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# Soviet Materialistic Philosophy versus American Practical Materialism\*

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**I**N the development of this subject an attempt will be made to show that in the ideologies and practices of the two great powers mentioned in the title there are inconsistencies which, for all the differences in thought and life between the two, make for the fact that they have much in common. Communist philosophy, being as the title suggests a materialistic philosophy, is in theory opposed to an idealistic humanism which gives a certain primacy to spirit, freedom, morality, the dignity and worth of the individual person. Yet in practice Communists contradict the logic of their materialism by an implicit "humanism" in that they pass moral judgments on party members and opponents alike, as if men were after all self-determining beings, morally responsible for their decisions and actions. In America, on the other hand, if there is a commonly professed "philosophy of life" it can be said to be a kind of "idealistic humanism" with the characteristics mentioned above. Yet in practice Americans contradict the logic of their humanism by an explicit "materialism" which finds expression in their actual outlook on life and in their actual deeds.

We turn first of all to a brief analysis of classical Communist Philosophical Materialism as found in the writings of Marx and Engels. These men, in opposition to the prevailing philosophical idealism of Hegel, purport to give a purely scientific view of man and history. Their method they hold to be the empirical, inductive method of science which begins with the observation of fact as a foundation for any theory which is to be built upon it. They observe what men do, and have done, in order to induce therefrom their understanding of man's nature and destiny. As Marx and Engels have written:

In direct contrast to German philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here the ascent is made from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not start from what men say, imagine, conceive, in order thence and thereby to reach corporeal men; we start from real, active men, and from their life process also show the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of the life process.<sup>1</sup>

Implicit within the quotation is the presupposition and prejudice of all forms of scientism:<sup>2</sup> the primacy of matter over spirit. For Marx and En-

\*This article is substantially the same as a paper read by the author to a meeting of the Workers' Educational Association in Toronto in February, 1955. The subject was one of a number assigned in a series entitled "The Cold War and History."

1. Marx and Engels: *German Ideology*, quoted in *A Handbook of Marxism*, edited by Emile Burns, p. 212.

2. "Scientism" is a term used to describe claims that are made on behalf of the scientific method as being the only valid method for acquiring knowledge of the real.

gels, matter is the supreme reality, matter in motion, matter in process. "Spirit" is a by-product of matter. As far as the nature of man is concerned this "materialism" takes the form of the assertion that man's economic existence is his primary concern and determines every aspect of his thought and life. These men do not maintain that man lives by bread alone. Indeed Marx explicitly denounces a crass materialism which denies the existence of spiritual activity and spiritual creation. Man's cultural life which is produced by the creative activity of spirit is "real" life. But Marx does maintain that all of man's spiritual activity is a by-product of a materialistic concern for economic well-being and will reflect that concern. Man's beliefs, thoughts, sentiments—his ideals, morals, arts, science and religion—are the reflection of the particular class, i.e. the economic group, to which one belongs. The various economic groupings are determined by the kind and the degree of the possession, or dispossession, of property:

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and characteristically formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual who derives them through tradition and education may imagine they form the real motives and starting point of his action.<sup>3</sup>

Man is therefore, from this point of view, an economically determined being; or to say that he is a socially determined being is to say the same thing. There is nothing absolute or eternal about our religious beliefs or moral values. Each class in society has its own special morality. "Men," writes Engels, "consciously or unconsciously, derive their moral ideals in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based—from the economic relations in which they carry on production and exchange."<sup>4</sup> Religious beliefs come into being in relation to economic realities. They serve the purpose of making the dispossessed content with their lot on earth, while they hope for reward or fulfilment in an eternal realm beyond time; or they are used by the dispossessors to give an aura of sanctity and of necessity to an economic order in which they profit greatly at the expense of their fellowmen. Religion is, therefore, either an opiate of the people or a tool in the hands of the unscrupulous.

We may conclude from the foregoing that the individual person is thought to have no independence in relation to the economic group to which he belongs. Indeed, on these premisses, there can be no such reality as an individual, personal being, i.e. one who is free, self-determining, individually responsible for his beliefs and deeds. There can only be individual members of a collective whole, each of whom in his individual life reflects "ideal" principles of thought and action which have their source in ma-

3. Marx: *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, quoted in *A Handbook of Marxism*, p. 126.

4. Engels: *Anti-Duhring*, quoted in *A Handbook of Marxism*, p. 248.

terialistic, i.e. economic, realities. This is the economic determinism inherent within Communist philosophical materialism.

In this brief survey of Soviet materialist philosophy as reflected in the writings of Marx and Engels we have sought to develop only those ideas which are relevant to the thesis of our study. It is not our intention to discuss what is valid or invalid in the points that have been raised. It is the author's considered judgment that we have here a mixture of truth and error wherein what often is so is taken for what must inevitably be so. But what we must say concerning these views in the context of our thesis is that there is nothing in this philosophical materialism which logically justifies the communist's moral censure on all those who set themselves against communist thought and practice. On such philosophical premises, those who are the opponents of communism may be pitied, opposed, overthrown, exterminated—but they cannot be morally judged and condemned! The wrath of moral condemnation evidenced in the actual judgments of the communist against his "fascist" foes, as well as the trials and punitive imprisonments of those within the party who are found guilty of deviation, stand in sharp contradiction to the philosophical understanding of man as an economically determined being. Arthur Koestler, a convert from Communism, has written of this contradiction:

The Party denied the free will of the individual—and at the same time it exacted his willing sacrifice. It denied his capacity to choose between two alternatives—and at the same time it demanded that he should always choose the right one. It denied his power to distinguish between good and evil—and at the same time it spoke accusingly of guilt and treachery. The individual stood under the sign of economic fatality, a wheel in a clockwork which had been wound up from all eternity and could not be stopped or influenced—and the party demanded that the wheel should revolt against the clockwork and change its course. There was somewhere an error in calculation; the equation did not work out.<sup>5</sup>

There is here a serious contradiction between Communist theory and Communist practice. But one wonders if it is not possible to find reasons for the contradiction both in the philosophy and its classical proponents themselves.

Communist theory had its rise not only in a scientific view of man and history but also in the profoundly humane feelings and interests of its "founder." Marx's personal thoughts and desires would seem to have been genuinely humanistic. The philosophical system he propounded is not as objectively scientific as it is said to be for it reflects the ideological interests of Marx. It was in the name of human values, in prophetic protest against the nineteenth century capitalist system, which tended to treat the vast majority of men as mere means to the end of production, and thus de-personalized vast areas of human life, that Marx launched his philosophy in the world. He cries out against the Christian teachings not in wilful

5. In his novel *Darkness at Noon*, and quoted in Koestler's autobiographical work *The Invisible Writing* p. 356.

blasphemy but, no matter how mistakenly, with genuine concern for his fellow-men:

The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submission, humility, in a word, all the qualities of the "canaille"; and the proletariat . . . needs courage, self-confidence, pride, a sense of personal dignity and independence, even more than it needs daily bread. The social principles of Christianity are lickspittle, whereas the proletariat is revolutionary. So much for the social principles of Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Marx and Engels both revolted against an idealism which they believed to be more concerned with idealizing the real than with changing it. They revolted against a pious spirituality which manifested an unconcern for man's physical life and physical needs and centered all attention on "spiritual values" and the cultivation of the "inner life." They deliberately set out to correct this false emphasis on one aspect of human existence to the denial of the other, and in doing so they fell prey to an equally extreme and false emphasis.

"Marx and I," wrote Engels in 1890, "are perhaps responsible for the fact that our disciples have sometimes insisted more than they ought on the economic factors. We were compelled to insist on their fundamental character through opposition to our opponents who denied it, and we had neither time nor opportunity to do justice to other factors."<sup>7</sup>

Here is an admission of ideological taint which must qualify claims to scientific objectivity. Communist theory is, in part at least, determined by the historical situation out of which it arose. Its materialism is a "polemic materialism" set in opposition to an equally one-sided idealism and spiritualism.

In view of these humanistic and polemical elements in the origin of Communism it becomes less difficult to understand the contradictions in practice of its proponents. The moral judgments which they level against their opponents are a witness to the remnant of the original humanism whence modern communism has sprung and they continue to be a very distorted and ambiguous witness to the moral responsibility of the individual, and thus of the primacy of spirit over matter, which stand in contradiction to the materialism of Soviet ideology.

We now turn to a brief description of American practical materialism. In Communism the materialism is found in the theory, the humanism in the practice. In the American "way of life" the humanism is found in the theory and the contradictory "materialism" in the attitudes and deeds which actually determine that way of life. We have already suggested that if there is a commonly accepted "public philosophy" in America it tends to be a humanism which takes its stand against a thoroughgoing scientific naturalism, and the materialism which is inherent therein, and asserts in

6. Marx: *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, translated by J. F. Scanlan, p. 235.

7. Quoted by Denis de Rougemont in *Communism and Christians* etc.

man both the reality and primacy of spirit. It is not with this philosophy that we have mainly to do here. Its main tenets will be familiar to all our readers for we imbibed them with our primary and secondary school education. We wish rather to concentrate on the practical materialism which stands so glaringly in contradiction to the beliefs we profess.

The fact that we in Canada share this practical materialism with our neighbours to the south is indicated in our first illustration and is to be understood as pertaining throughout. A colleague of the author told of attending a short while ago the reunion of a University class which graduated some twenty-five years ago. He said that he could not help but remark that all the conversation seemed to revolve around two questions: What are you working at? How much money are you making? It might, of course, be contended that the necessity for making small talk with those whom passing years and changed circumstances had made something less than friends explains the choice of such topics of conversation. But anyone who has had dealings with students during the past quarter century and has had occasion to observe the way in which the question of the immediate, material benefit of courses determines whether or not they will be chosen, knows that the subjects of conversation at the reunion cited only witness to a predominant concern for economic well-being to the exclusion, or at least dethronement, of concerns more in keeping with a genuinely humanistic philosophy of life.

The second illustration in support of our thesis comes from a story in *Time Magazine*, February 26, 1955. Under the section entitled "Education" (!) there is an account of "as bold an experiment as has ever been tried in business: a full-time ten month course in liberal arts for young executives." What is the reason for this excursion into the study of the "humanities" on the part of business men? Is it in order to participate through learning in the "spiritual values" of a humane culture? Not at all! It is for purposes largely materialistic. It was because the President of a large private enterprise, which performs an extremely useful and necessary public service, found that his young executives had "neither the background nor the ability to make the sort of broad decisions that modern business demands." So the President of the Company and the President of the University got together and set up a special "Institute of Humanistic Studies for Executives" and worked out a curriculum which they hoped would serve to "educate" for the demands of modern business. The experiment is apparently "paying off."

We have chosen these illustrations because they are recent; a multitude of others lie close at hand in the press, in books, on radio and television and in the ordinary conversations of men, to show that the aim of a distressingly large number in the professional, industrial and commercial world is to be a "success" and that the measure of success is an economic one. Nor is this practical materialism we have indicated at the level of management and the professions confined to these groups alone. Labour, too, gives clear evi-

dence of the same. Among the labouring classes "getting ahead" is measured almost exclusively in economic terms. The adequate standard of living after which we all seek is judged largely in terms of its material components. Welfare is understood largely in terms of material goods. Economic prosperity is thought of as being unqualifiedly good; it is sought as an end in itself and is made an index of social health. This is not the place to evaluate this practical materialism. We shall attempt such an evaluation at the end of the article. Here we are interested merely in pointing to the fact of its existence, to establish the contention that at every level of American life today it is the quantitative, material ends of living that for so many have become the objects of ultimate concern.

Moreover, it often happens that this practical materialism is hidden, hypocritically, behind a facade of spirituality. We use our humanistic philosophy as an ideological defence for our materialistic aims and ends. "I doubt," Reinhold Niebuhr has said, "that any modern nation could produce hymns to freedom so shamelessly loaded with ideological taint as those with which the National Association of Manufacturers promises abundance and happiness to all if only we will let everyone do what he wants in regard to the control and use of his property."<sup>8</sup> An example of the same "ideological taint" might be found closer to home in the fact that a large industrial concern recently offered what at first appeared to be a generous gift of a civic auditorium to the people of one of our largest cities, ostensibly as its contribution toward the cultivation of the Arts; but it actually turned out to be a thoroughgoing commercial venture engaged in for apparently economic ends.

The practical materialism of this Continent has even more subtle forms of existence and manifestation than this all-absorbing quest for material gain. As a by-product of this quest we find that people tend to look on others, and themselves, in a materialistic way, placing a "commercial value" on their own and other's lives. We thus tend to lose ourselves as persons and to become mere "things." In the business world men are often thought to be merely expendable commodities, bought and sold in the open market solely in terms of their economic worth. In the political realm men are often thought of as mere units in the mass, "things" to be coerced and controlled by propaganda, effectively administered by mass forms of communication, or manipulated by a new group of people highly skilled in the technique of "social engineering." In the social world so often men are not valued for what they are in themselves but for what they are in terms of the group to which they belong. And even in the intimate realm of personal relations, such as marriage and the family, it can happen that we value one another mainly as possessions, as property is valued.

Moreover, this impersonal, objective, oft-times commercial way that many are looked upon by others is reflected in the way in which men look

8. In an article entitled *The Sickness of American Culture in The Nation*, March 6, 1948.

upon themselves. Eric Fromm has given us a brilliant analysis of this fact in the chapter entitled "The Marketing Orientation" in his book *Man For Himself*:

Since modern man experiences himself both as the seller and the commodity to be sold on the market, his self-esteem depends upon conditions beyond his control. If he is "successful" he is valuable; if he is not, he is worthless. The degree of insecurity which results from this orientation can hardly be over-estimated. If one feels that one's value is not constituted primarily by the human qualities one possesses, but by one's success on a competitive market with everchanging conditions, one's self-esteem is bound to be shaky and in constant need of confirmation by others.

It is in this way that, for all the vaunted "humanism" which holds that the value of man *does* reside in the "human qualities" he possesses, American man is victimized by a practical materialism which actually values him as a commercial commodity with quantitative, saleable parts.

We have suggested in our analysis of Communism that the clue to the reasons for the Communists' practical deviation from their theoretical philosophy might be found in the latter's origins; so it may also be with the American practical deviation from its philosophy. Contemporary American humanism had its rise in the modern scientific age. It is a humanism which by and large is based upon the empirical methods and attitudes of science; thus it gives man no adequate protection against the inroads of scientific assumptions and attitudes when these are turned toward man himself. We are unable, within the scope of this paper to trace the way in which the scientism of contemporary humanism has left man exposed to the practical materialism of present day American life. A very able analysis of this may be found in Professor Derwyn Owen's book *Scientism, Man and Religion*. We must be content with pointing out here that this humanism does purport to have a "scientific base," that it could have grown and flourished only in a soil of wealth, security and prosperity, and that, paradoxically enough, it is not free from responsibility for the practical materialism of the present-day American "way of life." Communism may indeed turn out to be but "a systematic and coherent statement of many of the axioms of modern culture we hold ourselves".

This correspondence between Communism and American practical materialism is spoken of by Denis de Rougemont in a composite work entitled: *Communism and Christians*:

The "anti-Marxist crusade" organized throughout the world by the panic of capitalism is well-known. The true motto of the crusade is: dividends first! but it proposes to use the spiritual as a mask. It enlists many estimable people in a cause which it depicts as a gilt-edged security. It is in fact the crusade of hypocritical materialism against generous materialism; the crusade of the fascists against their brother Stalinism, a war of religions which are not ours . . . We are offered our choice of two kinds of materialism, but Communism at least wanted to change the world.<sup>9</sup>

9. *Op. cit.*, p. 258.



The quotation leads us into the final section of our paper. The title sets one kind of materialism over against the other in such a way as to suggest that one might have to choose between the two even though the choice is one between the lesser and greater of two evils. The title was originally given to the author and he has sought to develop his thesis within its limits. The subject might also suggest that by discovering similarities between the two protagonists in the present "Cold War" we might have some common ground for a reconciliation between the two. For the Christian, both of these suggestions must be forthrightly rejected. Neither type of materialism can be accepted for both are false. And mutuality in error cannot be any kind of basis for friendship or even co-existence. In Marxism the genuine humane impulses out of which its philosophy sprang, and which we have suggested might still be reflected in the bitterness of moral censure passed by communists on their foes, are corrupted by the materialism of that philosophy and the practices to which it most generally leads. In the American way of life, the practical materialism of which we have spoken casts its blight on all the humane elements of its humanistic philosophy so that it too ends in the dehumanizing of man. Let our choice therefore be neither the one nor the other. Let us reject both in the name of a philosophy, which is no philosophy but a faith and a way of life, which does full justice both to the spiritual and material aspects of human existence, and which secures both for man because it finds the source of both in God. We speak of the Christian understanding of the nature and destiny of man as grounded in the revelation of God to man in Jesus Christ.

If "materialism" means either the philosophical materialism of Communism, which regards "matter" as primary and "spirit" an epiphenomenon of matter, or the "practical materialism" of America, which makes the chief end of man, and the standard of all that is valued, the acquisition of money and the things that it will buy, there is no place in Christian thought and practice for "materialism." But if "materialism" means the recognition of the reality and goodness of the physical aspects of man's life and the assertion of the truth that these form part of the essential nature of man and thus must be affirmed in any statement of what is the good life for man, then the Christian faith justifies "materialism."

We have noted above that Marx revolted against the pietistic spiritualism which concentrated on the cultivation and salvation of the spirit to the denial of interest in the physical necessities and the material well-being of man. The Christian Church should also engage in such a revolt for, as Archbishop Temple has said, the Christian religion is one of the most "materialistic" of religions. Wherever it has been true to its foundation in revelation, the Church has never denied the essential goodness of things physical. Indeed it has affirmed it and included the whole realm of the material in God's saving work in Christ. For God is the good Creator not only of eternal spirits but of bodies and things as well; and He is the Redeemer not only of men's souls, but of their bodies as well. We who are

Christians must therefore guard against fighting a false "materialism" with an equally false "spiritualism." The God in whom we believe has revealed His will for the fulness of life for man on every level of his being. Salvation is the restoration of man's being to its essential wholeness—its essential unity of body, mind and spirit. Our Lord in the Gospel story of His saving words and deeds was concerned with both man's physical and spiritual needs. Indeed, in the last analysis, these needs are virtually inseparable.

However, though "materialism" is thus affirmed within our faith, there is in Christian thought a certain primacy of the "spirit" over the "body." For man is created and redeemed to be a self-determining being who actualizes the meaning and attains the fulfilment of his life in love; and love means a relation between persons wherein both the self and others are fulfilled in community. Wherever, in philosophy or practice, Communist or American "materialism" tends to deny the dignity and worth of personal beings made for love, or to frustrate the fulfilment of their beings through communal relations of which love is the very essence, it must be challenged and opposed by any who have heard and believed the Word of God.