

# MARXISM AND FREEDOM

## ***The Declaration of the Rights of Man proclaimed man's inherent liberty. Why has it been illusory?***

**By RENE MAUBLANC**

*Last week M. Maublanc discussed several conceptions of the meaning of freedom. He analyzed their psychological aspects as well as their historical background. Readers who wish to pursue the subject further will find ample reward in reading Frederick Engels' "Ludwig Feuerbach" and "Anti-Duhring," as well as Dr. Howard Selsam's "Socialism and Ethics."*

**I**NDICATED in my first article that to pass from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom it is imperative to reach a proper understanding of the laws of nature and society. As long as science has not reached a certain level there can be no real human freedom.

What is it that men until now have called social freedom? It is the fact that men have gradually progressed to the degree that their sciences and techniques have given them a certain power over nature. In the long past this power was not sufficient to give all men freedom from servitude to nature. The creation of the first tools, however, permitted man to win a little more room and independence in the world. But at that moment it was not the majority of men who were able to liberate themselves. It was simply a small minority among them; the others remained entirely subject to slavery. And that is the origin of class divisions. Only a few men were free, and their freedom was based upon the condition that the great mass of mankind worked for them.

Freedom at that moment was, therefore, a class privilege. It was necessary for the great majority of men, the slaves and later the serfs, to assume the harsh burden of immediately productive work for a small number of the privileged, who devoted their leisure to the development of the sciences, literature and the fine arts. This division into classes, and the Marxists were the first to see it in its

fullest meaning, was the necessary condition for the advance of civilization and social progress. Civilization was able to move ahead because there was a class freed from servile work. And that class believed that it alone was worthy of enjoying freedom.

Is not what is at present called freedom very often a vestige of these ancient liberties, these privileges of the ruling classes? And is not this freedom based upon the inequality of men?

However, in the eighteenth century, another idea of freedom appeared, resting on the idea of equality, the idea of freedom contained in the Rights of Man. How is this to be explained? It is explained by the very development of civilization through the progress of science and technology. This progress permitted men to foresee the outlines of a society in which there would be no need of men working for others, in which production would be great enough to satisfy the needs of all men. This is another way of saying that all men would have access to that privileged freedom which up until then only certain of them will have possessed. More precisely, freedom appears as a need of a hitherto lower class which feels itself capable of directing public affairs and protests against the abused liberties usurped by the privileged class. Thus freedom was claimed by the bourgeois class against the freedom usurped by the nobility. But instead of considering the freedom it claimed the historical product of an epoch, and a stage in the development of humanity, the eighteenth century bourgeoisie gave it a universal character. In order to claim freedom for itself the bourgeoisie made freedom a quality inherent in human nature, a right from which all men ought to profit by the sole fact that they are men. And this is the idea that you find in the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

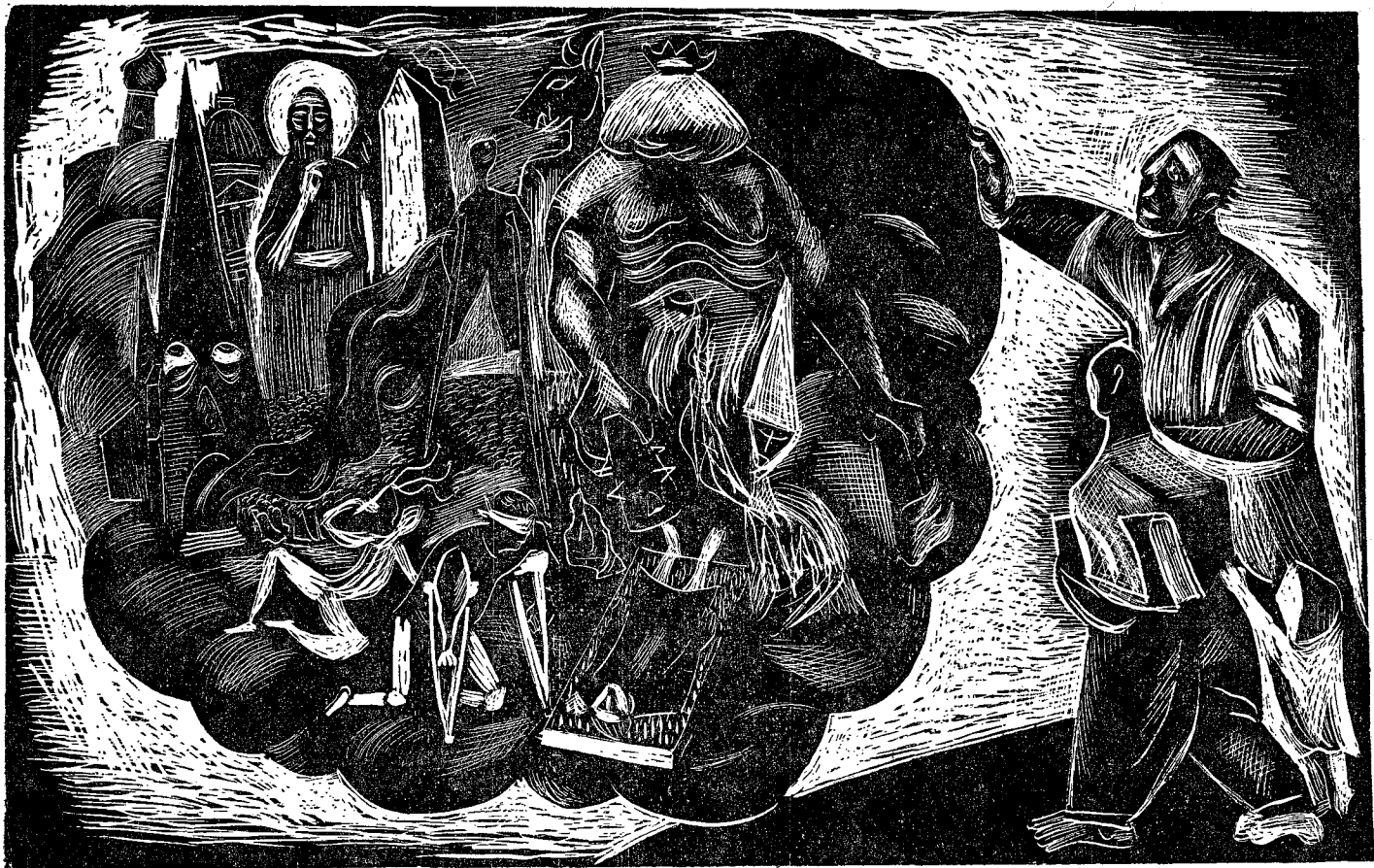
But the freedom thus affirmed has

remained for the most part abstract and, therefore, illusory. Why? Because at that moment economic and social developments were not sufficient for all men to receive real freedom. Instead of equal rights for all men, what was achieved at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth century was a greater extension of old privileges to new groups, or the establishment of new privileges for a new ruling class. In sum, one ruling class was replaced by another.

**T**HUS the bourgeoisie proclaimed that all men equally possessed a certain number of freedoms, for example freedom of trade. In reality what was this freedom of trade? It was, in theory, the right of all men to trade freely upon an equal footing with all other men. But actually, it is not that. It is freedom for those who find they have sufficient money to trade and to continue trading; that is to say, freedom for those who possess certain privileges in the first place and use these privileges in order to maintain them.

The same is true of the right to property. What is the right to property according to the conception in the Rights of Man? It is the right of everybody to own something. But what in fact has this right become and who has achieved it? The right of property as it exists under our bourgeois legal system is the right of the owner to keep his property no matter how far-reaching or how abusive the right is, and to deny others all possibility of ownership. For, if one admits the real right to own, it means freedom for each individual not only to keep the fruits of his labor but to have the means of working without being exploited by others.

Does this mean that the idea of real social freedom is solely theoretical and must always remain on paper? Not at all. It can only be realized, however, through a growth in the material power of men. The more men succeed in producing to satisfy their needs, the more they succeed in producing by working less themselves and using natural forces to greater advantage. In other words, the more mechanization is substituted for human effort the more there is the possibility of liberation for all men. And this, as I have said, depends on an understanding of the social laws which complement an understanding of the laws of nature. For it serves no pur-



Irving Amen.

pose to increase the production of wealth if disorganized production only gives rise to economic crises, social disorders and international wars, endured by men as unavoidable catastrophes which they do not know how to avoid.

It is certain, for example, that a man who works seven hours a day and amply earns his living that way can be considered more free than a man who is forced to work twelve hours to achieve the same results. And it is certain that if one can conceive a system in which no man works more than seven hours a day there will be an advance in freedom for all men. Thus a regime in which no one works more than seven hours a day increases the general freedom by extending it equally to all. But because the increase in freedom for everyone is represented by a decrease in freedom for those who up to now did nothing and who in the future will work seven hours a day, it is easily considered by the latter to be a scandalous attack upon their personal liberty.

That is why the liberty which the Marxists conceive is opposed to what a great number of people call liberalism. There is, indeed, a doctrine called liberalism which aims above all at con-

serving certain privileges founded upon class inequality. Hence this liberalism is opposed to genuine progress toward general freedom. And so it is that in the name of an unjust liberty we find at every turn protests against advances which, in reality, are in the direction of universal and just liberty. We have some rather timely examples. At this very moment, in several countries in Eastern Europe, the great landed properties are being divided among the poor peasants and the agricultural workers. That guarantees the right of each to possess the means of making a living for his family. It is a just extension of the right of all to property. But the landlords cry "persecution" and consider that their "right of property" is outrageously violated.

**T**HERE are other difficulties and ambiguities in the conception of freedom. They arise from the concept that "freedom consists of the power to do anything that does not hurt others." But it is not always easy to take into account what injures and what does not injure others. It is much easier to think about one's own liberty than to think about the liberty of others. That is true not only when it is a question

of a freedom like freedom of property or freedom of trade, but also when it is a question of other freedoms such as freedom of conscience. But in every case, the only legitimate freedom rests upon the equality of persons, while very often the freedoms we claim for ourselves presuppose privileges.

What does freedom of conscience mean? It means freedom for each to think as he wishes and to express what he thinks. But, in fact, freedom of conscience is usually invoked in a slightly different manner. Freedom of conscience is invoked in a general way by the followers of one religion or another; they mean freedom for themselves to hold certain beliefs and to propagandize publicly for these beliefs. Very well! But that ought to presuppose an equal freedom for non-believers. And that is much more difficult to get. If many believers were prevented from practicing their religion they could justly consider that an attack upon freedom of conscience. Yet these same people do not consider attacks on materialist beliefs as violations of freedom of conscience. In fact they consider the existence of materialist beliefs as contrary to freedom of conscience. They are incapable of respect-



ing the opinions of others as they demand that others respect theirs. But this one-way freedom of conscience is improper and unacceptable.

**W**HEN will we achieve real freedom? It can only come about gradually; it cannot come immediately, or in one fell swoop. Real freedom will only come in a classless society. A society without classes is being created; it is already on the road to realization in certain parts of the world. It is being built little by little, in proportion to the progress of science, in proportion as the power of man over nature progresses. And only a classless society can permit a freedom really worthy of the name, that is to say, a

freedom broad enough to include all humanity.

But this freedom among equals can not be achieved without certain victims. Some will see a lessening in what they call their freedom but which in reality is the freedom of privilege based upon inequality. There is no point in ignoring this. That is why when classes are abolished in capitalist countries certain people will see their privileges eliminated. This will not be "suppression of freedom" but an increase in the share of liberty of the great majority of people who have hitherto been deprived of it.

This, therefore, is the way Marxism approaches the theory of freedom. It is, to use a word in vogue, a dynamic

approach. For Marxists freedom is not a fixed or metaphysical reality. Freedom is not an immutable quality inherent in human nature. Freedom was not won without struggle against those who were not at all eager to share it with others. We have come into that epoch of history where mankind can really be free because science is showing us how to overcome servitude to nature. Man is succeeding in transforming the world to his own use. And the Soviet Union is the example of man's attainment of freedom by his own creative effort. This freedom is not complete; it is ever-expanding. Its guiding philosophy, Marxism, shows the way not only for the Soviet Union but for the whole of humanity.

## **AGAIN—THE BOOK BURNERS**

**An Editorial by CHARLES HUMBOLDT**

**I**N AN editorial entitled "Gorilla in the Library," published in *NEW MASSES* on Sept. 10, 1946, Joseph North wrote, "The dominant class in all capitalist and feudal society has conjured up 'morality' as a peg on which to hang political campaigns." He was referring to the Hearst "clean book" crusade, which he identified as a deliberate fascist tactic and preparatory step toward the silencing of free expression in the United States.

On Thursday, November 28, two judges of the Special Sessions Court of New York, affirming charges brought by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, held Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* to be obscene and fined its publisher, Doubleday & Co., \$500 on each of two counts of publishing and selling the book. A third judge, Nathan D. Perlman, submitted a dissenting opinion in which he cited Judges Learned Hand's and John M. Woolsey's acquittal of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. From now on, until and unless the decision is reversed in a higher court, anyone found selling the book can be sentenced to one year's imprisonment.

I am not unaware of the irony of this action. Earlier this year, I reviewed Wilson's book [*NM*, May 7], saying that his provocateur's philosophy could only have the effect of dividing the intellectual from the working class and the progressive elements in society. I shall go further to say that *Hecate County* is an ugly and corrupt book which we would not lift a finger to see published. It echoes, in refined tones, the Red-baiting lies of the yellow press, just as it parallels, in its own elegant fashion, the scandal pages of Hearst's *American Weekly*. One might be tempted, therefore, to find it amusing that Mr. Wilson's friends do not recognize him, and that the apes of Hearst howl for the author to be put behind bars too. But to find it so would be to forget Mr. North's warning, to ignore the larger context within which the decision falls.

We have often seen how reaction wears the hypocritical disguises of piety and elaborate concern for the family and education to cover up its cynical disregard for all human feelings and values. Thus the Catholic hierarchy defends child labor by citing the sanctity of the home: the parent has a sacred right to turn his young sons and daughters into instruments of production. The most obscene press in the world, surviving brother of the defunct Streicher's *Der Stürmer*, becomes the defender of public virtue and taste, which is supposedly being undermined by Communists and liberals alike. (The *Journal-American* has recently entered the field of art, to engage in buffoonery against the work of leading American painters, represented in the State Department's cultural exchange show.) The sanctimonious Clare Luce, by an apt use of dots and dashes, accuses Marx and the Communists of advocating the destruction of the very family ties which Marx describes as being torn asunder by the action of modern industry. And the Legion of Decency justifies its attacks on anti-fascist films by pleading Christian forbearance toward one's enemies.

It is not hard to see where all this is leading—to the most elaborate array of bigot bell and book, fire and brimstone, cap and gown, hood and mitre, quill and nightstick, for the propagation of faith in capitalism and the establishment of human bondage as the will of God. As the crisis of capitalism grows more acute, and as people lose their belief in its everlastingness, as they come nearer to realizing it as the source of their suffering, the capitalists redouble their efforts to keep them in ignorance, turn them backward, pervert and vulgarize their standards and constrict their cultural outlook. Men must not only be made to think their interests lie where their oppression is planned; they must be persuaded to accept their oppression as a good. The honest writer, because he pursues reality and reveals, if only by implication, the decay of the existing social order, is willy-