

Variations of Marxism by Célestin Bouglé (1938)

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The philosophy of Marxism, in my student days, was very simple, not to say simplistic. It was characterized by fierce denials: the denial of anything that resembled spiritualism, anything that smacked of idealism, the refusal to grant any value or efficacy whatsoever to doctrines, beliefs, feelings.

If human rights or immanent justice were mentioned, Paul Lafargue, Karl Marx's son-in-law, would rise up to sweep away these "metaphysical prostitutes". And he sharply rebuked Jaurès, the reconciler, for having wanted to wrap up idealism alongside materialism in the folds of his orator's toga, for having dared to invoke Plutarch or Michelet at the same time as Karl Marx. Did Marx not peremptorily declare: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but their being that determines their consciousness"? What great things can be hatched from this egg!

We must seek in the modes of production that sustain life the underlying reason, not only of the ways of governing or legislating, but of the ways of thinking: it is not only law and religion, but also literature and philosophy that must now be explained, like material products, by the progress of industrial technology and class conflicts.

Hold on tight; if the century's mathematical physicists have risen to the notion of a natural law of absolute value, it is because of the progress achieved before their eyes by royal absolutism. Meanwhile, the hypothesis of the unity of cosmic forces would be a product of the salon, those 17th-century salons where the idlers of the bourgeoisie sought to dazzle each other with ingenious connections.

Such examples suffice. They are like warning signs. They signal a grave danger: that which one runs when one wishes, by a single one of the competing forces in the social environment, by the productive forces of economic life alone, to account for the highest creations of the mind, religion, science, art. The disproportion

between the unique cause invoked and the value, the complexity, the variety of the effects, is obvious to all eyes. And the interpreter, persisting in his simplicity, takes on the air of a clumsy Sisyphus.

Whence, among the philosophers of Marxism, a retreat before the abyss, a step back. They are rereading their author and realizing that his theories have indeed been oversimplified. Marx did not want this either. Did he ever claim ultimately to exclude any kind of idealism from the philosophy of history? He too sets himself a goal, makes an effort to replace the realm of freedom with that of necessity and remains, as Saragat¹ says, a “humanist”. In any case, he would have agreed with Engels in asserting that the economic factor acts only “in the last instance”.²

In the end, we find ourselves faced with a Marxism, let us not say watered down, but enriched and softened, ready to tolerate, to welcome, to seek nuances of explanation that, in my student days, would have made Paul Lafargue shudder with horror.

The most curious thing is that Russia itself, the Russia of the Soviets, is collaborating in this intellectual enrichment and softening.

Such, at least, is the impression that emerges from M. G. Friedmann’s highly informed, highly nuanced book entitled *De la Sainte Russie à l’U.R.S.S.* [From Holy Russia to the USSR].

He tells us about a remark that is attributed there to Stalin. One day, questioning his son about the history of England, he heard him speak of “merchant capital” and “the third period of struggle between landed gentry and urban bourgeoisie”. But the child did not even know Cromwell’s name. So let us give Russian children a more concrete, more lively story, where we see people living and acting. And halt the abuses of this merchant capital, the well-worn phrase of Pokrovsky’s³ first books.

¹ Giuseppe Saragat (1898-1988) was Italian socialist that was the president of Italy from 1964-1971.

² F. Engels to J. Bloch. September 21, 1890. Translated by S. Hook.

³ Mikhail Pokrovsky (1868-1932) was an influential Soviet Marxist historian.

Let's also halt the many efforts spent on repressing and imprisoning the great writers in a class, declaring them incapable of seeing anything above and beyond the economic interests of their groups, of which they are assumed to be nothing more than unthinking spokespersons.

Reading our new literature textbooks, says Yermilov⁴ in *Pravda*, one would think that the “Russian classics were just maniacs concerned only for the material well-being of their social group.” It is time to recognize that more than once, by the vigor of their personal thought, they managed to escape from this infernal circle to reach human values. It is time to proclaim that the unionized worker of the USSR also has the right to seek intellectual and moral nourishment from more than one author from the time of Holy Russia.

Bravo. And thank you for the dose of “humanism”. In France, too – and M. G. Friedmann knows this better than anyone – it could usefully sweep away some remnants of “vulgar sociology”.

⁴ Vladimir Yermilov (1904-1965) was a Soviet literary critic.