

THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION

A correspondent has asked: "What is the value of the Materialist Conception of History?" Reply has been made as follows:—

THE MARXIST interpretation of history is known as the Materialist Conception of History. According to it, thought and action depend entirely upon the material conditions of production. In other words, the technique of production at any time explains both the social condition of men and the ideas which they hold. It does not seem to occur to Marx that the technique of production is a result of the thoughts which men think; and that therefore the argument moves in a circle.

The materialist conception of history reinforces the economic argument of Marx in favour of socialism by asserting that communism is bound in any case to happen. The argument is that the present conditions of production lead to growing concentration and monopoly of industry, and that it also leads to a growing class struggle of which the ultimate result will be the seizure of all means of production by the proletariat (the expropriation of the expropriators) and the establishment of a communist, classless society.

Those who have swallowed these doctrines without reflection usually have no difficulty by selecting certain historical facts and suppressing others in demonstrating that all history has in fact happened according to Marx's conception. The strain involved in so explaining Russian and German history during the past thirty years is rather great.

The forces which hold society together are more profound than Marx imagines. They have their roots no doubt in instincts of race preservation, and develop into the loftiest emotions of self-sacrifice, patriotism and service to others. On the other hand, the race cannot survive without the individual and the impulse of self-preservation is strong. This may have encouraged man's inventiveness, which has become so developed that the exercise of it is an end in itself, not determined by economic motives.

The error of the materialist conception of history is to mistake the part for the whole. Economic environment certainly is one of the conditions under which men must live, but it is not the only thing which determines their thoughts and actions. A train can only run on railway lines; they are a condition determining how it can run; but the number of passengers seeking conveyance and the number of merchants seeking transport, and the revenues so gained in relation to costs, determine how many trains shall run from one point to another. Thus, although men must conform their actions to the economic condition in which they are, their freedom of action is not taken away.

Moreover, freedom of choice is a necessity of rational economic action, which involves sacrificing what is less valuable in order to get something more valuable. If it were possible to have

two men whose economic condition was in every way identical at some moment, could it be seriously doubted that their subsequent actions would be different, and that the difference between them would become greater and greater as time passed?

LONDON HOUSING SITES.

Speaking in the House of Lords on 28th September Lord Latham said that the figure of £12,000 an acre for housing sites in London which he had mentioned on an earlier occasion was by no means exceptional; it was an average figure. He gave the following details, the figures having been certified by the Ministry of Health: In Bermondsey, £22,000 an acre; in Lambeth, £29,000 an acre; in Holborn, £30,000 an acre; in Finsbury, £37,000 an acre; in Stepney, £33,000 an acre; in St. Pancras, £32,000 an acre. Even in a place like Stoke Newington, which is on the boundary of the County of London and which is one of those areas where the planners suggest that development should be on the basis of 100 persons per acre, upwards of £12,000 has been paid per acre (namely, £120 *per person*). He could give even more startling figures acquired by the Borough Councils, and he was not suggesting that they were more wasteful than the London County Council, because these valuations had to be approved by the Chief Valuer of the Treasury. There was a scheme in Holborn where the land cost £45,000 an acre, and in St. Marylebone the figure was £27,000; and Lord Latham mentioned the experience of the L.C.C. in connection with the improvement of the Strand, where the price of the land asked was at the rate of £1,000,000 an acre. In an article in the *Daily Herald*, 13th October, he referred to the impossible prices of land which deprived the people of London of much needed open spaces. The County of London Plan, he said, suggested that in London there should be four acres of open spaces per one thousand of the population. That would mean an additional 4,157 acres at a cost spread over years of more than £50,000,000.

POTTER'S "HOGSNORTON"

In the "Monday Night at Eight" B.B.C. entertainment programme on 30th October, Mr. Gillie Potter was in his best form as "condescendingly informative." He explained that all the difficulties on the Marshmallow estates at Hogsnorton were to be settled by planning. "It is still a secret, however, that the largest tripe factory in the world is to be built at Hogsnorton, but one gentleman in the know hurried to Hogsnorton and offered Lord Marshmallow £100 an acre for land that was not worth £5 an acre. Lord Marshmallow was staggered, but gladly accepted this. The gentleman then returned hurriedly to London and sold the land again for £500 an acre to a second gentleman in the know. This second gentleman is now negotiating the sale of land to the Government at £5,000 an acre."

DEBT AND SUBSIDIES

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury stated on 20th October that the total expenditure of the country during the five years of war up to 2nd September, 1944, had been £24,000,000,000 (twenty-four thousand millions). Answering a question in the House on 31st October, Sir John Anderson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, said that the expenditure on war services in the same period was approximately £20,000,000,000. Of the total expenditure in the first five years of war, £11,234,000,000 was met by taxation and other revenue and £12,659,000,000 by borrowing. The total of the National Debt on 30th September, 1944, was approximately £21,200,000,000, an increase of £12,800,000,000 since the beginning of the war.

The subsidies from the Treasury on bread, milk, sugar, eggs, etc., amount in the present financial year to £214,000,000. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury, answering a question in the House on 24th October, said that if the food subsidies were withdrawn, while current prices were paid to producers and distributors, so that retail prices rose by the amount of these subsidies, the effect would be that the cost of living index would rise from its present position of 30 per cent. above the level of September, 1939, to 46 per cent. above that level; or, what is the same thing, from 101 per cent. above the level of July, 1914, to 126 per cent. above that level. Which means also that the "pound" which represented 20s. in 1914 has now a purchasing power of only 8s. 10d.

P. J. MARKHAM

The death of Mr. P. J. Markham, late of Mitcham, Victoria, was announced in the August issue of the *Adelaide People's Advocate*. For the past number of years Mr. Markham was secretary of the Henry George Foundation, Australia, and was in frequent correspondence with the Foundation in Great Britain, especially for the supply of books and pamphlets. His most recent order was for 1,000 copies of *Progress and Poverty*, a shipment of which is now on the way. Associated with the Literary Committee of the Australian Foundation, he rendered valuable service in connection with the numerous publications it has produced. Previously, and for many years, he was secretary of the Victorian Henry George League, and for a time was editor of the *Melbourne Progress*. His colleagues in Australia pay tribute to his memory and extend, as we do, sincere sympathy to the bereaved relatives.

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