

# COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

## MR. PARKES ON MARXISM.

The finding of a reviewer for books by *Scrutiny* collaborators, especially when, as in the case of Mr. H. B. Parkes's *Marxism: a Post-mortem*, a part of the given book has appeared in these pages, sometimes faces the Editors with a problem of some delicacy. We are anxious that the critical rigour of the review shall be patent beyond all possible suggestion of partiality in the approach. Mr. Parkes's book is reviewed below by a Marxist. But Mr. Hill knows that we think much more highly of Mr. Parkes's work than he does ; and, if the hazards of communication across the Atlantic do not frustrate us all, Mr. Parkes will have an opportunity for a reply.

*MARXISM: A POST-MORTEM*, by Henry Bamford Parkes  
(Allen and Unwin, 7/6).

' Human nature is basically everywhere the same ' (p. 164); ' All history . . . proves that power corrupts ' (p. 22); ' Members of the capitalist class exercise the functions of organization and management, they take risks in the new industrial enterprises, and —by abstaining from spending all their incomes—they provide savings for industrial expansion ' (p. 93); ' The only values which can be justified in terms of a consistent materialism are wealth, pleasure and power ' (p. 205); ' There is one phenomenon for which Marxism offers no explanation: the behaviour of Marxists ' (p. 143). Those familiar with this type of literature will meet with many old friends: for Dr. Parkes's book is distinguished by a wide eclecticism rather than by originality or penetration.

His aim is to dispose definitely of a philosophy that has been an unconscionable time dying. But his treatment seems to the present reviewer to contain many serious confusions. First, the economic foundation of Marx's thought—not discussed until after p. 80—is so incorrectly stated that Dr. Parkes's refutation loses some of its point. For Marx the determining factor in any state of society was ' the ownership of the means of production.' Dr. Parkes seems to have met this phrase, but its meaning eludes him; and he argues

repeatedly as though 'Marxists judge development by the standard of economic productivity' (p. 188). 'As the economic system becomes more productive, the social structure and the prevalent ideology must change also' (p. 167)—here the passage from Engels which Dr. Parkes quotes reveals his misapprehension). 'Inequalities of distribution cause struggles between the different classes' (p. 69). This makes nonsense of all Marx's economics, for quarrels about *distribution*—as Dr. Parkes painstakingly but irrelevantly shows—might continue in the early stages of a socialist society, and the best ratio of distribution is open to dispute on subjective grounds. But Marx advocated a transition to a society in which, because the means of production were communally owned, both production and distribution could be planned. Dr. Parkes's misunderstanding leads him on to knock down a number of Aunt Sallies of his own elevation, and finally to conclude: 'A low level of economic productivity may (as in the Italy of the Renaissance) be associated with a high cultural achievement' (p. 162). He would be a bold Marxist indeed who would deny that platitude; but a Marxist would not be interested in the productive level of society as a whole so much as in the class ownership of the means of production.

Students of Marxism will recognise the gravity of this fundamental confusion. Equally irrelevant, unfortunately, is Dr. Parkes's refutation of the Marxist theory of the 'withering away of the state.' He ignores the very precise Marxist definition of the state ('It is absurd to speak of the democratic state as an instrument of bourgeois dictatorship'—(p. 61) and proves that the disappearance of the state (in Dr. Parkes's sense of that elastic word) is not 'even theoretically conceivable' (p. 23; cf. pp. 56, 60-61). A hundred pages later Dr. Parkes conceives the impossible; the state can wither away when the details of life are 'determined by habit, not by discussion, argument and coercion by the majority party,' p. 125. The last three methods are not identical; and if we rewrite the sentence to read 'by habit, discussion and argument, and not by coercion,' we have a tolerable representation of what Lenin said in a work referred to elsewhere by Dr. Parkes.

By a similar sleight of hand Dr. Parkes uses the phrase 'coup d'état' where Marx speaks of 'revolution,' and so is able to descant on the superior virtues of constitutionalism. But by

definition Marx conceived of revolution as the antithesis of a coup d'état, and of a revolutionary situation as one in which constitutionalism has broken down. The class theory of politics is wished away altogether: 'When . . . an industry is in a state of depression, it is frequently necessary that its workers should agree to lower wages' (p. 80). That word 'necessary' begs the question Marx made it his life's task to raise.

These confusions come from Dr. Parkes's own mind and method, and are a little hard on the victim. However much they disagreed as to his success or failure, most people would agree that one of the most permanently valuable of Marx's experiments was his attempt to introduce a scientifically precise terminology and to expel loose words with content primarily emotive. The critics of Marxism usually either accept his terminology or reject it altogether for stated reasons. Not so Dr. Parkes. He not only uses Marx's strict terms with a laxity that intentionally or unintentionally creates confusion: he does not seem to be aware that these words have a precise meaning. He is worse than dishonest: he is obtuse.

Dr. Parkes's statements have the kind of amiable intangibility that most infuriated Marx, and which makes it difficult indeed to know whether one agrees with him or not. 'Only a free society can achieve economic progress' (p. 206). 'Only a free society can achieve cultural and intellectual development' (p. 207). All no doubt true: but can any precise meaning be attached to the word 'Freedom'? Dr. Parkes defines it as 'the right of the individual to do what he chooses' (pp. 113-114). Such freedom clearly never has existed anywhen, and we shall shortly see that Dr. Parkes is certainly not prepared to allow it to bad men. 'The humanistic ideal,' he rather more cautiously observes, 'cannot be deduced by processes of reasoning from any philosophy; it is a fundamental datum of the human consciousness' (p. 204). 'Moral intuitions are prior to philosophical rationalization' (p. 205). Some call it thinking with the blood. This is the antithesis of argument. Dr. Parkes makes his emotional noises and when I dissent he says his noises are prior to philosophical rationalizations. We can get nowhere on that level.

But the looseness of phrase and thought supplies Dr. Parkes with his most dangerous weapon, a logical Morton's fork. 'The argument of this book . . . is that Stalinism is the logical and

necessary consequence of Marxist and Leninist theory,' he announces clearly on p. 50. Marx, however, 'never became a genuine Marxist' (p. 196) 'Lenin's Marxism was often more verbal than real' (p. 14). The popular front policy adopted by the Communist International in 1935 was 'a complete abandonment of all those doctrines which had characterised Communism since its origin' (p. 41). The reader may be a little bewildered but the point clearly emerges that the Marxists are equally reprehensible whether adhering slavishly to dead dogma or absorbing it with 'cynical opportunism.' (pp. 34, 184).

Dr. Parkes makes use of a blanket concept 'Marxists' which may or may not include Marx but certainly covers something much wider than most Marxists would accept. The Second and Third Internationals are used impartially to illustrate the follies and failures of 'the Marxists,' those these two bodies have never been distinguished for their ideological agreement. (Similarly the British Strike of 1926 demonstrates the ineffectiveness of revolutionary methods!—p. 60). To these 'Marxists' some surprising views are attributed, such as 'Their insistence that all aesthetic and intellectual creations are mechanistically determined by the economic and social system' (p. 170). 'According to the canons of Marxist criticism, art can have no permanent value . . . It would appear to follow that there is no reason why Communists should read either 'Dante or Shakespeare,—Marx's two favourite poets (p. 173). This is either deliberate misrepresentation or mere ignorance of the considerable body of Marxist criticism in existence, not only in Russia: either is culpable. To talk about 'what would appear to follow,' when there is a mass of detailed evidence, is not untypical of Dr. Parkes's lack of respect for scientific method.

Usually the views of 'Marxists' are not supported by *pièces justificatives*: the reader appreciates the prudence of this on the occasions when references are given. Thus the startling statement, 'They argue that Newton's cosmology was a reflection of seventeenth-century absolutism and Darwin's revolutionary theory of nineteenth-century bourgeois competition (p. 171), can certainly not be justified by the reference to Hessen's study of Newton, and even if it could he is not a plural entity. Later on the same page the implication that Engels argued 'that when society changes the laws of nature also change' is refuted by the extract quoted. More

often the misrepresentation is less easy to detect because of the impression of Dr. Parkes's references to these unspecified 'Marxists.' 'Have they stopped beating their wives?' he thunders; and how are we to know they are not bachelors?

This confusion was peculiarly Mr. Parkes's own. A further source of muddle, which he shares with a multitude of well-meaning moralists, may be summed up as the theory that the idea of a cake is better than half a loaf. Mr. Parkes again has two prongs to his fork. One is called 'liberalism,' and covers everything in the civilization of the last century and a half of which he approves. The other is called 'capitalism,' which stands for everything in that civilization of which he disapproves. 'The principles of the system' 'must not be confused with the practices of capitalism' (p. 124). That was Marx's mistake. Mr. Parkes, on the other hand, looks back to an 18th century golden age which has somehow gone wrong through 'an astonishing misinterpretation of the details of John Locke and Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson' (p. 200). He argues and few will deny it that if the purest ideals of 'liberalism' could all be realized without all the accidental accompanying beastliness of 'capitalism,' how nice that would be. On the other hand he stresses the ugly realism of Marxism, its analysis of capitalism, and its attempt to discover scientifically what practical steps are to be taken to get out of the mess which (Marx believed) liberal illusionists helped to reconcile the world to. 'The remedy,' Dr. Parkes observes severely, '... is to reform the practice, not to abandon the principles' (p. 130). 'An examination of how liberal democracy has attempted to reconcile individual freedom with the need for order and for co-operation will show that the problem is not insoluble (p. 115); an examination of how mediæval alchemy attempted to turn iron into gold will also no doubt show that that problem is not insoluble either.

Dr. Parkes's 'liberalism' is not only non-existent, it is not even capable of existence; for it is self-contradictory. On the one hand, 'once a government begins to interfere with the mechanisms of the free market and with the flexibility of prices and earnings, it finds itself inexorably compelled to increase its control of the economic system.' And then that most terrifying of all spectres, bureaucracy, rears its ugly head (p. 147). On the other hand, in Dr. Parkes's Utopia, while 'the right of the individual to do what

he chooses ' (p. 113-114) is preserved, ' economic rewards must be more closely co-ordinated with social services, so that only those persons can achieve personal wealth who have genuinely increased the wealth of the community ' (p. 120). How that is to be done without interfering with the mechanisms of the free market,' Dr. Parkes prudently refrains from even asking; this cake remains on the table whilst he is enjoying its taste. Dr. Parkes then uses this abstract ' liberalism ' as a measuring rod to test the practice of what claims to be the most practical of all philosophies. Heads he wins, tails the Marxists lose.

His illustrations are illuminating. ' Men enjoy more freedom when the state restricts the power of the strong to oppress the weak ' (p. 115) (which in this never never land it very cleverly does without interfering with ' the mechanisms of the free market '); but what Marx aimed at was to create the conditions for a society in which there should be no strong to oppress the weak. Whether Dr. Parkes's naïveté is assumed or not is difficult to determine. ' The purpose for which new industries are developed is the production of more consumer's goods ' he states as a self-evident fact in the middle of a discussion of Marx's economic theory (p. 103). ' Capitalism causes war only when it abandons the free market ' (p. 140). Tariffs, like Topsy, just ' grow ' (p. 141). Yet Dr. Parkes claims to have read *Das Kapital* and Lenin's *Imperialism*. The complaint is not that he disagrees with and disapproves of what he is criticising, but that he never seems to have grasped its point at all. He discusses the materialist conception of history, and yet is content to write, " All historical experience shows that the fall of autocracy is followed immediately by the establishment of political freedom and representative government ' (p. 63). Yet Dr. Parkes accuses the Marxists of over-simplified generalization and fatalism and neglect of the human factor in historical causation. Again he criticises the labour theory of value, yet writes, ' The most socially useful labour is (or under desirable social conditions ought to be) the labour which produces the largest profits.' (p. 91). The bracket contains a very Parkesian slide from the real to the rational, but either version would seem to a Marxist (on the kindest interpretation) to misuse the word ' profits.'

Space forbids further illustration of Dr. Parkes's methods. But it is worth recording one or two of his positive contributions to

human thought, for they are as valuable as his destructive criticisms. 'Modern society is not divided merely into two classes—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat' (p. 64). 'Paradoxical as it may appear,' he perceives, 'the purpose of all Marx's career was to abolish the proletariat' (p. 196). The only basis for a permanent civilization is that men should put back into the earth as much as they take out of it' (p. 188). 'Communism was classical but Fascism was a romanticist nightmare' (p. 32). 'Marxism . . . should properly be regarded as a Christian heresy' (p. 205), a use of the word 'properly' which should interest future lexicographers. 'Domination over others or interference with the rights of others, is always pathological' (p. 203). Finally two sentences, each a necessary part of the chain of destructive arguments in which it occurs, between which the reader may take his choice:—'Unskilled labour . . . does not easily acquire the sense of unity and the tradition necessary to a vigorous trade unionism' (p. 67): 'Industrial unions representing unskilled labour are usually more honest and militant than the craft unions of the labour aristocracy' (p. 80).

In short, this book is not what it claims to be, a scientific and definitive summing up of Marxism. Dr. Parkes has read discursively in the secondary literature about Marxism, but never mentions 'The German Ideology' or 'Materialism and Empirio-Criticism,' to give only the most obvious examples. Dr. Parkes selects targets where he finds them without attempting to assess relative significances. When he cannot find a target he constructs it. The book has a superficial attractiveness due to its pleasant and clear style, but this only reveals the commonplaceness of the thought. Here the author suffers by his very virtues. Dr. Borkenau, for example, from whom Dr. Parkes takes many of his ideas, does this sort of thing far more effectively, for at least his style does not lend itself to immediate comprehension. Dr. Parkes sets against Marx's attempt at a scientific analysis of society all the common prejudices and 'moral intuitions' of the average university educated man of secure position, but never attempts to discover whether these intuitional truths are mutually compatible. The 'nationality' of Marxism, Dr. Parkes finds, 'is not of a kind which commends itself immediately to the disinterested intellect' (pp. 155-6). And the really perplexing problem, for him, is, 'What motive caused such men

as Marx and Lenin themselves to abandon comfort and respectability and to choose poverty and obscurity in exile?' (p. 193). Dr. Parkes has not said the last word on Marxism, but Marx himself long ago made many relevant remarks about 'Kathedersozialisten.'

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## A SCIENTIST ON PROPAGANDA

*POLITICAL PROPAGANDA*, by F. C. Bartlett (Cambridge University Press, 3/6).

Professor Ernest Barker's new series of books on Current Problems opens with the excellent choice of a scrupulously scientific thinker to write on a topic that too often falls to the verbal magicians among sociologists—those whose impressive orotundities are no less a technique of mass hypnotism merely for being aimed at highly intellectualised élites. In contrast to such writers Professor Bartlett brings true scientific scepticism to his problems. He is especially sceptical of sweeping intellectual generalisations and all-inclusive themes. In their place he offers his characteristic combination of painstaking attention to familiar facts together with unexpected subtlety in the analysis of some of them. On the difference between education and propaganda, for instance, he takes up a commonsense standpoint which leads to no radical formulation, but which is at least unpretentious and will not impede other writers. Immediately after this, however, he offers, still in the simplest possible words, a basic fact which is of the utmost practical and scientific importance:

'It is one of the curious things about human society that, where potentialities of division are very numerous, the possibility of serious splitting may be at a minimum, but where possible lines of division are few, the group may be in serious danger of radical deterioration. For when potentialities of division are numerous, if a split occurs it is likely to affect individuals or small groups of individuals only, leaving the general society not much upset. But where there are one or two simple lines of possible cleavage, any actual division works disaster to the whole group.'