

From TIM ENRIGHT:

1. The Text.

Since the Twentieth Congress when Kruschov set the Communist world rocking Marxists have been lining up into two broad camps: those who hold that Marxism is basically unimpaired and those who see the need for varying degrees of revision. The former, if they are genuine Marxists and not mechanists, are aware that the perspectives of Marxism widen with each new epoch of discovery and experience. The revisionists inevitably sup 'the pauper's broth of eclecticism,' as Engels called it, and a variety of 'Marxist' brands have been appearing.

Marxists in the west have since 1917 been looking at the Soviet Union with Utopian spectacles. After a long maudlin night we are feeling the bitterness of we are feeling the "bitterness of remorse in the harsh reality of a new dawn. The important fact is that Marxism in shedding its Utopian mist, has recovered its stature, though many are as yet too jaundiced to be aware of it.

Edward Thompson in the course of his discussion article 'Socialist Humanism' (*New Reasoner* 1.) fired many broadsides at the structure of Stalinism. His shooting is often accurate but is outrageously wild When his target is theoretical Marxism as developed by Lenin and Stalin. He accuses them of failing to understand Marx and Engels; from this failure stemmed many evil consequences. To quote: 'his (Lenin's) concern with the first premise of materialism led him into a num-

ber of fallacies. Among these (1) the repeated lumping together of ideas, consciousness, thought, and sensations as "reflections" of material reality. But a sense-impression, which animals share with men, is not the same thing as an idea, which is the product of exceedingly complex cultural processes peculiar to men.' Now it is true that ideas differentiate man from the animal. Ideas are abstractions and the power of abstraction is the result of man's gift of language. As Pavlov put it, "speech constitutes a second system of signals of reality which is peculiarly ours." Ideas are abstracted from reality; they bubble to the surface through 'complex cultural processes,' but the question is how they came to the boil and above all what constituted the fuel. This last is the reality. 'Complex cultural processes' are a sieve through which ideas pass at a given stage; they are not, as Edward Thompson implies, the *fons et origo* of the ideas themselves.

When Lenin speaks of reflection he does not imply a mirror passivity, but an activity which is determined by the relations between an organism and its environment. That activity increases in complexity the higher up the scale of life we go, but from the lowest level of sensation to the highest reaches of abstraction it is conditioned by material reality. 'The real intellectual wealth of the individual depends entirely on the wealth of his real connections' wrote Marx and Engels (*The German Ideology*)-

The second of Lenin's 'fallacies' is: 'The repeated statement,

in an emotive manner, that material reality is "primary" and "consciousness, thought, sensation" is "secondary," "derivative." Partially true: but we must guard against the emotional undertones that therefore thought is less important than material reality. Man is a conscious being, not an animal being with a "derivative" consciousness.' The 'emotional undertones' are of Edward Thompson's making. Bluntly and without qualification Lenin again and again (as Marx and Engels before him) stressed the primacy of matter. It is precisely because 'Marxists' in his day were skirting this basic premise and coming to terms with various forms of idealism that Lenin wrote his pungent work 'Materialism and Empirio-Criticism.'

Engels informs us: 'The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature ... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism.' (*Ludwig Feuerbach*). No 'partially true' or 'emotional undertones' here. The division between the camps is clear-cut. Though is *less important* than material reality simply because it is derived from that reality and from no other source, not even from "complex cultural processes." Marx wrote: "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought." (*Capital*, Preface to second edition).

'Man is a conscious being,' declares Edward Thompson, 'not

an animal being with a "derivative" consciousness.' Materialism declares that he is both; for there is nothing in his consciousness, no matter how intricate the process may seem, which does not reproduce in one form or another some aspect of outer reality. To assert otherwise is to reject the very basis of Marxism.

To continue with Lenin's 'fallacies': 'Lenin slipped over from Marx's observation "social being determines social consciousness" to the quite different (and untrue) statement that "social consciousness reflects social being." From this, he slipped over to the grotesque conclusion that "social being is independent of the social consciousness of humanity." How can conscious human beings, whose consciousness is employed in every act of labour, exist independently of their consciousness?' This question is, I submit, itself grotesque and shows how completely he misunderstands not only Lenin but Marx as well. In the opening sentence of the most frequently quoted passage in Marxism Marx declares: 'In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will.' (*Critique of Political Economy*, Preface). What is this but another way of saying that "social being is independent of the social consciousness of humanity?"

As these statements are identical, so are the first two. To imply a difference between "social being determines social consciousness" (Marx) and "social consciousness reflects social being" (Lenin) is mere casuistry. The

question of reflection in Marxism I has been touched upon above. It is an active process and Lenin clearly understood it as such: "The approach of the mind to a particular thing, the taking of a cast of it, is not a simple, direct act, a lifeless mirror reflection, but a complex, twofold, zig-zag act" (Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*).

Lenin's "fallacies," according to Edward Thompson, "were seized upon by Stalin, systematised, and built into the framework of his thought. In *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* all sense of human agency . . . has disappeared." Now whatever else Stalin may have been, he was often a brilliant expositor of Marxism. *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* appears to me a work of luminous lucidity. Here, among other things, he explains in a positive way the role of ideas: "As regards the *significance* of social ideas, theories, views and political institutions, as regards their *role* in history, historical materialism, far from denying them, stresses the important role and significance of these factors in the life of society, in its history." The same point occurs again and again, but he is also careful to assert that "New social ideas and theories arise only after the development of the material life of society has set new tasks before society." This Edward Thompson condemns as ideas being "always framed within such a context of more or less efficient responses to stimuli." Elsewhere (*Concerning Marxism and Linguistics*) Stalin writes: "The superstructure is created by the base precisely in

order to serve it" and Edward Thompson, quoting Marx in his defence, cries 'How far we have come from real men and women, from the "educators and the educated";' But have we? Was it not the same Marx who declared that: 'mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.' (*Critique of Political Economy*, Preface). As we see, Stalin has only rephrased Marx.

Marx and Engels have also aroused Edward Thompson's ire. He pronounces their doctrine of the 'basis' and 'superstructure' to be 'a bad and dangerous model,' 'a clumsy static model,' 'poor.' He goes on: 'In fact, no such basis and superstructure ever existed; it is a metaphor to help us to understand what does exist — men, who act, experience, think and act again.' Only men? What of nature? Does not all else follow from the permanent conditions of action and reaction between man and nature? Whether the model is bad or good depends entirely on the construction placed upon it. As is well known, some of the early followers of Marx and Engels interpreted it in a rigid, mechanical way, stressing the economic base to the exclusion of all else. Of such followers Marx declared: 'All I know is I am not a Marxist.'

Edward Thompson overreaches himself when he classes Stalin with these mechanists, saying that he "used it not as an image of men changing in society but as

a mechanical model, operating semi-automatically and independently of conscious human agency." The refutation of this is to be found in the section on the role of ideas in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* from which I have quoted above.

He continues: 'Hence Stalin's statement that historical science "can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology." This is nonsense . . . we will never attain to a *precise* science of history, like a natural science, because of man's creative agency.' The Christian writer, Edward Hutton, in his famous book *Rome* is equally contemptuous of "history as a science" as though a thing so concerned with humanity could be anything but an art' (p. 37). That Christian transcendentalists should be revolted at the idea is natural especially in view of the conclusions Stalin drew from it; he is worth quoting more fully: 'Hence the science of the history of society, despite all the complexity of the phenomena of social life, can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology, and capable of making use of the laws of the development of society for practical purposes.' (*Dialectical and Historical Materialism*)- Is this not the whole point of the Marxist approach to history? And again he is paraphrasing Marx who wrote in the Preface to *Critique of Political Economy* from which I have quoted twice already: 'a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political,

religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.' Stalin's phrase 'despite all the complexity of the phenomena of social life' shows clearly his awareness of the 'distinction.'

Enough perhaps has been said of Lenin's 'fallacies' and the 'errors' of Stalin, Marx and Engels to show that it is not they who go off the rails but Edward Thompson whenever he tackles fundamental questions of theory. His polemic is at first glance convincing: 'Your exposure of the nonsense talked by the Stalinists about basis and superstructure . . . arc excellent.' (Hanson, *New Reasoner* 2. Also C. Taylor in the same number: 'theories of this kind ("economic automatism") quite incompatible with the early writings of Marx were produced by Stalin and his cohorts, as Thompson clearly shows').

In stating contrary views I am aware that I lay myself open to the charge of being a 'dogmatist,' even a 'Stalinist.' Be it so. Wary as we may be of quoting the text there are times when this is necessary. Such a time is now when the very basis of Marxism is under assault and that by those who claim to be 'Marxists.'

On materialism Marxists must be unequivocal. When criticising the socialist third of the world we generally leave out of the reckoning a fact which is of prime importance: there and there alone the philosophy of materialism is uppermost and assertive; elsewhere prevails idealism, in one form or another 'a road to clericalism' (Lenin).

Edward Thompson's case is that Stalin, following Lenin who in turn misinterpreted Marx, overstressed the materialist base of society and underrated accordingly the conscious role of the individual. Material reality is a fact inconvertible. You may deny its existence with a solipsism such as Berkley's, but you can neither reduce nor enlarge it. It determines all our thoughts and actions and, as Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin, so often stressed, these cannot be isolated from it. In attempting to diminish the importance of the materialist base Edward Thompson is flitting on the perimeter of idealism.

2. Evaluation.

If Stalin then was generally a sound Marxist theoretician, how are we to explain the crimes perpetrated during the latter years of his personal dictatorship? Was he a monstrous Janus developing Marxist theory with one head and with the other calculating diabolical crimes? Leaving aside the question of Stalin's personal weaknesses which Lenin himself exposed, and which no doubt played their part, how are we to resolve the dilemma?

The logic of the situation is inexorable. The time-machine of Russian Communism metamorphosed the Middle Ages into the Twentieth Century in the space of forty years. In its path obstacles external and internal were crushed to dust. Accepting the goal, human suffering was inevitable. The full significance is clear to us now of Marx's statement about socialism "not as it has

developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges." (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*). When the womb was Czarist Russia, the 'birthmarks' were the secret police and the concentration camp. This was the price of socialism; an appalling price, the more so since we now know that it could have been far less. But *there had to be a price*- Socialism will always be accompanied by a disfigurement whose quality is predetermined by the place of birth.

According to Edward Thompson, Stalinism was the antithesis of 'socialist humanism'; it failed to place 'real people . . . at the centre of its aspiration.' How are we to measure 'socialist humanism' then? Evidently not in terms of millions of people wrenched from the grime of poverty and ignorance into a life of ever-expanding horizons; not in terms of the abolition of Czar, capitalist and kulak and the power of the priest; not in terms of dying civilizations rising to the nourishing prosperity of a mounting birth-rate and a developing vernacular culture. He writes: "Socialist humanism declares: liberate men from slavery to things, to the pursuit of profit or servitude to "economic necessity." Liberate man, as a creative being -- and he will create, not only new values, but things, in super-abundance.' This is simply idealistic anarchy. En-

gels wrote: 'Freedom does not consist in the dream of independence of natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and to those which govern the bodily and mental life of men themselves — two classes of laws which we can separate from each other at most only in thought and not in reality. Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with real knowledge of the subject . . . Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves¹ and over external nature which is founded on the knowledge of natural necessity.' (*Anti-Duhring*). The weapon which wins this 'control' is science. And do not the achievements and possibilities of Soviet science stagger not only the layman but the scientists of the world? Clearly the basis of man's liberation is firmly laid in the Soviet Union.

Charlea Taylor writes: 'Marx said: the proletariat cannot free itself without freeing all members of society. Socialist humanism must add: the proletariat *must* not free itself by depriving some *men* of their status as human beings.' This is academic moralising. What is the reality? The Russian proletariat has freed itself, or if this be grudged, has won the means of its freedom. But the seeds were sown, as they had to be, in a soil of civil war and violent class upheaval. Socialism will not germinate in a suburban garden no matter how the Fabian

geneticists may experiment with newly acclimatised varieties of *Industry and Society*. There has been no stage in man's convulsive evolution when some men have not been deprived of their 'status as human beings.' It continues today under capitalism, for it fascist, liberal or social-democratic, *and* under socialism. There are still classes in Soviet society, the workers and the peasants, (the bureaucracy too has many of the marks of a separate class) and while there are classes there is also class morality. But how much superior is Soviet morality to Czarist morality. The one is life full-blooded, emergent; the other was a lip-service to outworn creed and precept, a cloak for rampant immorality. As Engels said, there is "progress in morality, as in all other branches of human knowledge." The Soviet Union is still building socialism and is a long way from the final stage, communism, and "a really human morality which transcends class antagonisms and their legacies in thought."

Harry Hanson has this to say: 'Our aims, if we are socialists, are not of the kind that involve the acceptance of draconian political regimes (in Britain) or the sacrifice of the present generation for the benefit of future ones. We can go forward in comparative liberty . . . making full use of these liberal institutions which, like our productive powers themselves, were won for us by the sacrifice of previous generations.' I do not wish to discuss the present generation's lifeboat status, but it is pertinent to ask how much is due

to the struggles of our forbears and how much to past and *present* generations in the colonial empire. Do not the colonial loot of the giant combines and plantation slavery also determine the evolution of 'those liberal institutions' in Britain? There was another society where the people had bread and circuses, and the elite discussed philosophies and the Stoic doctrine of the brotherhood of man, while all the time the eagle of slavery was gnawing at its vitals. There are a myriad differences between ancient Rome and Britain today, but there are also parallels.

And what of the future? Edward Thompson, declares: 'New (men and women are arising (in the Soviet Union) who seek to create a society, not of stagnation, but where the false dialectic of class is replaced by the human) quarrel between the actual and the potential, between the boundless aspirations of life and the necessary limitations of the particular, the concrete, the personal.'

Declarations about the replacing of 'the false dialectic of class' are not new. They range from the observation of the Fabian Society's general secretary that the class struggle exists only in men's minds, to the papal encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, which says: "class war . . . is changing gradually to an honest discussion of differences, based upon the desire of justice." Far from being 'false,' as Edward Thompson alleges, the 'dialectic of class' is the most positive force in history, the lever on which all else turns. It is no less so in the Soviet Union. 'The class struggle

does not disappear under the dictatorship of the proletariat, it merely assumes different forms,' wrote Lenin. It is only out of the 'dialectic of class,' prevailing in the present stage of socialism, that communism can, and will I believe, be reached.

Since philosophy began there has also been eclecticism. The emasculation of Marxism is however on a different plane, for Marxism transcends philosophy. 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it,' was Marx's last thesis on Feuerbach. Reject or qualify one of its elementary principles and what is revolutionary becomes evolutionary; what is purposive and immediate wilts to the merely academic Marxists however embrace Marxism as a comprehensive system of thought and practice. 'Socialist Humanism,' says Charles Taylor, 'cannot be based on Marxist Communism alone.' Marxists on the other hand declare that 'Marxist Communism' transcends 'Socialist Humanism.'

Basic Marxism has not been invalidated a tittle by the disclosures at the Twentieth Congress. These have brought about a valuable re-appraisal from which a new stream of creative Marxism should flow. Was this ever more necessary in Britain than today when monarchy is the opium of the people and religion that of the educated classes? Antonio Gramsci speaks as truly for Marxists now as when, in the shadow of Italian fascism, he wrote: 'Marxism . . . contains in itself all the fundamental elements not only for constructing a whole and integral

conception of the world, a total philosophy and a theory of the natural sciences, but also for bringing- to life an integral practical organisation of society; in other words, for becoming a total, integral civilisation.' (*The Modern Prince*)-