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NO TIME TO MINCE WORDS


WITH MANY MILLIONS OF BIAFRANS about to starve, with the evil legacy of Middle Eastern colonialism nearer to flash point than solution, with the reality of civil disintegration, both in America and China, as well as the terrible poverty of large sections of the world, it would not be unreasonable to object to books on political theory, let alone polemics. Yet, such is the reality of human existence, that the more awful its visage appears, the more soluble its ideologues become. The theories of ideologues require a lesser form of verbalising called "review" or "criticism".

My opinions about facts, theories and solutions can be expressed by three quotations from Ludwig Wittgenstein:

1. "The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution" (Tractatus, 6.4321).

2. "The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem" (Tractatus 6.521).

3. "The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and life, not through a medicine invented by an individual" (Foundations of Mathematics II.6).

The late Paul Engelmann bridges the gap between these ideas and politics by saying: "the ideal strivings of human society, culminating in socialism on the one hand and nationalism on the other, must in future be acted out, not talked about". (Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a memoir, Basil Blackwell, p. 133). These attitudes are also reflected by Wolfgang Lefevre, an ideologue of the Socialist German Student Federation (SDS), who says "a movement towards radical democracy does not arrive at a consciousness of its aims at the writing desk". (Der Spiegel, No. 26,
Finally, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, the hand that signs the paper (shades of "accords"?) may hold dominion over man by a scribbled name, but has no tears to flow (Collected Poems, J. M. Dent, p. 62). This reviewer, no sentimentalist indeed, would rather see more "tears" than scribbled names or theories.

On the day that Hitler invaded Austria in 1938, Dr. Karl Popper embarked on the writing of a two volume work entitled The Open Society and its Enemies (Routledge and Kegan Paul), which attacks Plato in Volume 1, and Hegel and Marx in Volume 2. He continued writing through 1943, and the work was published in 1945. By 1962, this work had run to a fourth edition and was also printed in paperback. Most libraries of any size carry it, even in Australia. The mere fact that Maurice Cornforth's "reply" is dated 1968, more than a generation later, is significant. Had Cornforth's book appeared in 1948, its value would have been much greater. But in those far off days, communists who said anything that was not an echo of Stalin's "line" (or, worse still, pet prejudices), were faced with expulsion. One was not free to talk about "Open Philosophies". On the other hand, a great deal of what Popper says about marxists and communists is only true of stalinists of that period, and has little relevance to contemporary marxist thinking in many lands. The history of ideas, like the history of events, defies all efforts at severe simplification, if one desires to remain moderately objective and accurate.

At this point, I would like to recommend to anyone seriously interested in the problems surrounding socialism to read both books. They are eminently worth reading, not because they provide any real answers, but because they are so well written that they demonstrate the comparative irrelevance of a mere theoretical structure in relation to actual problems. Like logic, they say nothing directly about the real world, but apply to it obliquely and at times ambiguously. But they can be used as spring boards, to go forward to different, more practical ways of thought-in-action.

Both books are excellent examples of very different ways of writing on theoretical questions. Popper's is European (despite its excellent English). Here we have all the references, notes, cross-references, and in general evidence of the widely read background of the author, so necessary on the Continent. Cornforth on the other hand, employs the British "essay" style, with few notes, fewer references, and little evidence as to the cultural milieu of the protagonist and his argument. Compensating for this we have lucidity, clarity and simplicity (qualities that are worthwhile and hard to achieve) on every page.
Basically the argument turns on the question “Will marxism lead to a democratic society or an authoritarian one?” At the time when Popper wrote, he had “the facts” on his side, in the sense that the communist world was a monolithic, authoritarian regime, when viewed from the point of the average westerner. Today, however, Cornforth has “the facts” on his side, insofar as the United States, which more or less embodies the alternatives that Popper offers, is anything but the sort of desirable society his theories promise.

If one is fortunate enough to live in a country that is not in the midst of war, dominated by a foreign power, or socially disintegrating, one still has a choice of attitudes. We, living in Australia, are in such a position. In today’s world, this is a privilege, and one that not enough of our citizens make use of. Triennial voting in Federal elections is not really an adequate form of participation in the democratic process. The needs of modern society call for a more fundamental and comprehensive involvement on the part of its members. Here, both Popper and Cornforth demonstrate something important, and that is the possibility of a well thought out attitude. Nor is this due to the fact that they both have a university background. Proportionately, there are just as many muddle-headed “I’m all right Jack” types within the precincts of Academe as on the factory floor.

The really important thing about Marx was that he addressed himself not to abstruse questions concerning religion or philosophy, but to highly practical, contemporary issues. His focus was always to the existing state of affairs, what it consists of, and how it should and can be altered. When it came to the question of effecting some change Marx fully accepted the limitations and possibilities inherent in the actual state of affairs. He made every attempt to be realistic and prudent. Even so he made mistakes, aplenty, and would be the first to laugh loudly at the sort of “ex cathedra” infallibility ascribed to him by some “Marxists-Leninists”. Scepticism will always be an essential quality of any attitude that desires to be described as “scientific” (whatever that might mean today). On the other hand, the temptation to ideological idolatry, in any field of human thought, is tremendous. It is so easy. Once we are “in possession of the truth”, we need no longer think much, read much, agonise or doubt, and as all these activities are forms of work, people fight shy of them.

Two terms that are used by these authors in a fundamental way are “reason” and “science”. Both terms are loaded with emotional undertones. Everyone wants to be considered “reasonable”, and everyone wants to be either “scientific”, or at least not in open conflict with science. The deliberations of both our authors about
these terms (Popper, Volume 2, Ch. 24 and Cornforth, Part 1, Ch. 1-4) are informative and stimulating, but not conclusive. Nor is this lack of conclusiveness the authors' fault. Both "science" and "reason" are terms that grammatically hide the fact that there are, in reality, only "actions" and "objects" that can be called "rational" or "scientific". But objects and actions are never conclusive. You simply cannot conduct an experiment to end all experiments, or write a text-book to end all text-books. The continually changing reality of which we are part does not allow for conclusive, final or absolute actions or objects. However, the way in which the abstract symbols "science" and "reason" are often used, by these and other authors, could easily lead readers to suppose that these constitute some sort of ultimate, almost oracular, court of appeal, whose judgement is final.

Generally speaking, theoreticians and writers, be they left or right, belong to a small group of people whose problems are rather specific, because they enjoy a higher standard of living. The average factory worker throughout the world at present is not nearly as concerned with "freedom" as the average novelist, or pedagogue. In most capitalist countries, sickness impoverishes the worker, and the opportunities for higher education for his children are poor, while in most communist countries there is a shortage of housing, and of consumer goods. These are the sort of problems that still mainly concern the masses, and it is from them that they would like to be "free". While governments prate about their good intentions, and the "freedom" of their societies, these problems are often only tackled at a snail's pace. The race to the moon, power politics, armaments and god knows what else take precedence. All in the name of freedom. It is little wonder that so many citizens view their governments with a cynicism and scorn, which results in self-centred, short-sighted political apathy.

What very few theoreticians of either side of the left-right dividing line are prepared to face, is the tremendous interaction of contemporary capitalism and socialism. Despite all propaganda, people are well aware of many of the good and bad features of both systems. Ordinary people, quite rightly, want to know why they cannot have the best of both worlds. Nor is protest restricted to ordinary people as the world-wide unrest among students and intellectuals has shown. This interaction will continue, will grow, in scope and pace, and will modify all the ideological pretensions current around the centres of power. Communists in the west are not "subversives", and dissidents in socialist countries are not "counter-revolutionaries". Indeed, the real revolutionaries are those who are critical of establishment humbug (a profession about as old as prostitution), and wish to introduce some purposive, rational change. Marx was such a revolutionary, and one might
say that "marxist is as marxist does" (the words and the labels do not make the reality). 

Popper and Cornforth, respectively, present first class examples of traditional liberal and communist attitudes. Insofar as these two ideological positions have influenced our world in very many important and far-reaching ways, we should all be conversant with them. But this is not the case. A great many people's politics are like catechism or Sunday School religion, a primitive set of cliches, prejudices, oversimplifications, and sacred cows. Only by making a thorough study of these traditional positions can we hope to go beyond them intelligently and efficiently. These two authors give everyone an opportunity to create a dialogue within himself, to stimulate himself into more precise thought about the problems in his actual life situation. For this they deserve much praise and gratitude.

One element that neither book faces adequately, but which is a real component of the contemporary world is that of urgency. Many scientists (the new priesthood whose "imprimatur" is so often asked for) have warned that the statistical likelihood of the world avoiding a major catastrophe is small. I believe that the world situation is so critical that many people have developed a "crisis-immunity", which enables them to enjoy a completely unwarranted sense of security. Even a modest list of the present, possible risks to mankind would be formidable and frightening. Crises call for new attitudes, new approaches, new questions. Yet these cannot be culled from a vacuum. They must be developments (albeit revolutionary ones — "leaps" in fact) of traditional positions. This is the ideological task of the present. This also is the point where youth will begin to show an interest. They sense what is in store for them, and are looking for ways to equip themselves for it.

In his preface to the second edition of his book (1959) Dr. Popper writes "the fact that most of the book was written during the grave years when the outcome of the war was uncertain may help to explain why some of its criticism strikes me today as more emotional and harsher in tone than I could wish. But it was not the time to mince words — or at least, this is what I felt then." This reviewer feels that these days, when the outcome of the world crisis is in doubt, are also not days to mince words, least of all about political theory and practice. Cornforth partially acknowledges the critical and urgent state of affairs in the world. In Chapter 4 of Part 3, page 358, he says, "What is desperately urgent is to establish right away that measure of democratic control by informed working class organisations which can begin the planning of production in industrially developed countries
and offer real aid to the underdeveloped. For Australians, living in a part of the world that is largely underdeveloped, this throws out a very real challenge. Is there a political working class organisation in Australia which

1 produces a national weekly newspaper,
2 provides political schools for all sections of the community,
3 opens its meetings to any interested observer,
4 creates a wide field for personal participation through conferences, journals and policy making bodies,
5 is making strenuous efforts to reconstruct itself to suit the needs of contemporary Australia?

This is the real question confronting the thoughtful citizen. The answer to this question constitutes the vital criterion in making a personal political decision. Nor should it be forgotten that Marx defined a "worker" as anyone who has no other means of maintaining himself than to sell his capacity to labor. Today this includes a lot of high ranking and well to do people. What people really need today is an "open" socialist party, in which they can truly be themselves as well as being members of a purposeful team. By a real fusion between marxism, the democratic traditions of Australia, and the available insights into the needs of the times, the Communist Party of Australia is becoming an "open" party, and will continue to become more open, as more people avail themselves of the opportunities it affords.

The continued reprinting of Popper's book, and the publication of Cornforth's book, demonstrates that "marxism" is very much a living subject. Readers of Cornforth's book will not realise from reading it that a large body of works dealing with all aspects of marxism is published each year in the west. There are many conflicting, even contradictory, views about what "marxism" is. Today any group claiming to be "the only true" marxists, will rather quickly look ridiculous, and suffer the consequences. In fact, the enterprise of marxist orthodoxy, so religiously attempted under Stalin, is a museum piece, and not a very attractive one at that.

The contemporary marxist task and problem is the development of marxist principles to cope with new situations, and the application of these advanced ideas so as to obtain mass support. The internal and external situation of the working class has undergone such vast quantitative changes that the inevitable qualitative change has followed. Revolution, in its many forms of which violence is the least desirable, is more necessary than ever before,
but, using Regis Debray's phrase in an altered context — we need a revolution within the revolution. There are signs of this within many socialist parties. In the CPA, the 21st Congress was a revolutionary turning point. To create and maintain such a revolutionary movement requires certain things from its protagonists. Among these the following would certainly find a place:—

1 They should be conversant with as much information about ideological and historical matters as possible (after all Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky as well as many lesser revolutionaries were learned men).

2 They should constantly be involved in some form of socialist political activity (activism is the key attribute given by the masses to real socialists).

3 They should know and respect the needs, aspirations, fears and feelings of the masses — have, as it were, a continuing dialogue with them (the narrow-minded fanaticism that considers this unnecessary is the door to ineffective sectarianism).

4 They should be slow to resort to lies, violence, subversion, vituperation, factionalising, and the whole gamut of undemocratic and inhuman means that litter the political history of this and previous centuries (it is becoming harder each day to win worthwhile support with these means — as many men in and out of power are beginning to discover).

Once again, I hope that many people will read both Popper's and Cornforth's books. Whatever conclusions readers come to, it is also to be hoped that consequent to, or parallel with, reading, they will act. Action without thought is childish, thought without action is sterile. Only a growing intellectual maturity, coupled with a developing power of ethical action can be expected to produce better forms of human life. These in turn will lead to better thought-action patterns. This is the benign circle of progress, as opposed to the vicious circle of stagnation. Marx was primarily interested in helping men towards better states of life. His vision and insights are by no means used up. There is far more ahead of us than behind us. He would have been the first to acknowledge the sincerity and value of men like Popper and Cornforth. And while this is no time to mince (too many) words, it is also a time to work optimistically (or at least with a "forward looking pessimism") for the betterment of man's condition.