

Vulgar Socialism By Correspondence

CHAPTER II BERENBERG DISCOVERS "MATERIAL DETERMINISM"

In our first chapter we analyzed the vulgar economics that makes up about one-fourth of the Rand School's correspondence course in "The Fundamentals of Socialism." Before we proceed to our next topic we take this occasion to remark that we have by no means exhausted the ignorance of economics displayed in the three lessons that Berenberg devotes to that subject. But we will forbear, and turn to the next of the three main types of ignorance into which the course is divided, the ignorance of the mechanism of history and historical materialism. In the course of this analysis we will take up the first of the author's three great discoveries—namely the discovery of "Material Determinism."

"Historical materialism is in a certain sense all there is to Marxism." So speaks Labriola, and, this being true, we are indeed approaching holy ground.

"Material Conception of History" is the tempting title of Lesson IV. of Berenberg's course, but as we have already gotten inklings of the nature of that lesson from passages in earlier ones, we approach it with mingled anticipation and dread.

"Everything Changes."

Already in Lesson II. we were treated to our first glimpse of Berenbergian dialectic under the head of "Evolution." Here the author says:

"The world does not remain stationary. Everything moves, shifts, changes. EVEN the methods by which people earn their daily bread changes." (The grammar is not our own.)

Surely, this is a substantial improvement on Marx. Marx seemed to think that legal and juridical relations, forms of property, social structures, religion, morality and the like tend to remain stationary—so much so that a revolution is necessary at intervals to wipe them out and substitute new ones.

Marx thinks that the ONLY thing that tends to change by itself is the economic foundation, the material forces of production. Berenberg shows that "everything changes," and grudgingly admits that "EVEN" the economic foundation is subject to this universal law of automatic change.

It is very easy to see, thus early in the course of Socialism, that the Marxian "dogma" of the necessity of revolutions is based upon the belief in the unchangeability of the social structure (of law, government, morality, and the like), which unchangeability acts as a hindrance or fetter upon the ever-changing economic foundation until that foundation, through the class identified with it, rises in revolt against these static fetters and against the ruling class identified with them. To Marx's theory then revolution is an integral necessity.

Revolution a Luxury.

But Berenberg believes in the tendency to change that is innate in such conserving and conservative institutions as law, government, religion and the like, and as an afterthought admits (with the qualification of an eloquent "Even") that the economic foundation also changes. This is very convenient, for if the economic foundation remained stationary while the social superstructure changed, a revolution might nevertheless have to be occasioned by the superstructure, lest the unchanging mode of making a living become a fetter upon the changing superstructure.

Obviously then, to Berenberg's system, revolution is not a necessity. At best it is a superfluous luxury, and we will not be surprised to find when we come to his last and greatest invention that that invention is "The Bloodless Revolution a la Berenberg."

However, the reader will have to be patient for a while, for we are determined to finish our analysis of "Material Determinism" and other matters, before we treat our reader to that other greater invention.

The Discovery.

Berenberg leads up to his discovery gradually. Modestly enough, he calls Lesson VI. (in which the great contribution is formulated), by the

old Marxian name of "Materialist Conception of History," in place of the name of his own theory, "Material Determinism."

He begins Lesson VI. by summing up what he has so far shown, that the worker is "defrauded" of part of his product, a summary, which Marx, in his intolerance, would have called a "flummery of social justice." Then he (Berenberg) asks the question which follows logically from Berenbergian economics, namely, "Why do the capitalists not realize this wrong, and of their own accord help the worker?"

He proceeds to answer his own question by explaining that there are different views of what is right and what is wrong.

"The Socialist's explanation of these different points of view is this:

"MATERIAL CONDITIONS DETERMINE THE ACTIONS OF HUMAN BEINGS."

"This is a law of human nature." And "This law of human nature the Socialists call 'MATERIAL DETERMINISM.'" (How modestly he speaks, for he is the first "Socialist" to call the law by that name!)

But the real statement of his famous formula comes a little later, when he sums it up in words, every one of which we shall note with interest, namely:

"MATERIAL DETERMINISM DECREES THAT SELF-INTEREST COMES FIRST"

Shop-Keeper Philosophy.

This then is Berenbergian materialism, the type of materialism which the church and the academy have always pretended was the essence of Marxism, and which the Marxists prior to Berenberg have always repudiated as un-Marxian,—a materialism that sums itself up in the word "self-interest," a materialism that leaves no place for ideals, a thoroughly vulgar materialism of the pocket-book, a type of materialism that has always associated itself in our minds with the timid and crafty petty bourgeoisie, the small shop-keeper-eager to get ahead, fearful of risking too much of his little store, impervious to ideals, never risking long chances and generous sacrifices, carefully calculating the cost of each move and the narrow margin of profit involved.

Berenberg's materialism precludes idealism (used in the every day sense of the term). It concerns in the bourgeois concept of mankind, "Each man has his price." "You can't get something for nothing." "I'm not in business for love." "How much is in it for me?" In the bourgeois world, art, and science, virtue and integrity, votes and reputations and the bodies of women are saleable commodities. And the philosophy of the bourgeoisie, more especially of the petty bourgeois who cannot think in large terms and never has his imagination stirred by vast ventures, huge flotations of stock, gigantic swindles—his philosophy is a product of this degrading result of the profit system where everything is saleable, where "self-interest comes first."

But this is a far cry from the materialism of Marx and the Marxians.

Marxian Materialism.

"When Social-Democrats call themselves materialists, they only want to emphasize their view that they refuse to acknowledge anything which pretends to lie beyond human cognition in a metaphysical way."

So speaks Dietzgen.

In other words, Marx was a "materialist" in the philosophical not the vulgar sense of that term. He did not mean that men were not swayed by ideal motives, by ideas, by things contrary to their personal self-interest. His own life is a striking disregard of the dictates of self-interest, and the millions of adherents to the cause that calls itself "Marxian" are millions of examples of sacrifice of time, of leisure, of position, of freedom, and oftentimes of life itself, while in Russia, in the name of that cause a whole people, first to weary of the war, is still battling against the united imperialist nations of the entire world.

Materialism vs. Idealism.

Marx was a materialist in the philosophical sense of that term. He was an opponent of the philosophy known as idealism, which is derived from idea, not ideal. He insisted that we must explain natural phenomena in terms of the natural, the material

world. Proletarian philosophy has no room for the supernatural. Proletarian philosophy rejects the belief that God decides the conduct of men, and it looks for causes where it finds effects, namely in the material world. Proletarian thought rejects that species of philosophy which says that ideas arise spontaneously, that feudalism, for example, was abolished merely because some man or many men "got the idea" of a new system, or because the idea came down from heaven, or because "history" is a personified entity capable of itself having an idea which it has always been striving to attain, by virtue of which each change is a move on the part of history to bring the material facts of life in line with this idea.

Yet the above are samples of the idealistic philosophy which Marx rejected in favor of a materialistic philosophy and they have nothing to do with the question of whether men are swayed by ideals or exclusively by calculating self-interest.

Berenberg's "Material Environment."

Now let us return to Berenberg's discovery. Lest we be unfair to him, let us take his two modifications of his own law that self-interest comes first.

"Not personal interest alone," reads his first reservation, "but the entire material environment determines people's conduct. So, for example, any business man will invariably pay his personal bills, but will, if hard pressed cheerfully go into bankruptcy to avoid paying business obligations." (At this juncture we are moved to wonder what the conduct of this particular business man has to do with his whole material environment.)

"So again," continues the author, "artists find that they are painting not the picture that they want to paint, but the picture for which there is a market, in other words, the picture which the material conditions force upon them." (All of which confirms us in our belief that Mr. Berenberg has a thoroughly bourgeois soul which believes that "material conditions" are conditions of the market, and that self-interest lines up interest with principle and profit and loss—in short, that Berenberg's "Materialism is pocket-book materialism.")

Ideology in History.

Then there is a second reservation in which Berenberg admits that abstract ideas (and even that form of them known as ideals) do occasionally influence people to "defy material conditions." (Whatever that may mean!)

"There have been," he admits, "men who died rather than offend their consciences. Artists and writers who starved rather than paint or write the trash that sells. Yet these instances are rare. It is impossible to build a law on them. They must be regarded as exceptions to the law."

Yet Marx has built a law on them. And Marx does not regard them as unexplainable exceptions. Nor does Marx, nor can any one who examines the facts of life believe that the belly and the pocket-book determine human history and that self-interest comes first.

History Refutes Berenberg.

History is an overwhelming refutation of the cheap absurdities of this mechanical pocket-book materialism of Berenberg. When the Belgians rose as one man to meet the "invader" was each soldier measuring his own interests in the conflict? If he had stopped to figure it out he would have discovered that all he could have "gotten out of it" would be a bullet wound, the loss of an arm or a leg or of life, rotten food, shell shock, venereal disease—surely it was not self-interest that dictated his entry into the fray.

"But," cry Berenbergians, "are not wars fought for foreign markets, for spheres of influence and exploitation?"

Aye, they are, but the soldiers who fight them volunteer for such abstract ideas and ideals as patriotism, love of country. They never expect to see the products of and often times do not even know enough geography to know the location of, these "foreign markets."

Compare the number who profited by the war with the number who it. Immediately it becomes apparent that whole masses are moved by a mass ideology (emotional ideas, ideals), and not by the self-interest of the individuals that make up the mass.

Our own movement is a living re-

futation of Berenberg's law of "Material Determinism," which decrees "that self-interest comes first." Does the revolutionist going to jail measure his experience in terms of self-interest? When a man joins the Communist Party after the "raids" we have just witnessed, does he not laugh at calculating self-interest? Our movement, based on a materialistic philosophy, is an idealistic movement. Class consciousness and the emancipation of the working class are tremendous and inspiring ideals. Every Communist would be a stool pigeon. For there's more money in it.

So Marx, in place of ignoring or denying the force of ideology in human history, recognizes it, insists that it is an ever-present phenomenon, and explains it. It is no "exception" to the Marxian law of historical materialism. Let us see how he explains it.

In the Marxian system the economic structure is the basis, the real foundation of the social structure. Out of these economic relations grow codification, sanctification and idealization in law, morality, religion, philosophy, patriotism, poetry, art and other forms of social consciousness. These things Marx calls the superstructure, because they grow out of and are built upon the economic foundation.

The Bourgeois Revolution.

Thus, to select a single example, feudalism disappeared and capitalism took its place only after trade, invention and discovery had developed a merchant-trader-manufacturer class on whose further development feudal institutions had become a fetter. The manufacturer needed free labor and the serf was tied to the soil. Hence developed the ideology of freeing the serf.

The feudal ruling class, the landed aristocracy, alone had political power. But the growing capitalist class needed political power to sweep away feudal privileges, monopolies, restrictions on "freedom of trade" and similar hindrances.

And so, to the slogans of "Liberty, equality, fraternity," fired by the desire "to free mankind" from feudalism, to make all men equally "free" (free to buy and sell labor), to liberate the serf,—the forces of the bourgeois revolution, aided by proletariat and peasantry, moved forward to the attack upon feudal government, feudal law, feudal religion, feudal philosophy and the feudal aristocracy whose cause as a class was identified with this superstructure.

And the reader will now remember how Berenberg declared that everything changes, "EVEN" the methods by which people earn their daily bread," while Marx declared that the economic structure was always changing, while the superstructure of law, government, religion, morality and the like tend to remain stationary, until this superstructure becomes so great a fetter upon the further development of economic forces that the economic forces rise in revolt against the superstructure, or more accurately, that the class identified with the developing economic forces, attempts to change the fettering superstructure, and in so doing comes into conflict with the class that is identified with that superstructure.

And a working class ideology of class-consciousness and class solidarity and class loyalty, is a very real and a very powerful weapon in the further development of society. Therefore, we have built a Communist movement, to develop, to crystallize, to direct that ideology. And this, too, is a far cry from Berenberg's apologetic conclusion, "The only thing that can be done (to material determinism or self-interest) is to harness this natural force and use it for the benefit instead of TO THE DETRIMENT of the world."

With this we shall leave Berenberg's great discovery, "Material Determinism," again haunted by the feeling that we have not begun to exhaust the ignorance displayed in the seventy odd lines of type, which Berenberg devotes to his lesson in vulgar materialism and vulgar philosophy, and we shall begin to prepare ourselves and our reader for the task of considering the Berenbergian class struggle and his discovery of "collectivism" together with "three methods of attaining it," all of which we shall try to consider in our next.

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