

## I

### THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY: A FUNDAMENTAL PROPOSITION OF MARXISM— LENINISM.

Comrade Engels in his authoritative work, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, points to the discovery by Marx of the materialist conception of history as one of the two great discoveries which elevated socialism to the scientific status. Hence the importance of this proposition for the very foundation of Marxism, of scientific socialism, of the science of the proletarian revolution.

Comrade Lenin obviously considered the materialist conception of history to be a cornerstone of Marxism, as he gives the subject a prominent place in his brief article on the *Teachings of Karl Marx*.<sup>\*</sup> In the section, entitled, "The Materialist Conception of History" Lenin quotes a lengthy passage from Marx' *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

"In the social production of the means of life, human beings enter into definite and necessary relations which are independent of their will - production relations which correspond to a definite stage of the development of their productive forces. The totality of these production relations constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis upon which a legal and political super-structure arises and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of the material means of life determines, in general, the social, political, and intellectual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their existence, but, conversely, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing production relationships, or, what is but a legal expression for the same thing, with the property relationships within which they have hitherto moved. From forms of development of the productive forces, these relationships turn into their fetters. A period of social revolution then begins. With the change in the economic foundation, the whole gigantic super-structure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations we must always distinguish between the material changes in the economic conditions of production, changes which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic, in short, ideological forms, in which human beings become conscious of this conflict and fight it out to an issue.

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\* All reference works quoted in this pamphlet are listed in the bibliography.

"Just as little as we judge an individual by what he thinks of himself, just so little can we appraise such a revolutionary epoch in accordance with its own consciousness of itself. On the contrary, we have to explain this consciousness as the outcome of the contradictions of material life, of the conflict existing between social productive forces and production relationships." (page 15)

Lenin then discusses how this historical materialism overcame "the two chief defects in earlier historical theories."

". . . in the first place, those theories, at best, examined only the ideological motives of the historical activity of human beings without investigating the origin of these ideological motives . . . In the second place, the earlier historical theories ignored the activities of the *masses*, whereas historical materialism first made it possible to study with scientific accuracy the social conditions of the life of the masses and the changes in these conditions." (page 16, Lenin's emphasis)

Yet, rather than "showing how all the ideas and all the various tendencies *without exception* have their roots in the condition of the material forces of production" (page 16, our emphasis) as Lenin and Marx instruct, the cadres from all the organizations of the "new communist movement" give as their fundamental answer to the question, what is the origin of Marxism, the response, that the origin of Marxism was in the mind of Marx, or Marx and Engels.

Comrade Engels himself, however, gives quite a different answer. He says,

". . . certain historical facts had occurred which led to a decisive change in the conception of history. In 1831, the first working class rising took place in Lyons; between 1838 and 1842, the first national working class movement, that of the English Chartists, reached its height . . .

The new facts made imperative a new examination of all past history. Then it was seen that *all* past history, with the exception of its primitive stages, was the history of class struggles; that these warring classes of society are always the products of the modes of production and of exchange—in a word, of the *economic* conditions of their time; that the economic structure of society always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole super-structure of juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical and other ideas of a given historical period." (page 51, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels' emphasis)

He concludes by saying,

"From that time forward socialism was no longer an accidental dis-

covery of this or that ingenious brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes—the proletariat and the bourgeoisie." (page 52)

Elsewhere Engels pointed out further that,

"Men make their history themselves, but not as yet with a collective will or according to a collective plan or even in a definitely defined, given society. Their efforts clash, and for that very reason all such societies are governed by *necessity*, which is supplemented by and appears under the forms of *accident*. The necessity which here asserts itself amidst all accident is again ultimately economic necessity. That is where the so-called great men come in for treatment. That such and such a man and precisely that man arises at that particular time in that given country is of course pure accident. But cut him out and there will be a demand for a substitute, and this substitute will be found, good or bad, but in the long run he will be found. That Napoleon, just that particular Corsican, should have been the military dictator whom the French Republic, exhausted by its own war, had rendered necessary, was an accident; but that, if a Napoleon had been lacking, another would have filled the place, is proved by the fact that the man has always been found as soon as he became necessary: Caesar, Augustus, Cromwell, etc. While Marx discovered the materialist conception of history, Thierry, Mignet, Guizot, and all the English historians up to 1850 are the proof that it was being striven for, and the discovery of the same conception by Morgan proves that the time was ripe for it and that indeed it *had* to be discovered." (page 203, *Letter to Heinz Starkenburg*, taken from *Reader in Marxist Philosophy*, Engels' emphasis)

Thus Engels explains that the *material basis of Marxism was created by the proletariat*, and specifically by the risings of the Lyons textile workers in 1831 and by the 1838-42 period of working class national movement among the English Chartists. Marx was the discoverer of these ideas which alone could explain this material reality, but Marx, the individual, was an historical accident as proven by, among other things, the independent discovery of these ideas by Lewis Henry Morgan (and Engels could have added, by the German worker, Joseph Dietzgen and by Engels himself—see Engels, *Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844*, written *before* his joint activity with Marx was begun).

As philosophic materialists, we Marxist-Leninists have to conclude then that it was the proletariat in its first organized risings against the bourgeoisie in the 1830's which was the primary creator of Marxism, while the individuals, Marx and Engels, from the bourgeois intelligentsia, were merely the outstanding discoverers of these facts of life created by the struggle of the proletariat.

Hence, as Engels puts it,

“The new productive forces have already outgrown the capitalist mode of using them. And this conflict between productive forces and modes [relations] of production is not a conflict engendered in the mind of man, like that between original sin and divine justice. It exists, in fact, objectively, outside us, independently of the will and actions even of the men that have brought it on. *Modern socialism is nothing but the reflex, in thought, of this conflict in fact; its ideal reflection in the minds first, of the class directly suffering under it, the working class.*”  
(page 55, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, our emphasis)

At this point the honest working class reader may be saying, “Okay, I read all the quotes; but so what? What is the stake of the working class movement in the USA, 1976 in this little debate you’re trying to start up?”