THOUGHTS ON THINKING*

VI.

In an earlier article I tried to simplify the term "dialectics" and suggested that a substitution of the word "evolutionary" might assist towards its understanding. We saw that Hegel employed the dialectic from the Idealist point of view and that his explanations proved to be no explanations. So let us examine Hegel's philosophy more closely and see if we can discover the weakness which were so apparent to Marx. Hegel was in advance of his times by reason of the enormous historical sense that underlay his system. The current of his thought always proceeded in line with world development. But the process of world development was regarded as a test of the unfolding of the concept, that is, the Concept was the ultimate Reality and the uncoiling of physical events over time evidence of the logicalness of his postulated concept. Hegel regarded phenomenal change, i. e., manifestations of social and natural law, as the self-development of the Absolute Concept. Not his concept or that of any man, but a universal concept that existed independently of time and space — an all-embracing world-soul. The dialectic development in nature and history struggled along after the self-developing concept, which moved itself, how or why nobody knew.

Now, if the universal concept be self-moving, governed by laws inscrutable, or no laws at all, and the process of natural change be but a reflection of the evolution of the cosmic concept, then what purports to be an explanation, being itself unexplained, is no explanation. How explain the known in terms of the unknown? How can history be logical if history but images a causeless, self-changing mind? The only wisdom such a philosophy can impart is that whatever is in the world is in the world, and that it changes because it does change. Four thousand years ago the chroniclers of Hebrew myths had explained as much — or as little — and in language simple and direct. The cosmology of Genesis, the gropings of primitive speculation, had said as much and left the rationale of the universe as enigmatic as before; and similarly the ponderous intellectual machinery of Hegel, milling the same metaphysical grist, could grind out no more logic than what was already in the world.

But the great value in Hegel's system was his sense of historical continuity. The principle of evolutionary progression pervaded his entire work, its content was historical and there was a real relationship between the thought process and the world. But the true relationship between the concept and the universe was inverted. It was standing on its head. If it could be turned upright on its feet the real content which everywhere entered the philosophy would be in alignment with the true sequence of causality. Before Marx could satisfactorily apply the dialectic he had to make his ideological reversal. Marx turned Hegel's system up side down, or rather, he turned what had heretofore been up side down right side up; and as Engels says, "We contemplated the concepts in our heads once more materialistically — as images of real things instead of regarding the real things as images of this or that stage of development of the absolute concept."

Marx applied the dialectic primarily to history and human society and showed that all problems, all knowledge and the purposes of all knowledge are always set in a concrete historical context. Here was discovered a guiding thread running through the mazes of the social process. By its guidance not only were the apparent anomalies and inconsistencies of the past reconciled and explained, but a course of action was suggested that would rid society of its major ills.

Nowhere in Marx is the dialectic expounded as a formal philosophical system. But the method is bone and sinew of his entire work and its detailed application is to be found in all of Marx's economic theories. It is practically applied in the materialistic conception of history and is woven warp and woof in the socialist theory of the state and the class struggle.

The essential idea in the dialectic as applied to society is this: it seeks the cause of social change **within the social process** itself and not in the realm of metaphysical abstraction.

Socialists do not claim that society is an organic mechanism which can be entirely explained by one invariable rule. They admit the existence of relatively independent factors which effect the course of history in varying degrees. The influence of the exceptional intellect on the state of general culture, the inimical or benign influences of religious movements, the accidents of technological and scientific discovery, or the caprices of fashion — all are recognized as real, active subsidiary influences on the body social and politic. It may safely be admitted that many of the minor and some of the major turns in social and economic progress are unpredictable. The multivariety of causes, the incalculable complexity of social reactions do not admit of strict scientific prediction. But again, the point to remember is — ALL the causes and ALL the effects operative within the body of society are to be explained in terms of nature and society itself. Or in other words nature and society generate the forces under which new forms and expressions arise. This explanation of social motivation completely eliminates the idealist's soul-concept.

Marx's method is realistic, materialistic; but it should not be reduced to a standardized mechanical formula by which alone to account for every possible variety of social phenomena.

A philosophy of social change must admit of empirical verifications of its theories, that is it should be submissible to proof; and the conditions under which change is possible must be indicated as at any given time. Furthermore it must recognize the consciousness of human beings; that they actively participate in shaping the course of their own histories.

Dialectics provides a nexus between one culture and another. This is revealed in the development of social institutions: an antecedent condition exists — from it arises more or less appropriate social responses. But as the conditions become unstable the form of the institution either effects a change in the conditions or perpetuates itself as a new thing, the product of the altered conditions and its antecedent form. The new combination in turn giving rise to a continuous modification of conditions, reacting reciprocally on them and itself.

Marx refused to divide social experience into two mutually exclusive compartments and classify one, the external world, "cause," and the other, consciousness, "effect." On the contrary he showed that social change resulted from the interactions of nature, society and human intelligence. That the conventionally accepted "effect," consciousness, was itself as much a cause as the laws of nature and society, and that vice versa, the assigned causes were in turn effects.

Marx applied the dialectics of social change to all stages of development. For the first time in the history of human thought a law was discovered with which to explain local and universal social evolution. The gist of the dialectic — the merging and harmonizing of opposites into a new

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***Because of space limitations, this series of articles on "Thoughts on Thinking" had been interrupted.**