

Fatalism and historic necessity

By Charles Rappoport

The opponents of our method and theory—bourgeois scientists, and Syndicalist or Anarchist doctrinaires—are in accord in urging against Marxism the accusation which men like Guyot, of vulgar political economy, levelled of old against Socialism in general: they say we are guilty of an attack upon the individual, of an attempt upon liberty.

It is not the capitalist system which sacrifices the liberty of the many to the greater liberty of the privileged few; it is we who do so. It is not the regime of capitalist property which makes the “free” will of the immense majority of the population obey the hard law of *labour for another*; it is Socialism!

From the Frenchman De Molinari to the Prussian Eugene Richter, from the Englishman Herbert Spencer to the Italian Syndicalist Arturo Labriola, from the extreme right of the political horizon to the extreme left of “Socialist” opportunism, we hear vituperation against “the Socialist tyranny”, against “the future slavery”, and, above all, against the “suppression of individual liberty”—of capitalists!

Note, in the first place, that the same accusation of fatalism has been made against all modern philosophers who proclaim the subordination of so-called moral phenomena to natural law. When Hippolyte Taine, the author of *L'Intelligence*, wrote that vice and virtue are as necessary products of certain conditions “as are vitriol and sugar”, he was stupidly accused of *recommending* the replacing of the consumption of sugar by that of vitriol. The minds of many moderns are so degraded by centuries of theological and metaphysical education that they take plain statements of fact for approvals or condemnations. They resemble the capricious woman who broke her mirror because it revealed the decline of her beauty.

This accusation of fatalism is somewhat comprehensible, and even excusable, when applied to those theories which subordinate human history to the influence of climate or the geographical environment. The climate, within certain limits, is practically invariable. The sky of Greece and of France has varied little from the most remote times; but how many revolutions have occurred under the same sun!

Thomas Buckle has been reproached for his climatic fatalism; but hardly with justice, because the celebration author of *The History of Civilisation* proved that as men developed they emancipated themselves from the influence of the geographical and climatic factors, and began to dominate nature.

But, I repeat, the geographical interpretation of history may well give rise to a fatalistic tendency. The semi-invariable nature of the geographical factor lends itself easily to this. One may say the same of *all* historic theories which subordinate history to external nature.

Such is not the case with the Marxian theory. Nothing is more human or more varied than the mode of production. To produce, said Marx in his *Capital*, man needs a plan, a consciousness of the work to be done. He knows what he is doing. He thinks his work. After Vico, Marx affirmed that history is made by man. Revolutions in the method of production which generate political and social revolutions are due to the great and small “inventions”—that is to say, to the products of human talents and genius.

Therefore Marx has not excluded man from history. He did not consider individuals as mannequins launching “new modes of production”, like modes of another kind are “launched”—that of the harem skirt, for example.

That is not all; it is the “dogmatic”, “sectarian”, and “orthodox” Marxians who have insisted, against Bernstein and his more or less idealistic school, on the necessity of affirming and propagating the “final aim” of Socialism.

It is they, and they alone, who have, in the great crisis of International Socialism (which is far from being terminated) remained unshakeably faithful to the Socialist ideal—without stupidly repeating the word—while opportunists of every order, or even of disorder, have allowed themselves to drift at the mercy of the political events of the day, along with the blind and fatal forces of the system which knows only the inexorable struggle of appetites and interests.

But the dialectical method is the enemy of all that is arbitrary. It does not place history in an aeroplane at the mercy of the winds of “His Majesty, Chance”. The movement of history is nothing like the zig-zag of a drunken man. It is governed by necessities. Humanity is not free to renounce its physical and intellectual needs. As it is not suicidally disposed, it submits, in order to live, to the *necessities of production*. Production gives rise to and determines the social system. To a given social system there correspond definite ideas and conceptions; religion, morality, philosophy, science.

It requires all the interested blindness, all the brutal selfishness, of the capitalist to say to the worker: You are free to cease to work. Absolute liberty is death.

A society is not transformed by the force of The Word, nor by strokes of will. It is necessary that all the forces of the past and present collaborate therein. Already Saint Simon, the true precursor of Marx, had clearly shown that the elements of the new system accumulate during centuries, and prepare themselves within the framework of ancient systems. according to him, the capitalist class has taken seven or eight centuries to become the dominant force in society.

Isolated men, or small minorities, may, from time to time, indulge their gentle fantasies. They may dream of transformations in the twinkling of an eye. In the name of the “right of abortion” they may apply the forceps of “direct action” to the body social in order to bring the new society into the world before its time. But society as a whole—an entire class—only gives itself such aims as are in the domain of the realisable and possible. And when the time comes it shrinks from no necessary means. Evolution does not exclude revolution, any more than the gradual transformation of the earth excludes cataclysms. Births occur in blood, and are associated with cries and painful rendering. But only monsters come into the world before the normal hour.

A ship is launched. Does it deprive its captain of liberty to give him a nautical chart, prepared with scientific accuracy, and a compass? Would he be more free if he drifted at the will of the waves? The dialectic method, as used by Marx and Engels, provides us with chart and compass to determine the movement of history. It does not fetter us. It simply shows the way. In helping us toward the *desired goal*, it emancipates us from blind forces, from the *fatality of chance*. It is, therefore, an influence of freedom—not of slavery.

Primitive man is the slave of Nature. He is literally terrorised by natural phenomena. He seeks by cruel human sacrifices to obtain a mitigation of his lot. Natural science emancipates him. From being the slave of Nature he becomes master. Modern society is still at the mercy of blind, semi-natural forces. We are, in relation to society, what primitive man was in relation to nature. It is necessary to conquer our liberty. We must emancipate ourselves from the blind social forces which bind and oppress us. Society must become *our thing*, as the great forces of nature have become. We must become masters of society, just as we have become, more or less, the masters of our natural environment.

But how have we conquered nature? By studying it; by learning its laws and making them serve our ends. It is the same with social laws. We shall only vanquish social oppression when we have discovered the laws of the working of society. Science is liberty. And the dialectical method, which powerfully aids toward that discovery, toward the edification of social science, is the tool of liberty, the instrument of precision of our emancipation.

The dialectical method is therefore quite the contrary of fatalism. In making us cognisant of *historical necessities*, it makes us able to effectively combat the fatalist decree of capitalist ignorance that there always have been poor, and always will be!

No, replies the dialectical method. Capitalist poverty is an “historical category”, which will disappear with the historical conditions which create and nourish it.

The dialectical method of Socialism is the method of science and of liberty.

(translated from *Le Socialisme*)

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