

DR. MARX AND THE VICTORIAN CRITICS

by .

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SINCE THE APPEARANCE of marxism as an intellectual force hardly a year — in the Anglo-Saxon world since 1945 hardly a week — has passed without some attempt to refute it. The resulting literature of refutation and defence has become increasingly uninteresting, because increasingly repetitive. Marx' work, though voluminous, is limited in size, and it is technically impossible for more than a certain number of original criticisms to be made of it, and most of these have been made long

ago. Conversely, the defender of Marx finds himself increasingly saying the same things over and over again, and though he may try hard to do so in novel terms, even this becomes impossible. An effect of novelty may be achieved in only two ways: by commenting, not on Marx himself but on later Marxists, and by checking Marx' thought against such facts as have come to light since the last critic wrote. But even here the possibilities are limited.

Why, then, does the debate continue? One reason is sheer ignorance. It is a melancholy illusion of those who write books and articles that the printed word survives. Alas, it rarely does. The vast majority of what is printed enters a state of suspended animation within a few weeks or years of publication, a state from which it is occasionally awakened for equally short periods by research students. Much of it appears in languages we cannot read: the bulk of German pro-and-anti-marxist literature is out of the reach of most English commentators. Consequently not many people realise quite how repetitive the literature of 1956-7 is; not even some of its authors. The other reason is political. Ideas do not become forces until they seize the masses and this, as advertising agents have recognised, requires much repetition, not to say incantation. Those of us who think Marx a great man and his teachings politically desirable, must keep on shouting it from the rooftops, including the modest ones of "The New Reasoner." Those who are opposed to his ideas must do the same. It does not matter that it has all been said before, in some instances by ourselves.

Nevertheless, one gets bored with the job sometimes. When the editors suggested that I might wish to write a reply to Mr. Trevor-Roper's "Marxism and the Study of History" ("Problems of Communism" V, 5 Sept-Oct, 1956, published by the U.S. Information Agency), I was therefore not enthusiastic, though this article spends a flattering amount of space in attacking a somewhat technical article of mine on 17th century history ("Past and Present," 5 and 6) which will thus I hope be more widely read than it has so far been. But this is not the place for a technical discussion on 17th century history, and Mr. Trevor-Roper's general observations about historical materialism are not worth lengthy refutation. However, it may be worth considering Mr. Trevor-Roper as the latest link in an evolutionary chain of bourgeois Marx criticism which, in this country, began about eighty years ago.

A comparison between the tone of the modern and the late Victorian Marx-critic is instructive. Mr. Trevor-Roper has spent a good deal of time propounding the very implausible propositions that Marx has made no original contribution to history except "to sweep up the ideas already advanced by other thinkers and annex them to a crude philosophical dogma;" that his historical interpretation is useless for the past and discredited insofar as the

predictions based on it have not come off; and that he has been without significant influence on serious historians, while those who claim to be marxists either write "what Marx and Lenin would have called 'bourgeois' social history" or are "an army of dim scholiasts busily commenting on each others' scholia." In brief, that Marx' intellectual reputation is grossly inflated, for "disproved by all intellectual tests, the marxist interpretation of history is sustained and irrationally justified by Soviet power alone." Though this thesis owes something to Mr. Trevor-Roper's well-known inability to resist a sweeping phrase, it is not the only one of its kind. The number of commentators who purport to be quite unable to understand how any person of balanced mind and normal intelligence can be a marxist, is nowadays considerable

The writings of the Victorian Marx-critics are mostly and justly forgotten; a warning to those of us who engage in this discussion. But when we dip into them we find a wholly different tone. Admittedly British writers found it 'abnormally easy to maintain their calm. No anti-capitalist movement challenged them, few doubts about the permanence of capitalism nagged them, and between 1850 and 1880 it would have been hard to find a British-born citizen who called himself a Socialist in our sense, let alone a Marxist. The task of disproving Marx was therefore neither urgent nor of great practical importance. Happily, as the Rev. M. Kaufmann, perhaps our earliest non-marxist 'expert' on marxism put it, Marx was a pure theorist who had not tried to put his doctrines into practice ("Utopias from Sir Thomas More to Karl Marx," 1879, p.241). By revolutionary standards he seemed even to be less dangerous than the anarchists and was therefore sometimes contrasted with those fire-eaters; to his advantage by Broderick ("Nineteenth Century" Apl. 1884, p. 639), to his disadvantage by W. Graham of Queens College, Belfast, who observed that the anarchists had "a method and logic . . . wanting in the rival revolutionaries of the school of Karl Marx and Mr. Hyndman" ("The Social Problem," 1886, p. 423). Consequently bourgeois readers approached him in a spirit of tranquility or — in the case of the Rev. Kaufmann—Christian forbearance, which Mr. Trevor-Roper's generation has lost:

"Marx is a Hegelian in philosophy and a rather bitter opponent of ministers of religion. But in forming an opinion of his writings we must not allow ourselves to be prejudiced against the man" ("Socialism," 1874, p. 165).

Marx evidently returned the compliment, he revised Kaufmann's account of himself in a later book.¹²¹

English literature on Marxism, as Bonar observed not without thus showed a calm and judicial spirit already lacking from German

(2) "Utopias." See Kaufmann's chapter in "Subjects of the Day: Socialism, Labour and Capital" (1890-1) p. 44. I do not know who the "mutual acquaintance" was, at whose instigation Marx did this,

out smugness ("Philosophy and Political Economy," 1893, p.354) discussions of the subject; but then, marxism was already a mass force in Germany. There were few attacks on Marx motives, his originality or scientific integrity. The treatment of his life and works was mainly expository, and where one disagrees with it, it is because the authors have not read or understood enough, rather than because they mix prosecution with exposition. Admittedly they were often defective. I doubt whether anything even approximating to a usable non-socialist summary of the main tenets of Marxism, as they would be understood today, exists before Kirkup's "History of Socialism" (1893). But the reader could expect to find, as far as it went, a factual account of who Marx was and what the author thought he was at.

He could expect to find, above all, an almost universal admission of his stature. Milner, in his 1882 Whitechapel lectures ("National Review," 1931, p.477) plainly admired him. Balfour in 1885 thought it absurd to compare Henry George's ideas with his "either in respect of (their) intellectual force, (their) consistency (their) command of reasoning in general or of (their) economic reasoning in particular" ("Report of the Industrial Remuneration Conference," 1885, p. 344). John Rae, the acutest of our early 'experts' ("Contemporary Socialism," 1884, reprinting earlier articles) treated him with equal seriousness. Richard Ely, an American professor of vaguely progressive leanings whose "French and German Socialism" was published here in 1883, observed that good judges placed Capital "on a par with Ricardo" and that "about the ability of Marx there is unanimity of opinion" (p.174). W. H. Dawson ("German Socialism and Ferdinand Lassalle," 1888, 96-7) summed up what was almost certainly the opinion of all except, as he notes, the miserable Duehring whom recent Marx-critics have been vainly trying to rehabilitate: "However its teaching may be viewed, no one will venture to dispute the masterly ingenuity, the rare acumen, the close argumentation and, let it be added, the incisive polemic which are displayed in . . . the pages (of Capital)."⁽³⁾

This chorus of praise is less surprising when we recall that the early commentators were far from wishing to reject Marx *in toto*. Partly because some of them found him a useful ally in their fight against laissez-faire theory, partly because they did not appreciate (as Mr. Trevor-Roper does) the revolutionary implications of all this theory, partly because, being tranquil, they were genuinely prepared to look at him on his merits, they were even prepared, in principle, to learn from him. With one exception: the labour theory of value, or to be more precise, Marx' attacks

(3) Readers may find a few of these opinions in Dona Torr's Appendix to the 1938 reprint of Capital vol I; but she had consulted only a small fraction of the available literature.

on current justifications of profit and interest. Perhaps the critical fire was concentrated against these because the 'moral accusation implied in the phrase 'labour is the source of all value' affected confident believers in capitalism more than the prediction of the decline and fall of capitalism. If, so they criticised Marx precisely for one of the less 'marxist' elements in his thought, and one which, though in a cruder form, the pre-Marxian socialists, not to mention Ricardo, had already propounded. At all events the theory of value was regarded as "the central pillar of German and all modern Socialism" (Graham, "Socialism/' 1891, p. 139), and once it fell the main critical job was done.

However, beyond this it seemed clear that Marx had a good deal to contribute, notably a theory of unemployment critical of the crude Malthusianism which was still in vogue. His views on population and the 'reserve army of labour' were not only normally presented without criticism (as in Rae), but were sometimes quoted with approval, or even partly adopted, as by the pioneer economic historian Archdeacon Cunningham ("Politics and Economics," 1885, p. 102) — he had read Capital as early as 1879 ("The Progress of Socialism in England," 'Contemp. Rev.' Jan., 1879, p. 247) — and William Smart of Glasgow, another economist whose fame rests on his work in economic history ("Factory Industry and Socialism," Glasgow, 1887). Similarly Marx' views on the division of labour and on machinery met with general approval, e.g. from the reviewer of "Capital" in the "Athenaeum," 1887. J. A. Hobson ("Evolution of Modern Capitalism," 1894) was clearly very struck with them: all his references to Marx deal with this topic. But even more orthodox and hostile writers, like J. Shield Nicholson of Edinburgh ("Principles of Political Economy, I" 1893, p. 105) observed that his treatment of this and allied topics "is both learned and exhaustive, and is well worth reading." Furthermore, his views on wages and economic concentration could not be brushed aside. Indeed, so anxious were some commentators to avoid a total rejection of Marx, that William Smart wrote his 1887 review of "Capital" (quoted above) specifically to encourage readers who might have been put off by the critique of the value theory to study the book, which contained much "of very great value both to the historian and the economist"

An elementary textbook design for Indian university students (M. Prothero, "Political Economy," 1895) sums up reasonably well what non-marxists saw in Marx; all the better for being slightly ignorant and thus reflecting current views rather than individual study. Three things were singled out: the theory of value, the theory of unemployment, and Marx' achievement as a historian, the first to point out that "the economic structure of the present capitalist society has grown out of the economic structure of the

feudal society" (p. 43)⁽⁴⁾. Indeed Marx made his greatest impact as a historian, and among economists with a historical approach to their subjects. (As yet he hardly influenced the professional non-economic historians in England, who were still sunk in the routine of purely constitutional, political, diplomatic and military history.) In spite of Mr. Trevor-Roper, there was really no dispute among those who read him about his influence. Foxwell, as bitter an academic anti-marxist as was to be found in the 1880s, mentioned him as a matter of course among the economists who "have most influenced serious students in this country" and among those who had produced the marked advance in "historic feeling" at this period. (The Economic Movement in England, "Q.Jnl.Econ." 1888, pp. 89, 100). Even those who rejected the "peculiar and in my opinion erroneous, theory of value given in Capital" felt that the historical chapters must be judged differently (Shield Nicholson, op.cit. 370). Few doubted that, thanks to Marx' stimulus "we are now beginning to see that large sections of history will have to be re-written in this new light" (Kirkup, op.cit. 159), apparently ignoring Mr. Trevor-Roper's demonstration that the stimulus was not Marx', but Adam. Smith's, Hume's, Toqueville's or Fustel de Coulanges'. Bosanquet ("Philosophical Theory of the State," 1899, p. 28), has no doubt that the 'economic or materialist view of history' is 'primarily connected with the name of Marx', though 'it may also be illustrated by many contentions of Buckle and Le Play.' Bonar (op.cit.), though specifically denying that Marx invented historical materialism — he very properly instances Harrington as a pioneer (p. 358) — has nevertheless not previously heard of the following marxist historical contentions, which amaze him: that "the very Reformation is ascribed to an economic cause," that the length of the 30 Years War was due to economic causes, the Crusades to feudal land-hunger, that the evolution of the family was due to economic causes and that Descartes view of animals as machines could be brought into relation with the growth of the Manufacturing system (p. 367).

Naturally his influence was most marked among our economic historians of whom only Thorold Rogers can be regarded as wholly insular in inspiration. Cunningham in Cambridge, as we have seen, had read him with sympathy since the late 1870s. The Oxford men — perhaps owing to the much stronger Germanic tradition among local Hegelians — knew him before there were English marxist groups, though Toynbee's only incidental criticism of his history ("The Industrial Revolution") happens to be mis-

(4) The author had not yet learned from Mr. Trevor-Roper that Marx' claim to priority is a propagandist invention of the Marxists, who have deliberately obscured the work of earlier non-marxists who had said it all long ago.

taken⁽⁵⁾. George Unwin, perhaps the most impressive English economic historian of his generation, took to his subject through Marx, or at any rate to confute Marx. But he had no doubt that "Marx was trying to *get* at the right kinds of history. The orthodox historians ignore all the most significant factors in human development" ("Studies in Economic History" xxiii, Ixvi).

Nor was there much disagreement about his achievement as a historian of capitalism. (His views on earlier periods the reviewer in the Athenaeum found "unsatisfactory and quite superficial," but they were normally neglected, and indeed most of his and Engels' most brilliant *aperçus* were not as yet available to a wide public). Even the most extended and hostile British critique of his thought — Flint's "Socialism," 1895 (written mainly in 1890-1)—admits:

"Where alone Marx did memorable work as a historical theorist, was in his analysis and interpretation of the capitalist era, and here he must be admitted to have rendered eminent service, even by those who think his analysis more subtle than accurate, and his interpretations more ingenious than true" (p. 138).

Flint was alone neither in his British distrust of "a tendency to over-refinement in reasoning" (Athenaeum, 1887), nor in his admission of Marx' merits as a historian of capitalism; more especially of 19th century capitalism. It is the modern practice to throw doubts on his and Engels' scholarship, integrity and use of sources (cf. "Capitalism and the Historians" and the recent critique of Engels in "History Today" by Chaloner and Henderson), but contemporaries hardly explored this avenue of criticism, since it seemed patent to them that the evils which Marx attacked were only too real. Kaufmann spoke for many when he observed that "though he presents us exclusively with the dismal side of contemporary social life, he cannot be accused of wilful misrepresentation" ("Utopias," p. 225). Llewellyn-Smith ("Economic Aspects of State Socialism," 1887, p. 77) felt that "though Marx has coloured his picture too darkly, he has rendered great service in calling attention to the more gloomy features of modern industry, to which it is useless to shut our eyes." Shield Nicholson (op. cit. p.370) thought his treatment in some respects exaggerated, but also that "some of the evils are so great that exaggeration seems impossible." And even the most ferocious attack on his bona fides as a scholar did not dare maintain that Marx had coloured a white, or even gray, picture black, but at best that, black as the facts were, they (sometimes contained "silvery streaks" of evidence which Marx had paid no attention to. (J. R. Tanner and F. S. Carey, "Comments on the use of the Blue Books made by Karl

(5) Toynbee disagreed with Marx' view that the yeomanry had disappeared by 1760 (1908 edn. 38). However, recent views are with Marx rather than Toynbee. I trust that the revelation of this fact will not drive some nistonans into revising their views

Marx in Chapter XV of *Le Capital*," Cambridge¹ Economic Club, May Term, 1885).

Was the modern tone of hysterical anxiety completely absent from the early bourgeois criticism of Marx? No. From the moment that a marxist-inspired Socialist movement appeared in Britain, Marx-criticism of the modern stamp, seeking to discredit and refute to the exclusion of understanding, also begins to appear, notably from the mid-80's. Hostile continental work was now translated — Laveleye's "Socialism of Today" (1885), Schaeffle's "Quintessence of Socialism" (1889). But home-grown anti-Marxism also began to sprout, notably in Cambridge, the leading centre of academic economics. The first serious attack on Marx' scholarship, as we have seen, came from two Cambridge dons in 1885 (Tanner and Carey), though Llewellyn-Smith of Oxford — 'a far less 'anti-marxist' place in those days — did not take the criticism too tragically, merely observing, a few years later, that Marx' "quotations from blue books are very important and instructive, though not always trustworthy" ("Two lectures on the books of political economy," London, Birmingham and Leicester, 1888, p. 146). It is the tone of denigration rather than the content of this work which is interesting; phrases like "the mongrel algebraical expressions" of "Capital" or "an almost criminal recklessness in the use of authorities which warrants us in regarding other parts of Marx' work with suspicion" (pp. 4, 12) indicate—at least in economic subjects—something more than scholarly disapproval. In fact, what made Tanner and Carey mad was not simply his treatment of the evidence—they shied away from "the charge of deliberate falsification . . . especially since falsification seems so unnecessary" (i.e. since the facts were black enough anyway)—but "the unfairness of his whole attitude towards Capital" (p. 12). Capitalists are kinder than Marx gives them credit for; he is unfair to them; we must be unfair to him. Such, broadly, appears to be the basis of the critics' attitude.

At about the same time Foxwell of Cambridge developed the Trevor-Roperian line that Marx was a crank with a gift of the gab, who could only appeal to the immature, notably among intellectuals; a man—in spite of Balfour's warning—to be bracketed with Henry George:

"Capital" — "was well calculated to appeal to the somewhat dilettante enthusiasm of those who were educated enough to realise, and to be revolted by the painful condition of the poor, but not patient or hard-headed enough to rind out the real causes of this misery, nor sufficiently trained to perceive the utter hollowness of the quack remedies so theoretically and effectively put forward"

Dilettante, not patient or hard-headed, utter hollowness, quack, rhetorical: the emotional load on the critic's vocabulary piles up. To Foxwell we also owe (through the Austrian Menger) the popularisation of the German parlour-game of attacking Marx' origin-

ality, and regarding him as a pillager of Thompson, Hodgskin, Proudhon, Rodbertus, or any other early socialists who took the critic's fancy. Marshall's "Principles" (1890) took this over in a footnote, though the pointed reference to Menger's demonstration of Marx' lack of originality was dropped after the fourth edition (1898). The view that Rodbertus and Marx — the two were often bracketed together—made "mainly exaggerations of, or inferences from, doctrines of earlier economists" (Flint, *op.cit.*, p. 136) or that some other earlier thinker—Rodbertus (E. C. K. Gonner, "Rodbertus," 1899) or Comte (Flint, *op. cit.*)—had said what Marx wanted to say about history earlier and vastly better, already brings us into Mr. Trevor-Roper's universe. Marshall himself the greatest of the Cambridge economists showed his usual combination of marked emotional hostility to Marx and equally marked circuitousness⁽⁶⁾. But on the whole the root-and-branch anti-marxists remained in a minority in the 19th century, and for a generation thereafter tended to follow the Marshallian line of tangential sneering rather than full-scale attack. For marxism rapidly lost that influence which provokes discussion.

Oddly enough—and I make Mr. Trevor-Roper a present of the fact, though there are better things for a marxist to do than to teach anti-marxists their business—the calm type of Marx-criticism proved much more effective than the hysterical type. Few critiques of Marx have been more effective than Philip Wicksteed's "Das Kapital — a criticism" which appeared in the socialist "To-Day" in October, 1884. It was written with sympathy and courtesy, and with full appreciation of "that great work," "that remarkable section" in which Marx discusses value, "that great logician" and even of the "contributions of extreme importance" which Wicksteed believed Marx to have made in the latter part of volume I. But, whatever we may now think of the pure marginalist approach to value-theory, Wicksteed's article did more to create the mistaken feeling among socialists that Marx value theory was somehow irrelevant to the economic justification of socialism than the emotional diatribes of a Foxwell or a Flint ("the greatest failure in the history of economics"). It was in a Hampstead discussion group in which Wicksteed, Edgeworth, Shaw, Webb, Wallas, Olivier and some others discussed "Capital," that much of "Fabian Essays" was matured. And if, a few years later, Sidgwick could talk of Marx' "fundamental muddle . . . which the English reader I think, need hardly spend time in examining, as the more able and influential among English socialists are now careful to give it a wide berth" ("Econ. Jnl." V., p. 343), they did so not because of Sidgwickian jeers, but because of Wicksteedian argument — and perhaps, we might add, because of the inability of British marxists to defend Marxian political economy against its

(6) His views are discussed at greater length in a special **note below**.

critics. Workers still insisted on Marxism, and revolted against the early W.E.A. because they did not teach it; but not until events had demonstrated that the confidence of the Marx-critics in their own theories was misplaced, or excessive, did Marxism revive as an academic force. It is unlikely that it will disappear from the academic scene in future.

Note: "Marshall and Marx."

Marshall appears to have begun without any marked views about Marx. The only reference in the "Economics of Industry" (1879) is neutral, and even in the first edition of the "Principles" there are signs (p. 138) that at one time the danger to capitalism from Henry George worried him more than that from Marx. The references to Marx in the "Principles" are as follows. (1) a criticism of his 'arbitrary doctrine' that capital is only that which "give(s) its owners the opportunity of plundering and exploiting others" (p. 138). (From the third edition—1895—this is transposed and elaborated). (2) that economists ought to avoid the term 'abstinence' choosing rather something like 'waiting/ because—at least so I interpret the addition of a footnote at this point —• "Karl Marx and his followers have found much amusement in contemplating the accumulations of wealth which result from the abstinence of Baron Rothschild" (p. 290). (This reference is dropped from the Index from the third edition, though not from the text). (3) That Rodbertus and Marx were not original in their views, which claim that "the payment of interest is a robbery of labour," and are criticised as a circular argument, though one "shrouded by the mysterious Hegelian phrases in which Marx delighted" (p. 619-20). (In the second edition an attempt is made to substitute a summary of Marx doctrine of exploitation for the earlier caricature of it (1891)). (4) A defence of Ricardo against the charge of being a labour theorist of value, as falsely claimed not only by Marx but by ill-informed non-marxists. (This defence is progressively elaborated in subsequent editions). It will be remembered that Marshall had too great an admiration for Ricardo to wish to throw him overboard as an ancestor of socialist theorists, as many other economists—Foxwell for instance—were prepared to do. But the task of showing that Ricardo was not a labour theorist is complex, as he seems to have appreciated. Thus we note not only that all Marshall's references to Marx are critical or polemical—the only merit he allows him, since he lived in pre-Freudian days, is a kind heart—but also that his critique seems to be based on a much less detailed study of Marx' writings than one might expect, or than was undertaken by reputable contemporary academic economists.