CHAPTER II

THE MATERIALIST INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

I

EVERY theory of social action is ultimately a philosophy of history. It attempts, as best it may, to read in the experience of mankind the lessons which would justify its own special urgency. With Bossuet, and, in a sense, with Vico, that lesson is the dominion of Providence over the effort of mankind; with Fichte, it is the victory of reason, of free inquiry, over the blind demands of faith; with Bonald and de Maistre it is the necessity of religion as the one power able to compel that subordination without which men are the necessary victims of anarchic disorder.

Marx is no exception to the general rule. While his own interpretation is not, in its large outlines, original, the peculiar emphasis and direction he gave to it are all his own. To understand it, indeed, it is necessary to consider its meaning in the light of Hegel's work; for Marx was, in a special sense, the pupil of Hegel, even though the turn he gave

to the master's doctrine was one which the latter would doubtless have been the first to repudiate. For Hegel, any adequate philosophy of history must be based upon the idea of evolution. He insists that the world of human experience is created by reason; and because reason is a principle of growth, its embodiment in the facts is meaningless save as we study it in the terms of development. History, then, for him, becomes the slow development of the idea of freedom; and institutions are the efforts of men to embody that idea in concrete externality. Institutions, in fact, are the idea; without them it can have no meaning. Each age in history records an idea of justice which represents the effort or capacity of that age to realise its substance. But its understanding is necessarily partial and imperfect; and as the logical consequence of its limitation becomes apparent, the contradiction between idea and need becomes obvious. The result is a new form of the idea, based upon the negation of its predecessor. The negation, indeed, is constructive. It possesses a positive character merely because it supplies something wanting in what has gone before. It does not destroy; rather it mitigates or fulfils by compelling a new combination of the elements it has inherited.

Being, therefore, is becoming; each element of life, in the process called by Hegel dialectic,

is in continuous transition to new form. And in the variety we encounter, each element is always accompanied by its antithesis. Love involves hate, good evil, freedom slavery. Every idea contains these positive and negative elements; though the negative, by its correction of inadequacy, has a positive character also. Progress—which, for Hegel, is the movement towards perfect freedom—is thus the contradiction of one aspect by the other. Each is essential to, and comes to be by reason of, its opponent. Without feudalism, there could not have been the middle-class State; without the middle-class State, there could not have been a proletarian movement. The working out of the idea of private property is necessarily a revelation of its imperfections; and the remedy for these is supplied by the antithesis of common ownership. There comes, that is to say, a stage in the history of the idea when its utility for its age draws near completion; its antithesis then begins the work of creative destruction, only to be destroyed in its own turn as its purpose is fulfilled.

With Hegel, of course, the doctrine became a philosophy of conservatism. It enabled him, not altogether logically, to reject both liberalism and representative institutions, and to find in the absolute Prussian State the highest embodiment of freedom as a universal idea. What, however, interested Marx in

Hegel was not the result but the method. It was the notion of each age producing the corrective to its own error that threw light, for him, upon his own problems. Nor was insight wanting in many of Hegel's own *obiter dicta*. His insistence, for example, that the philosophy of an age merely expresses its view of what it needs; his perception that the centralised State cannot develop until the people are divided into rich and poor; his view of Greek colonisation, and his emphasis upon the geographical factor of history; his conception, in a word, of ideas as a function of a given material environment gave to Marx the clue he required. As Feuerbach and Strauss applied the Hegelian dialectic to the destruction of Christianity, so Marx applied it to the destruction of capitalism. He was the first to see the significance of the method as a factor in social analysis; and no one can doubt the power of the lever in his hands.

Like all great conceptions, the notion of the materialistic interpretation of history is essentially simple in character. It is simply the insistence that the material conditions of life, taken as a whole, primarily determine the changes in human thought. It is not some indwelling idea, Providence, the World-Spirit, or Natural Reason, which secures the changes that occur. These are conceptions invented by men, and interpreted by men, in their effort to explain the character of the world

about them. The colour and connotation of our ideas is always given by, and shaped from, the manner in which men have to gain the means of life.

Were the conception to be left there, it would not be of great importance. For it would simply insist that man's ideas are born of his experience, which is an obvious platitude. But Marx went on to assert that, within the framework of the general environment, the vital characteristic, the category which is above all important, is the system of production which obtains at a given time. The productive forces of society are those which, personal and impersonal, enable men to satisfy their needs. They bring into being, at each state of their interaction, institutions and ideas which, in their turn, react upon them. Law, religion, the forms of government, the place of men in their various social groupings, all these are primarily determined by the system of production which obtains. Translated into abstractions, they become moral, political, and religious systems, which simply represent the ideas of men about the worth, in some given aspect, of the system under which they live. The groundwork of each generation is the way in which it produces the means of life. Thereon, and thereon only, is erected the system of institutions and ideas which represent their reflection upon their meaning and value. "Men make their own history,"

said Marx, "but they do not do so spontaneously under conditions they have themselves chosen. On the contrary, they must make it upon terms already handed down to them and determined." They are, briefly speaking, a function of the way in which they satisfy their wants. That is the key to social evolution.

Economic necessity is therefore the foundation upon which all other parts of the social structure must be built. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx attempted to summarise his view of historic development in terms of this view. Nor is it possible to deny its truth. It is clear, for instance, that feudal society transforms all institutions to suit its special needs. Law is built in terms of relationships which fix men into a landholding system conceived in the interests of its possessors; even religion adapts itself to the needs of feudalism. The church which begins as the prophet of equality has no difficulty in adjusting its doctrines to the social hierarchy which feudalism requires. As mediæval society declines, there grows into its place the middle-class State, with its emphasis upon private property. Little by little it sweeps away ideas and institutions which serve the mediæval notion of status to replace them by others built upon the conception of contract. The individual replaces the corporation; Protestantism, with its emphasis upon the individual and his conscience, replaces Rome. The

petty sovereignties of feudalism give way before the national State with its facilitation of commerce by the promotion of order and legal simplicity. When the despotic monarchies of the *ancien régime* hinder this development, they, too, are destroyed by the necessity of yielding to its claims. At each stage of the historic process we encounter not abstract notions with an independent life, but concrete necessities set by a material environment which makes them inevitable.

So Marx would explain a given set of historic ideas. Not less important is his view of how they come to change. Material conditions do not stand still. New markets, new methods, and new raw materials are discovered; organisation, whether of production or distribution, is improved; and the economic system becoming obsolete, a change in its foundations becomes essential. But its essentials are the whole structure of society, its ranks and classes, its laws and form of State, its religious institutions and intellectual systems. There is a contradiction between the existing theory of society and its external environment. Men have to learn to think in the new terms that environment requires.

Mr. Bertrand Russell has given us a very happy illustration of this relationship between thought and the material world. The case for the emancipation of women, as he points

out,[1] is as old as Plato; the arguments on its behalf were urged with irresistible force by thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill. Yet, despite this cogency, they were broadly impotent until the entrance of women into industry was so widespread, that a readjustment of their political position became inevitable. Not less significant is the history, between the Reformation and the Revolution of 1688, of the doctrine of toleration. Scattered thinkers like Robert Brown, statesmen like William of Orange, were able to see its value; but to their own day it was a plea without either moral or intellectual validity. But when, in the seventeenth century, it was found incompatible with commercial prosperity to persecute, men had no difficulty in affirming that a religion of love was incompatible with repression made in its name. Ideas, doubtless, always lag behind the environment of which they are a part; but sooner or later their adjustment is effected with an ease which makes men wonder at their previous conservatism.

There is, moreover, another aspect to the picture. New truths are born of new environments, and they have, as we have seen, to fight their way painfully to acceptance. In every social order a division of men may be made into those who are on the side of the existing position, and those who seek to change

[1] *Bolshevism in Theory and Practice*, p. 122.

it. In general, that division is between the possessing class in a given society and those dependent upon it. To the former belongs the authority of government. They utilise their power to make the laws and to operate the institutions in the interest of their class. They identify social good with their own preservation. Attacks upon them they will punish as sedition. Education, justice, religious teaching, are tempered to serve their interests. This is not, it should be insisted, a conscious effort on their part to exclude members of the non-possessing class from a share in social benefit; it is simply the natural reaction to the material environment. But the class excluded from the privileges of possession naturally, also, desires a share in them. Hence arises, in every society, a struggle between classes for its control. Sometimes, compromise is possible because the system represented by the possessing class has not yet reached the limit of its utility; then we get concessions from above which often bring with them a period of comparative tranquillity. But when the system has reached its apogee, compromise becomes impossible. No margin is left within which the possessing class can at once concede, in any serious way, and yet maintain its supremacy. Then revolution, as in England in 1642, or France in 1789, supervenes forcibly to alter the character of the State. A new

balance of power is created, and institutions are adjusted to the new synthesis.

As soon, then, as private property became the outstanding feature of Western civilisation, institutional change became a function of class antagonism. All history is full of the record of this struggle; most of the great legislators of antiquity, Lycurgus and Solon, for example, were men seeking to mitigate its acerbity. Patrician and plebeian in Rome, feudal lord and serf in mediæval Europe, squirearchy and bourgeoisie in the Industrial Revolution, capitalist and wage-earner in our own day, the struggle between these contending forces for the mastery of the State represents the universal antithesis everywhere discoverable. It determines the social ideas of each epoch. "What else," wrote Marx, in the *Communist Manifesto*, "does the history of ideas demonstrate except that intellectual production changes its character in proportion with the changes in material production. The governing ideas of each period are always the ideas of its governing class." New theories, in fact, are nothing other than the expression of new social forces detected in the material environment by some thinker more prescient than the rest; and they gain in authority in the degree that this environment makes them increasingly the expression of its ideas. "When the ancient world was at its last gasp," declares the

Communist Manifesto, "the ancient religions were overthrown by Christianity. When Christian ideas succumbed in the eighteenth century to rationalism, feudal society fought its death-battle with the then revolutionary bourgeoisie. The doctrines of religious freedom and liberty of conscience simply gave expression to the rule of free competition within the domain of knowledge."

II

This view of history, it should be emphasised, is not a communist discovery. Historical materialism is as old as Aristotle; and thinkers like Harrington and Madison have made it the corner-stone of their systems. Nor did communism originate the theory of class-antagonism as the motive power of change. So far from being, as Engels asserted, "the unique and exclusive property of Marx," it is characteristic of almost every radical doctrinaire after the French Revolution. It is set out with emphasis in Babeuf's *Manifeste des Egaux* (1796),[1] a document which, not unsignificantly, is not referred to by Marx in his discussion of the Utopian socialists. It was asserted by Blanqui in the trial of 1832 where the Society of the Friends of the

[1] Babeuf, indeed, may well claim to be the founder of the idea of proletarian dictatorship.

People was condemned by the government of Louis-Philippe. It was a commonplace with Saint-Simon and his disciples; Bazard, very notably, in the *Doctrine Saint-simonienne*, speaks of "men divided into two classes, the exploiters and exploited, masters and slaves." So, also, German socialism, as with Karl Grün, as early as 1844, wrote of history as "no more than a continuous war, in essence, between the fortunate, the possessors, the conquerors, against the unhappy, the disinherited, the oppressed;" and he inquires whether history can secure a classless society. And among non-socialist thinkers, Linguet in the middle eighteenth century, and Sismondi in the early nineteenth, had held similar views. One neglected French thinker, Constantine Pecquer, may be said to have outlined the theory of historic materialism with a clarity as great, and a conviction as intense, as Marx himself ever displayed.

Marx, indeed, may be said, if a little grudgingly, to have recognised this. "The founders of these systems," he says of the Utopian Socialists in the *Communist Manifesto*, "see the class antagonisms, as well as the action of the decomposing elements in the prevailing form of society." Where he, in particular, and communists in general, differ from their forerunners is in the deductions made from the general theorem. For while the earlier thinkers, as a rule, seek some

basis of stability in a non-economic idea of justice, as with Sismondi, or in some special pattern of institutions, as with Saint-Simon, Fourier and Proudhon, Marx takes his stand on quite different grounds. He insists, and his followers insist even more vigorously, that the transition from one system of production to another is necessarily marked by violent revolution; and he argues that the conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat is the final phase of the class-struggle. These differences are fundamental in texture. From the one derives the whole formidable apparatus of political method and strategy that distinguishes the communist from his opponent; from the other is born the sense of ultimate optimism which characterises communism. It is self-confident and audacious because it has been taught that the inevitabilities of the future are upon its side.

Class-antagonism, we have seen, is the instrument which forces social theories and institutions into closer harmony with the system of production. What are the marks by which a class can be known? Men, clearly enough, may be divided by colour, or religion, or political allegiance; they may be grouped as freemasons or clericals, as nominalists or realists. On the Marxian view, the scientifically valid method of classifying them is by the way in which they earn their living. On this view, modern society is divisible into

two great groups, the capitalist and the wage-earner. Of the one, the outstanding feature is the fact that he lives by owning; he has land, or shares, or workshops, or access to raw material; of the other, the dominating fact is that they live by, and are mainly dependent upon, wages. Marx is not concerned with minor features of distinction. Some wage-earners may have investments; many of the working-class to-day have holdings in co-operative societies. Most capitalists either manage, or assist in managing, the properties with which they are connected. Marx does not deny the possibility of minor sub-divisions along these lines. They are, for him, as insignificant as the fact that among capitalists some are successful and others unsuccessful, while some wage-earners are well-paid while their fellows are compelled to live upon the very margin of subsistence. His essential point is the insistence that however the two great classes are sub-divided, one is united with itself by the fact that it lives by the sale of its labour, and the other by the fact that it owns, in its capital, the means of production.

That difference, for the communist, is fundamental. It means that between the two classes there is a permanent and ultimately irreconcilable hostility. There may be periods of greater or less tension between them; but, in the last resort, one of them can

live only by the conquest of the other. For the wage-earners, as a class, are concerned only with securing the highest possible price for their labour, while the capitalists, again as a class, are constrained, in the interest of profits, to purchase it at the minimum price. In the contest between buyer and seller of labour, an antagonism is involved the nature of which touches the foundations of the State. Labour, it is clear, must either find a purchaser quickly, or starve; capital is subject to no such disability. Their relationship, therefore, by definition places a weapon of oppression and exploitation in the hands of the capitalist, and this can only be removed as the relationship itself is destroyed. But to destroy that relationship is to destroy the private ownership of capital, which means in effect its social ownership. This, in its turn, means a society without masters or men; and the destruction, accordingly, of this division is the final social struggle in that it produces a classless society.

It is in the detailed discussion of the means whereby this change is effected that the peculiar Marxian doctrine is revealed. "Middle-class historians," wrote Marx in 1852, "long ago described the evolution of class-struggles, and political economists explained the economic physiology of classes. My contribution has been to add the following theses: (1) that the existing classes are bound up with certain phases of material

production; (2) that the class-struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; (3) that this dictatorship is merely the transition to the abolition of all classes, and the creation of a free and equal society." The proof of these theses is built partly on the grounds of historic fact, and partly on prophetic deduction from them. The necessary hostility between capital and labour leads to the formation of trade unions. These, in their early stages, foreshadow the coming of the struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat. For the experience of trade unions slowly but inevitably convinces the workers that so long as capitalism persists, their subjection as a class is a necessary phase of the social order. They begin to see that its overthrow, the attainment, that is, of the common ownership of the means of production, is the condition precedent to their release. In growing numbers, therefore, they begin to see that their task is the preparation of this class-struggle. Their hostility to their masters becomes infused with a general idea; they think as communists. They prepare consciously for their emancipation. But Marx insists that, for the completion of the process, the emancipation must be attained by the workers themselves. They must not be satisfied with reforms, nor put their trust, from a lack of audacity or self-confidence, in the sense of justice displayed by bourgeois thinkers and

politicians who are appalled at the existence of misery and want. They must seek, not the mitigation, but the exacerbation of the class-struggle.

For any concessions that are won from capitalism are evidence merely of its weakness. They do not prevent the inevitability of a final conflict between the capitalist and the wage-earner. Things like the battle over rates of wages, or the length of the working-day are, so to speak, merely an index to the greater struggle beyond. The workers' task is not to aid their masters in finding terms upon which capitalism may endure, but to discover the period at which its overthrow may be successfully prepared. To that end they must capture the machinery of the State; since it is through its possession of this machinery that the governing class enforces its will. And, possessing it, the workers must then utilise its authority to transform a capitalist into a communist society.

The trade unions, then, awaken the class-consciousness of the masses, and direct their effective energies to the capture of the political State. Upon the basis they provide, a Labour Party is built up which becomes the expression in the political sphere, of the class-consciousness typified by them in the economic sphere. The Labour Party's function is to be the class-conscious vanguard of the advancing proletariat. It will, under favourable con-

ditions, find circumstances not unhelpful to its task. There will be a more or less complete political democracy, and this can be turned to communist advantage. Not, indeed, that the democracy so established is ever real. "This democracy," wrote Lenin, "is always bound by the narrow framework of capitalist exploitation, and consequently always remains, in reality, a democracy only for the minority, only for the possessing classes, only for the rich. Freedom in capitalist society always remains more or less the same as it was in the ancient Greek republics, that is, freedom for the slave-owners. The modern wage-slaves, in virtue of capitalist exploitation, remain to such an extent crushed by want and poverty that they 'cannot be bothered with democracy,' have 'no time for politics'; and, in the ordinary peaceful course of events, the majority of the population is debarred from participating in public political life."

In the communist view, therefore, capitalist democracy is hypocritical for two reasons. It is, firstly, narrowly political; the absence of democracy in the economic sphere means the virtual exclusion of the toiling millions from any share in it. Because capitalism makes them slaves, they have the mentality of slaves. And, secondly, it is democratic only to the point that the foundations of capitalism are not threatened. Let the workers, for instance, obtain a majority at the

polls, and seek to effect a transformation to communism by peaceful means, and they will find that the capitalist class will seek their violent overthrow. Ordinary political effort, therefore, is only of value as a demonstration to the workers of the futility of peace. It does not postpone the conflict that must come.

And for the communist that conflict is definite war, with the methods and instruments of war; the formulæ of peace are out of place until the victory of the proletariat is complete. How exactly the conflict will come, it is not possible to state dogmatically. Marx himself predicted that it would arrive first in the most advanced industrial countries; a prophecy which the experience of Russia has contradicted. He believed that, as a rule, it would grow out of a revolution in which, with the aid of the revolutionary working-class, a democracy of social reformers would come into power. The duty of the communist was then plain; he must separate from the new régime and fight it, as Lenin compelled his followers to do after the first Russian Revolution. He must seek to weaken the new government at every turn so as to facilitate his own access to power. "The workers," Marx told the League of Communists in 1850, ". . . must aim at preventing the subsidence of the revolutionary excitement immediately after the victory. . . . During and after the struggle, they must seize

every opportunity to present their own demands side by side with those of the middle-class democrats. . . . Guarantees must be exacted, and the new rulers must be compelled to make every possible promise and concession, which is the surest way to compromise them." From this position to definite armed revolution is only a step. Once the communist is in power, "progressive development," as Lenin says, "marches through the dictatorship of the proletariat. It cannot do otherwise, for there is no one else who can *break the resistance* of the exploiting capitalist, and no other way of doing it." The more thoroughgoing, indeed, that dictatorship is, the shorter will be the period of transition to communism; for weakness here provokes counter-revolution which defers the effective abolition of private property in the means of production.

We shall discuss elsewhere in this book the theory of a dictatorship and its significance; here, to complete the picture, something may be said of the communist view of society after the revolution is complete, and its outlook upon the relation of class-structure to national and international organisation. Upon the first problem communists have been studiously, and with justice, vague; for a new system of production is bound to create ideas that it is impossible to foresee in any detail. All that can be done is to posit certain basic principles.

The subjection dependent upon the present division of labour will disappear; there will be no opposition between brain and manual work. Labour will cease to be a commodity, bought and sold in order to achieve the bare means of subsistence. The State will wither away because, in Lenin's phrase, "when people have become accustomed to observe the fundamental principles of social life, and their labour is so productive, they will voluntarily work *according to their abilities*." Men will overpass what Marx termed "the narrow horizon of bourgeois law." "Society," says the *Communist Manifesto*, "will be able to inscribe upon its banner: From each according to his powers; to each according to his needs." And we are warned by Lenin that sneers at his view as Utopian are out of place. "The *anticipation*," he says, "of the great socialists that it *will* arrive, assumes neither the present productive powers of labour, *nor the present* unthinking man in the street, capable of spoiling, without reflection, the stores of social wealth, and of demanding the impossible." There will, in fact, be a different human nature, or, at least, a human nature which expresses itself in different wants from the present; it is perhaps because of this that Bukharin insists so strongly that "the monopoly of education must become the privilege of the proletariat, if the proletariat is to win."

The communist is clear that the victory of

his movement is dependent upon the occurrence of a world-revolution. "The realisation of proletarian dictatorship," writes Bukharin, "is gravely imperilled in one country unless active assistance is given by the workers of other lands." Marx himself never denied the reality of nationalism, though for him, as for his successors, its hold upon the workers was a part of the defences of capitalism. The communist admits that love of country is real and widespread. But he insists also that it must be overcome. The worker's real country is his class. Under capitalism, the workers have no real share in power. The political institutions of their country are merely a means for their exploitation. Since their task is to destroy the bourgeois State, to defend it, as in the late war, is to be false to their historic mission. It is to suggest that they have interests in common with their oppressors. But, in fact, they can only have a country by seizing the State, and they can only seize the State for communist ends successfully, by uniting with the working-classes of other countries. Nor must the worker be led away by pacifist ideals. Disarmament is impossible for the capitalist State since, of necessity, it lives by war to secure markets and raw materials from its rivals. The worker, therefore, who supports pacifist effort, simply prevents those whom he influences from service to the armed struggle

for communism. So long as the class-struggle remains unresolved, to yield to nationalist feeling is to betray, therefore, the highest allegiance the worker can know. The only significance of the worker's country to him is the fact that it happens to be his immediate battlefield in the coming conflict. Moral appeal it can have none until its capitalist government has been overthrown.

III

It is worth while to insist upon what the materialist interpretation of history is not, before discussing its general validity. It has no necessary connection, in the first place, with the metaphysical theory of materialism. That doctrine, though communists in general adopt it, is equally compatible with Buckle's view that climate is the decisive factor in historic events. Nor does it insist that economic conditions are the sole cause of change; it merely argues that they are its main cause. Roughly speaking, it is an argument to the effect that man's situation is the preceptor of his duty, and that in that situation economic elements are paramount simply because the means of life are the first thing to which men must pay attention.

In this simple form, it is impossible not to regard the theory as in the main true. It is

clear, for example, that the substance of legal categories is largely determined by their economic context. Contract, tort, the law of husband and wife, are all of them set and altered by the system of production out of which they grow. More specifically, a rule like the "common employment" doctrine in English law [1] could only have been born in a capitalist society; and the limitations upon the suability of the State in contract all bear upon them the marks of a business civilisation. The adjustment, moreover, of church practice to its economic environment has been very striking; the way, for example, in which the doctrine of grace received an interpretation which made business success a proof of God's favour, and poverty an index to His anger, is proof that ecclesiastical theory does not evade the general ambit of the doctrine. And anyone who considers the history of the interpretation of the American Constitution will find little difficulty in seeing in its attitude to problems like those of child labour, or the State regulation of wages and hours, a proof of the general truth of the materialist view. There is no department of human life in which the governing ideas and institutions will not be found, upon examination, to be largely a reflection of a given set of economic conditions.

[1] Cf. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (ed. of 1920), pp. 364–6.

We must be careful, indeed, not to push the theory too far. There are particular sets of facts in which it is not helpful as an explanation; and there are others where the obvious requirements of an economic environment cannot be met through the pressure of non-economic factors. They will not wholly explain, even though they are often relevant to, the actions of an individual; as Lassalle, for example, or Robert Owen. Often enough, a man's political creed is born, not of an economic situation, but of an intense psychological dislike for the atmosphere of his family. Nor can either religious or nationalist movements be wholly explained in religious terms. The loyalty of Catholic working-men to their religion, the fierce separatism of the Balkans, both involve methods of explanation which have reference to a human nature not exclusively determined by material conditions. Possibly the Catholic working-man is unwise in preferring his Church to his class; and certainly the nationalism of the Balkans, with its perpetual recurrence of war, is the chief cause of its economic backwardness. But, in cases like these, the rational interest of men is overcome by distracting counter-currents of loyalty which afford them satisfaction superior to that which reason might afford.

Here, indeed, it may be argued, is the real weakness of materialism as a philosophy of

history. It is too exclusively preoccupied with a rational theory of human action to remember how much of man's effort is non-rational in character. "The larger events in the political life of the world," writes Mr. Bertrand Russell, "are determined by the interaction of material conditions and human passions." Obviously the latter can be modified in their operation by intelligence; but obviously, also, the modification is at best but partial. When we estimate, therefore, the character of a social system we must measure not merely the effect upon men of the way in which they earn their bread, but of the wider total effect upon them of the chance in that system to satisfy their chief impulses. Men may choose a less advantageous economic order, even when its utility is obviously exhausted, because they prefer its psychological results to those of its antithesis. A state, for example, which did not afford adequate opportunity to energetic and determined men would rapidly change even if it satisfied the inert majority of its members.

All this, however, is merely a footnote to the general truth of the materialist interpretation; it does not destroy its general adequacy. The difficulties emerge less in this aspect than when we come to its communist application. Here, critics have naturally fastened upon two things. They deny the validity of class-antagonism as a permanent

social fact; and they argue that there is no reason to accept the Marxian deductions therefrom as an accurate prevision of the future.

We are not for the moment concerned with the political or ethical results of the doctrine of class-war; that must be a matter for discussion in later chapters. What is here important is the question whether it is true. Those who deny it usually do so upon two grounds. They argue, first, that there is an interdependence of social interests which makes it impossible for one class to be injured without all being injured; and, secondly, they argue that, in each social conflict that arises there is an objectively just solution which is the good of the community as a whole. A minor argument is sometimes employed to the effect that the class-consciousness of which Marx speaks is either non-existent or confined to an insignificant minority of society.

In fact, however, none of these views really touches the core of the communist position. The Marxian does not deny the interdependence of classes: what he insists upon is that in the relationship of this interdependence the interests of the capitalist class are considered superior to those of the working-class. It would certainly be difficult for any observer to urge with seriousness that this is not the case. Rarely, indeed, in history does a party or class in power deliberately

sacrifice its own well-being to that of others. The history of things like the franchise, education, the administration of justice, the laws of inheritance, of, that is to say, privilege in general, is not the history of its voluntary surrender by its possessors; every concession won has been secured only after hard fighting, in which, very often, either the threat or fact of violence has been an integral part of the victory. "Had the people of England," said Mr. Gladstone, "obeyed the precept to eschew violence and maintain order, the liberties of this country would never have been obtained." The communist answer to a theory of social interdependence is an admission of its truth and an argument that, under the present scheme, its benefits are not justly divided between classes. This seems well within the facts.

Nor is the second argument much more tenable. It is true that in most social conflicts the parties demand more than they feel they ought to have, and that each is but little careful of the well-being of those indirectly affected by the dispute. But a theory which urges the existence of an objectively just decision in the dispute omits to declare who is to determine what that decision shall be. The communist, from his standpoint necessarily, denies that any such arbitrator can be found. For into his decision there will enter a stream of ideas and prejudices begotten of

the special complex of interests to which he belongs, even if he be unconscious of their presence. Nor can a capitalist government be regarded, in any just sense, as an impartial judge. Its main purpose is, he argues, to uphold capitalism; and that makes it *a priori* inclined to favour one of the disputants. Anyone who examines, for instance, the series of disputes in the British coal industry since 1919 will find it difficult to maintain that the government of the day has acted impartially as between miners and mine owners. Whenever the interests of capitalism have required it, the results of inquiries have been evaded; and even when their tenor has been verbally accepted, care has been taken to deny their spirit in applying them.

To accept the materialist conception is not, of course, to say that it explains all historic phenomena. There are passages in Marx's works in which this claim seems to have been made; and some of his less cautious disciples have written—wrongly—as though this was the view that he took. In fact, Marx was himself, as a rule, insistent upon the limits within which the theory applies; and he was well aware that while productive systems act upon men, men also react upon productive systems. Criticism of the doctrine, indeed, should concentrate less upon its general outline than upon the communist prophecies which have grown out of it. It is difficult,

in the first place, to see why the communist should be assured of the ultimate triumph of the proletariat. An observer of modern capitalism might well argue that the evidence points not to some single and universal solution, but to a variety of quite different results. What may occur, for instance, in a small and highly industrialised country like England, may bear little resemblance to the destiny of peasant civilisations like Roumania and Hungary; and the mere problem of size in America might well make the issue there qualitatively different from what it is in most European countries.

Nor is this all. A revolution that failed might easily lead to a Fascist dictatorship which would discover new forms of industrial organisation more nearly resembling feudalism than anything we have known under the régime of free contract. Marx's view, in short, that a given system of production is governed by inevitable "laws" which direct its outcome unduly simplifies the problem. For those "laws" are merely tendencies which are, at each instant of time, subject to a pressure which makes prophecy of their operation at best a hazardous adventure. The currents of fact and thought which the communist emphasises are undoubtedly there; but there are also counter-currents of fact and thought upon which sufficient stress is rarely laid.

It is worth while, here, to remember the

circumstance under which Marx himself wrote. He knew well the two revolutionary periods of 1789 and 1848; his views were largely generalisations built upon them. The insight he displayed in their analysis was remarkable; but it is difficult not to believe that, at times, the agitator in him was victorious over the scientist. His view is obviously built upon a confidence in rationalism which most psychologists would now judge to be excessive. It has in it that optimistic temper which stamps him as the child of the Enlightenment. Tennyson's "far-off divine event towards which the whole creation moves" has just the same serene certainty, Wordsworth's view of evil as the parent of good has the same happy triumph of faith over doubt, as Marx's insistence that, however often defeated, the proletariat emerges triumphant. He writes of a social system as though it were a species that must conform to the morphological tests of the naturalist. It has no function save to unfold the necessary stages of its evolution. But no social system is, in fact, of this kind. Its life is not merely an inevitable unfolding of inherent tendencies. There are always the novel and unexpected to give the lie to our predictions.

But the communist reliance upon a kind of natural law in social evolution leads him seriously to underestimate the power of forces which are of a non-economic kind. The degree to which nationalism, for instance, will

resist economic necessity is remarkable. The mysterious nature of herd-impulse may be admitted; but our ignorance of its nature ought not to blind us to its significance. An English working-man ought, doubtless, to feel that he has more in common with the French or German worker than with the English capitalist. The fact remains that, in general, he gives no sign of such feeling. Some would add that Marx underestimated also the power of religion to influence the actions of men; though anyone who measures the substance of Christian doctrine with the achievement of Christian civilisation may well doubt whether, in this realm, Marx went very far astray.

Nor is it easy to see why his view of the communist state should be accepted. If the revolution he foresaw became universal, there is no inherent reason why the result should be the kind of society he desired. For, in the first place, the intensity of destruction now requisite to the overthrow of a social system might well make impossible a society in which generous impulses had opportunity; and, in the second place, while economic classes might, by hypothesis, disappear, another form of class-rule, that of a doctrinal aristocracy, for example, might take its place. The poison of power is notorious, and it is difficult to see why communists should be held immune from its toxins. It is, indeed, so much the most powerful of the factors by which men in

politics are moved that there is no theoretical reason why those who make the communist revolution, or their successors, should abdicate from the pleasant task of exercising authority over their fellows. Ideologies produce economic systems, just as economic systems produce ideologies. The communist emphasises the second, but he is too little willing to see the possible consequences of the first.

We cannot, either, overlook the possibilities that better industrial organisation and the prospects of scientific discovery might easily make of capitalism a system able to satisfy the main wants of the workers. It might then be true of them, as it seems to be true of the American worker in our own day, that they would thereby be led to exchange political power for material comfort. Capitalism is not an unchanging phenomenon; and the margin of possible improvement, under its ægis, is larger than its critics like to admit. The intensity of production, for instance, which might follow a general level of high wages, might, so far from leading to revolution, prove a safeguard against it by the great increase it secured in the average standard of life. We may agree with Marx that, unless capitalism proves itself capable of large reforms, it is destined to perish; but that does not commit us to the theory that communism will take its place. For, in the first place, the breakdown of capitalism might result not in communism, but in anarchy from which

there might emerge some dictatorship unrelated in principle to communist ideals; or, in the second, the victory of the working-class might lead to the discovery that the operation of a communist system is impossible. Neither Marx nor his disciples, that is to say, can predict of a revolution more than that a change in the system of production will be the precursor of a change in the habits of society. If that change means the social ownership of the means of production, it is possible to assume that the habits of society will be better, since, under the present system, these have but little relation to justice. But the assumption, however justified, still remains an act of faith.

There is, however, a defence for the Marxian view of inevitable revolution that must not be overlooked. Few of the great social changes with which history acquaints us but have been accompanied by violent upheaval; and even the prediction of its inevitability, as in the France of the *ancien régime*, has not moved those in power to make the concessions which might have avoided it. Why, it may be asked, should we assume that in this respect the future will be different from the past?

On any *a priori* ground, we have no reason to make any such assumption. Those who possess to-day the instruments of economic power are certainly not less anxious to preserve them than were their predecessors. We can only argue that the general democratisation

of political institutions makes popular want more effective in securing response than at any previous time; and that the cost of revolution, even if unsuccessful, is now so immense that few Governments would be prepared to risk its coming if concession could purchase its avoidance. We can point, also, to the fact that whereas to Marx one of the root causes of revolution was the increasing misery of the working-class, the evidence seems to prove a genuine and important improvement in their condition during the last hundred years. If that condition continues (a condition, however, which involves the maintenance of peace), the resultant prosperity might leave a margin within which changes of the necessary range might be secured.

It is, of course, impossible to say that they will be secured. Modern civilisation is, at best, a fragile thing; and while there are revolutionary forces at work which, in a period of war or similar crisis, might easily make for disaster, there are also counter-revolutionary forces the hostility of which to social change are not less dangerous. Lenin in Russia must be paralleled by Mussolini in Italy. Nor must we make too much of the view that the average worker has little thought of the class-relationship which Marxism postulates. In ordinary times this is true, and Marx himself both admitted and explained it. But revolutions always spring from the acts of a minority, and their power is

enormous to educate rapidly into exactly that class-consciousness postulated by communists. The two outstanding facts before us are the inevitability of change, and the certainty that any serious attack upon the position of the workers will meet with resistance. Unless, that is to say, there is a considered and continuous effort after social improvement, their united influence might easily demonstrate the truth of the communist position.

We conclude, then, that the materialist interpretation of history is, as general doctrine, undeniable. In the context of communism, there is no necessary connection between its theses and the inferences and predictions made by Marx. A necessary connection may, however, be made. The only way to avoid its coming is to prove by social policy that it is unnecessary. We cannot urge, with any profound conviction that this is being done. The invasion of human demands for the benefit of a few is still the rule rather than the exception in history. The strength of the communist position lies in its insistence that it will remain the rule. Thereby it draws the attention of the disinherited to the glaring disparities of our social order. History shows clearly that they will act upon their observation unless they are shown that they can obtain by other means the reasonable satisfaction of their desires.