

Marx-Engels Correspondence 1890

Engels to C. Schmidt In Berlin

Abstract

Transcription/Markup: Brian Baggins;

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[...]

I saw a review of Paul Barth's book [*Die Geschichtsphilosophie Hegels und der Hegelianer bis auf Marx und Hartmann*] by that bird of ill omen, Moritz Wirth, in the Vienna *Deutsche Worte*, and *this* book itself, as well. I will have a look at it, but I must say that if "little Moritz" is right when he quotes Barth as stating that the sole example of the dependence of philosophy, etc., on the material conditions of existence which he can find in all Marx's works is that Descartes declares animals to be machines, then I am sorry for the man who can write such a thing. And if this man has not yet discovered that while the material mode of existence is the *primum agens* [primary agent, prime cause] this does not preclude the ideological spheres from reacting upon it in their turn, though with a secondary effect, he cannot possibly have understood the subject he is writing about. However, as I said, all this is secondhand and little Moritz is a dangerous friend. The materialist conception of history has a lot of them nowadays, to whom it serves as an excuse for *not* studying history. Just as Marx used to say, commenting on the French "Marxists" of the late [18]70s: "All I know is that I am not a Marxist."

There has also been a discussion in the *Volks-Tribune* about the distribution of products in future society, whether this will take place according to the amount of work done or otherwise. The question has been approached very "materialistically" in opposition to certain idealistic phraseology about justice. But strangely enough it has not struck anyone that, after all, the method of distribution essentially depends on *how much* there is to distribute, and that this must surely change with the progress of

production and social organization, so that the method of distribution may also change. But everyone who took part in the discussion, "socialist society" appeared not as something undergoing continuous change and progress but as a stable affair fixed once for all, which must, therefore, have a method of distribution fixed once for all. All one can reasonably do, however, is 1) to try and discover the method of distribution to be used *at the beginning*, and 2) to try and find the *general tendency* of the further development. But about this I do not find a single word in the whole debate.

In general, the word "materialistic" serves many of the younger writers in Germany as a mere phrase with which anything and everything is labeled without further study, that is, they stick on this label and then consider the question disposed of. But our conception of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for construction after the manner of the Hegelian. All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different formations of society must be examined individually before the attempt is made to deduce them from the political, civil law, aesthetic, philosophic, religious, etc., views corresponding to them. Up to now but little has been done here because only a few people have got down to it seriously. In this field we can utilize heaps of help, it is immensely big, anyone who will work seriously can achieve much and distinguish himself. But instead of this too many of the younger Germans simply make use of the phrase historical materialism (and *everything* can be turned into a phrase) only in order to get their own relatively scanty historical knowledge — for economic history is still as yet in its swaddling clothes! — constructed into a neat system as quickly as possible, and they then deem themselves something very tremendous. And after that a Barth can come along and attack the thing itself, which in his circle has indeed been degraded to a mere phrase.

However, all this will right itself. We're strong enough in Germany now to stand a lot. One of the greatest services which the Anti-Socialist Law did us was to free us from the obtuseness of the German intellectual who had got tinged with socialism. We are now strong enough to digest the German intellectual too, who is giving himself great airs again. You, who have really done something, must have noticed yourself how few of the young literary men who fasten themselves on to the party give themselves in the trouble to study economics, the history of economics, the history of trade, of industry, of agriculture, of the formations of society. How many know anything of Maurer except his name! The self-sufficiency of the journalist must serve for everything here and the result looks like it. It often seems as if these gentlemen think anything is good enough for the workers. If these gentlemen only knew that Marx thought his best things were still not good enough for the workers, how he regarded it as a crime to offer the workers anything but the very best!

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