Discussion:

Towards Scientific Humanist Socialism

ALTHOUGH — or perhaps because — I am a professional scientist, I cannot entirely agree with Robin Blackburn (ALR Apr.-May 1970) about "the debate between those seeing socialism in the humanist way and those seeing scientific socialism."

Science is concerned solely with ascertainable facts and demonstrable causal relationships, and is totally irrelevant to value judgements. A scientific approach is therefore quite indispensable when we are concerned with the best way to achieve a given end, but it can tell us absolutely nothing about whether that end is worth achieving.

Of what use is it to prove scientifically that "socialism is the form of society that resolves the contradictions of capitalist society", if most of the people of the capitalist countries retort, "Yes, but we prefer the contradictions of capitalism"? We could perhaps go on to prove that socialism will raise the living standards of the overwhelming majority of humanity, but the upholder of capitalism replies, "Maybe, but I'm too busy looking after number one to worry about other people's bad luck." So the argument could go on, until, to avoid an infinite regress, we must eventually fall back upon some such grossly unscientific but therefore unanswerable argument as "that's the way all decent people feel it ought to be." This, however, is obviously quite futile unless we can persuade our interlocutor to accept our standards of decency, and this, of course, involves a moral rather than a scientific judgement.

When Attorney-General Hughes alleges that the organisers of the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign cannot completely control all the participants, and that the Campaign is likely to lead to "actions repugnant to all decent Australians", thereby implying that he and his fellow-warmongers are in complete control of the actions of their hirelings and conscripts in Vietnam, and that the massacres, the rapes and mutilations and tortures, the laying waste of the people's homes and countryside, are being carried out with his connivance, and are not repugnant to decent Australians, we can demonstrate no scientific fallacy in his argument; we can only point out its moral implications, and hope that Australians who are "decent" by Mr. Hughes' standards are in an insignificant minority.

When External Affairs Minister McMahon threatened that the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign might lead to the same kind of tragic results as the peace demonstration by University students at Kent, Ohio, a few days earlier, he was using a scientifically valid method of discouraging some people from taking part in the Campaign. He could, of course, have equally scientifically guarded against such a tragedy by guaranteeing that armed troops and police would not be used against the Campaign. The correctness or otherwise of his choice can be judged only in moral and humanist, not scientific terms.
It has been proved scientifically that, if pollution and despoliation of the earth and its air and water continue unchecked at the present rate, our planet will be literally unfit for human habitation by about the end of this century, and the human race, along with most other higher forms of terrestrial life, will be set irrevocably on an unspeakably miserable road to rapid extinction. If, however, some business tycoon or Tory politician likes to say, "Yes, that is important, but not as important as an umpteen-billion-dollar industry," we cannot prove scientifically that he is wrong. It is, after all, neither more nor less scientific to use science for the purpose of murdering one's children for one's own enrichment (provided one can get away with it) than to use it to build a better world for one's children, but nearly everyone who is neither a business tycoon nor a Tory politician would agree that it is immoral and inhuman.

It follows from all this that, to have any social and political relevance, socialism must be both scientific and humanist: scientific in its choice of means, humanist in its choice of ends.

The supposed irreconcilable dichotomy between science and humanism, reason and emotion, knowledge and feeling, that has bedevilled much marxist thought for nearly half a century is, in fact, the product of an undialectical interpretation of Marx's theories. Robin Blackburn justifiably refers to "the marxist concept of a human nature to a great extent historically determined", but, like many people before him, argues from this as though "to a great extent" were synonymous with "entirely". Interpreted in this way, the "concept" is demonstrably false, and therefore unscientific and unmarxist.

The new-born human infant is not an undifferentiated lump of protoplasm, passively waiting like wet clay to be moulded into whatever form its environment imposes upon it, but a highly complex organism, every detail of whose structure plays a part in determining how it will react to a given environment, just as surely as its environment determines in which of innumerable possible ways it will develop. In short, no human being is formed solely by his environment nor by heredity, nor is he a chimera of environmental and hereditary factors, but the product of continuous complex dialectical interaction between the genotype and the total environment (in which, of course, social and historical factors pay a major but not an exclusive role).

The contrary view, often erroneously attributed to Marx by friend and foe alike, leads to such absurdities as the ludicrous pseudo-marxist idealised concept of capitalist society as made up of a proletariat consisting entirely of determined, class-conscious revolutionaries (forgetting that right-wing trade union bureaucrats and renegade politicians and their supporters, scabs and blacklegs, even storm-troopers, are usually of working-class origin, not to mention the late ex-house painter Adolf Schicklegruber, alias Hitler), an idiotic middle class universally incapable of original thought or determined action (forgetting that Abraham Lincoln, Lenin, and Marx himself, were middle class intellectuals), and a ruthless, monolithic bourgeoisie (forgetting that Engels, Robert Owen, and Wilberforce of anti-slavery fame, were capitalists).*

* To forestall charges of "revisionism", I must emphasise that I am not trying to refute Marx's theories on the historic roles of the classes, but only the ultra-marxist, super-proletarian view that all the characteristics of every individual are solely and completely determined by his class origin.
Without denying that accepted moral standards tend to differ between different societies, and between different classes within the same society, everyone who relies on his own observations rather than on some accepted dogma must admit that individuals vary widely even within the same class in the same society, that we all know individuals whose attitudes to some matters are quite inappropriate to their class origin and even to their epoch, while, on the other hand, there are certain basic attitudes that seem to be common at least to those generally regarded as the most advanced thinkers in every age. Every one of the world’s great religions, for instance, preaches the Golden Rule in one form or another, though they originated in different millennia and in societies in widely differing stages of development. It is also significant that identical twins nearly always show remarkable similarities in their mental and emotional attitudes, even when separated at birth and reared in quite different environments, while, on the other hand, infant anthropoid apes never develop more than a superficial resemblance to human beings, even when reared as human babies. Any social theory that fails to explain all these facts is ipso facto unscientific, and therefore unmarxist.

**BASIC HUMANISM**

**UNIVERSAL MORALITY**

It seems, then, that there is a definable “basic humanism” or “universal morality”, despite the widely different ways in which it manifests itself in different societies, different classes and different individuals. This, however, does not necessitate the adoption of any kind of idealism or supernaturalism, nor of “some ideology of supra-historical human nature”, but can be explained in purely scientific and materialist terms.

Nearly everyone nowadays knows something about Darwin’s theory of the “survival of the fittest”, but it is not always appreciated that “fitness” in the Darwinian sense has little in common with the sense in which the word is used by sportsmen and physical training instructors, or in such vernacular expressions as “you’re not fit to lick his boots”. It refers simply to the fittest to survive genetically, or, more precisely, to the possession of hereditary traits that can be passed on to the maximum number of viable offspring. The organism that lives to a healthy and contented old age and then dies peacefully with no descendants to mourn his passing, is much less “fit” in the Darwinian sense than one who lives a short but hectic life, leaving behind numerous offspring to transmit his genes to generations yet unborn. It follows that an individual prepared to risk his life for his offspring may be fitter to survive than one motivated solely by instincts of self-preservation.

Similarly, when animals band together for warmth or protection against predators, the fittest herd may be the one with most members prepared to subordinate their individual interests to the good of the herd. In this way, gregarious and altruistic instincts tend to be favoured at the expense of instincts of self-preservation, although the latter, of course, can never be completely eliminated. Every species has achieved its own equilibrium between those instincts and other traits that fit the individual for competition with others of its own species, and those which fit it for co-operation in the preservation of the species. The fossil record shows, however, that when the former become very highly developed at the expense of the latter (as in the dinosaurs of about sixty million years ago, and in the great cats and some other large animals of present and recent times)
the species is on the verge of extinction.*

Man, of course, as the most social of all animals (with the possible exception of the ants, bees and termites, whose rigid, hierarchical social structure would hardly be envied even by fascists and tories, since it provides no privileges for parasites), has the most highly developed altruistic instincts. Moreover, with increasing complexity of social organisation, his social loyalties have tended to extend from the family to the horde, to the clan, the tribe, the nation, and finally to the whole species. It is therefore no accident or miracle that what is common to all the great religions and all ethical codes that have won broad acceptance throughout the ages, is an emphasis on the sacredness of life, and of human life in particular, and on man's duty to his neighbour, on the brotherhood of man.

It is precisely this common human heritage which determines that all men tend to react similarly to similar environments, and so produces class moralities and class loyalties within the broad framework of our common heritage. On the other hand, it is precisely the fact that all men, though similar, are not identical, that has enabled natural selection to work upon the individual differences among our early ancestors to produce that common heritage which so sharply differentiates us from even our nearest relatives among the other animal's. Similarity and dissimilarity form a dialectical unity of opposites, as they do in every evolutionary process.

* This theme is developed more fully in Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, which, though proved by later research to be wrong in some details, is still probably the best available text on the subject as a whole.

In the present era, when the whole of humanity has become socially and economically interdependent, and the very success of the species is tending to exhaust and destroy the very environment that renders human life possible, our highly developed social instincts become more than ever essential to the very survival of our species.

There is therefore an objectively definable sense in which all those who, like Nixon, Gorton, Hughes, McMahon and the rest, preach and practise genocide and exploitation of man by man, and consider investments more important than human life and a human environment, are themselves human only in a physiological and biochemical sense, while socially and ecologically they have ceased to be human and become dangerous vermin, which must be destroyed or rendered harmless if humanity itself is to survive.

The views here expressed are not, of course, purely scientific, since they imply, in addition to the scientifically ascertainable facts I have adduced, the aesthetic judgement that life is more beautiful than death, the emotional judgement that humanity should live on, the moral judgement that our children and their children have a right to inherit an earth at least as rich and beautiful as that which we inherited from our fathers. Nevertheless, this is the only possible basis for a political philosophy relevant to the present epoch, and, arming ourselves with this philosophy, we shall win the world for communism, not by appeal to scientific texts, but by appeal to the common humanity and basic morality of the overwhelming majority of our fellow-men.

ARTHUR W. RUDKIN