document is written in such a way as to imply that Marx held views to the contrary.

Bob Potter.

MODERN CAPITALISM and REVOLUTION

by PAUL CARDAN

From the alien (bourgeois) core of marxist economics (the concept of labour power as an 'integral commodity') to the problems of our society: bureaucratisation, political apathy, alienation in production, consumption and leisure. What are revolutionary politics today? 25 p + postage.

'HISTORY AND REVOLUTION' ON UNHISTORICAL MATERIALISM

by MAURICE BRINTON

Unlike Bob Potter, I have enjoyed writing this article. Firstly because the discarding of an illusion is like the shedding of a load - one moves about more freely without it. Secondly because to help demystify others, far from being 'barren', is in my opinion a fruitful activity in itself.

Since its first issue Solidarity set itself a difficult task: the systematic critique of every aspect of the dominant ideology (a task we have more recently come to realise included a critique of certain aspects of marxism). Marxism, with its heavy emphasis on the 'development of the productive forces', is now officially espoused by the ruling strata of Russia and China. It is becoming the ideology of the emerging state capitalist regimes in the Third World. This is no accident - and makes it more than ever necessary for libertarian revolutionaries to take a long cool look at every strand of the doctrine.

I agree with Bob that Marx 'very much bears the birthmark of his age'. But I disagree with him that Marx therefore needs 'revision'. In the past revolutionaries have only interpreted (or revised) Marx - the point today is to transcend him.

In such an endeavour, misrepresentation would not only be pointless. It would be self-defeating. I will seek to show in this article that far from misrepresenting Marx and Engels (as Bob alleges) Cardan's pamphlet History and Revolution brings into focus certain socio-centric aspects of their thought, of which many traditional revolutionaries are still blissfully unaware. In my opinion these deformations viciate the claims to universality put forward on behalf of 'historical materialism', first by Engels and later by every variety of marxist. In relation to 'historical materialism', I am asking for the baby to be thrown away with the bath water. The infant has been dead for many years and the putrefaction in the bathroom is now threatening the water supply of the whole district.

The object of History and Revolution was critically to examine historical materialism as presented by Marx and Engels. To do this we inserted various quotes, emphasising some of their more outrageously inadequate formulations. Alas! there is no satisfying some people. On the one hand B P denounces us because he thinks Cardan's text fails to fulfil our promise that Cardan would 'take up the argument with the founders of scientific socialism themselves'. (B P's point here seems to be that .. Cardan's text proper only contained a single quote from Marx. Adding insult to injury the said quote didn't even run to half a dozen lines.) At the

same time Bob attacks Solidarity (London) for peppering Cardan's text with 'ridiculous vulgarisations' . . . from the writings of Marx and Engels. The fire is misdirected. Our quotes are, of course not vulgarisations. They are the genuine, original product, grotesque as it may seem. What makes our quotes appear 'ridiculous' (and incidentally helps us use them for purposes of 'desacralisation') is our deliberate juxtaposition of their inflated claims to universality . . . with a variety of concrete, specific situations. (We know of no better way of testing the validity or puncturing the pretensions of even the broadest of generalisations.)

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The first half of Bob's article is not really a critique of History and Revolution at all. It is a critique of another of Cardan's texts, namely Modern Capitalism and Revolution. Over half-way through his article (p. 3) B P announces that we now 'approach the field of historical materialism'. This circuitous approach presents major problems to someone attempting a serious reply. To follow Bob on his spiral, interesting and necessary as (in another context) it might be? Or to restrict the discussion to the original terms of reference (the pamphlet History and Revolution)? I have chosen a third course, namely to indulge in a deliberate digression aimed at stressing the relation between the two discussions.

In both Modern Capitalism and Revolution and in History and Revolution Cardan demands that revolutionaries apply to marxism itself one of the most profound of Marx's insights, namely that the dominant ideas of each epoch are the ideas of its ruling class. Marx wrote in a period of full bourgeois ascendancy. It would have been a miracle (and Marx was a man, even a great man, . . . but not a miracle merchant) if some bourgeois ideas had not permeated his own writings. Unlike others, Cardan does not just pay lip service to this as a theoretical possibility. He dissects each of the various components of marxism (economics, history, philosophy) in a search for such a bourgeois core. He seeks to discover, in each strand of marxism, the 'unmarxist in Marx'.

In Modern Capitalism and Revolution Cardan seeks to identify the alien (bourgeois) element in marxist economics. He sees it as Marx's attempt to treat labour power as an integral commodity. ('Labour power, therefore, is a commodity neither more nor less than sugar. The former is measured by the clock, the latter by the scales'(1).) In doing this, according to Cardan, Marx is treating labour power in theory much as the bourgeoisie would like to treat it in practice. Both endeavours fail - and for the same reason. Labour power is not an integral commodity. It is unique in that it is embodied in human beings. Like other commodities it has a use-value and an exchange-value. But unlike other commodities the extraction of its use-value and the determination of its exchange-value are not simple technical operations. They are profoundly influenced by the struggle of workers, both as

(1) K.Marx. Wage Labour and Capital, Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 81.
(Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow 1958.)

individuals and as a class. The exchange-value of labour power, unlike that of other commodities, is therefore not solely determined by its cost of reproduction (2). According to Cardan, Marx's treatment of labour power as an integral commodity leads to an erroneous theory of wages, which in turn has historically led to many erroneous economic prognostications.

In History and Revolution, Cardan seeks to identify the alien (bourgeois) element in the marxist view of history. He sees it in the attempt by Marx and Engels to apply to the whole of human history certain categories and relationships which are not transcendental (contrary to what is implied in so much of the writing of Marx and Engels) but which are themselves the product of historical development and more particularly of the rise of the bourgeoisie. Among such historical (non-transcendental) categories and relationships, Cardan stresses two: the notion of the primacy of the economy and the concept of a certain pattern of interaction (determination) between economic 'infrastructure' and ideological 'superstructure'. The retrojection of these categories and patterns onto other areas of history - with a view to constructing a universal and 'scientific' theory of history (which Engels repeatedly claimed 'historical materialism' to be) can only be achieved, according to Cardan, through a systematic rape of the facts.

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To turn now to the substance of the matter: the discussion of 'historical materialism' itself. Here I must confess to nothing but disappointment. B P does not discuss any of the new and interesting ideas developed in Cardan's text. These are rather patronisingly dismissed as 'some general views on history and philosophy that are not basically at variance with Marx'. (The same Cardan, incidentally, is accused of 'falsifying' and 'misrepresenting' Marx's ideas on history.)

In the concluding pages of this text I will take up the question of 'falsification' and 'misrepresentation'. At this point I would only like to stress how the defence of orthodoxy can render people blind to what is new. Does Bob not recognise as new (whether right or wrong) Cardan's attempted proof of the fact that 'the materialist conception of history' is basically monist (unifactorial) in its approach, and that it is moreover idealist (the driving force for social change being the growth of technological ideas)? What does B P think of Cardan's attack on the logical sloppiness of allegedly 'scientific' explanations that have to take refuge behind such formulae as 'economic factors being in the last analysis determinant'? What does he have to say about Cardan's assertion that profoundly different cultures may develop on the basis of very similar technological infrastructures? Can one take that without batting an eyelid, and still call

(2) Bob here misses the point altogether. The question is not whether the action of men can influence the price of sugar. The question is whether sugar itself can influence its own exchange value, as labour power can.

oneself a 'historical materialist'? Won't B.P. even respond to Cardan's assertion that vast areas of history including modern history (the emergence of the new ruling classes in the Third World) cannot be satisfactorily interpreted according to the models proposed by 'historical materialism'? Why does B.P. not deal with the core of Cardan's critique, namely that the materialist conception of history (with its belief that the same 'forces', acting in various societies, will by and large have the same 'effects') presupposes constant human motivations (and in particular the characteristically bourgeois motivations of constantly increasing production and consumption) whereas in fact human motivations are themselves very much the products of historical development.

What does B P think of Cardan's argument that the different meanings with which concepts, institutions and economic categories are vested in various societies imply the need for different types of articulation between economic and other factors? Didn't Marx and Engels deal with this articulation in a largely static (and on the whole unidirectional) way: the way it undoubtedly operated at a certain stage in the growth of bourgeois society - and then seek to retroject this ('ultimately') deterministic relationship between economic infrastructure and ideological superstructure onto other periods of history?

Also worthy of discussion would have been Cardan's claim that the technico-economic categories cannot 'always have been the determinant ones, for during long periods of history they neither existed as materialised categories of social life, nor as poles or values' (they in fact only assumed this dominant role with the emergence of the bourgeoisie). Isn't B P provoked beyond endurance by Cardan's claim that even the 'class struggle' strand in marxism is deterministic in that it denies an autonomous (non-predetermined) role to the struggle of social classes? And why doesn't B P go through the roof when Cardan makes his most challenging statement of all, namely that 'the activity of classes and social groups may bring about new elements that are neither predetermined nor predeterminable'. Isn't this a negation of everything Marx and Engels stood for, in the realm of the philosophy of history? Does it not make of the materialist conception of history (with its promise of a key to help unravel past, present and future) not so much something that is wrong (although it is wrong in parts) as something which is meaningless and hence irrelevant?

Does B P really believe that all this is 'not basically at variance with Marx'? How elastic is his Marx? How much that is embarrassing can be swept under the carpet before people notice a bump? How much can its tenets be stretched without altering the original system of ideas? One is reminded of the Hindus who, when confronted with Buddhism, responded by claiming that Gautama was but the 11th incarnation of Vishnu!

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A debate on the forementioned points would have made for a genuinely interesting discussion. It could have marked the beginning of a collective endeavour to cover new ground. We hope this discussion will still take place. Instead we now have to descend from the sublime to the ridiculous.

B P's real objections to Cardan's pamphlet is that it 'falsifies' and 'misrepresents' the views of the founders of scientific socialism. It allegedly does so in three main areas:

- (a) In that it presents 'historical materialism' as a 'system' (whereas Marx and Engels apparently had no such intention).
- (b) In that the famous passage of the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy in which Marx talks of the 'material forces of production coming into conflict with the existing relations of production' (a statement which Marx himself described as the 'guiding thread' to all his historical studies) was only intended as a very general statement. B P implies that this statement of Marx's was not intended to apply to other forms of society (i.e. presumably to slave society, Asiatic society, feudal society). It would be a crude simplification, he believes, to suggest that marxism saw contradictions between 'forces of production' and 'relations of production' in all societies - or that these contradictions generated the driving force for social change.
- (c) In that Cardan imputes to Marx and Engels an over-emphasis on the role played by economic factors in the determination of the cultural and intellectual productions of various phases of history.

Let us look, in turn, at each of these objections.

Did Marx and Engels, the founders of 'scientific' socialism, seek to present the development of history as governed by coherent 'laws' (such as governed for instance the natural sciences)? They undoubtedly did - and it is childish to pretend the opposite! Engels speaks of the 'Great Law of Motion of History (discovered by Marx) which . . . has the same significance for history as the law of transformation of energy has for natural science'. If this isn't describing a 'system', I don't know what is. From thermodynamics, we pass to biology. 'Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature so Marx discovered the law of development of human history'. Marx himself speaks of the 'evolution of the economic formation of society' as a 'process of natural history'. He describes how 'Asiatic, ancient feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production were progressive epochs in the economic formation of society' (clearly perceived as a process) and proclaims that 'with the inevitability of a law of nature capitalist production begets its own negation'.

Marx and Engels didn't mention anywhere that the 'laws' they believed they had discovered (and to which they repeatedly refer) were only to be related to a limited range of historical phenomena (limited geographically and limited in time). They don't say that their 'laws' were only intended to apply to the functioning of bourgeois society - or that they had little relevance to other periods of history. On the contrary. The appeal of the marxist view of history (as can be ascertained by anyone who examines any textbook by any marxist economic historian) is its claim to universality. 99.9% of the marxists of today (and that may include comrade Potter himself) would subscribe to the view that 'the economic structure of society always

furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of judicial and political events'. They would also subscribe to the proposition that 'every other form of production' (i.e. forms of production that antedated bourgeois production) 'Has its peculiar inherent laws They work themselves out independently of the producers and in antagonism to them as inexorable natural laws'.(3)

Engels' repeated references to natural science in fact becomes quite meaningless if not seen as universal. Just imagine us speaking of a second law of thermodynamics that had only operated during the last three centuries - or of laws of gravitation, the effects of which had only manifested themselves in Western Europe!

A critical reading of Marx and Engels will show that B P's second objection is no more tenable than the first. (We are not discussing here, let us repeat, whether Marx and Engels were right or wrong. B P has not chosen to take the discussion up at this level. We are discussing whether - as B P alleges - Cardan has misrepresented them).

Boldly proclaiming the universality of his analysis Marx says: 'the relations of production, in their totality, constitute . . . a society at a definite stage of historical development . . . Ancient society, feudal society, bourgeois society (emphases - and sequence - in Marx) are such totalities of productive relations, each of which denotes a special stage of development in the history of mankind'.(4) What conflicts were there within these societies? Why was one form of relations of production to be superseded by another? How, in general, do relations of production change? Marx is quite explicit on the point. In the same paragraph (and therefore clearly referring to all the forementioned stages of society) he says 'they change, they are transformed with the change and development of the material means of production'. In other words in all known societies changes in technology bring about changes in the material means of production. These in turn, through their development, revolutionise the relations of production. Changes in culture, law, ideas, etc., follow.

This theme that changes in the forces of production (the result of technological development) provide the driving force of history recurs again and again in the writings of Marx and Engels. It would serve little purpose to give dozens of quotes. Let one suffice: "As a result of technological

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- (3) B P must have read this quote (emerging from the jaws of Death on p. 5 of our pamphlet). I am genuinely amazed that he can nevertheless write that 'no one, certainly not Marx or Engels, would disagree with Cardan's proposition that economic relations cannot be construed into an autonomous system whose functioning would be governed by its own laws, independently of the social relations'. But perhaps he thought our quote was only a 'vulgarisation'?
- (4) Wage Labour and Capital. Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 90. Note the clear and unambiguous formulation about 'a development in the history of mankind'.

change 'ancient property relations found their doom in feudal property relations, and these in bourgeois property relations' (emphases in Marx). 'History itself', continues Marx, 'has practiced its criticism upon past property relations'.(5) Note again the historical sequence, unequivocally showing the intended scope of what Marx was talking about. Note also the virtual personification of History, whose objective seems to be the development of the productive forces and whose method seems to be the successive transcending of all relations which prove obstacles in her path.

The clearest example, however, of the fact that Marx and Engels saw the conflict between 'forces of production' and 'relations of production' as an important factor moulding the evolution of pre-capitalist societies (and that this is not therefore a 'crude' extrapolation by Cardan) is to be found in the Communist Manifesto itself. Marx and Engels are discussing feudal society, and conjure up the very 'model' which, according to B P, they only intended to apply to capitalist society. 'At a certain stage in the development of the means of production and exchange . . . the feudal organisation of agriculture and manufacturing, in a word the feudal relations of property, become no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces. They become so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder: they were burst asunder'.(6) It isn't a question of Cardan accusing Marx of personally attempting to rewrite the past (as B P rather naively alleges). It is something much more subtle and much less personalised. It is a question of Marx and Engels defining a framework and then claiming that through this framework alone can the meaning of the past be genuinely grasped.

Let us turn finally to B P's third point. Is Cardan misrepresenting 'the founders of scientific socialism' in attributing to them the view that the ideological superstructure of any society ultimately derives from its economic base?

Here again, an honest reading of the overwhelming majority of the texts of Marx and Engels, the texts which have been translated into dozens of languages and reproduced in millions of copies can leave one in no doubt that there is no misrepresentation. Most of the classical writings stress the profound determinant effect of the economic infrastructure on the ideological superstructure. There is no mention in Marx or Engels that the primacy of the economy is itself a historical category, related to the rapid technological development occurring in bourgeois society, or that this therefore viciates any analyses of pre-capitalist societies, which made of the economy the ultimate determinant. One has to turn to a certain letter written by the ageing Engels, nearly a decade after Marx's death, to find

(5) K. Marx. On Proudhon. Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 39.

(6) The similarity of this description to Marx's famous anticipation of the end of bourgeois society is worth recalling. In Capital, Marx says that 'new forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society. But the old social organisation fetters them and keeps them down. It must be annihilated: it is annihilated.' From mechanism to metaphor the similarity is striking.

even the hint of a serious discussion of the 'retroactive' effects of the ideological and cultural superstructure on the development of the economic base. And even here, Engels seeks refuge in phrases such as the economic infrastructure being 'ultimately determining'. (I personally consider Cardan's demystifying attack on this intellectually slipshod formulation to be one of the most telling points of his pamphlet.)

In his letter to Bloch (1890) Engels complains that if someone were to take his phrase about 'the ultimately determining element in history' being 'the production and reproduction of real life' and distort it 'into saying that the economic element is the only determining one', that person would be transforming an important proposition 'into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase'. Is there really all that difference between 'ultimate' and 'only' in a chain of causal links? Isn't this tantamount to saying that the non-economic, non-predetermined influences can have no fundamental effect? And anyway, wasn't it Engels himself who proclaimed that 'all the social and political relations, all religious and legal systems, all the theoretical outlooks which emerge in history are to be comprehended only when the material conditions of life of the respective corresponding epochs are understood'. Why? Because 'the former are derived from these material conditions'.(7) Could the ideological Frankenstein's monster created by Marx and Engels really be stopped in its track by five lines in the letter to Bloch?

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Marxism, in its day, gave us many profound insights, some of which (the class struggle, the concept of surplus value, the theory of alienation, the importance of economic factors in historical development, the need ruthlessly to demystify all ideologies) are still valid today. Other aspects of marxism are today of lesser value. Marxist economics and the materialist conception of history are suspect, because deeply permeated in their most fundamental conceptions by the capitalist mentality prevailing at the time they were written.

As more and more revolutionaries begin to see through these tainted areas, we can anticipate a quasi-religious reaction by residual marxists (even by those who now like to call themselves 'anarchists'). They will refer to increasingly esoteric writings of the Founding Fathers in an attempt to defend the faith. (For instance, B P in his text refers to writings that Marx did not see fit to have published in his lifetime!) I wouldn't be surprised if within a short while Engels himself wasn't cast to the wolves as 'never having been a proper marxist'.

This deep, innate conservatism has profound psychological causes, the nature of which I have hinted at elsewhere(8) and which I cannot here

(7) F. Engels. Karl Marx, a contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 368.

(8) The Irrational in Politics, Solidarity pamphlet No. 33.

discuss. In an epoch where every realm of knowledge is being challenged more thoroughly and criticised more deeply than at any other time in history, it is sad to see revolutionaries cling pathetically to the past, in the futile belief that today the only thing that isn't in need of thorough revolutionising is . . . revolutionary theory itself!

In his major work on capitalism, Marx defined the organic composition of capital as the ratio of 'dead labour' to 'living labour'. Let us compare capital with the theory that guides our action. The doctrine of most marxist revolutionaries unfortunately comprises a very high ratio of 'dead theory' to 'living theory'. Isn't it time we began to move forward?

Maurice Brinton.

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