

Discussion on Philosophy

Philosophers, the People and the Party

Joan Simon

“There’s no existing form of society good enough for the philosophical nature; with the result that it gets warped and altered. . . . If only it could find the ideal society to match its own excellence, then its truly divine quality would appear clearly, and all other characters and ways of life stand revealed as merely human.”

“. . . ‘With all this in mind’, I said, ‘. . . we felt bound in all honesty, though with some trepidation, to say that there would never be a perfect state of society . . . until some chance compelled this minority of uncorrupted philosophers, now called useless, to take a hand in politics, willy-nilly, and compelled society to listen to them.’ (Plato, *The Republic*, Book VI, § 497, § 499.)

IN his article “Philosophy, Criticism and Progress” (*Marxism Today*, October, 1957) Maurice Cornforth does not in fact call on Plato. But the conclusion he reaches (without any apparent trepidation) is as near as nothing that which Socrates is made to voice in the second quotation above; while some of his implied criticisms of existing societies call to mind the first.

At the outset he outlines the conclusion reached by Engels seventy years ago. Engels pointed out that, with the development of the positive sciences, the role of philosophy ceases to be that of speculating about all aspects of the world—or about the “true end” of knowledge, “ultimate reality”, and so on; instead philosophy is limited to investigating “the theory of the laws of the thought process itself, logic and dialectics”.¹

But, this conclusion once stated, Cornforth’s subsequent argument is framed to evade or transcend it. And it culminates with the proposition that it is the philosopher’s task to formulate “values”, above the heads of—or as an intermediary for—the people; that it is he who must tell parties and states what ends to serve and the ways in which they should work towards these.

¹ *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of the Classical German Philosophy* (London, 1947), p. 70.

I am no philosopher, as will no doubt appear. But as a Marxist I take strong exception to this conclusion and to many of the arguments which lead up to it. There is only space here to deal briefly with some of these.

A False Premise

In the first place Cornforth’s whole thesis is founded on a false premise. He opens by saying that philosophy is not concerned with any specific aspect of reality but rather “tries to answer certain kinds of questions” about all aspects of reality. The chief characteristic of these philosophical questions is that they all spring from “a certain kind of criticism of current ideas”. In order to criticise one must first “doubt everything” and have “freedom of thought”.

What is it that philosophy criticises? “The general assumptions underlying the current ideologies of society” and also “common sense”. By criticising “tradition and common sense” in this way, philosophy arrives at a “world outlook”.

How does Cornforth reach this first stage in his argument from which all else flows? Descartes said it is necessary to doubt everything; Hegel said freedom of thought is the first condition of philosophy; even the medieval schoolmen raised questions about the dogma of the Church.

Now Marx did not say that “philosophers have only criticised the world”; had he done so the force of his counterposing remark—“the point is to change it”—would have been very much less. What Marx did say is that philosophers have only “interpreted the world differently”. This is a much more accurate analysis than that of Cornforth which is based on a few selected quotations.

The medieval schoolmen certainly never regarded freedom of thought as a condition of philosophic reasoning; nor, by any means, did they doubt everything. In general their terms of reference were to build up from two apparently mutually exclusive elements—the philosophy of the pagan world of antiquity and Christian dogma—a consistent world

view which upheld the latter; which expressed, that is, in terms of scholastic theology, the ideological outlook of feudalism. True, in the process, and in dependence upon the changing forms of the class struggle, some came to conclusions which challenged the dogma of the Church, in opposition to others who stood on their heads to defend it; but that is another thing.

Lack of Historical Approach

Later philosophies were also concerned above all to *systematise* knowledge, to arrange it in such a way that it made up a consistent body of thought; or rather later philosophers, for with the advent of bourgeois social relations it was now individuals who advanced a "world outlook".

This makes sense of Engels's statement: that Hegel, by the very splendour and extent of his "system", effectively brought philosophy (as it had been understood until then) to an end. In constructing a consistent system of this kind a philosopher, rather than endlessly asking questions, tried to iron out contradictions, to achieve an entirely logical argument at all points.

But, said Engels, if no contradictions remained we should have arrived at absolute truth; world history would be at an end. Of course philosophers cannot define the course and end of human knowledge in this way; this is "accomplished by the entire human race in its progressive development". Once one realises this

"one leaves aside 'absolute truth' which is unattainable along this path or by any single individual; instead one pursues attainable relative truths along the path of the positive sciences, and the summation of their results by means of dialectical thinking."¹

It can be seen, therefore, that the very foundation of Cornforth's argument is in question. Philosophy has not been just criticism.

If, instead of making superficial judgments about "philosophy in general", Cornforth had first defined bourgeois philosophy in the light of historical materialism, and then defined Marxism likewise, he would have started off on quite another foot. As indeed he did in an article written some years ago which opened with the words: "Marxism presents a philosophy of a new kind, differing in fundamental respects from all previous philosophies" while taking its departure "from the standpoint reached in previous philosophy."²

Imprecision of Thought

The whole of the remaining argument goes astray in so far as it is based on a false premise. But it is

¹ *loc. cit.*, p. 18.

² "Marxism and the Development of Philosophy", *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. II, No. 3, p. 102.

worth investigating some of the reasons why it reaches the given conclusion.

The first thing to note about it is the number of generalities and, in spite of all that is said about philosophy's preoccupation with logic and reasoning, the imprecision of thought. This is inevitable because the argument does not start from any clear philosophical standpoint to examine questions of philosophy, nor has it any historical context, but begins, as we have seen, by defining "philosophy in general" in the void.

First, then, we are told that philosophy is criticism. All philosophy—that is, a few dogmatists and apologists apart—is criticism. Later we learn that there is "philosophical criticism which in effect attacks the whole tradition of the older, capitalist order and works to create the new tradition of socialist society, and the opposite criticism"; i.e. bourgeois philosophy and socialist philosophy, usually called here "socialist ideology".

Using this later knowledge to clarify the original definition of what philosophy criticises, we arrive at the following: "socialist ideology" criticises the "general assumptions underlying the current ideologies of society" and common sense, in order to arrive at a world outlook. Is this true of Marxism?

Or, to take another aspect of the same argument, "socialist ideology" (a) criticises the capitalist tradition, i.e. bourgeois ideology, (b) helps to create the developing socialist tradition, by criticism. It follows that a primary need for the development of "socialist ideology" is that it should take into account as much questioning and criticism as possible. Indeed, its advance will be "the surer and more fertile the more, in developing the principles of socialism, socialists are aware of and draw conclusions from all the critical questioning of the philosophy of our time"; i.e. the more they pay attention to bourgeois ideology. Is this proposition altogether consistent and correct?

Philosophy and the Class Struggle

It will be seen that Cornforth makes no fundamental distinction here between Marxism and philosophy in general. The corollary of this is that, leaving fundamental Marxist theses aside, he goes on to operate with what may be called bourgeois-liberal categories, such as "human values", "general progress" and so on. Though he attempts to invest these with a Marxist content, the attempt inevitably fails so that in the end the Marxism gets left out.

The argument relating to philosophy, the class struggle and progress provides a good example of this. It may be outlined as follows:

Marx showed that history is the history of class struggles—that is, progress takes place through the class struggle. This provides the historian with a key to assessing events; he can not only report

them but also seek their causes and seek also to evaluate their results in terms of "general human progress".

Philosophy itself contributes to general human progress as an element in the class struggle; a philosopher, that is, makes his contribution through his association with some class. This association is, however, "active, creative"; the philosopher "does not merely repeat and systematise the already spontaneously formed beliefs and aims of a class, but by the questions he asks and the criticisms he makes helps form those beliefs and aims, which could not take the form they do otherwise".

What is the measure of human progress in this sense? Its measure is "the growth of productive technique and knowledge". From the Stone Age to today such progress can be objectively measured; it is "an ascertainable fact". But there is more to progress than this; if it is to be something "desirable to strive for" then "what evidently counts is not technique and knowledge in themselves, but the way of life they enable people to enjoy". Here "moral rather than factual considerations" arise with which philosophy must be concerned. In fact it is the task of philosophy to "help progress" both by advancing knowledge and technique and "contributing to the formulation and realisation of a way of life" whereby people can "enjoy the fruits of progress".

There are two very significant terms in this passage. The first is "spontaneously formed". Apparently the working class arrives at ideas and aims not in the process of the class struggle but "spontaneously", being forced to wait for precise formulations from philosophers before these ideas and aims can truly be formed and become operative; i.e. the machine waiting to be put into action by a motive force.

Thus though the class struggle finds mention as the means through which "general human progress" takes place and, too, as the source of philosophical thinking, this is a formal adjunct to the argument rather than an integral part of it. To look back carefully at an earlier train of thought is, in fact, to find that it has already been left aside there; the argument has really been continued logically from the first proposition. "If . . . philosophy arises from criticising and questioning tradition", tradition itself being the superstructure formed on the basis of property and class divisions, then philosophy ultimately arises from "a certain instability in (these) social relations and a tendency for them to be changed in various ways".

It is here that the class struggle is, in effect, eased out in favour of "a tendency" for social relations to be changed; and to omit the class struggle in this way is to forget dialectics in favour of a purely formal proposition. Hence the subse-

quent lapse into metaphysical reasoning. It is in the light of this that "general human progress" is also eventually defined as consisting of two distinct elements: (1) the advance of knowledge and technique; (2) the creation of an enjoyable way of life.

It is here that the second significant term occurs; as if to underline how mechanical this conception is Cornforth actually uses a key metaphysical formulation. He writes "technique and knowledge *in themselves*" [my italics. J. S.] do not make progress something desirable to strive for; they are only a means to the end of creating a way of life people may enjoy.

Here it becomes necessary to ask what "people"? What is all this "general progress" of "mankind"? Since the whole argument seems by implication to be a criticism of what is, or is not, done in socialist countries, let us look at them.

A Metaphysical Argument

The first obvious point is that the advance of knowledge does not occur in a vacuum, apart from people and their way of life. It takes place when young people go to the university, everyone can buy books cheaply, the family's radio and television are fundamentally educative, scientists have access to the latest scientific equipment, scholars to libraries, and so on.

When all children stay in school until seventeen they gain access to the masterpieces of world literature, to the history of philosophy, to scientific method; they have time to develop the ability to read widely and with discrimination, to learn from what they read, to think critically. This acquisition of knowledge fundamentally changes the people's way of life, spurs novelists and artists to new heights, increases opportunities for enjoyment and guarantees further changes in the direction people want.

Again, the advancement of technique only occurs when people invent new machines and make them. In so doing men humanise nature, and human powers are, as it were, incorporated in the new machines in an objective form. This itself advances men's ideas, provides a new point of departure for thought, invention, and so on. This is the very stuff of the process of change, the changing of nature and the changing of man through society; this is how new values are created, of all kinds, material and spiritual.

The mastery of knowledge and technique, and the mastery of nature by their means, afford people the keenest enjoyment. When thousands of young people went to Siberia recently, with nothing but their enthusiasm, skill and the essential equipment for building houses and factories, they did not consider that they might not enjoy the "way of

life" the virgin lands had to offer. They went to create a way of life, themselves; and have done so successfully enough, though it is doubtful whether any philosophers were there to point the way. This is progress; material and human progress inseparably connected under socialism.

Ends and Means

It will be seen that in his treatment of this question Cornforth is not at all clear about the relation of means and ends; nor therefore well qualified to give advice on this matter. His next main point, that it is the role of philosophy to do just this, arises from this very confusion. Having *separated* knowledge from the people's way of life, he postulates that particular persons, specifically concerned with the laws of thought—the philosophers—can and must formulate for ordinary people the values they should accept and the ways in which to work for them. The people must be told what is ultimately good for them on the one hand and the party and state told how to serve this end on the other.

Leaving aside the superb arrogance of this conception, the underlying idea seems to be that people may not "be given" enough material things—houses, shall we say; nor, more important, spiritual things such as freedom of thought and criticism. A state, a party, stands in the way, pursuing its own ends to the detriment of the people's needs and aspirations.

What is to guarantee that this will not happen? Will training more philosophers to criticise and formulate desirable ends do the trick? Of course not; philosophers have been doing the latter, under capitalism, for centuries—indeed they have been at it since the time of Plato.

On the other hand an essential guarantee is to bring to the widest sections of the people the tools and the opportunities whereby they can make themselves felt, judge, criticise and correct; primarily by strengthening working class and popular organisations and their scope of action and by extending education of all kinds, not least in Marxism itself.

One of the conclusions I should draw from this train of argument is that a primary task of socialist philosophers is to examine how Marxism can best be *taught*. In some socialist countries in my (admittedly limited) experience, such teaching can be dismally inept. This in turn is probably because philosophers have not made it their first concern; because they are not themselves clear about the scope and content of their subject, its place and significance in the general scheme of things, and are out of touch with developing popular needs.

It is unlikely that this position will be rectified

until philosophers recognise that another of their main tasks is to apply criticism to themselves.

Another questionable formulation which occurs throughout Cornforth's article is socialist "ideology". This is not a very happy term; Engels defined ideology as "occupation with thoughts as with independent entities, developing independently and subject only to their own law".¹

True, when arguing that philosophy must clarify social purposes, Cornforth underlines that these "do not *originate* from philosophical thought"; but he also consistently emphasises that they cannot become operative until philosophers formulate them; that the views of philosophers are "formative elements in class ideology", that people cannot strive for social purposes, least of all realise them "without the guidance of critical philosophical discussion".

Ideology and Marxism

Here it is discussion from above, among philosophers, that seems to be intended and doubts are not allayed by the proviso that the philosophers will be concerned "with basing and justifying our ideas on knowledge of the actual conditions and needs of mankind". For how does "mankind" make its needs known to the philosophers? No indication is given. The people's organisations, parties, are mentioned only as objects of criticism for philosophers, are implicitly condemned for their tendency to become ultimate "ends". We are left to suppose that the philosophers diagnose "mankind's needs" for themselves, in the light of their philosophical questioning of tradition, i.e. in their own closed world.

By all these means we arrive at the end point that philosophy has a twofold task; it is not, as suggested by Engels, concerned only with logic and dialectics but "also and finally questions of 'value', " as questions relating to "the formulation of human purposes". In the final sentences Marxism receives direct mention; it is itself an outlook "concerning the ends of human life and the means to achieve them" and must, rather than merely repeating propositions, be "developed as such".

But Cornforth does not develop the Marxist outlook in this article. On the contrary.

The key point about Marxism, what makes it different from all preceding philosophies, is that it is grounded in the class struggle; that it brings philosophical techniques to the working class movement, informs day-to-day work, raises it to new levels, in sum enables the working class to formulate its aims and policies scientifically. In fact, as Cornforth himself has often pointed out, Marxism has a revolutionary as well as a scientific character;

¹ *loc. cit.*, p. 65.

it is "the militant class philosophy of the proletariat".

It was precisely the advent of this philosophy—growing out of Marx and Engels's painstaking examination of the laws governing the development of society, of the internal working of the class struggle and, deriving from this, of the necessary strategy and tactics of the working class movement—that gave birth to Communism; eventually to organised Communist Parties, accepting the Marxist outlook as a guide to action, with a corresponding form of organisation which cements theory and practice in the hard and constant struggle to spread scientific socialist thinking and make concrete advances along the road to socialism.

The Communist Party uses Marxism as a guide to action from the standpoint of those in the forefront of the class struggle. It is the application of

Marxism to practice in this way that is the essential guarantee both of the development of the working class movement and of Marxism itself.

"Marxism", as Cornforth has said (in the article already referred to), "means above all confidence in our struggle and in the future of humanity—confidence based on science, on casting off illusions, on the fight against reactionary ideologies, on scientific socialism. The liberating force of Marxist philosophy lies in the fact that it bestows and develops this confidence, and that armed with Marxism the people's movement is invincible."

The people's movement is armed with Marxism in this sense, not by philosophers who enunciate guiding principles from above the battle, but in the thick of the struggle by the Communist Party. To extend active and collective participation in the class struggle in this way is the key both to creative Marxism and human progress.

Discussion on Marxism and the British Labour Movement

The Revival of British Socialism

Desmond Greaves

WE should feel some community with the men of the eighteen-eighties. What happened then is being enacted today on a vaster canvas and with an inevitably different outcome. The British Empire is being demolished before our eyes, and the ideas it gave rise to cannot long survive. A younger generation, which shows even if somewhat anarchically its impatience with empiricism, hardheaded practicalism and the parochialism of the metropolis, is already on the way up. Traditional British "contempt for theory" may in the next decade turn into its opposite, and they will be hard days for the educational cranks who think it is possible to learn without thinking and studying.

Theory of some sort is, of course, as inescapable as the famous Hound of Heaven. Your "sound practical man" may not realise it, but his contempt for socialist theory merely denotes imprisonment within capitalist theory, too scrappy to be recognised as such. Without theory a joiner cannot drive

a nail into a coffin, or a musician blow a flea out of a trumpet. But so much of the past lives in the minds of this oldest working class that the British would almost need to become the most theoretical nation on earth, in order to get the outworn lumber away.

For these reasons pay tribute to the initiative of Lionel Munby. His enquiry is valuable and important. To enter the lists in criticism is to pay him the compliment of imitation. A clear estimation of the role of scientific socialist ideas in the second great crisis of British capitalism is a necessary part of the preparation for the supreme class battles which many of us believe will fall in the nineteen-sixties.

Such an estimation cannot be arrived at hastily. Betty Grant rightly demands the study of primary sources and not books "about" things. Through *Our History* she has made much useful matter available. Fact, date and circumstance are indispensable and cannot be taken for granted. But