

# The Theoretical System of Sun Yat-Sen

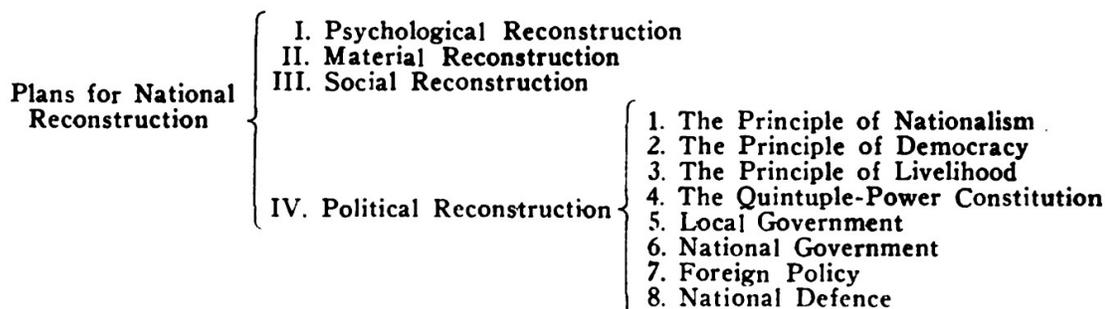
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## I.

It is customary to refer to the teachings of Sun Yat Sen as the "Three Principles" as though the two are conterminous. Accurately speaking, that is not the case. In his will Dr. Sun clearly stated that the course of the Chinese Revolution should be guided by his *Plans for National Reconstruction*, the *Program of National Reconstruction* and the *Manifesto of the First Party Congress*, in addition to his *Three Principles*. It is evident from this that Sunyatsenism embraces a good deal more than the "Three Principles."

The question then arises: How are these different parts related to each other

*for National Reconstruction—Psychological Reconstruction, Material Reconstruction, Social Reconstruction*—had been published, I devoted myself to the writing of *Political Reconstruction*, in order to complete the book. This part, which was larger than the former three, included *The Principle of Nationalism, The Principal of Democracy, The Principle of Livelihood, The Quintuple-Power Constitution, Local Government, National Government, Foreign Policy, National Defense*, altogether eight parts." To put this plan in diagram form, we have something like the following:



in the Sunyatsenian system of thought if Sunyatsenism is not a medley of heterogeneous and disconnected ideas? To answer this question is the purpose of this chapter.

This task is not as easy as it may appear to be, for Dr. Sun was not very explicit on this point. It is true that in the preface to his lectures on the Principle of Nationalism Dr. Sun indicated clearly the general plan of his works—those contemplated as well as those already completed—and their inter-relations, but they throw little light on the question before us. There he wrote: "After the first three parts of my *Plans*

Without question, this diagram gives us a clear cross-section view, so to speak, of Dr. Sun's theories, but its value in demonstrating the Sunyatsenian theoretical system—that is, the relation of the component parts or theories to each other and the unity of the whole—is almost nil.

Under such circumstances, it is necessary to read Dr. Sun between the lines and grasp the logic behind them in order to see the unity of his thought. The following pages are offered as results of such a study.

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Works of Sun Yat Sen*, new and enlarged edition, (Shanghi, 1927), Vol. IV, "Miscellaneous Writings," pp. 50-1.

## II.

"Every theory of social action," writes Professor Laski, "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 Boussuet, 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."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Sun 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 Marxism; for Dr. Sun was, in a special sense, the pupil of Marx, even though he disagreed with Marx on many fundamental points. Marxism has for its foundation the Materialistic Conception of History which maintains that "production, and, next to production, distribution of the product, is the basis of every social order; that in every historic form of society the division of the product of human labor produced by it, and with it the social arrangement into classes or estates, depends on what and how it is produced in that society, and how the product is exchanged. Accordingly, the last causes of all social changes and political transformations are to be sought not in the increasing insight of men into the laws of eternal truth and justice, or some similar 'ideas,' but in the changes of the methods of production and distribution—not in the philosophy, but in the economics of the given epoch."<sup>3</sup> As Marx himself expressed it:

"In making their livelihood to-

gether men enter into certain necessary involuntary relations with each other, industrial relations which correspond to whatever stage society has reached in the development of its material productive forces. The totality of these industrial relations constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis upon which the legal and political superstructure is built, and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The method of producing the material livelihood determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not men's consciousness which determines their life; on the contrary, it is their social life which determines their consciousness.

"At a certain stage of their development the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the old conditions of production, or, what is its legal expression, with the old property relations under which these forces have hitherto been exerted. From forms of development of the productive forces the relations turn into fetters of production. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic basis the whole vast superstructure becomes slowly or rapidly revolutionized."<sup>4</sup>

In other words, economic conditions are the prime movers of history. Social systems are but a reflex of their economic foundation, and therefore cannot be changed at will except as there has been a change in the economic foundation.

From the Materialistic Conception of History Marx deduced his Theory of Class Struggle, for class struggle is always the product of economic conditions of a given epoch. Marx believed that the

<sup>2</sup> Harold J. Laski: *Communism* (London, 1927), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Louis B. Boudin: *The Theoretical System of Karl Marx* (Chicago, 1907), pp. 25-6.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx: *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Preface. The translation of the passage quoted is according to Boudin. See the latter's *Theoretical System of Karl Marx* (Chicago, 1907), pp. 16-17.

class struggle is the dynamic force of social progress. The economic interests of the exploiting class must invariably conflict with the interests of the exploited. This conflict, thought Marx, furnishes the basic motive for social progress. Marx was not the first to discern the presence of the class struggle in history, but he was the first to assign to this struggle the rôle of the propelling power in social progress. This point was strongly emphasized by Marx's disciples, when he was accused of adopting the class struggle theory from others. Kautsky's defense serves as a noteworthy example. It reads:

"But wherein consists the particular merit of the *Communist Manifesto*, if the so-called theories of increasing misery and concentration of capital were acknowledged by the other Socialists of their time, if they all based their Socialism upon the economic tendencies of the capitalist mode of production?

"This merit consisted first of all in the fact that these theories appeared more clear-cut in the *Manifesto* than in any other Socialist publication of their time; and secondly *in the conception of the rôle of class struggle as the driving force in social development* and in the application of this conception to the proletarian struggle."<sup>5</sup> (Our italics).

It was against such Marxian ideological background that Dr. Sun set forth his *Min Sheng Shih Kwang* or the Social Interpretation of History. He neither questioned the general importance of the economic factor in history nor ignored the phenomenon of class struggle. To Marx properly belongs the glory of having discovered that social systems have an economic foundation and explanation and that class struggle is an outstanding

phenomenon of all past history. But, maintained Dr. Sun, when it comes to the *interpretation* of these discoveries, Marx sadly missed the mark. Marx thought he had discovered in them the laws of social evolution. In reality, what he discovered and described with such infinite detail were not the *laws* and operations of social evolution, but *manifestations* of the *effects* of the operations of the laws of social evolution. He did not deal with causes, but with effects, which he mistook for causes. He had never discovered the laws of social evolution and their operations.

The Social Interpretation of History is based upon the theory that man's effort to solve his problem of existence is the propelling motive force in history. Everywhere and at all times man manifests a strong will to live, to live comfortably and to perpetuate themselves. This will to live arises the problem of existence, and man has been forced under the penalty of extinction to concentrate his energies upon its solution. All past history is but a record of trials and experiences man encountered in his efforts to make secure his earthly existence.

Man's earthly existence, however, is not merely animal existence; and the problem of existence is not exclusively one of subsistence. Subsistence gained, man craves for higher things which are non-economic in character but the possession of which is equally indispensable to the free expression and development of his personality. This is where man and brute part ways; this is where culture and civilization begin. Had man been satisfied with mere physical existence, human society would not have been different from the animal kingdom.

In prehistoric times, man *struggled* for existence. This struggle took on two different aspects, namely, the *exterior* war of the species against the adverse natural conditions and the rival species, and the *inner* war for the means of existence within the species. The extent and importance of the latter were never very great; and in the long course of evolution,

<sup>5</sup> Karl Kautsky: "Das Kommunistische Manifest ein Plagiat," *Neue Zeit*, Jahre XXIV (1906), Vol. II, p. 698. Quoted by V. G. Simkhovitch in his *Marxism vs. Socialism* (New York, 1913), pp. 150-51.

it has been reduced to a minimum. Man has been taught by long experiences to recognize the force they can borrow from the practice of mutual aid and support, and the joys they can find in social life. Gradually a consciousness of human solidarity has developed until after the dawn of history we find cooperation through the division of labor to be the rule of social life.<sup>6</sup> All social advance has been registered not as the result of conflict of interests at the point of production, but in response to the common interests of the majority as social beings. Social evolution always operates in response to this universal law. The end and aim of all social progress are the solution to the problem of existence.

The struggle for existence—the Marxian class struggle being one form of such struggle—is an exceptional phenomenon rather than the usual rule of maintaining existence. It is an *effect* of the insecurity of life and not a *cause* of social progress. It is to the interest of society as a whole to eliminate the cause of such struggle; and in proportion as society advances in its efforts to eliminate the cause do the effects disappear. "Society progresses," said Dr. Sun, "in response to the common interests of the majority of society rather than to the conflict of interests. If the interests of the majority of society are harmonious, the majority of people will benefit and society will progress. The reason why society likes to see the interests of its majority in perfect harmony is because of the universal quest for a solution to the problem of existence. From ancient times until now man has exerted energies in order to maintain his existence. And mankind's exertions for continuous existence has been the cause of society's unceasing progress, the law of social evolution. Class struggle is not the cause of special progress, it is a disease developed in the course of social

<sup>6</sup> *Collected Works of Sun Yat Sen*, new and enlarged ed., Vol. I, "Lectures on the Principle of Democracy," pp. 2 *et seq.* Dr. Sun was evidently under the influence of Kropotkin's writings. See the latter's *Mutual Aid* (New York, 1914), p. v.

evolution. The cause of the disease is the inability to subsist, and the result of the disease is class war. What Marx gained through his studies of social problems was a knowledge of diseases in the course of social evolution. Therefore Marx can only be called a social pathologist; it cannot be said that he is a social biologist."<sup>7</sup>

The test for any form of society is its ability to answer the ever-increasing range of needs—largely but not exclusively economic in character—of society. Failure to measure up to this test makes its doom inevitable. Gradually there are evolved new social conditions and new material productive forces which will replace the old and which promise to come closer to the solution of the universal problem of existence. This change represents one distinct advance over the previous stage in the process of social evolution, and social life is, to that extent, enriched.

Such, in essence, is Dr. Sun's philosophy of history which he called *Min Sheng Shih Kwang* or the Social Interpretation of History. We shall now contrast it with Karl Marx's Materialistic Conception of History and see the exact points of difference. In the first place, in the Marxian system of thought it is the inanimate material productive forces which occupy the center of the stage; in the Sunyatsenian system, it is human life itself. In the second place, with Marx, it is economic evolution which gives rise to social evolution, for he maintained that social systems change with a change in the mode of production; on the other hand, to Dr. Sun it is social evolution which dictates economic evolution, for he explained that modes of production change because they fail to solve the problem of existence. In the third place, to Marx class struggle is the only form of struggle for existence; to Dr. Sun, it is only one of the multifarious forms which that struggle may

<sup>7</sup> *Collected Works of Sun Yat Sen*, new and enlarged ed. (Shanghai, 1927), Vol. I, "Lectures on the Principle of Livelihood," pp. 13-14.

take. It follows from this that while Dr. Sun recognized the importance of nationalist movements, Marx ignored the force of national sentiment completely. In the fourth place, Marx stressed the clash of human interests and the law of mutual struggle in the process of evolution; Dr. Sun, on the other hand, emphasized social solidarity and the law of mutual aid. In the fifth place, class struggle is, according to Marx, the rule of life and the cause of social progress; according to Dr. Sun, it is a symptom of social pathology and is no more the law of social biology than disease is the law of human physiology. In the sixth place, Marx was the champion of class revolution and consequently he saw the social problem from the angle of the producers who constitute only one portion of society; Dr. Sun, on the other hand, was the leader of a movement for the emancipation of a whole nation; therefore he viewed the question from the standpoint of the consumers who make up the whole of society. Finally, the two men held widely divergent views regarding the prospect of social progress. According to Karl Marx, or, to be exact, according to his logic, social progress will come to an abrupt end when the social revolution is accomplished, for then class struggle ceases; and with the cessation of class struggle, social progress loses its motive power. According to Dr. Sun, it will continue forever, for he maintained that man's quest for a more nearly complete solution of the problem of existence is the driving force in social change, and that that problem will continue to present itself as long as there is humanity.

The point has often been made that Dr. Sun's philosophy of history was verbally taken from Mr. Maurice William, an obscure American Socialist writer, thereby implying Dr. Sun's lack of originality. Nothing is further from truth than this. It may be granted that Mr. William's book<sup>8</sup> had suggested to Dr. Sun the broad outlines of his theory of Social Interpretation of History; but to give him any greater credit than this is unjustified. As we have pointed out a while ago, the peculiar emphasis and direction of Dr. Sun's theory are all his own. Moreover, the *Min Sheng Shih Kwang* is, in one sense, but the philosophical basis of the *Min Sheng Shu I* or the Principle of Livelihood which Dr. Sun formulated almost twenty years before the appearance of Mr. William's book. Therefore the effect of Mr. William's influence upon Dr. Sun is rather a confirmation of what was already in the latter's mind than suggestion of something that was strictly new. As Dr. Sun himself expressed this point, "The new theory of this American scholar (meaning Mr. William) tallies exactly with the third principle (meaning the Principle of Livelihood) of our party."<sup>9</sup> That statement should have settled the disputed question long ago.

(To be continued)

<sup>8</sup> Maurice William, *The Social Interpretation of History*, (New York, 1921).

<sup>9</sup> *Collected Works of Sun Yat Sen*, new and enlarged edition, (Shanghai, 1927), Vol. I, "Lectures on the Principle of Livelihood," p. 10. (Our italics.)