

# The Marxist Theory of the State

*THE THEORY OF CAPITALIST SOCIETY. By Paul Sweezy. New York: Oxford University Press. 1942. 378 pp., notes and index. \$4.*

Reviewed by CARL FRIEDRICH

**M**R. SWEZEY'S book is a very competent statement of the basic position of Marx as developed by Lenin and other orthodox revolutionary Marxists. It is comprehensive and impersonal, yet pointed and uncompromising. It deals, parenthetically, with a good deal of the literature that has accumulated over the years, either criticizing or reinterpreting Marx's position. To do this, is a courageous thing for any member of an American university faculty, even if the university be Harvard. It will no doubt be seized upon by those who wish to prove that Harvard is a hotbed of radicalism, just as writings of the opposite tenor are taken to prove that the faculty is a body of reactionaries. (As a matter of statistical fact it may interest these viewers-with-alarm that the voting corresponds closely to that of the nation at large, as might be expected from so large a sample of the American people.) But while it proves little concerning the faculty except its tolerance—for the author has long been known for his Marxism among us—it does show conclusively that Sweezy is a Marxist through and through.

This book is unquestionably a fine achievement of an orderly and trenchant, if perhaps a bit unoriginal, mind. Sweezy succeeds in reducing the masses and mazes of argument and discussion on Marxist economics, sociology, and political science to a comprehensible pattern. Besides he sets forth the ideas in readable English. All this is a notable achievement of the academic mind. But it confronts the reviewer with a difficult dilemma. He might, of course, use the book as a point of departure for a discussion of Marxism and show why it is a false, erroneous doctrine. An impossible job in a book review. Or, on the other hand, if he be a Marxist of another school, quarrel with the author about his interpretation of Marx and Marxism. Certainly many a graduate or revisionist may feel the call to do so. But that, too, would seem a rather lengthy assignment. Or finally one might pick on various points of detail, thereby conveying a somewhat misleading impression of the book.

Choosing the last of these alternatives, I shall concentrate upon one main pillar of Sweezy's structure, his discussion of the "state." My excuse: the Marxist theory of government is

the central weakness of Marxism. It is not too much to say that Marx was blindspotted in regard to the state. His Prussian antecedents, reinforced by British environment, provided him with that curious mixture of cynicism and idealism concerning government which has always been so striking a part of the political tradition in both Germany and Britain. In Germany it is represented by the Prussian, in Britain by the Tory imperialist. Both these minorities find their most ambitious expression in Hegel's political philosophy—the philosophy of "success with a halo." This tradition is cynical in believing that the "state" as the organization of the successful is the embodiment of supreme value, and it is idealist in believing such a supreme value to be realizable. Marx adopted and "reinterpreted" these two positions by asserting that the supreme value is economic power, the control of the means of production, and then splitting history into two halves. In the first half, up till now, the state as the organization of the successful was the executive committee of the dominant capitalist class, while in the second half, yet to come, the state "withers away" as economic power becomes collective.

This confused and unrealistic doctrine is repeated by Sweezy without any attempt at evaluating the reality of the Soviet Union where the governmental organization, far from withering away, has become more and more totalitarian and all-inclusive; the large body of writing concerned with this problem is passed over in silence. In order to buttress the Marxian position, Sweezy sets forth as the "liberal" theory of government what he calls a "class-mediation" theory of the state. According to him, this theory alleges that the state is established "in the

interests of society as a whole for the purpose of mediating and reconciling the antagonisms" between class and class. This he thinks an unsound approach because it assumes that "the underlying class structure is an immutable datum." This so-called "liberal" theory is a straw man. Some "liberal" theories make such assumptions, but many other theories of government do not. Indeed, it has been the characteristic of some more recent theorists to question the utility of the state concept altogether. For this concept of the state was a semantic weapon in the hands of the rising monarchical governments of Western Europe and was skillfully used by their learned propagandists against both the church and the lower orders. It is for this reason that the concept never struck root in America and in England only during the last hundred years.

It is therefore quite possible to agree with Sweezy's assertion that "we must ask: how did a particular class structure come into being . . . ?" and yet entirely disagree with his further assertion that "any particular state is the child of the class or classes in society which benefit from the set of property relations which it is the state's obligation to enforce." For the teaser in these propositions is the unproven major premise that "a given set of property relations serves to define and demarcate the class structure of society." But even were this assumption granted, it would still in no wise follow that "the state" had or felt any obligation to enforce a particular set of property relations. The history of government is a much less simple matter. The notion, so typical of nineteenth century Prussia and England, that there is always one and only one government in each given place or society is so often contrary to the actual facts that it might almost be considered a marginal case. Over long stretches of time different classes entrench themselves in different rival governments or in different parts of a government which is one in appearance only. At other times, those engaged in government are in no sense a class, but a conquering tribe or a militant religious group or just a plain gang engaged in getting what they can out of all the classes of a subjugated society. In his interesting summary of Marx's writing on the length of the working day as an illustration of how the state may be an economic instrument, Sweezy like most Marxists gives striking illustrations of how the "state," that is to say some part of the apparatus by which a society is governed, may be used to alter the existing system of property relations.

It would be interesting to discuss how these basic distortions work out



Paul Sweezy

in Sweezy's discussion of monopoly, world economics, and imperialism. There is here, as in all Marxist writing, much challenge and hence food for thought. It is certainly amusing to trace how a writer of Sweezy's ability, once having donned the red glasses of Marx's static class concept, sees everything in red without ever suspecting the glasses. It is particularly striking in the analysis of fascism. A good many Marxists have been troubled by this phenomenon. After all, it was not clearly foreseen by Marx, though in commenting on the dictatorship of the third Napoleon he said some important and prophetic things. But Sweezy is not troubled. To him, fascism is simply a form of imperialism. He quotes Lenin with approval as having anticipated the psychology which "fosters and encourages the growth of a fascist movement," although as a matter of fact Lenin, in the sentences quoted by Sweezy, displays the typical Marxist underestimate of the bourgeois, for he writes that "the small proprietor . . . becomes extremely revolutionary, but is incapable of displaying perseverance, ability to organize, discipline, and firmness." Would that this had been so; unfortunately the history of fascism proves exactly the opposite. Sweezy proceeds to treat fascism as a rear guard action of declining capitalism, and having done so finds, of course, that fascism cannot "eliminate the contradictions of capitalism." Yet fascism is not inevitable. It "arises only out of a situation in which the structure of capitalism has been severely injured and yet not overthrown. . . . So far as history allows us to judge a prolonged and 'unsuccessful' war is the only social phenomenon sufficiently catastrophic in its effect to get in train this particular chain of events" which leads to fascism. He is undoubtedly right in his conclusion, but I doubt whether the reasons he gives are adequate. Here as everywhere, in Marxist fashion, Sweezy emphasizes the economic aspects of the situation to the almost complete neglect of all others. No doubt the economic factors are of very great importance, but there are other social, religious, technological, and more especially political factors involved.

In a concluding chapter Sweezy sketches the prospects of world capitalism. Briefly put, he considers them poor. If you accept his basic premises, you will be forced to agree with him. It is the advantage of any dichotomy that it allows of only two alternatives. Having posited the choice of either capitalism or socialism, Sweezy finds it easy to prove the good prospects of socialism by showing how poor are the prospects of capitalism. Automatical-

ly, and without further proof, the prospects of socialism become good. But suppose the prospects of socialism also are poor? Suppose the dichotomy of capitalism-socialism is arbitrary and hypothetical? Obviously then our views of the future will become less dogmatically certain. It may even be conceivable that Marxism, far from being very radical, assumes a rather staid and mid-Victorian countenance. Karl Marx and his conspiratorial gatherings of the First International may appear just as much a part of an age definitely past and gone as the world exhibitions of St. Louis and Paris. They were both built on the unquestioned

belief in material progress. That child-like faith is vanishing fast in the twentieth century. Fascism is a last desperate reaching out for the millenium, the "new order," pre-planned to last a thousand years. But in the forces united to put down this madness there is evidence of a new spirit. The West is becoming mature. That's why Britain, Russia, and America can combine and follow China. No wild enthusiasm for a dawning millenium—a tempered sense of the good life: I am afraid there is little sign that Dr. Sweezy has come to grips with the real forces that are molding the future outside of the economic realm.

## Mental Calisthenics

### MATHEMATICAL RECREATIONS.

By Maurice Kraitchik. New York: W. W. Norton. 1942. 328 pp. and index. \$3.75.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

GOETHE once remarked, in "Dichtung und Wahrheit," that Formal Logic was a pretentious statement of intellectual arrangements without which any human being would be put into an asylum or a cemetery at an age before he had an opportunity to meet a professor of philosophy. Still, there is such a thing as Mental Calisthenics—pugilists find it advisable to skip ropes or lie on their backs and kick their heels in the air without any object of their professional mayhem in the remote vicinity. The various exercises and exertions of abstract mathematics possibly furnish similar hygiene and development for the little gray cells, to borrow from Hercule Poirot.

Professor Kraitchik has assembled here a generous collection of the mathematical quirks and strip-teases that have occurred to three thousand years of poker-players in mortar-boards. Apart from the problems that definitely have to do with probabilities, as in the sections on poker, chess, and dice, there are very interesting historical implications in the book—the "ancient problems" which most high school freshmen can solve now by the employment of those revealing characters "a," "b," "y" and "x," for example. Some of these are from Chuquet, who had probably fudged a little from the new science of Algebra—Al Ghebr—invented within the century by the superb but decaying Mohammedans in neighboring Spain. The problems from Clavius, who was writing at the same time as Shakespeare, are of the same nature and suggest that the spread of algebraic knowledge in Europe was not very extensive between Isabella and Elizabeth: say, a trifle over a century.

Professor Kraitchik puts this down as historical matter; one can find enough occupation in the permutational probabilities of chess, dominoes, or any of the standard games of chance to fill one's leisure for a decade or so.

The book is written by a former Professor of Mathematics at the University of Brussels, now with the New School for Social Research in New York. The simple and sincere thanks he gives to his country of refuge in his preface are worth reading, whether one knows a modulo from a Heronian parallelogram or not, or wants to bother to find out.

### ANSWERS TO LITERARY QUIZ

1. In "The Gloria Scott Case," by Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes deciphered this message by reading every third word.
2. "Patterns," by Amy Lowell.
3. From Maria, wife of Don Luis, to Denis Moore, in "Anthony Adverse," by Hervey Allen.
4. One of "The Love Letters of Smith," by H. C. Bunner.
5. From Max Eisenstein of San Francisco to Martin Schulse of Munich, in "Address Unknown," by Kressman Taylor.
6. "The Letter," by Somerset Maugham.
7. From the Interurban Express Company to Mike Flannery, in "Pigs Is Pigs," by Ellis Parker Butler.
8. In "The Three Musketeers," by Dumas, the musketeers took this letter from Charlotte de Winter and executed her on the strength of it.
9. From Marjorie Jones to Penrod Schofield, in "Penrod," by Booth Tarkington.
10. The handwriting on the wall interpreted by Daniel for Belshazzar, in Daniel. 5.