

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Laws of Dialectics

A PHILOSOPHY FOR A MODERN MAN, by H. Levy. Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50. (A Book Union Choice.)

A NEW book by Professor Levy is an event for those who know the work of this earnest and gifted British scientist. *The Universe of Science* first brought Levy before the American public. For a great many of us the book was a milestone in our theoretical development. Levy coolly demolished Eddington and Jeans and ruled all spiritualism and philosophical idealism out of the sciences. He expounded the nature of the scientific process, centering his exposition in the concept of the isolate, and throwing new light on the problem of scientific determinism. He denuded mathematics of all traces of Platonism and set it soundly on a social and functional basis. Eloquently he explained the social responsibilities of the scientist and his relation to the working class. Subsequent to the publication of this book, Professor Levy's participation in a discussion in the *British Labor Monthly* showed that he was aware of the political implications of his thought and was seeking to clarify the relationship between his analysis of scientific method and the philosophy of dialectical materialism. A short but significant sequel to *The Universe of Science* was his *Science in an Irrational Society*, published in England in 1934. Since that time various articles have appeared, such as that on probability in the second issue of *Science and Society*, all of which led one to hope for still further analyses and a more comprehensive synthesis from Levy. This hope is fulfilled in the present book.

The most striking feature of *A Philosophy for a Modern Man* is its organic unity. The first sentence states its thesis:

For ordinary men and women a philosophy will have meaning and importance when it is based on the assumptions the material world forces them to make in their practice of life, when it illuminates their relation to the world and to society, and so acts as a guide to conduct.

From this Levy proceeds through the problems and techniques of scientific analysis as they manifest themselves in human thought and practice in a material world, analyzes the nature of cause and change as they appear in society, and concludes with a chapter entitled: "What It Means for You and Me, or *The Unity of Theory and Practice*," which is the starting point over again, now enlightened by the whole course of the intervening analysis. This analysis enables him to conclude that:

For us the problems of philosophy are resolved into those of guiding ourselves and others toward

this classless society. Our philosophical theory has to emerge in political practice.

John Strachey sought to expound a similarly unified world-view in his *Theory and Practice of Socialism*, taking as his starting point the contradictions in capitalist economy and the success of Socialist economy in the Soviet Union, and building on this foundation an edifice that included dialectical materialism, the arts, and culture in general. Levy, as a mathematician and physical scientist, on the contrary, starts with the theory and practice of science, viewing science always as a human activity conditioned in its course of development by the needs and desires of men. His aim is to show that the application of the principles and methods of science to changing human society leads to, or rather, is historical materialism, and in our own day, the theory and practice of scientific Socialism.

This is not to imply that human motivation as determined by the class nature of capitalist society does not enter into the process. Levy states explicitly that "If men are to become causal agents in the orderly construction and reconstruction of society, they must become so in virtue of their desires and their biases." Thus Levy admits to being a propagandist but would insist that he is not for that reason less a scientist. For he is attempting "to see the part that human desires do play in bringing about the history that men make," in order to enable us by scientific understanding of the direction of social development and of the next "logical" phase of society to help bring it about "deliberately and with enlightenment."

Chapter One concisely sketches in the major tenets of modern materialist philosophy, starting with the existence of the universe, its changing character, the existence of human beings with their changing consciousness of the world about them, and ending with the priority of matter, and mind as a quality of matter. Levy dismisses neatly the argument of some of our super-scientists that "matter is

out of date." Having laid this foundation, he proceeds through 164 closely argued pages to develop the principles of scientific analysis and the laws of change. He shows that to get scientific knowledge of anything, i.e., of a quality or a mode of behavior, we must isolate it from the wider group of things in which it exists, study its internal structure or processes, and then replace the isolate in the environment from which we have mentally separated it, and now reexamine its internal structure in the light of the wider situation, and vice versa. This, like many other phases of his work, is illustrated with copious examples from many fields of science and daily life and even presented pictorially through some amusing drawings.

He then distinguishes between group qualities and atomic qualities (showing, of course, the relativity of the distinction), and hence between atomic isolates and group, or statistical, isolates. These distinctions enable Levy to steer easily between atomism and organicism, between mechanical analysis which destroys the thing analyzed and such seeing of things as wholes that makes all analysis impossible. On this basis he can recognize the emergence of order at one level out of disorder at another, the forming of new qualities or group patterns by atomic isolates brought into relationship, and the development of the animate out of the inanimate without recourse to such concepts as those of creative and emergent evolution.

But most important of all, and the high spot of the present work, is Levy's quest for and development of a generalized law of movement. Through many examples borrowed from divergent fields, and following the methods used by the sciences, he arrives at a formula for the transformation of a quality, or for what, as he himself says, Hegel and the dialectical materialists know as the transformation of quantity into quality. It is impossible to go into the details of Levy's formula here. Levy himself must be read for its development. He has enlarged and deepened this particular "law of dialectics" by giving it a precise and concrete formulation which can apply alike to the phenomena of the physical, biological, and social sciences. To Levy it is clear that this dialectical law is a reflection in consciousness of objective processes in the worlds of nature and society. This analysis alone makes his book an important contribution to dialectical materialism.

It is unfortunate that Levy, perhaps because of his roots in the British tradition, so shuns the terminology of dialectical materialism; also that he does not attempt to do for the other two dialectical principles, viz., the unity or interpenetration of opposites and the negation of negation, what he does for this one. But as the present work represents a concretization and development of his earlier



Freda Weinsweig

thought, it is to be hoped that he will go on to bring in the whole of dialectical materialism. Even his own analysis indicates that the other principles are implied by this one, just as this one is by the others. Levy perhaps does not yet fully admit the necessity and cogency of the unity of opposites and the negation of negation. Be that as it may, this analysis of the relation of quantity to quality is worth ever so much more than are the ordinary reiterations of the same principle without any effort to probe its meaning further.

It is interesting to note that the phenomenalist tendencies of Levy's *The Universe of Science*, which had given way to a considerable dose of pragmatism in *Science in an Irrational Society*, nowhere appear here, and that the pragmatism of the second book is almost entirely gone. One must say "almost" gone, for it suddenly obtrudes itself in the last page of the book in his account of truth, in spite of a materialist statement a few pages earlier. This is particularly unnecessary in view of Lenin's careful analysis of truth in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

There is much valuable material in the last two chapters on social development and our place in it. The analysis of the present impasse of capitalism and of the inevitability of the transition to Socialism is cold and clear, even if wanting the concrete richness of Dutt or Strachey. Levy is simply trying to sketch in briefly what we get when we apply the scientific principles he has developed earlier to the social scene. The chapters contain many insights and sharp observations which deserve the fuller development he has given to the more general problems of scientific analysis. Occasionally he slips into a loose statement, such as that all parties on the Left in Germany equally ignored the middle class, or a careless formulation, such as that which suggests that the program for a people's front must be a Socialist program, and negatively that the democratic framework is not likely to break, short of its use toward the abolition of private profit. But there is much excellent material in these chapters, some of it eloquently written.

One cannot close an account of *A Philosophy for a Modern Man* without reference to the illustrations that enliven its pages. The frontispiece wittily satirizes Sir James Jeans's *This Mysterious Universe*, while other drawings help one to picture vividly as isolate (the "fish out of water"), the relation between external and internal qualities, the dawn of statistics, how an isolate can be torn from its context (the hiker in a hurry), and the struggle between content and form in the guise of a fat boy bursting out of his clothes.

Professor Levy has given us a valuable work, and it is appropriate that his book should have been published in a large edition in England for the Left Book Club and recently selected here by the Book Union. It should be particularly stimulating to American men of science and students of philosophy who are seeking a method of dealing with the social problems that confront them and



Aaron Sopher

who do not understand dialectical materialism as the scientific philosophy designed for precisely the purpose of understanding and transforming society.

HOWARD SELSAM.

## Escape from Devil's Island

DRY GUILLOTINE, by René Belbenoit. E. P. Dutton & Co. \$2.50.

**R**ENÉ BELBENOIT'S unsparing account of his fifteen years' "living death" in France's notorious South American penal colony, will shock even those who have been partly inured to inhumanity by the current newspapers, radios, and movie houses. Belbenoit stole a necklace; for that crime—although the necklace was recovered and returned—Belbenoit was sentenced to eight years at hard labor in French Guiana. His sentence there was lengthened because he made four unsuccessful attempts to escape; in the fifth he reached the United States, and although he was emaciated, had no teeth, and owned only the ragged clothes on his back, he writes that he was "no longer afraid." He may not be afraid, but the United States will deport him in March, and there is a decided likelihood that this brave man, unless something can be done to help him, may eventually have to face again the "administration" he has attacked in this book.

Although the name, Devil's Island—the island where Dreyfus was kept—has captured popular imagination, the penal colony is actually synonymous with French Guiana itself. The larger number of the several thousand convicts are held on the mainland and only the most refractory men—and political prisoners—are sent to the three misnamed Isles du Salut (Islands of Health). It deserves to be much more widely known and realized that France's single remaining possession in the Americas has been used since 1852 as an exterminating ground for her rebellious citizens and that since 1852 her free and emigrating citizens have shunned it.

Seven hundred prisoners are brought to the colony every year, and with a criminal popula-

tion of around three thousand, seven hundred regularly die each year so that the population remains constant. If overcrowding tends to develop, certain "regulating camps" are used where, by working men waist deep in water and by other extreme practices, the number of *forcats* is more rapidly reduced. "The policy of the administration is to kill, not to better or reclaim," Belbenoit writes. Hardly any element which might contribute to the process of extermination is overlooked—starvation, inadequate clothing, torture, and finally the lethal practice of condemning men to one-, two-, and three-year stretches of solitary confinement, the "guillotine seche" from which the book takes its name.

In conclusion, I should like to quote a penetrating, sensitive passage in Belbenoit's book about the psychology of prisoners; from it much may be learned about the psychology of all imprisoned human beings.

The psychology of the place at first frightens them: for the axiom of life in French Guiana is every man for himself; self-interest reigns supreme and is at the bottom of every action. Each man revolts inwardly against everything. Reduced to a struggle for bare existence, they shut themselves up within themselves for refuge. They are miserably lonely—but, to each man, each other convict appears incapable of sympathetic understanding or appears to be an evil character: for they all, with a warped perspective, see each other at their worst, when they are looking with their hearts for someone unattainable to talk with, to confide in, to lift them out of that hell. They hunger for someone "all right" to talk with. But they withdraw within themselves and encase themselves in a world of their own. Many acquire the habit of talking to themselves; it is a sort of a safe communion which, to some extent, brings relief. There is no helping of one another, no coöperation; for there is lack of good faith, lack of trust, among men of this type, particularly in this environment where life is stripped of all civilized sentiment. Individualism, egotism, take the leading role in guiding their actions, and every prisoner suffers in this exile from the devouring restlessness which is one of the factors in his obsession to escape.

MILLEN BRAND.

## British Labor Since the War

THE POST-WAR HISTORY OF THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS, by Allen Hutt. Coward-McCann, Inc. \$2.75.

**T**HE resignation of Anthony Eden from the British cabinet roused the Labor Party to demand a vote of censure which if successful would have compelled a general election. The immediate response of six million workers and anti-fascists to the Labor Party's position and the organization of week-end demonstrations revealed that despite past vacillations the Labor Party has responded forcefully to a serious emergency. However, mistaken policies pursued in the last decade have made it difficult for the Labor Party to overthrow the Chamberlain government.

Allen Hutt's superb *The Post-War History of the British Working Class*, with its main accent on labor's political role, explains the