

AGAINST IDEALISM

BY MICHAEL McCREERY

The following is one of the first public articles by Michael McCreery, written in the early days of his involvement in the fight for the victory of Marxist-Leninist principles. VANGUARD is reprinting this particular article at this time as it is felt it is important that the variety of Comrade McCreery's contributions be remembered as well as their outstanding quality and insight. - The Editors.

MAURICE CORNFORTH'S "Philosophy, Criticism and Progress" in the October 1957 issue of *Marxism Today*, is an article which confuses rather than clarifies the theoretical questions it attempts to deal with.

For example, Cornforth lays many traps for the unwary in the course of his "thinking aloud" about the nature of philosophy, by failing to make clear when he is describing the views of various historical schools of philosophy and when he is giving us the Marxist view on philosophy.

He quotes Engels with approval, "That which still survives, independently, of all earlier philosophy is the science of thought and its laws - formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is subsumed in the positive science of nature and history."

but himself gives upwards of ten definitions of philosophy many of which do not agree with this Marxist position. Such statements as "The subject matter of philosophy should be defined in terms of the kind of questions philosophers try to answer," and "Philosophy questions and criticises the general assumptions underlying the current ideologies of society," may be correct statements of the way in which logical positivists and other schools have defined the scope of philosophy, but they are not within miles of Marxism.

There is, however, a more basic source of confusion. The author purports to be a materialist, but in fact makes considerable concessions to idealism.

For Marxists the distinction between these two points of view in philosophy is vital. Engels wrote,

"The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of modern philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being."

And in his *Materialism* Lenin shows that all philosophers can be classified into two fundamentally opposed schools according to how they tackle this question of the nature of reality;

"The fundamental philosophical trends are materialism and idealism. Materialism regards nature as primary and spirit as secondary; it places being first and thought second. Idealism holds the contrary view. This root-distinction between the 'two great camps' into which the philosophers of the 'various schools' of idealism and materialism are divided Engels takes as the corner-stone."

And Lenin maintains that there can be no compromise between these two schools,

"either materialism consistent to the end, or the falsehood and confusion of philosophical idealism."

With this in mind let us look at Maurice Cornforth's soliloquy. In the course of this he says,

"The measure of the general progress of society is the growth of productive technique and knowledge . . . In this sense progress is not a matter of opinion or preference but of ascertainable fact."

Thus far we can agree; but he continues, "While it may be suggested that technique and knowledge provide the objective basis and measure of progress I do not think that these concepts exhaust what we mean when we speak of progress, not merely as something which happens and can be measured but as something desirable to strive for . . . What evidently counts is not technique and knowledge in themselves but the way of life they enable people to enjoy. And here we are beginning to speak of things which cannot be measured, and to introduce moral rather than factual considerations." [Italics in this and other quoted passages are all Cornforth's.]

In the course of his remarks Cornforth

has switched from a materialist to an idealist standpoint. This can be seen most clearly if we look at what he says in the light of Lenin's answer to the question, "What is meant by a definition? It means essentially to bring a given concept within a more comprehensive concept." The most comprehensive concepts possible to man are those of being and thinking, matter and sensation. Beyond these it is not possible to go. It follows that the ultimate, the fully comprehensive definition of any concept must for a materialist be in terms of physical being and matter, for an idealist in terms of thought and sensation. The unbridgeable gulf between these two sets of ultimate concepts reflects irreconcilable views on the nature of reality.

On which side of this fence is Cornforth, in the above passage? Unmistakably the idealist. For in his definition of the concept of progress moral considerations, themselves unmeasurable, take precedence over material, factual considerations. The objective concepts of technique and knowledge in terms of which human progress is at first defined are themselves specifically subordinated to the subjective concept of an enjoyable way of life.

Cornforth gives philosophy the important task of examining these unmeasurable moral considerations in terms of which we are to assess human progress.

"Philosophy contributes to progress also by dealing with the ends which we try to make our material progress serve, and helps to formulate the purposes which by our material progress may be realised."

This completely erroneous view of what philosophy is about (compare it with Engels' classic definition quoted above) is itself further evidence of the idealist nature of the path Cornforth is treading. But his handling of the concrete issue of the class struggle provides, I think, the conclusive proof.

Cornforth points out that when Marx says that history is the history of class struggles this does not mean only that from time to time one class delivers a blow against another, but that

"Progress takes place, marked by such things as increase of productive power, increase of knowledge and development of those ways of life embraced under the terms 'civilisation' and 'culture'."

and that this happens

"not independently of class struggle but through class struggle." So far so good; but now he wavers, "A historian can therefore . . . assess the various historical actions not solely in terms of how they promoted some particular class interest but of how they promoted general human progress."

And a later passage completes his ruin. "A philosopher's contribution may transcend class interests in the narrow sense. It may not be exhausted by ideas which do no more than serve a particular class at a particular time . . . but may also include ideas which serve and in their development continue to serve the general interests of human progress."

This last passage is categorically wrong, and can be shown to be so on Cornforth's own evidence. For if progress only takes place through class struggles then actions and ideas which advance the interests of the class which is the standard bearer of progress at any particular time and place must, of necessity, be identical with actions which promote general human progress.

For a consistent dialectical materialist it is impossible for a situation ever to arise in which the interests of general human progress differ from the interests of the particular class which is carrying the banner of progress at that time. Yet Cornforth does admit this possibility as soon as he allows that there can be ideas which serve general human progress in addition to those ideas which serve a particular class at a particular time. A second yardstick has in fact been introduced whereby actions and ideas may be judged and this clearly allows for the possibility of a clash.

It is not difficult to see that such reasoning can be put forward as a justification for deserting the interests of the working class in a time of crisis.

The way in which Cornforth puts his argument tends to obscure the fact that he is attempting to revise basic Marxist theory; for he never directly contradicts the Marxist position. Rather he attempts to by-pass it. The critical stage at which the leap from materialism to idealism is made is concealed from the unwary by the introduction of an "end," which proves to be idealist, the attainment of which is made possible by strictly materialist "means" (e.g. "the end which we try to make our material progress serve.")

When Comrade Cornforth, widely accepted as a leading Marxist theoretician, throws doubt and confusion upon problems that have been resolved for fifty years, it is little wonder that we have yet to smash the crumbling bastions of bourgeois thought in this country, and win the intellectuals to our side.

LONDON MEETING HONOURS McCREERY

Nearly 100 people gathered at Conway Hall on the 11th May to pay their respects to the work and memory of Michael McCreery, late Secretary of C.D.R.C.U. and co-Editor of "Vanguard."

Industrial workers, professional workers and intelligentsia of many countries, some of whom had never met Michael and knew him only by his writings, heard John James, Mrs. Ahilya Noone and Dave Volpe give an account of Michael's vital contribution to the cause of international solidarity of the exploited peoples.

One after the other, speakers from the Hall told of his personal kindness to them and of his readiness to help out in all kinds of difficulties.

Former economic students of his, recounted how he would find time to personally coach a pupil through a difficult exam, showing great patience and courtesy.

They spoke of how he would visit comrades in hospital and encourage them in dark days. How he would never shirk any task for the Leninist cause, no matter how small and humble.

It was announced that Michael had bequeathed his magnificent library to, as he put it, "our common ideals" and that this would henceforth be known as the *Michael McCreery Library of Politics, Economics and Culture*. An on-the-spot appeal for funds with which to extend this Library resulted in a collection of £15.

The entire proceedings were a dignified and poignant tribute to a Communist leader whose work was so tragically and prematurely cut short.

A.G.

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