

Philosophy vs. Marxism

Why I Am Not A Communist

By John Dewey

Having had the opportunity to see Mr. Bertrand Russell's contribution, I have doubts whether I can say much that he has not already said. But I begin by emphasizing that I write with reference to being a Communist in the Western world, especially here and now in the United States, and a Communist after the U. S. S. R. pattern.

1. Such Communism rests upon an almost entire neglect of the specific historical backgrounds and traditions which have operated to shape America's patterns of thought and action. The Russian church and state's autocratic background, the fact that every progressive movement in Russia had its origin in some foreign source and has been imposed from above upon the people, explain much about the form Communism has taken in that country.

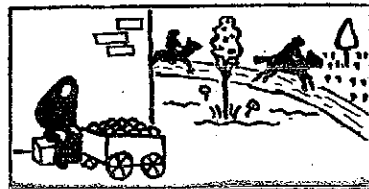
It is therefore nothing short of fantastic to transfer Russian communism's ideology to a country so profoundly different in its economic, political, and cultural history. Were this acknowledged by Communists and reflected in their daily activities and general program, were it admitted that many of Russian Communism's practical and theoretical features (like belief in Marx's plenary and verbal inspiration, the Communist Party's implicit or explicit domination in every field of culture, the ruthless extermination of minority opinion in its own ranks, the verbal glorification of the mass and the actual cult of the infallibility of leadership) are due to local causes, the character of Communism in other countries might undergo a radical change.

But this is extremely unlikely. For official Communism has made the practical traits of the dictatorship of the proletariat and over the civil liberties of all non-proletarian ele-

(John Dewey is one of the few philosophers in history whose ideas have penetrated through all strata of the society in which they worked in their own time. Heir to William James, founder of pragmatism, he developed instrumentalism, influenced the thinking of the man in the street as well as the dominant leaders of his generation. Within a few decades he has seen the American school system, revolutionized by his theory of education. What distinguishes his philosophy is its practicality, its usefulness as a tool for fashioning rational ways of life on the basis of the incomplete knowledge we possess of it. In the following article the internationally known philosopher, honorary president of the Henry George School of Social Science, discusses the philosophic aspects of Marxism. Harry Gunnison Brown concludes the series in next month's issue with "Economic Science vs. Marxism."—The Editors.)

ments as well as of dissenting proletarian minorities, integral parts of the standard Communist faith and dogma. It has imposed and not argued the theory of dialectic materialism (which in the U.S.S.R. itself has to undergo frequent restatement in accordance with the exigencies of party factional controversy) upon all its followers. Its cultural philosophy, which has many commendable features, is vitiated by the absurd attempt to make a single and uniform entity out of the "proletariat."

2. Particularly unacceptable to me in official Communism's ideology is its monistic and one-way philosophy of history. This is akin to the point made above. The thesis that all societies must exhibit a uniform, even if uneven, social development from primitive communism to slavery,



from slavery to feudalism, from feudalism to capitalism, and from capitalism to socialism, and that the transition from capitalism to socialism must be achieved by the same way in all countries, can be accepted only by those who are either ignorant of history or who are so steeped in dogma that they cannot look at a fact without changing it to suit their special purposes.

From this monistic philosophy of history, there follows a uniform political practice and a uniform theory of revolutionary strategy and tactics. But where differences in historic background, national psychology, religious profession and practice are taken into account—and they must be considered in every scientific theory—there will be corresponding differences in political methods, differences that may extend to general policies as well as to the strategy of their execution.

For example, so far as America's historic experience is concerned, two things among many others are overlooked by official Communists whose philosophy has been projected on the basis of special European conditions. We in the United States have no background of a dominant and overshadowing feudalism. It is a possibility that important social changes in the direction of democratization of industry may be accomplished by groups working with the working class although, strictly speaking, not of them.

The other point is our deeply rooted belief in the importance of individuality, a belief almost absent in the Oriental world from which Russia has drawn so much. Not to see that this attitude, so engrained in our habitual ways of thought and action, demands a very different set of policies and methods from those embodied in official Communism, verges to my mind on political insanity.

3. While I recognize the existence of class conflicts as one of the fundamental facts of social life today, I am profoundly skeptical of class war as the means by which such conflicts can be eliminated and genuine

social advance made. And yet this is a basic point in Communist theory and is more and more identified with the meaning of dialectic materialism as applied to the social process.

Historically speaking, it may have been necessary for Russia—in order to achieve peace for her war-weary soldiers, and land for her hungry peasants—to convert incipient class war into open civil war culminating in the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat. But nonetheless Fascism in Germany and Italy cannot be understood except with reference to the lesson those countries learned from the U.S.S.R.

How Communism can continue to advocate the kind of economic change it desires by means of civil war, armed insurrection and iron dictatorship in face of what has happened in Italy and Germany I cannot at all understand. Reliable observers have contended that the Communist ideology of dictatorship and violence together with the belief that the Communist Party was the foreign arm of a foreign power constituted one of the factors which aided the growth of Fascism in Germany.

I am firmly convinced that imminent civil war, or even the overt threat of such a war, in any Western nation, will bring Fascism with its terrible engines of repression to power. Communism, then, with its doctrine of the necessity of the forcible overthrow of the state by armed insurrection, with its doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat, with its threats to exclude all other classes from civil rights, to smash their political parties, and to deprive them of the rights of freedom of speech, press and assembly—which Communists now claim for themselves under capitalism—Communism is itself an unwitting, but nonetheless powerful, factor in bringing about Fascism. As an unalterable opponent of Fascism in every form, I cannot be a Communist.

4. It is not irrelevant to add that one of the reasons I am not a Communist is that the emotional tone and methods of discussion and dispute which seems to accompany Communism at present are extremely repugnant to me. Fair play, elementary honesty in the representation of facts and especially of the opinions of oth-

ers, are something more than "bourgeois virtues." They are traits that have been won only after long struggle. They are not deep-seated in human nature even now—witness the methods that brought Hitlerism to power.

The systematic, persistent and seemingly intentional disregard of these things by Communist spokesmen in speech and press, the hysteria of their denunciations, their attempts at character assassination of their opponents, their misrepresentation of the views of the "liberals" to whom they also appeal for aid in their defense campaigns, their policy of "rule or ruin" in their so-called united front activities, their apparent conviction that what they take to be the end justifies the use of any means if only those means promise to be successful—all these, in my judgment, are fatal to the very end which official Communists profess to have at heart. And if I read the temper of the American people aright, especially so in this country.

5. A revolution effected solely or chiefly by violence can in a modernized society like our own result only in chaos. Not only would civilization be destroyed but the things necessary for bare life. There are some, I am sure, now holding and preach-

ing Communism who would be the first to react against it, if in this country Communism were much more than a weak protest or an avocation of literary men. Few Communists are really aware of the far-reaching implications of the doctrine that civil war is the only method by which revolutionary economic and political changes can be brought about.

A comparatively simple social structure, such as Russia had, may be able to recover from the effects of violent, internal disturbance. And Russia had the weakest middle class of any major nation. Were a large scale revolution to break out in highly industrialized America, where the middle class is stronger, more militant and better prepared than anywhere else in the world, it would either be abortive, drowned in a blood bath, or if it were victorious, would win only a Pyrrhic victory. The two sides would destroy the country and each other. For this reason, too, I am not a Communist.

(Professor Dewey's remarks are presented here by courtesy of the author and of V. C. Calverton, editor of *The Modern Monthly, An Independent Journal of Radical Opinion*, in which they appeared in connection with a symposium on Marxism to which many outstanding thinkers and writers contributed. Copyright, 1934, by The Modern Monthly, Inc. For additional material, see Dr. Dewey's "Impressions of Soviet Russia," New York, 1929, New Republic, Inc., \$1.00.)