

The Meaning of Henri Bergson

In this French philosopher's ideas, a dying class saw a reflection of its own image. His antagonism toward science. . . . Hacker's new book obscures American history.

THE death of Henri Bergson several days ago came at its appointed hour with the end of the Third French Republic. The bourgeois republic has taken with it to the grave its chief ideological spokesman. By some final irony, Bergson lived to see his own disciple, Jacques Chevalier, now Secretary of State for Education in the Vichy government, promulgate the principles upon which French fascist education is to be founded. Bergson himself did not wish to deduce the fascist consequences which were latent in his thought. That job of relentless demonstration was left to history.

What was Bergson's role in French thought, and why did his ideas gain such renown? To answer this question, we must place Bergson against the background of French society in the years after 1871. When the French bourgeoisie crushed the Paris Commune, when it massacred the workers at Pere La Chaise, it gave up whatever loyalty to the French Revolution it had still retained. Thenceforth, the French bourgeoisie had no use for Voltairean materialism. It abandoned the vigorous faith in reason and scientific method which had been the rallying cry of the French revolutionary bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century. Science, materialism, intelligence were dangerous because they might be used by the working class to criticize and overthrow the bourgeois order. The bourgeoisie of the Third French Republic desired a philosophy which would provide some rationalization for its anti-scientific, anti-materialistic bias. Bergson gave the bourgeois republic its ideology. He was rewarded with a chair at the College de France.

In Bergson's ideas, the decaying class saw a reflection of its own image. Truth, said Bergson, could not be obtained by the scientist's observations in a laboratory, nor could it be given to the workman engaged in working with tools. Truth, on the contrary, was accessible only by means of an intuitive method, the monopolistic rights to which were reserved to the leisure class. Veblen once observed that every leisure class defines "reality" in such a way as to make it conform to its own "contaminated" mentality. Bergson defined "reality" with such exquisite delicacy that his lectures became the rendezvous of the fashionable ladies of Paris. The scientist, said Bergson, sees only the exterior of things; he does not see things from within, since his symbols always stand between him and the objects with which he deals. But, continued Bergson, there is a "higher" knowledge, metaphysics, which does not need symbols and which does see things from within. To obtain this "knowledge," you must stop

thinking, you must stop analyzing, you must stop occupying yourself with material objects. You must withdraw from any practical contact with the external world, and turn inward upon yourself. You will then perceive the flow of your own pure personality, and with this "intuition," indeed, reality will have been revealed. The pursuits of the French leisure class, which Proust has described, were thus an ideal preparation for the discovery of metaphysical truths. Reality unspoiled belonged only to the idle.

The French bourgeoisie, like its English brethren, was concerned with taking the sting out of Darwin. Bergson's doctrine of creative evolution provided a dose of metaphysical nonsense serviceable to their interests. Bergson proposed the view that the evolutionary process was driven by an original impetus of life, the well known *elan vital*. From the scientific standpoint, this statement is as devoid of meaningful content as Bergson's other famous doctrine that thought needs a brain not for its existence but only in order to express itself. Fortunately, scientists were not impressed by Bergson; mathematical and experimental methods have been applied by men like J. B. S. Haldane to the biological problems which Bergson said were beyond scientific explanation.

It would be a legitimate problem to discover the conditions under which the kind of introspective data that Bergson describes occurs. But these data have no more exclusive claim upon the word "reality" than the visions of a drunkard.

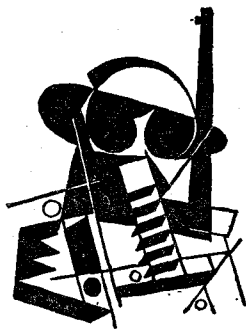
Bergson's system differed in one important respect from the metaphysics of the medieval schoolmen. Unlike their fixed, orderly world, Bergson's *elan vital* was uncertain in its aspirations, blundering in its ways. The uncertainties and instabilities of the bourgeois order are projected by Bergson into the eternal scheme of things. Change, he believed, could not be described by causal laws. According to Bergson, therefore, the Marxian method is basically unsound, because it tries to analyze the process of economic development. There was a time when men like Sorel, the exponent

of syndicalism, sought to propagate such views among the working class. Some French workers, disheartened by the reformist policies and betrayals of Socialist leaders, sought consolation in a kind of "proletarian mysticism." The Bergsonian doctrine was primarily, however, an expression of the intellectual disintegration of the bourgeois class. Young French intellectuals who saw themselves condemned to lives of corrupt careerism tended to express their disillusionment with intelligence by adherence to Bergson's philosophy of the "self-hatred of the intellect."

Bergson's writings during the first world war have been republished as Allied propaganda for the second world war. Bergson criticized German imperialism for its insatiable lust of conquest, but he was blind to the ways of Anglo-French imperialism. The method of intuition had its nationalist shortcomings. The Germans are the villains in Bergson's metaphysical drama, for they are plotting against the *elan vital*. Indeed, German hegemony would make Bergson's metaphysics false; and therefore, the Germans must be defeated. The war, said Bergson, is the outcome of Prussian mechanism, the Prussians, "a people with whom every process tended to take a mechanical form . . . the idea of Prussia always evoked a vision of rudeness, of rigidity, of automatism." . . . Germany, he declared, proposed the mechanization of the spirit whereas the Allies proposed the spiritualization of matter. The colonial peoples exploited by Anglo-French imperialism, the trade unionists imprisoned by Daladier and Petain, could comfort themselves with the thought that they were being "spiritualized."

Like a typical bourgeois philosopher, Bergson believed that the social laws of the bourgeois order were the universal laws of all social systems. Men, he asserted, have a war instinct, and war is natural. . . . "The origin of war is ownership, individual and collective, and since humanity is predestined to ownership by its structure, war is natural. So strong, indeed, is the war instinct. . . . Think now of the enthusiasm of a people at the outbreak of a war!" (*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*). Perhaps Bergson became doubtful on this point when he saw the "enthusiasm" with which the French people followed the Daladier government into the war.

Bergson's polemic against historical materialism reflected his aversion toward the working class. Social initiative, he said, has always come from the upper classes. "Thus it was the upper middle class, and not the working classes, who played the leading part



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in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, aimed against the privilege of wealth. Later it was men of the educated classes who demanded education for all." (*The Two Sources*). The upper middle class did, indeed, play a leading part in the Revolution of 1848, the leading part, that is, in the betrayal of the Revolution. Bergson evidently forgot the events of the June days of 1848—the suppression of the workers who rose to defend themselves against the reactionary bourgeoisie. And it is an illusion to entrust the cause of public education to the hands of the "educated classes." We have only to observe the restrictions which the French fascists have placed on the educational opportunities of the working class.

Bergson's method of "intuition" led to some curious results when it was applied to social problems. Europe, said Bergson, is overpopulated; therefore, there are wars. Or to quote his inimitable words: "Let Venus have her way, and she will bring you Mars." Bergson proposed that reproduction should be rationally regulated. Presumably the *elan vital* must be mechanized, after all, if it is to survive. In addition to repeating Malthus, Bergson spoke with a vaguely reactionist tinge concerning the need for a "central, organizing intelligence" which would "allot to the machine its proper place." He looked forward to some mystic genius who would transfigure the masses of men. Imperialism, he said, will then become mysticism. Thus culminates the transcendental nonsense.

Class interests forbade the French bourgeoisie's having a complete sympathy with science. Bergson's anti-intellectualism was essentially similar to the ideological products of the German irrationalists and the English metaphysicians. And it is noteworthy that neo-Bergsonian ideas have been brought into circulation by the ideological advocates of American participation in the imperialist war. Antagonism to science is a common property of the "thinkers" of the rival decaying capitalist states. Anti-intellectualism springs from no obscure source. If you don't like the consequences of scientific method, you simply say something is wrong with science, and you look for some alternative "method" of "real" knowledge. The Encyclopedists of the eighteenth century, the spokesmen of the young French bourgeoisie, were ardent teachers of science and joyous concerning the prospects of industrial civilization. Their heritage has been renounced by the decadent bourgeoisie; it will be safeguarded by the working class.

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Obscuring History

THE TRIUMPH OF AMERICAN CAPITALISM, by Louis M. Hacker. Simon and Schuster. \$3.

LOUIS M. HACKER's book contains much excellent factual material on the history of trade and manufacturing in America from colonial times until the 1870's. It is important to stress, however, that, in spite of its am-

bitious title, the book contains little else of value.

In some circles Hacker is regarded as a Marxist. This is by no means the case. Hacker belongs to the school of so-called "economic determinists," of which Charles H. Beard is perhaps the outstanding exponent in America; and between "economic determinism" and the Marxist materialist conception of history, there is the sharpest divergence. The major Marxist criticism of Hacker's book must necessarily be that it is too *narrowly* economic in that it fails to recognize the role of consciousness in history—the role of the idea, of organization, conscious struggle, and especially of politics.

By persistently underestimating the role of conscious political activity, Hacker creates the impression that political struggles have been ephemeral by-products of economic events and of no major consequence in themselves. Perhaps the crassest example of this is to be found in his discussion of the Kansas Civil War (p. 213). This conflict resulted from the effort of the slaveholders to vote slavery into Kansas by overrunning the territory with the infamous "border ruffians." To meet the slaveholder offensive, Abolitionist societies of the North, representing the middle-class farmers, artisans, rising industrialists, workers, and Negro people, organized the Emigrant Aid Society to assist the movement into Kansas of free-soilers as permanent homesteaders. Thus two streams of emigration from two different class origins poured into Kansas, and a bitter and bloody clash was inevitable. It goes without saying that real estate companies made fortunes by selling to both free-soilers and border ruffians. Yet Hacker gives the impression that, therefore, the eastern land speculators were pretty largely responsible for the whole affair—a vulgarization of the Marxist theory of the basic role of the modes of production in history. Unquestionably there was land speculation; but it was secondary. The basic explanation of the Kansas Civil War must be found

in the conflict between two modes of production—chattel slavery and capitalism—arising from small scale commodity production. And this conflict took the form of a political class struggle.

The weakness of Hacker's interpretation is clearest in his scanty and superficial treatment of Jeffersonian democracy. After a fairly lengthy account of the Hamiltonian program, the victory of Jeffersonian democracy in 1800 is dismissed in two short paragraphs as an ineffectual agrarian movement which really came to terms with the capitalist interests without disarranging the Hamiltonian pattern "in any essential regard." This distortion of history follows the traditional Federalist interpretation. The conflict between Federalism and Jeffersonian democracy was never over *whether* or not capitalism was to develop, but over *how* it was to develop; whether it should rise rough-shod over the masses through an open political dictatorship as an instrument for rapid expropriation of the small owners even before the settlement of the vast Western lands, or whether it should develop on the basis of widespread democratic rights and ownership of land. In this conflict, the Federalists by no means had their way. Hacker does not even mention the vanguard role of Thomas Jefferson in leading the democratic mass movement, first to force a Bill of Rights into the Constitution and thereafter to support the Constitution, with all its shortcomings, as the only means of preserving American independence and those democratic victories already gained, against British and other foreign monarchical plots, as well as against internal Tory counter-revolution.

Hacker has nothing to say of the Bill of Rights whatsoever. Furthermore, he has nothing to say about the Federalist *political* program and the consequent Alien and Sedition Acts which, if left on the statute books, would have perpetuated a one-party dictatorship in America, making impossible any free election. The triumph of the Democrats certainly disarranged this Federalist pattern, as it did many others. In fact, if the Jeffersonians came to terms so easily with the moneyed interests, whence the long period of Federalist treasonable plots to dismember the Union, culminating in the Aaron Burr conspiracy and the Hartford Convention, of which there is not a word in Hacker's book? If Jeffersonian democracy was so ineffectual that it needs no discussion in a book on the triumph of American capitalism, how account for the fact that the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the natural resources of the country and created the basis for doubling the home market, was carried out by the Jeffersonians over the *almost unanimous opposition of the Federalists*? How explain the fact that it was the Jeffersonians who defended our national borders against foreign foes and expanded our territory by removing military bases from the hands of those foes or preventing their falling into such hands by taking advantage of the rivalries of the great powers through (1) the Louisiana Purchase; (2) the War of 1812,



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