Things must be studied in their movement

Part three of Edward Conze's explanation of dialectical materialism.

THAT everything should be studied in its development and changing forms is the demand of the second rule of scientific method. This is a simple consequence of the first law. For we cannot form an adequate picture of things as they are unless we take notice of their continual change and development. We have an intimate understanding of a house or a road when we know how it is built, of a tree or plant when we understand its growth, of the weather if we know how it was yesterday and how it will be tomorrow. When we confine or narrow down our attention to the condition in which things are at present, we see no more than a thin vertical section or slice of their full and complete history.

It would be like judging a whole film story by one "still" photograph outside the door of the picture-house, if we judged a thing merely by what it is at the moment. It may be possible so to judge a film if it is a specially stupid one. But the events of nature and society are far less stereotyped than are many of our films, so that when we study something, we must not ignore, for example, its past, which contains the causes of its present condition. We must also not ignore the trends inherent in it which drive it beyond its present state and which are the springs of its future development.

Everything in this world is subject to perpetual change. Religious believers and idealistic philosophers, while admitting that many things change, cling to certain exceptions from this law. They cherish the belief in an immutable God and his unchanging revelation, in an immortal soul, in eternal moral commands, and in the alleged eternal truth of scientific ideas. The craving for something stable, unchanging and eternal seems to be inherent in the very make-up of our minds. We live to think that those things will not perish which we like, cherish and value highly. There is nothing, however, in the world round us to justify this belief. There is nothing final. Everything in the world once had a beginning; and there is no part of the universe that will not perish.

Development is more than a monotonous movement that for ever repeats the same results, like a metal stamp which invariably cuts the same patterns. Development is a historically changing movement which goes through continually different stages.

Scientific method and nature

THE habit of studying things in their development has transformed all branches of science during the last two centuries and has thrown floods of light on the most bewildering problems of nature. Scientific method demands that the world should be studied as a complex of processes and events and not as a complex of ready-made things. All students of nature would now regard this statement as a commonplace. We are today so much accustomed to the startling results produced by this point of view that it has become difficult to realise fully the great revolution it brought about in modern science. But just because the results themselves are so familiar, it will be easy to appreciate the part which scientific method played in obtaining them.

Everything — the universe, the stars, the earth, the organisms, mind and the elements of matter — is regarded as in development. We all know now that the world was not always the same as it is today. The heavens, credited for so long with being eternal and immutable, have revealed some of their history to us. The stars are not changeless, as our ancestors thought. They pass through different stages. They are first gaseous nebulae, continually changing their structure and shape. They then gradually condense into detached masses. Thus the stars we see are born. Once born, they are not "fixed", but are in movement. They do not remain the same, but continually lose mass or weight, which melts away in radiation. Once, when a second star came near the sun, our solar system came into being. Astronomy has found that everything has a beginning in time, an end in time and a history in between. And yet, this idea, now a commonplace, first dawned only 150 years ago.

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The same is true of the earth. The present condition of its surface is only one short stage in a long and varying history. The science of geology has explained the formation of rocks and mountain, of valleys and coal fields, by assigning to them a definite place in this history.

The evolution of animals and plants is one of the most brilliant discoveries of modern science. Until about 1800 the different species of animals and plants were supposed to be invariable, definitely patterned forever, permanent and immutable. The idea that they gradually change, merge into one another and evolve from one another revolutionised the science of living things. As a matter of course, organisms are now studied in their changing individual and generic history (embryology and palaeontology).

The problems of our mind can be understood and solved only by studying our mind's development and growth, especially the experiences of early childhood, which are so decisive for our character, for our mental make-up, equipment and behaviour. We must even trace back the history of our mind beyond the beginnings of mankind, to the mind of the animals, which is fundamentally the same and from which our mind has developed. Experiments on infusoria, rats and chimpanzees and careful observations of children now begin to furnish us with some solutions to the riddles of our mind.

Not long ago the chemical elements were supposed to be immutable and permanent. Now we begin to obtain a first glimpse of their changing history. Of the 92 elements, at least the eight elements with the highest atomic weight are not permanent. They continually transform themselves into simpler atoms and into radiation. The best known of these are uranium and radium. Chemistry is just now on the way to transform elements.

Scientific methods and the social sciences

IN the social sciences, however, the conservative mentality of the ruling classes has retarded the application of this law of scientific method. The ruling class naturally is inclined to believe and to teach that the present condition of the political and economic system is the natural state of affairs. It is naturally disinclined to contemplate a radical change of things, by which it can only lose. By applying the second law of scientific method of economics, Marx broke the spell of conservative ideas. This has been one of his biggest contributions to the scientific foundation of socialism, the real question of socialism being: how are we to control the changes in society?

Marx realised that capitalism was only one particular and transient stage in the incessant flow of historical change. This discovery was possible because Marx had a more adequate conception of capitalism than anybody before him. The view that capitalism has always existed, as the natural and only possible form of human society, is based on a wrong conception of what capital is. For illustration I take a particularly inadequate, though not uncommon, definition of capital.

Capital, according to some capitalist economists, consists of goods which are put back for future use instead of being consumed at once. Where people save, there we have capital. From the very beginning, society was divided into persons who saved a part of their income and others who consumed their entire income at once. The first are the capitalists, the others are the workers. This division always existed, and always will exist. Always the far-seeing ants in the fable will be better off than the short-sighted crickets of the same fable. That will never change. One famous professor even went so far as to declare that there is no point in abolishing capitalism, since even our animal ancestors, the apes, enjoy a capitalist economy. For, do

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the apes immediately consume everything they have? No, they store up reserves, that is to say, capital. And our professor concludes triumphantly that no society can dispense with the reserves i.e. its capital.

Explanations of this kind tend to render the unthinking more willing to submit obediently to the capitalist system, as the necessary and inevitable arrangement of things. That is why they recur again and again in bourgeois economics, in different and, recently, less obvious and more sophisticated forms.

Marx's explanation

THINGS look somewhat different when we substitute for this superficial definition the scientific definition of capital which Marx gives. Capital, according to Marx, is wealth used to produced more wealth by the exploitation of "free" wage workers with the aim of making profits for the capitalist. The "free" wage worker who is indispensable for capitalism is defined by Marx as a person who sells his only property, his capacity to work, to an owner of the means of production. By this means the owner is able to obtain surplus value.

The nature of capitalism is seen when we apply the first and second laws of scientific thinking, viz, "think of things in their interrelations with other things," and "think of everything in its movement and development, for everything changes." Capitalism as it actually is, is obviously a transient stage in the history of mankind. In some countries — in Italy, France, England and Germany — it began slowly to grow about the year 1400 AD. It reached a certain maturity only about the year 1800. For a long time capitalism was confined to some few countries of Western Europe. It is easy to imagine that a system of production which, in the long history of mankind, has held sway for a mere 150 years and on only a small part of the globe, may conceivably disappear again. Further investigations have shown that trends within capitalism itself will probably one day destroy it.

At the same time capitalism, while it exists, is not always the same. As the features of human beings are altered as time goes on, so the face of capitalism is perpetually modified. Capitalism passes through a number of different stages.

We must be alive to all the new changes which continually go on in the system and in the circumstances of capitalist production. When capitalism alters, our fight against it must be altered. The example of Lenin reveals the strategical advantage which results from being alive to the changes in the structure of capitalism. In 1916 he was the only one to give full significance to the new features which capitalism had developed by that time. He was also the only one to take advantage successfully of the temporary weakening of capitalism after the war. The socialists in their fight against fascism have repeatedly suffered from a failure to appreciate that changing capitalism has changing needs.

The most recent change

I CANNOT show here in detail how capitalism went through the different stages of mercantilism, free competitive capitalism and monopoly capitalism. Something should, however, be said about the most recent change in capitalism. Under our own eyes, capitalism is developing in such a way that to many observers it seems to be developing itself out of existence. In the years between 1890 and 1914, the big monopolies were built up, the banks grew in size and influence and industrial capital fused with banking capital into what we call "finance capital"; effective economic power was concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. In this way, it gradually became possible to place the control of the economic system more and more into the hands of one institution — the state. The big industrial countries are rapidly moving towards state-capitalism.

The drive towards state-capitalism is reinforced by the conditions under which a modern war will be conducted. Already the experience of 1914 to 1918 has demonstrated that private initiative, left alone, breaks down under the strain of a modern war. In all countries, the state interfered with industry, in order to obtain the munitions, food, coal and uniforms necessary for getting on with the war. In those countries which are now most intensely preparing for war — Italy, Germany and Japan — state control of industry and agriculture has gone farthest. In Britain, the marketing and other boards seek to do a spot of planning with the food supply of the nation. The state will take over more and more economic control, the nearer we move towards the next war.

Many workers everywhere are taken in by this new change. While building up state-capitalism the capitalist wolves put on the skin of the socialist lamb. In Germany state-capitalism passes as "German socialism," in Japan as "state socialism". German social democrats hailed the nationalisation of economic life and the state control of production and distribution during the war as "war socialism". In Britain, few members even of the labour movement clearly understand the difference between nationalisation and socialisation. The workers may thus easily be deceived by the mimicry which British capitalism will soon adopt.

The new change in the structure of capitalism must be met by a change in our strategy. We have no longer to fight for state interference against private initiative. The main question now is not: should the state organise production or should production be left to the free play of private initiative and profit? The main question is now: whose state is to do the job, the workers' state or the capitalist state?

Human nature

SIMILARLY, human nature is frequently considered to be rigidly unchanging and unchangeable. It is one of the main arguments against socialism that human nature has never tolerated socialism and therefore never will tolerate it. Many people who should know better are proud of reiterating that socialism can become a reality only after men have lost their nature and have become angels.

Here again it is an unscientific, a one-sided conception of human nature, which lies at the root of the anti-socialist's fallacy. He regards human nature as something very selfish, composed essentially of egoism, hatred, aggressiveness and similar inclinations. What we do, however, actually observe is not a vague "human nature" but that concrete human beings exhibit partly egoistic, and partly social inclinations. We can further observe that class society, and capitalist society in particular, does everything to foster and encourage the selfish, acquisitive and competitive instincts, so much so that they tend to overrun the social side of human nature. In spite of that, this opposite side of human nature is clearly visible in friendship, love, maternal affection, in solidarity, in the emotions of sympathy and pity and in all those sentiments which keep together the social units, like family, clan, village, tribe, nation and class. It is even exploited to the fullest by capitalist society. It makes possible that spirit of sacrifice which alone enables people to endure slums, intolerable exploitation and misery. Without the spirit of sacrifice no wars could be fought, even for a fortnight. Under socialism we shall be able to develop more fully the social side of our nature. Under the present system of society almost everybody thrives by the defeat of a competitor. The reckless, selfish, anti-social individual is favoured by the rules of the game.

Socialism, on the other hand, will alter the rules. In a socialist society life will be made very unpleasant for those who try to advance at the expense of their fellow citizens. If once social standing and success have become bound up with a display of the social virtues, if it has become expedient in his own interest for everybody to display his social inclinations, there can be no doubt that all the reserves of the more noble social instincts will be set free — reserves which have, for so long, been suppressed by class society. The plasticity of "human nature" was manifested in the bank clerk who, at a month's notice, went to the trenches. It will be easy to induce "human nature" which has tolerated the misery of capitalism to tolerate a socialist society.