

Karl Marx: The Revolutionist

By Max Shachtman

A TALE used to go the rounds about Marx's first introduction to the Italian workers by way of his writings. He was envisaged as a stately old fellow, pacific in deportment and thought, and having the features and beard of an elderly Christ. When it was later discovered that Marx was swarthy, smoked the most atrocious cigars, that he was an overthrower of governments and a more or less unscrupulous politician; when other such details, great and small, were learned, the Italians were dismayed. Gone was their Marx!

However apocryphal this legend may be, it stands as an example of the wilful and unconscious misrepresentation of Marx and his work which has been carried on in the last fifty years by those who professed to be his ardent disciples or his avowed enemies. Out of Marx the brilliant analyst of politics and economy was created the habitue of the British Museum who drew up a dull book of statistics and of exploded plagiarisms; the revolutionary communist was relegated to the mean position of one who, as Spargo wrote, "belongs with the great evolutionists of the nineteenth century," and one whose thought "it is quite true, at times, harked back to the crude Utopian notion of a sudden and violent revolution." This rush to effeminize Marx gained in momentum with the years until there were left but few intellectual gnomes that had not taken a hand at explaining, interpreting, apologizing for, disproving or improving on the dead and helpless Marx.

But although Marx himself was helpless and ignorant of the deeds of his traducers, the system of thought, knowledge and action which we know as Marxism stood as a constant reproach and rebuttal to them. The more they butted their pens against the stone wall the more casualties there were to list. While today Marx's theories are being molded into deeds, while his ideas are the ideas and the fear of increasing and diversified millions, his opponents and detractors are forgotten. Mallock died obscurely in England a year or so ago; Boehm-Bawerk and his marginal utilitarians are confined to the realm of universities where no one expects any better; Jean Jaures is a tender memory among the French masses, a memory enhanced by his unfortunate and spectacular assassination; and the others? Seligman, Simkhovitch, Jevons of the sun-spots, Struve, Oppenheimer, Bernstein and the rest of the champions of the moment?—they are names of varying unimportance.

Marxism, the philosophic system which was erected by Marx, is the lever for the overthrow of the most pernicious social system in history, and the guide to the building up of the communist society.

Marx's economic theories are found in his scorching reply to Proudhon, in the Critique of Political Economy, in the Communist Manifesto and in Das Kapital. His plans and method of carrying out the proletarian revolution were developed in the period between the Communist Manifesto and the aftermath of the Paris Commune.

In general, Marx had laid down the economic basis

for social change: The development of the capitalist mode of production brings with it the centralization of the control of wealth in the hands of a diminishing number of capitalists and on the other hand the pauperization of the workers. The composition of capital increases in its constant factor, causing the intensification of the rate of exploitation. Capital finds itself unable to absorb its surplus and the resultant misery, unemployment and war force the militant and machine-organized proletariat to rebel. "Centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labor at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated."

But when Marx wrote this he had already assumed a working class not only blindly unified by the machine but also organized into a solidified, centralized political party which was conscious of its tasks and mission. Such a party he attempted to create when he became active in the Communist League, the program of which, the Communist Manifesto, he wrote with Engels, and in the more successful attempt in 1864 when the International Workingmen's Association was founded. In the inaugural speech, Marx said: "One element of success is possessed by the workers—their great numbers. But the mass can only bring their pressure to bear when an organization has gathered them together and given them an intelligent lead." And he later wrote to Engels (1867) that "in the next revolution, which is perhaps nearer than it seems, we . . . have this powerful machinery in our hands."

And it was in their hands! Marx used it to cripple the absurd theories and fantastic brotherhoods of Bakunin. Marx had dissented from the action of some French members of the International who had travelled from London to Paris "in order to do foolish things. . . overthrow the Provisional Government and set up a Commune de Paris," but when the Paris Commune was established Marx supported it superbly and attempted to give it direction. He sent regularly notes of instruction for the carrying out of various details of the work. On March 20 the General Council of the International (read: Marx) wrote to Paris: "In face of the difficulties that impede the departure of citizens Assi and Mortier for Lyons, we delegate citizen Landeck to Marseilles and Lyons with full powers." April 9: "Henceforth let the Republicans act, and do not compromise yourselves." And "we await results to give you our instructions." These are enough to show Marx's belief in a centralized international organization, the mold into which he tried to pour the International Workingmen's Association.

The fall of the Commune led Marx to reaffirm, more clearly than in 1847, his adherence to the dictatorship of the proletariat as the imperative transition period between the old and the new societies. This he did in his post-Commune address to the General Council of the International, three years later in his criticism of the German



Morgan Saves the Franc

Maurice Becker

party program (Gotha) and in various letter and documents. Further, he anticipated the Bolsheviks so far as to say that in the event of a middle-class revolution, the workers must set up against the new government "a revolutionary workers' government, either in the form of local committees, communal councils, or workers' clubs or workers' committees, so that the democratic, middle-class government not only immediately loses its support amongst the working classes, but from the commencement finds itself supervised and threatened by a jurisdiction, behind which stands the entire mass of the working class. . . . The arming of the whole proletariat must be carried out at once. . . . the workers employed in State service must arm and organize in a special corps, with a chief chosen by themselves, or form a part of the Proletarian Guard."*

Marx as the greatest political economist in history is acknowledged. The same Marx, but the Marx that formulated the tactics of the working class for the periods before and during and after the proletarian revolution, the

Marx that advocated revolutionary violence, that insisted on the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form of proletarian councils and supported by the proletarian army, Marx the revolutionist, is clouded by the pacific aura arising from the burning incense of his biographers, Spargo, the elder Liebknecht, Loria and the others who were neither called nor chosen.

The Russian working class revolution and the Communist International recovered Marx from the angelic robes in which his Boswells had embalmed him. The revolutionary spirit of Marx pervades every word and deed of the communist movement today, not because of Marx the individual, but because of Marx and his works as the historical expression and representative of the modern proletariat rising to power. Marxism is not dead; nor is it an historical subject for study and controversy. It lives today and blooms with the life and growth of the Communist International, with the approaching victory of the world's proletariat.

* Address to the Communist League.