

A NOTE ON DOGMATISM

by

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A SOCIAL THEORY that fails to provide essential clues to contemporary society will soon become a museum piece, and this is the position in which much of Marxism now finds itself. Marxism has struck few sparks in the political and intellectual life of Britain since 1945 and there are, in the main two reasons for this. One is the tendency of Marxists to forget that the application of Marxist principles to a given historical period or problem is not "the solution of a simple equation of the first degree" (Engels) but is only a more useful guide (or should be) than any other. The letters which Engels wrote in the last fifteen years of his life are full of examples of his vigorous criticism of the dogmatic absurdities that passed for Marxist analysis among the up and coming generations. As he wrote to Conrad Schmidt in 1890: "the materialist conception of history also has a lot of friends nowadays to whom it serves as an excuse for not studying history."

This apparently built-in tendency toward dogmatism among Marxists has certainly been present in Britain since the days of the 1880s when socialism came back to the Labour Movement in the form of Marxism; and we should recognise its deep roots amongst us. But in this last decade the second, and more important reason for the intellectual sterility, and in some respects, the plain fatuity, of much Marxist thinking and writing is that most Marxists in the world became enmeshed in Stalinism and infected with its dishonesties, its lies and its half truths. There has been a remarkable failure on the part of those involved in this, position to distinguish between fact and myth, for what Stalinism did above all was to substitute the smooth formulation for the gritty complexity of the real world. Stalinism, as is now recognised, is a form of philosophical idealism which, starting from given conclusions then proceeds to present a selection of the facts that effectively prove the conclusions; and the results continue to be described as scientific socialism. Thus over the years have emerged the myths concerning Soviet agriculture, the advanced 'democracy' of Eastern Europe, the distortions concerning the living standards of the working class under capitalism, and so on. On a minor level, one can illustrate the intellectual degeneracy of the Stalinist period by reference to the appalling standard of

historical texts issued by the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow—the volume entitled 'Marx and Engels on, Britain' (1953) being a typical example. Whatever criticism one makes about Marxist scholars like Riazonov and Steklov, the predecessors in the 1920s of the present research workers in the Institute, at least they were scholars and they were not illiterate as editors.

Since the answers most Marxists have given about their contemporary world have become less and less meaningful, it is not surprising that the appeal of Marxism in the West has steadily diminished. Many in Britain who came under the influence of Marxist ideas in the 1930s have turned away from its basic principles, and the younger generation have seen Marxism, not indeed as it should be, the most exciting body of ideas in the world today, but rather to quote Tawney of another age and time, as "piety imprisoned in a shrivelled mass of desiccated formulae." The capacity for questioning has gone and in its place is the stereotyped reply which affixes labels, provides the 'correct line' and constructs logical structures whose only error lies in the false assumptions on which they are based.

This failure to ask crucial questions of contemporary society is exhibited at its most melancholy in the apparent inability of Marxists to provide a realistic analysis of the development of world capitalism since 1945. "It is evident" wrote Lenin in 1914 (in his article in Granat's Encyclopaedia) "that Marx deduces the inevitability of the transformation of capitalist society wholly and exclusively from the economic law of the movement of contemporary society?" And what, we may ask, is the economic law of post 1945 capitalism? We have had, since 1945, full employment. In the years immediately following the end of the war, a full scale crisis was apparently expected by Marxists almost every year. Every slight increase in unemployment and each balance of payments crisis were seized upon as growing evidence of the general crisis which was just round the corner; and when the crisis did not happen, rearmament was given as the main reason. But of the many complex factors which, perhaps in fortuitous combination, have contributed to the development of British capitalism since the end of the war, and of the contradictions within the economy (which presumably Marxist economists still believe in) there has been no sustained account.

Since political programmes are geared to economic analysis and prognosis, in our ignorance of the shape and structure of contemporary capitalism we have been, politically speaking, groping in the dark in this past decade. Moreover, there are no vacuums in the world of ideas, and in the almost complete absence of a Marxist analysis that was not out of line with the facts, the theories of Crosland and Strachey have come to occupy the most prominent place in the intellectual baggage of the Labour movement. We

convince no one by our dismissal of these ideas as 'reformist'. It is a label which has too often served as an excuse for not meeting such theories on their ground and it is an approach that was certainly not part of the Marxist tradition before 1917.

Dogmatism is not only a matter of omission and a refusal often to admit what may be central in any political or theoretical problem; even more it is the result of the application of simplified categories to the real world that demands a many sided, not a one sided analysis. The approach by British Marxists to Indian independence may well be a classic case in point. And if I here briefly subject R. P. Dutt's views on India to critical analysis I do so with full appreciation of the services that Dutt has rendered to marxist scholarship in general and to our understanding of colonial questions in particular. But Dutt has also been among the architects of certain mistaken policies, some of which have had serious and indeed disastrous consequences, and among such is certainly to be included his analysis of the 1947 Indian settlement.

Before the establishment of formal independence on August 15th, 1947, Dutt had commented at length on the prospects before India. In the June, 1947 issue of "Labour Monthly" he underlined "the bankruptcy of the old imperialist order and irresistible upsurge of the Indian people" as the central fact of the contemporary situation. The conclusion for the imperialists, he noted, was to reach a settlement "before the situation has passed entirely out of control." And this above all meant a settlement which would encourage division and heighten antagonism within India—hence partition. Nevertheless, whilst recognising very clearly the evil consequences of partition, Dutt also emphasised in this June article the positive results that would flow from independence and the opportunities that would "emerge whereby the aims of the imperialists to keep India in a position of tutelage could be defeated. In particular he recognised the new possibilities in international affairs. It was an article, in short, which fully appreciated the nature of the imperialist settlement that was being planned and which recognised the strength of reaction in Indian society but withal sounded a note of cautious optimism, laying the crucial emphasis, rightly, upon the development of the progressive forces. Certainly there was no suggestion that the conditions of the settlement would impose upon India a condition of complete subservience to imperialism.

And yet, within less than a year of the achievement of independence this was now to be the argument. In a "Labour Monthly" article of June, 1948, Dutt, while still asking the question Which Way India? ("Is India ranged in the camp of struggle for freedom or in the camp of the oppressors?") gave the answer in unmistakable terms: "the new class structure and its political reflection, with the Indian bourgeoisie as the weak junior partner of Anglo-American imperialism [has] begun to reveal itself in its

full force." As for the earlier hopes that India would pursue an independent foreign policy:

"In vain the Indian Government Ministers endeavour to profess their policy of 'neutrality' between the two camps in the world today; their professions of 'independence' only thinly cover their growing dependence and subordination, economic, political and military, to the Anglo-American Bloc, whose policy is typically expressed in the present anti-communist offensive."

This clear cut attitude to Indian independence as a fiction and a sham received fullest elaboration in Dutt's book "Britain's Crisis of Empire" published in 1949. Now there were no question marks. Independence, so called, was no more than "a delegation of authority" by imperialism, the main characteristic of the new Governments being "continuity with the old imperialist regime." There was no change in the economic basis of exploitation. The conclusion (as always) was "inescapable":

"The new tactics of imperialism in decline, demonstrated in the partition of India and the establishment of the new Dominions of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, and in the Treaty with Burma, have not brought freedom to these countries. They are still held as satellite countries in the camp of imperialism. The yoke of imperialist exploitation still lies heavily upon these peoples, alongside the yoke of their own exploiters acting in association with imperialism."

But the real world was much more contradictory and complex than Dutt supposed. Alongside the continued repressive measures against the Left (there were many hundreds in jail by the summer of 1948) went the operation of democratic procedures which gave the Communist Party and its allies six million votes at the beginning of 1952. Whilst British capital was still very powerful in important sectors of the economy, in certain other respects imperialism had much less room for manoeuvre. From the end of 1950 India began to play an increasingly important role in world affairs and one that was far from the part of imperialist stooge, although this is not to say that socialists have by any means agreed at all points. (The recruitment of Gurkhas for Malaya and the facilities given at one time to the French during the war against Viet Minh are examples). In general, to explain the social and political complications of the Indian situation demanded a flexibility of analysis that for the first half dozen years after independence eluded R. P. Dutt and other Marxist commentators. As late as 1953, in a book published in that year, Dutt was still repeating the earlier analysis. Independence was still "a delegation of authority by imperialism to such forms of administrative authority in India as imperialism judged expedient in its own interests"; but, at the same time, reality was at certain points beginning to break through and there were hints that the possibility of a new situation developing was not out of the question. And as for India, so the political developments in West Africa were described as " 'constitutional' camouflage to cover colonial dictatorship."

In all this there are some important theoretical issues. The traditional marxist theory of imperialism has normally considered it impossible for imperialist countries to grant constitutional developments that are other than fictional. Certainly the power of imperialism, in all the political settlements, remains immensely strong; but since World War II imperialism has not always been strong enough to impose complete subjection upon the national leaderships in colonial countries. And when terms are agreed, whether they will be kept is another matter, for in the conditions of the world today the newly emancipated countries (speaking constitutionally) have some limited power of manoeuvre and cannot be considered as nothing more than the tools of the imperialists. The degree of dependence and the strength of imperialist control will vary from country to country and can only be analysed on the basis of estimates of relative power and economic and political relations with the major countries. Dutt himself has certainly now recognised these possibilities in India because today he writes of India as the foremost 'non-aligned' power and he has gone a long way towards endorsing, "despite heavy limitations," the Second Five Year Plan ("World News," 30th March, 1957).

Now there is every reason to be pleased when the hard facts of life are recognised; although those in India and Britain who accepted the magisterial pronouncements of Dutt about 'fake' independence look as silly today as those who still fail to recognise that a national revolt was behind the achievement of independence or appreciate the very heavy burdens that have been carried over from the imperialist period. Marxists in Britain will recover from the fact that on a number of important issues they have been talking nonsense, but the Indian C.P. cannot so lightly throw off their errors (although it should be emphasised that R. P. Dutt was certainly not responsible for the frenzied Leftism of B. T. Ranadive and his associates which had such unpleasant and unfortunate consequences within the C.P.I.) But if Marxists are not to repeat their past stupidities, which have stemmed from an over-simplified, dogmatic picture of the world, they must be prepared to check carefully their theoretical categories against the real world. The theory of imperialism which Lenin propounded was based upon an analysis of world relationships on the eve of World War I. Have the developments of half a century changed in any crucial way the pattern and structure of the economic and political relations within world capitalism? British Guiana fits into the old picture very well, but what about India and Ghana? All we need are the facts, and generalisations upon the facts. It is as simple, and as complicated, as that.