

Book Reviews

Dobb as Historian

Studies in the Development of Capitalism by Maurice Dobb (George Routledge & Sons, price 18s).

MAURICE DOBB has demonstrated in a most striking way the superiority of the Marxist approach to historical problems over the bourgeois eclecticism which nowadays passes as a substitute for proper analysis. Hitherto he has been known primarily as a Marxist critic of contemporary capitalist economy. In this book he reveals himself as a historian. With a wealth of detail drawn both from primary and secondary sources, he has analysed the amazing intricacies and contradictions at the root of capitalist development from the end of the middle ages until the present day. Not only at succeeding stages in the development of capitalism has he shown the effects of changes of technique on relations of production, but he has also indicated the political consequences of these changes. And, giving the lie to those critics who equate Marxism with a mechanical determinism, he shows the counteraction of class and ideology on the development of economic practices.

The main points of concentration in the book are on the new factors growing up in a decaying feudal economy which were to smash feudal social relationships; the striking contradictions in early capitalist society between those capitalists whose profit was gained by commercial manipulation and those whose profit was gained from capitalist production as such; the techniques and relations of production during the industrial revolution; and the growth of monopoly and economic crisis in the era of imperialism.

On the decline of feudalism, a subject still wrapt in obscurity—partly because of the small amount of research done on it, but even more so because hitherto the majority of economic historians have not analysed what evidence there is from the correct standpoint—Dobb shows how the problem must be approached from the point of view of the most fundamental of social

relationships, namely, the relationship between exploiters and exploited. Having thus defined the essence of feudal economy, he makes a penetrating and many-sided examination of the problems involved in the decline of that economy. The crisis of labour supply, the alternative solutions presenting themselves to the increasingly bankrupt feudal ruling class, the growth of a rural “kulak” class, are all discussed, not only from a full knowledge of the latest work on the subject by English historians, but with the illumination of European and especially Russian parallels.

While the growth of small scale urban industry, of local and eventually international trade is shown in considerable detail as contributing to the dissolution of feudalism and to the beginnings of a capitalist economy and a capitalist class, Dobb warns against the pre-dating of true capitalism. Merchant capital, concerned only in profit derived from adventitious price differences or from usury, is by no means incompatible with feudalism. The early merchant fortunes made in this way were not, in fact, the beginnings of the primitive accumulation of capital. In the 14th century the super-profits of moneylenders and war-contractors either vanished like snow in the sunshine in unproductive expenditure, or went to establish their owners in the ranks of the feudal ruling class—the de la Poles of Hull being the classic example.

On the primitive accumulation of capital, Dobb shows its operation in two phases. During the first phase, the bourgeoisie acquires cheap assets, which it realises in a later phase by sale at high prices, investing the proceeds in cheap capital goods and badly paid proletarian labour, the prerequisites of industrialisation. The principal asset thus acquired was land, the source of the economic and political power of the feudal aristocracy: the bourgeoisie made on the deal not only in the economic, but also in the political bankruptcy of its class enemy.

In the seventeenth century developments, mercantile monopoly, interested only in the “terms of trade,” is shown to be identified with political

reaction, and the industrial bourgeoisie with the progressive elements during and after the English Revolution. But the real victory of industrial capitalism does not occur until the end of the eighteenth century as a result of the coincidence of a number of necessary factors—a coincidence never since repeated, nor (as is convincingly demonstrated) ever likely to be repeated.

There are treasures of analysis in this remarkable book. If the case for a historical and Marxist outlook as the “essential foundation for any realistic system of economics” (the original aim of these studies), is proved up to the hilt, the work has also proved that a Marxist approach is the only possible one for the solution to historical problems. It is to be hoped that both historians and economists learn the appropriate lesson.

RODNEY HILTON.

Bluff and Bluster

Bevin by Trevor Evans. Allen & Unwin, 10s6d).

I FOUND THIS book very readable and interesting. Knowing both the writer and the subject of his book, I was curious to see what kind of picture Mr. Evans would reveal. It perhaps was more intended to present Mr. Bevin to the American public than our own, but, in any case, it contains a great deal of very informative and valuable information about a person, who has made his impression on the labour movement of Britain. You get a good picture of the rise and development of Bevin, against the familiar background of all trade union leaders of his age, of poverty and insecurity, of fighting against great odds, and in Bevin's case, without any attempt of seeking the willing co-operation of others who could have made the fight easier and more successful.

The book brings out very strongly the price working-class leaders must pay if they neglect the study of Marxist philosophy as a whole. It explains the role of Social Democracy, and the serious mistakes the movement has to pay on this account. But in Bevin's case, this neglect is coupled with a sense of contempt, and the complete

inability to realise that one man bands inevitably break down. You get the feeling very strongly that no one at any time or in any place had anything to “teach Me, Bevin.” Behind this facade of the Great Man theory, you get the attempt to cover up political weaknesses and blindness by bluff and bluster. It deceives no one in the long run, only those who practise it.

It also explains why, in critical situations, or where special thought and knowledge in the presentation of a policy is necessary, such types believe that silence is golden. Mr. Bevin was forced at the Paris Conference to operate this self-imposed silence, because he could not answer the arguments made by those speakers who formulated their case on their knowledge of Marxism. When Mr. Bevin had his biggest chance, he was the biggest failure, and Britain was leaderless at a Conference which could have made its name renowned throughout the ages for its Socialist approach to the grave problems which had to be decided. Bevin, as this book clearly shows, is one of those Labour leaders who believe it to be more important to prove they can make capitalism work more efficiently than the capitalists, and, who, in the long run, become the simple tools of the most aggressive sections of monopoly capitalism—as Bevin now proves by his willing servitude to American big business.

Mr. Evans' write-up of Mr. Bevin inevitably creates the picture of a lonely leader, who never possessed that supreme quality of leadership—the ability to win the willing collective work of those around him so that the great Cause of Socialism could the sooner be established.

HARRY POLLITT.

A Jubilee History

The Story of the Engineers by James B. Jeffreys (Lawrence and Wishart, price 10s6d, 301 pp.).

THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL of the Amalgamated Engineering Union are to be congratulated on their decision to mark the Jubilee of their Union with a play, a film and a history. Each of these has added to the cultural