

# DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 11, NO. 116.

NEW YORK, MONDAY, OCTOBER 24, 1910.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

## “ECONOMIC DETERMINISM.”

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**T**HIS is a term of recent coinage the exact meaning of which is asked from several quarters.

Historically the term is an attempt to substitute a “trick of rhetoric” for the accuracy of a scientific technical term.

The “materialistic conception of history” is the technical term used by Socialist science to sum up the sociologic law that social institutions are reflexes of and are determined by the prevalent system of wealth production and its exchange, together, as a matter of course, with the possibilities of the same. As broad illustrations of the law recent events in Portugal may serve:—

So long as the prevalent system of wealth production in Portugal was landly and the system of exchange to match, the social institution known as feudal asserted itself. The manifestations thereof was {were?} oneness of Church and State, or Monarchy plus Romanism. All attempts to alter the manifestations were aspirations, and had inevitably to prove abortive. When the feudal system of production and exchange substantially ceased to be, and the capitalist system had substantially crowded the feudal, then the republican flag was hoisted by the Bank of Portugal: the old institutions—Monarchy and Romanism—were chased away, and the Republic arose.

It by no means follows from the materialist conception of history that “other factors are practically negligible.” Results never are the issue of any one cause: results are the issue of combined causes: one of these is pivotal, none of the others negligible. Portugal itself furnishes the illustration.

Capitalism had not risen in Portugal the day before the Revolution. As far as the sole cause of capitalism is concerned, Portugal might have cast off her feudal institutions more than a generation ago. Other factors interfered with the

consequence of a postponement of the inevitable.

An even stronger illustration is furnished by America to-day. In America the private system of capitalism has for some time been crowded out by the collective. The existing social institutions of political government no longer fit the system of production and exchange. Nevertheless, a score of other factors, although all minor, none pivotal, are causing the postponement of the Socialist or Industrial Republic in lieu of the present. The large variety of races in the land with inherited animosities: the cultivation of these animosities by a so-called Socialist party with capitalist backing: the consequent prevalence of corruption: the further consequent rupture of the working class: these and many other factors are propping the now archaic Capitalist and blocking the path of Socialism.

The term “economic determinism” implies exactly all that is said above. Nevertheless, being a “trick of rhetoric” that is happening to the term that happens to all substitutes of established technical terms. Being a new term, it is supposed to have some new meaning, at least a variation to the old meaning. What all such variations may be is hard to tell. Probably there are as many variations as may suit various minds. One variation, however, is fatal to the term and should be enough to promote its rejection.

The materialist conception of history implies class rule, based upon class interests. It is the average CLASS interest of the capitalist that determines capitalism, not the incidental, or INDIVIDUAL interest of some individual capitalist. Hence, also, it is the CLASS interests of the proletariat that determines the inevitableness of Socialism, not the incidental, or INDIVIDUAL interest of any individual proletariat. “Economic determinism” has been and is being used to justify the action of individuals, active in the Socialist or Labor Movement, although such action be against their class interest. As an extreme illustration, theft practiced by individuals has been attempted to be justified on the strength of “economic determinism”; in other instances, the lecturing by “Socialists” in favor of views that are hostile to the class interests of the proletariat, but which lectures will fill the said “Socialist’s” pockets, is a conduct that is likewise being condoned upon the principle of “economic determinism.” What happens in these instances is simply this—wrong doers, aware they can not justify their conduct by any Socialist tenet,

resort to the “trick of rhetoric”; they coin a new sentence supposed to be identical with existing tenets; and then, under the confusion created by such new terms, ply their individual trade.

If “economic determinism” means the identical thing as the “materialist conception of history” then the term is redundant, and rejectable as such; if the term means anything else, then it is rejectable as a darkener of council.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
Uploaded November 2011

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