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ON THE ALLEGED CRISIS IN MARXISM



by
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Forgotten Books

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**On the Alleged Crisis
in Marxism**
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Citizens: the socialists of today possess the rare gift of evoking, from time to time, feelings of joy and hope in that very bourgeoisie which usually considers them – with good reason – their mortal enemies. What is the origin of this strange phenomenon? It springs from the imaginary splits in the socialist camp. In just the same way, the German bourgeoisie were gladdened some seven or eight years ago by the dissensions between the so-called *young* [1*] and *old* Social-Democrats, seeing in the former an antidote to the latter; they hoped that, with help from on high and the police, the “young” Social-Democrats would neutralize the “old”, thus enabling the bourgeoisie to gain mastery of the field of battle and reduce both the “old” and “young” to silence.

The bourgeoisie are now rejoicing at the polemic created by several articles by Eduard Bernstein in *N[eu]e Z[eit]* [2*], and by Conrad Schmidt in *Vorwärts!*. [3*] The bourgeoisie’s theorists have lauded these two authors as reasonable and courageous men who have realised the falseness of the socialist theory, and have not been afraid to reject it. Thus, Professor Julius Wolf, a fairly well-known socialist-baiter, has tried to reject the theory of Karl Marx, in a series of articles published this year in *Zeitschrift für Socialwissenschaft* under the title of *Illusionisten und Realisten in der Nationalökonomie*, making use therein of arguments borrowed from Bernstein and Conrad Schmidt. Professor Masaryk, too, in a speech at the University of Prague, spoke of the crisis in the Marxist school and contrasted certain ethical views expressed by Conrad Schmidt to what he considers immoral in the writings of Frederick Engels.

These gentlemen see new allies in Bernstein and Conrad Schmidt, and are grateful to them for this unexpected alliance. That is quite natural. However, I do not think that their joy at Bernstein's and Schmidt's articles will, or *can* be, long-lived. On the contrary, I think it will be of the same brief duration as the joy aroused by the discord between the "young" and the "old" Social-Democrats. Just as the expulsion of several young people who were undisciplined and incapable of obeying discipline was the only significant consequence of that dissension, so the polemic raised by Bernstein's and Conrad Schmidt's articles will at most end in these two gentlemen ultimately joining the ranks of the bourgeois democrats. That will be a loss to the German workers' party, but socialist theory will remain what it is: an impregnable fortress all hostile forces hurl themselves against in vain. Consequently, the joy felt by the bourgeoisie's theorists is too premature.

Indeed, what have Bernstein and Schmidt actually said? Have they advanced any genuinely new arguments against the theory of Karl Marx? That is something we shall now see.

As has been so excellently said by Victor Adler, the celebrated Austrian socialist, Marx's socialism is not only an economic theory, it is a world theory; the revolutionary proletarian movement is only a sector of the revolution in thought that marks our century. It has its own philosophy, as well as its own understanding of history and its own political economy. In what they call their criticism, Bernstein and Schmidt have attacked present-day socialism as a whole. We shall follow them through all the arguments they have brought forward, and shall, of course, *begin from the beginning, i.e., with philosophy.*

You are all, no doubt, aware that the founder of modern socialism was a firm supporter of *materialism*. Materialism was the foundation of all his doctrine. Bernstein and Schmidt call materialism in question, for they see it as an erroneous theory. In an article recently published in *N[eu]e Z[ei]t[ung]* [4*], Bernstein called upon socialists to return to Kant *bis zu einem gewissen Grad*. [1]He thinks, incidentally, that the socialists of today have already abandoned *pure or absolute* (the expression is his) materialism. Unfortunately he does not explain to us what is meant; by pure or absolute materialism, but he cites the words of a present-day materialist, a certain Strecker who, according to Bernstein, has said fully in the spirit of Kant: *Wir glauben an das Atom*, which means, “we merely believe in the atom”. It may hence be assumed that the *pure or absolute* materialists have spoken of the *atom* with less circumspection: they have claimed to have seen, felt or smell it. This assumption, however, is quite groundless. Several brief quotations will bring that home to you.

The eighteenth-century materialists were of the “*pure*” variety. Let us begin with La Mettrie, that *enfant perdu* of materialist philosophy, a man whose boldness frightened even the boldest.

“The nature of movement,” he says (*L’homme-machine*), “is just as unknown to us as is the nature of matter.”

“The essence of Soul in man and animals,” he says in his **Traité de l’âme**, “is and will always be just as unknown as the essence of matter and bodies,” and further: “Though

we have no idea of the essence of matter, we cannot deny recognition to the properties that our senses discover in it.”

Thus, La Mettrie frankly acknowledges that he does not know the essence of matter and that he knows only some of its properties discovered by the senses. This is equivalent to La Mettrie merely *believing* in the atom. Yet he was “*pure*” and “*absolute*”.

We shall now go over to another representative of eighteenth-century pure and absolute materialism.

“We recognise,” Holbach says in his *Système de la Nature*, “that the essence of matter cannot be understood or, at least, that we understand it only poorly, in the measure that it affects us ... We know matter only from the perceptions, sensations and ideas it gives us; it is only from them that we can judge of it, well or poorly, according to the specific arrangement of our organs,” and further: “We know nothing of the essence or true nature of matter though we are able to recognise some of their properties or qualities through the effects they have on us.”

This too seems to be fully in the spirit of Kant, does it not? Only it was written *before* the appearance of his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

But what about Helvetius, who has often been recognised as the most absolute representative of eighteenth-century materialism?

Oh, this one was most circumspect! In his book *De l'Esprit*, he says, in respect of the controversies over the relation of soul to body, that words *should not be misused*, that

everything possible should be drawn from observation, and that “one should advance only together with it, stopping the moment it abandons us and having the courage of not knowing what one cannot yet know.”

I shall add that, to Helvetius, what in *philosophy* is called the reality of the sensual world, was only *probability*.

Next to all this, Strecker’s word *Wir glauben an das Atom*, which Bernstein has cited as a sign of the great changes that have taken place of late in materialist theory, produce a really comical impression. Bernstein sees in these words a confession recently forced out of materialism under the influence of Kant’s philosophy. He thinks that the *pure* or *absolute* materialists never said anything of the kind, and did not even suspect it. *You see that this is absolutely untrue*. And when Bernstein says to us: “Let us return to Kant ‘*bis zu einem gewissen Grad*,’” we say in reply: “Comrade Bernstein, return *bis zu einem gewissen Grad* to your classroom; make a study of the theory you wish to criticise, and then we will discuss the matter.”

But perhaps you will ask me what is meant by eighteenth-century materialism? What is meant by the materialism of Karl Marx?

The enemies of materialism will reply for me.

Go to the National Library in Geneva, consult Volume 28 of *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne*, and look up the article on La Mettrie. The author of this article says that, besides other books, La Mettrie wrote *L’homme-machine*, a vile work in which the pernicious materialist theory is set

forth without the least restraint. But what kind of pernicious theory is it? Listen carefully:

“On noticing, during his illness, that his spiritual faculties had become impaired following the weakening of his bodily organs, he drew therefrom the conclusion that thought is nothing but a product of the physical organisation, and he had the audacity to make public his surmises on this score.”

Thus thought is nothing but a product of organisation: such is the true meaning of the theory held by La Mettrie and the other materialists. This may seem audacious, but is it false?

Let us see what Professor Huxley, one of the most outstanding and best-known representatives of present-day biology, has to say on the matter:

“Surely no one who is cognisant of the facts of the case, nowadays, doubts that the roots of psychology lie in the physiology of the nervous system. What we call the operations of the mind are functions of the brain, and the materials of consciousness are products of cerebral activity. Cabanis may have made use of crude and misleading phraseology when he said that the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile; but the conception which that much-abused phrase embodies is, nevertheless, far more consistent with fact than the popular notion that the mind is a metaphysical entity seated in the head, but as independent of the brain as a telegraph operator is of his instrument.”

La Mettrie is descended from Descartes; not from the latter's *metaphysics*, which was quite idealistic, but from his physiology. Here is what the selfsame Huxley says about the physiology of Descartes:

“In truth, Descartes' physiology, like the modern physiology of which it anticipates the spirit, leads straight to Materialism, so far as that title is rightly applicable to the doctrine that we have no knowledge of any thinking

substance, apart from extended substance; and that thought is as much a function of matter as motion is.” (*Les sciences naturelles et l'éducation*, Paris 1891, article sur le *Discours de la methode*, de Descartes, pp.25-26). [2]

It is true, citizens, that materialism, as evolved in the eighteenth century and accepted by the founders of scientific socialism, is a theory that toadies us that “we have no knowledge of any thinking substance, apart from extended substance; and that thought is as much a function of matter as motion is”. But this is a negation of philosophical dualism, and returns us direct to old Spinoza, with his single substance, of which extension and thought are merely attributes. Indeed, present-day materialism is a Spinozism that has become more or less aware of itself.

I say “more or less aware of itself” because some materialists have been little aware of their kinship with Spinoza. *La Mettrie* was one of these, but even in his lifetime there were materialists who were well aware that they were descended from Spinoza. Diderot is an example, who said the following in a short article entitled *Spinosisme*, published in Volume 15 of *l'Encyclopédie*. [5*]

Here is what Spinoza says in Theorem XIII of Part Two of his *Ethics*: “*Omnia individua quamvis gradibus diversis animata sunt*”. [3] This is what Diderot said.

Feuerbach (*Spiritualismus and Materialismus*) and Engels were also Spinozists.

But what is the difference between a materialism thus interpreted, and Kantianism? The difference is a vast one. It all lies in that which refers to the unknowable.

According to Kant, things in themselves are not what we perceive them to be, and the relations between them in reality are not what they seem to us; if we abstract ourselves from the subjective organization of our senses, all the properties and all the correlations of objects in space and time, and space and time themselves, *vanish*, because all this exists only as a *phenomenon*, i.e., only in us. The nature of things, regarded in themselves and independently of our own faculty of perception, is wholly unknown to us. Of such things, we know only the manner on which we perceive them: consequently, things belong to the area of the *unknowable*. In this, the materialists are far from agreement with Kant.

According to Kant, what we know about things is only the way we perceive them. But if our perception of things does take place, that, again according to Kant, is because *things affect us*. Phenomena are the products of the effect on us of things-in-themselves, *noumena*. However, the exertion of an affect already means being in some relationship. One who says that objects (or tilings) in themselves affect us is saying that he knows some of the relations of such objects, if not among themselves then at least between them, on the one hand, and us, on the other. But if we know the relations existing between us and things-in-themselves, we also know – *through the mediation of our faculty of perception* – the relations existing between the objects themselves. This is not direct knowledge, but knowledge it is; once we possess it, we no longer have the right, to speak of the impossibility of knowing things-in-themselves.

Knowledge means prevision. If we are able to foresee a phenomenon, we shall foresee how some things-in-

themselves will affect us. All our industries and all our practical life are based on that prevision.

Consequently, Kant's proposition cannot be supported. Everything correct in it had already been voiced by the French materialists *prior to Kant*: the essence of matter is incomprehensible to us; we gain an understanding of it only in the measure in which it affects us.

This is what Engels said in his book *Ludwig Feuerbach*, and what Bernstein and Conrad Schmidt have failed to understand.

This distinction between materialism and Kantianism may seem inconsequential to you, yet it is highly important, not only from the theoretical point of view but also – and perhaps particularly – from the practical.

Kant's "unknowable" leaves the door wide open to *mysticism*. In my German book *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Materialismus*, I showed that this "unknowable" is nothing else but God, a scholastic God. *Matter*, on the contrary, of which we gain a knowledge in the measure it affects us, totally precludes all and any *theological* interpretation. It is a revolutionary concept, which is why it is not to the liking of the bourgeoisie, who prefer – and very much so – Kant's agnosticism and our present-day Kantians.

When Bernstein calls us back to Kant, and when he criticises present-day materialism with the words "Wir glauben [an das Atom]", he is thereby proving nothing but his own ignorance. Consequently, this alleged crisis presents no danger from the philosophical viewpoint.

Let us now pass on to the materialist understanding of history.

What is meant by that understanding?

That “understanding” has often been very poorly understood and, if that is possible, has been interpreted still more poorly. In its false interpretation, it is vilely defamatory of the human race; but where is that theory which, poorly understood and badly interpreted, will not seem vile and absurd? In reality, the materialist understanding of history is the only theory that enables us to understand human history as a law-governed process. In other words, it is the only *scientific* explanation of history.

To give you an exact idea of the Marxist understanding of history, I shall first ask: what is meant by the idealist understanding? I shall begin by quoting from an eighteenth-century French author, now completely forgotten, but one who wrote a curious book. He was Cellier Dufayel and the book was entitled: *Origine commune de la littérature et de la législation chez tous les peuples* (Paris 1786).

“Just as literature is the expression of the litterateur’s thinking,” he says, “law is, in its turn, the expression of the thinking of the legislator, taking that word in the broadest sense.

“There is then a common source both for literature and for legislation... and that source is thought, whose origin is in man’s nature, which should be studied first and foremost, if one would proceed with method and advance with some certitude towards the goal one has set oneself.” (p.7)

Here is an understanding of history that is completely *idealistic*: human thought is the source of law, i.

e., of all social and political organisation. The development of that organisation is determined by human thought, which, in its turn, originates in man's nature.

This idealistic interpretation of history is, with few exceptions, peculiar to all philosophers of the eighteenth century, even to the materialists.

The weak point, the heel of Achilles, of this understanding of history will easily be seen. I shall describe it in a few words.

Were one to ask an eighteenth-century writer, say Cellier, how man's ideas take shape, he would reply that they are a product of the social environment. But what is a social environment? It is the totality of those very social relations which, Cellier Dufayel himself asserts, originate in human thought.

Hence we have before us the following antinomy:

1. The social environment is a product of thought;
2. Thought is a product of the social environment.

As long as we are unable to escape from this contradiction, we shall understand nothing either in the history of ideas or in the history of social forms.

If you take, for instance, the evolution of literary criticism in the nineteenth century, you will see it has been, and in part remains, quite powerless to solve this antinomy. Thus, Sainte-Beuve holds that every social revolution is accompanied by a revolution in literature. But where do social revolutions come from? They are caused by the development of human thought; since, in civilised societies,

the evolution of thought finds expression in the evolution of literature, we come up against the same antinomy: the development of literature hinges on social development, while social development is conditioned by the development of literature. Hippolyte Taine's philosophy of art suffers from the same shortcoming.

We shall now see how Marx's understanding of history successfully solves this antinomy.

Marx's materialist understanding of history is the direct opposite of the eighteenth-century understanding.

In a comparison of his own method with that of Hegel, Marx says in the *Afterword* to the Second German Edition of *Capital*:

“To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of ‘the Idea’, he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of ‘the Idea’. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.” [6]*

This is a *materialist* understanding of the history of human thought. Engels expressed the same in a more popular form when he said that it is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness.

It may, however, be asked: what does a way of life derive from if it is not determined by the mode of thought?

Social man's way of life is determined by his means of subsistence, which in their turn depend on the state of the

productive forces at the disposal of social man, i.e., of society.

The productive forces a tribe of savages dispose of determine that tribe's way of life; the productive forces at the disposal of Europeans in the Middle Ages determined the structure of feudal society; the productive forces of our times determine the structure of present-day society, capitalist society, bourgeois society.

You are all no doubt well aware that the types of weaponry determine the organisation of an army, the plans of campaigns, the disposition of units, the orders issued, and so on and so forth. All this creates the profound distinction between the military system of the ancients and that of our days. In exactly the same way, the state of the productive forces, and the means and modes of production, determine the relations existing among producers, i.e., the entire social structure as well. But once we have a social structure as a fact, the way in which it determines the state of men's mores and ideas will be readily understood.

Let us take an example the better to bring the point out.

The reactionaries have often accused the French philosophers of the eighteenth century – the Encyclopedists – of their propaganda having laid the ground for the French Revolution. That propaganda was no doubt a sine qua non of the Revolution. It may, however, be asked: why was it that such propaganda should have started only in the eighteenth century? Why was it not conducted in the times of Louis XIV? Where is the answer to be sought? In the general properties of human nature? No, for they were the same in the times of Bossuet and in those of Voltaire. But if the

French of Bossuet's times did not hold the same views as did the French of Voltaire's times, it was because of the change in France's social structure. But what brought that change about? It was France's economic development that did so.

I shall take another example, this time borrowed from the history of French art.

Kindly look at these two engravings made after Boucher, and at these two photographs of two celebrated pictures painted by Louis David. They are representative of two completely different stages in the history of French painting. Note the distinctive features in Boucher's art, compare them with the distinctive features in David's art, and tell me whether the difference that exists between these two painters can be accounted for by the general properties of human nature. For my part, I do not see any possibility of that. Neither do I understand how those properties of human nature could explain to me the transition from Boucher's paintings to David's. Finally, I fail to understand which of the properties of human nature had to lead to the transition from Francois Boucher's paintings to those of Louis David happening at the end of the eighteenth century, and at no other time. Human nature can explain nothing here. Let us see what the materialist understanding of history will show.

Again, it is not *psychology* but *political economy* that has to account for the evolution of social forms and human thought; it is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness.

This understanding of history, which has so often come under attack from bourgeois theorists, has also come under fire from Conrad Schmidt, and will doubtlessly come in for

the same treatment from Bernstein in the series of articles he is now publishing in *N[eue] Z[eit]*.

Incidentally, these gentlemen are not attacking in the open. On the contrary, they style themselves as adherents of this understanding of history; only they interpret it in a way that makes us appear to be retreating, together with them, from the materialist understanding of history and returning to idealism, or rather to eclecticism.

That was exactly what Conrad Schmidt said in the German journal *Der sozialistische Akademiker*: society's economy is merely an emanation of human nature; the latter is the supreme synthetic unity (*höhere zusammenfassende Einheit*), the foundation on which rests the operation of all the factors of historical development. Only, he goes on to say, that supreme unity always reveals itself in various forms. To understand the falsity of this view, one has only to ask oneself: what are the forces thanks to which man's nature goes over from certain forms to others? What are the forces that make the American Yankee's nature so profoundly different from that of the Redskin? Whatever they may be, those forces evidently do not lie in human nature. Consequently, the latter is not the supreme synthetic unity that Conrad Schmidt speaks of.

The economic structure of Yankee society is utterly different from the Redskins' economic organisation. To say that the latter is an emanation of human nature means saying absolutely nothing, since the question that has to be answered is: why is one emanation of nature so vastly different from another? On closer examination Conrad Schmidt's sapient remark means nothing but the following:

there would be no history but for the existence of the human race. This is what is known as a *La Palisse* truth. [7*]

Thus, Conrad Schmidt's criticism is far from dangerous to the materialist understanding of history, or, to put it more exactly, it can be dangerous only if Conrad Schmidt is taken for a Marxist.

Let us draw the conclusion. From this angle, too, it is not very difficult to overcome the crisis of the Marxist school. At our next session, we shall see whether there is anything serious in the objections raised by Bernstein and Conrad Schmidt to the *economic* views of *Karl Marx*.

Footnotes

1. [Up to a certain point.]
2. [Plekhanov is quoting from the French translation of Thomas H. Huxley's, *Method and Results, Essays. Descartes' discourse on method*].
3. [All individuals are animate in various degrees.]

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Notes

This publication is a summary of Plekhanov's lecture directed against "critics" of Marx, particularly Eduard Bernstein and Conrad Schmidt. Plekhanov delivered this lecture in Geneva and other towns of Switzerland and Italy late in the spring and early summer of 1898.

Subsequently the lecture provided the basis for several articles, among which were *Bernstein and Materialism* and *Conrad Schmidt Versus Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*.

1*. *The Young* – a petty-bourgeois, semi-anarchical opposition in the German Social-Democratic Party which arose in 1890. The "young" denied any kind of participation in parliamentary activities and disguised their opportunistic essence with the "Left" pseudo-revolutionary phrases. The "young" were expelled from the Party in October 1891 at the Congress of Erfurt.

2*. Bernstein launched a campaign against revolutionary Marxism with his article *Problems of Socialism*, which was published in the theoretical organ of the German Social-Democrats *Neue Zeit* for 1898.

3*. Conrad Schmidt's article *Kant, sein Leben und seine Lehre (Kant, His Life and Teaching)*, a review of Kronenberg's book of the same title, was published in the third supplement to the newspaper *Vorwärts!*, the central organ of the German Social-Democratic Party, on October 17, 1897.

4*. The reference is to Eduard Bernstein's article *Das realistische und das ideologische Moment des Sozialismus (Realistic and Ideological Moments of Socialism)* published in *Neue Zeit*, No.34, May 27, 1898.

5*. *L'Encyclopédie* was published in the second half of the eighteenth century (1751-80) by Diderot and d'Alembert, whose aim was a struggle against the "ancient regime" and clericalism, and the development of progressive science, philosophy and arts.

The excerpt, which Plekhanov intended to cite from Diderot's *Spinosiste* (not *Spinosisme*) is evidently the one he cited in his article *Bernstein and Materialism*.

6*. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol.I, Moscow 1974, p.29.

7*. *La Palisse Truth* – the truth which is evident by itself and does not need any proofs.