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EXCHANGE ON HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

by
Karl Kautsky

Forgotten Books

Karl Kautsky

Exchange on Historical Materialism

Debate with E. Belfort Bax

(1896)

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The Materialist Conception of History

The synthetic or the neo-Marxist conception of history

by E. Belfort Bax

The Aims and Limitations of the Materialist Conception of History

Part I. The Critics of the Theory

Part II. The Historical Theory

Part III. The Application of the Theory

Karl Kautsky

The Materialist Conception of History

(1896)

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*Some time ago there appeared in the **Neue Zeit**, of Stuttgart, a discussion between E. Belfort Bax and Karl Kautsky on the "Materialist Conception of History." It has more than once been suggested that this discussion would be of interest to readers of the **Social-Democrat**, and thanks to our comrade, J.B. Askew, who has been good enough to translate it, we are now able to reproduce it here.*

We followers of the methods of scientific Socialism, as laid down by Marx and Engels, are most unlucky; not only do the opponents of Marx and Engels fight us – besides that is natural – but, there are also people who every now and again go too far in their praise of Marx and Engels, and yet who find it incompatible with the dignity of a free thinker to apply their theories in a logical manner. The witty remark of

Marx that he himself was no Marxist, they apply in deadly earnest, and they would very much like to make people believe that Marx considered those who shared his point of view as idiots, who were utterly incapable of thinking for themselves. Or they declare that the Marxists are in the main incapable of understanding Marx, and that they, the non-Marxists, are raped upon to defend Marx's theory from the fanaticism of the Marxists.

Generally these curious beings content themselves with uttering certain of those phrases which, when brought out with the requisite tone of moral indignation, are sure of success in an assembly of freethinkers. A somewhat more serious attempt of this sort is made by the English Socialist, Belfort Bax, with an article entitled *The Materialist Conception of History*, which he has published in a recent issue of the Vienna weekly, **Die Zeit**.

Bax says of the materialist conception of history, after an introductory sentence:

> "Taken in its most extreme form, therefore, this (the materialist) conception (of the historical development) says nothing less than that morality, religion, and art are not merely influenced by the economic conditions, but that they spring alone from the thought-reflex of those conditions in the social consciousness. In one word, the essential foundations of all history are material wealth, its production and exchange. Religion, morals, and art are chance phenomena, whose expression can be directly, or indirectly, traced back to an economic foundation."

And in a footnote, Bax remarks in addition:

> "No one who knows the theories of Karl Marx will need to be told that Marx himself was far from taking up such an extreme standpoint in his statement of the materialist

> conception of history. '*Moi même je ne suis pas Marxiste*' – (myself, I am no Marxist) he wrote once, and he would most certainly have repeated this opinion if he had seen the latest performances of the 'Marxists,' Plechanoff, Mehring, or Kautsky."

This footnote is decidedly original. The latest performances of the Marxists have been a source of displeasure to Bax. But he is afraid it would not have sufficient weight if he simply gave expression to his personal feelings of dissatisfaction with us. With a tenacity, which would have done honour to Miss Eusapia, he invokes the spirit of Karl Marx and allows him to formally disavow us.

It is, doubtless, in the highest degree fatal for us if Marx, through the medium of Bax, had disavowed our latest performances. But Bax has really no need to strain his theosophic powers so much. The materialist conception of history is the work not only of Marx, but also of Engels, and he had seen the "latest performances of the Marxists." Why does Bax not mention Engels?

That is not the only remarkable point about this footnote. It is clear the only object is to get rid, once for all, of the three Marxists in question. To a clearing up of the issue it does not contribute in the smallest degree. On the contrary. In the text we only hear of the materialist conception of history. The note, on the other hand, tells us the conception developed in the text is not that of Marx. But he is very careful not to tell us whose conception it really is. Does Bax wish to insinuate that the conception of history there explained is the view of Mehring, Kautsky, &c.? Then I must protest against that, not only in my own name but in that of the Marxists generally. To no Marxist, who is to be seriously taken, has it occurred to speak of "Reflex-thoughts in the

social consciousness," whatever Bax may have meant by that? We have never looked for the "real foundation of all history in material welfare," since we never seek the real foundation of all human activity in "material welfare" alone. And one does not require to have studied the literature of historic materialism very deeply to know that no Marxist holds that religion, morals and art are "chance" phenomena.

It is also thoroughly unknown to me that any materialist historian has written any nonsense of that kind. The materialist conception of history which Bax fights is therefore neither the conception of Marx, not that of the Marxists who, it is alleged, differ from Marx. We hand it over to Bax with pleasure, and will not feel ourselves in any way affected if he destroys it root and branch.

But Bax does not take merely a negative position, but also a positive, as becomes a philosophic critic. He improves the materialist conception of history.

That is to him too one-sided.

> "The attempt," he says, "to deduce the whole of human life from one element, to declare all history on the basis of economy, overlooks the fact that every concrete reality must have two sides, a material and a formal, therefore at least two fundamental elements ... According to my idea the theory under question requires to be improved in the following sense: The speculative, ethical, and artistic capacities of mankind exist as such in human society – even if undeveloped from the beginning – and are not simply products of the material conditions of human existence, although their expression at every time in the past, always to a small and very often to a considerable extent, has been modified by these factors. The whole development of society is to a far greater degree modified through its material conditions, than through any speculative, ethical or artistic

> cause. But this is not equivalent to saying that every "ideological" cause can be resolved into a purely material condition ... I allow fully that the peculiar form of a movement, be it intellectual, ethical, or artistic, is determined by the material conditions of the society in which it asserts itself, but it will also be equally determined by the psychological elements and tendencies from which it is produced. Ability to think, e.g., the power of generalisation, of explaining events as cause and effect, can certainly not be reduced to the psychological reflex of the economic circumstances. In short, to summarise the views which I have here represented in opposition to the extreme Marxists: These extremists hold that human affairs are solely regulated through outward physical causes, while others hold the exact contrary, seeing only inward psychological and idealistic grounds. Both views I consider one-sided."

It we strip the core from all this philosophical learning, then we find that Bax wants to say that morals, religion, art and science are not produced through the economic conditions alone; it is necessary that these conditions act on men with certain ethical, artistic and speculative capacities. Only through the co-operation of both factors does a social, artistic, or ethical movement arise.

Who can deny that Bax is right, and that the materialist conception of history is put completely out of court? But not the theory of Marx, not even of the Marxists, but that discovered by Bax, according to which morals, religion, and art formed the "thought-reflex of the economic conditions" in the "social consciousness," material welfare the foundation of all action, and the "power of thought" could be "reduced to the psychological reflex of the economic conditions."

The Marxian materialist conception is unfortunately far too one-sided and narrow to be able to raise a claim to explain

the intellect, or all history. It has no pretension to be any more than a conception of history, a method for the research of the driving forces in the development of human society. Certainly it would be absurd to say that a work of art or a philosophical system regarded by itself was simply the product of social or in the last place economic conditions. But it is also not the duty of an historical hypothesis to explain artistic or philosophic activity. It has only to explain the changes which this activity had to undergo in the various periods. Doubtless, without intellect, no ideas. But does this deep knowledge help us in the smallest degree to answer the question, why the ideas of the nineteenth century differ from those of the thirteenth, and those again are not the same as those of the ancients?

It would be a palpable absurdity to pretend that the will and thought of men – as, according to Bax, “the extreme-wing of the materialist conception” say – are “alone determined through external physical force.” It is self-evident that the human organism plays a rôle in the production of idea, as the external world. But has the human organism changed its powers of thought, its artistic capacity, to any noticeable extent within historic time? Certainly not. The thought capacities of an Aristotle are certainly hardly surpassed; just as little the artistic ability of the ancients. What, on the other hand, has altered in the external world? Nature? Assuredly not. Greece enjoys just the same heaven today as in the days of Pericles but the society has changed, that is, really the economic condition and so far as nature and men have altered it has bean under the influence of the economic conditions.

The economic conditions are, therefore, not the only things which determine "human affairs" the "process of human life," but they are, among the determining factors, the only variable element. The others are constant, do not alter at all, or only under the influence of the changes of the variable element; they are, therefore, not motive forces of the historical development, even if they are indispensable elements of human life.

The materialist historian in no way overlooks, he does not undervalue the importance of the psychological factor in history. But very far from being a motive force of the historical development this factor shows itself far more as an essentially conservative element. Every historian knows what a great force tradition presents in history. While the economic development knows no standstill, human mind is always making the endeavour to remain in forms of thought which have been once attained; it does not directly follow the economic development but fossilises and remains in the old forms long after the social and economic conditions which created them are vanished.

So becomes, in the words of the poet, reason, folly; kindness a torment. That does not show itself only there, where a material interest is concerned in the maintenance of the old ways of thought. We would call to the mind, e.g., that designations of relationship are much more conservative than the family forms [1], as are our festivals, which defy all revolution, although the conditions are long passed away from which they sprung. The thought-forms of a later age offer accordingly many important hints for the recognition of the social conditions of a previous period. The economic development must then be far developed, its needs, and the

new social relations produced by it must have already come into glaring contradiction to the accepted forms of law, of morals, and the whole traditional forms of feeling, and thinking, and organisation of society, before even the select, especially penetrating and courageous, are forced by it to develop and defend new views, new ideals for law and morality, and for the organisation of society, with the then existing means of art and science, ideals which owe their origin and their historical importance to the new needs and social relations, and whose historic importance, whose influence on the revolution of the human conscience, and the reconstruction of society depends on the degree of their approach to that required by the economic development.

But so conservative is human thought, that even the most revolutionary spirits at the commencement of a revolution of thought cannot refrain from pouring the new wine into old bottles, and regarding their ideas not as the overturning but as the fulfilling. Christ came, as is well known, not to abolish but to fulfil the law; the Reformers had no desire to erect a new Christianity, which corresponded to the needs of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, but to bring back the primitive Christianity of the Gospels, and the first Democratic Socialists of our time believed they had only got to complete the work which the French Revolution had begun but not completed. Social-Democracy was originally only a logical democracy.

The struggle of the new with the old elements must be already far advanced before the thinkers of the new idea are aware of the fact that these are irreconcilably opposed to the old. Even later is this naturally the case with the average man – even within those classes who have an interest in the

rearranging of things. The class antagonism must have come to a head, the masses must be deeply stirred and agitated through the Class War before they acquire any interest for the now theories.

Thanks to this inertia of human consciousness the progress of society appears on superficial observation as the product of ideas, which come to certain “spirits favoured of God,” to use an expression which has made Bax especially angry, of ideas for which then the champions of progress win the mass of mankind. Thus it appears as though it was ideas which produce the progress of society. Nothing is more naive, than when the representatives of idealism reproach the materialists with overlooking the role of ideas in history. As if it were possible, as if the above-described process did not force itself on the attention of anyone who even began to study history. No, the materialists do not overlook this process, but they are not satisfied with that, in the manner of previous methods of writing history, which consists in remaining on the surface of the phenomena. They study deeper, and they find that the sequence of ideas is not arbitrary or haphazard, but determined by law; that to every distinct economic epoch of humanity distinct forms of religion, morals and law correspond, which one finds in all climates and among all races, and that, wherever the corresponding changes allow of investigation the change in the economic conditions precedes, and the alteration in the ideas of men only slowly follows, that therefore the latter is to be declared through the former and not the contrary.

That is the materialist conception of history; not as Bax describes it, but as it is laid down by Marx and Engels (let anyone compare among other things of the former the

preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, and of the latter *Feuerbach*) and their pupils. That Bax's criticism and even Bax's amendment is not to the point, is clear.

The whole criticism which Bax applies to the materialist conception of history, rests on his confusion of the historical development with the "whole of human life." He believes that an explanation of the first must suffice to give a full explanation of the latter. But he does not rest content with this confusion.

After he has discovered that human affairs are regulated through outward and inward causes, he at once puts his discovery into application, and remarks that in the course of the historical development alternately one factor, "the fundamental psychological tendencies," alternately the other, "the economic conditions," acquired the mastery.

> "We come now," he says, "to the important question, in what proportion to one another the two elements come into force at the various periods. That the one can considerably preponderate, and that this one throughout the whole history of human society has been the material element, is certainly to-day indisputable. But even in the periods for which we possess an historical record, we find – and that is indisputable – distinct periods in which the 'ideological element' preponderates. Those are the times in which a speculative belief is so firmly held by its followers that it forces the material interests of life into the background. To these belong the commencements of Christianity ... In the development of Christianity in the first two generations the material conditions played a very unimportant role, almost only a negative. Just so was in the early heretical movements of the Middle Ages the speculative element throughout predominant ... Certainly, it is hard for us who live in a period in which the economic factor forces all other into the background, to understand a time when that was not the case, so that children of this world could ever have accepted

> the teaching of theology with such unflinching faith, that it influenced their action; that chivalry, fealty, blood-relationship could ever have been so strong as to force all other expressions of life into the background, seems to the modern man inconceivable."

What common folk we materialists must be! All the finer feelings of the human soul, which rise above the passion for money-making, are to us inconceivable. The virtues of chivalry, loyalty, altruism, these are not to be grasped by materialists, but only by certain select idealists among whom Bax evidently counts.

And how ignorant we materialists are! Every schoolboy knows what strong belief possessed the souls of the first believers in Christianity, and the reformers of the Middle Ages, only we materialists do not. But Bax has no need to go to the extreme Marxists to find this crass ignorance, even Marx is guilty of it. It is well known that in the preface to his *Critique of Political Economy*, 1859, he developed the "Theory of Historic Materialism." An American critic made the same discovery that our English critic makes to-day: Marx had declared that "the method of production of the material life determines the social, political and spiritual life in general"; to this the critic replied "that is all very right for the world of to-day, where the material interests dominate, but neither for the Middle ages where Catholicism, or for Athens or Rome where the political interest, was predominant." In a note in *Capital* on this Marx remarked:

> "In the first place it is strange that anyone should have chosen to assume that these universally known figures of speech about the Middle ages and the ancient world could have remained unknown to anyone. One thing is clear, that neither the middle ages could live from Catholicism, nor the ancient world from politics. The method in which they

> acquired their living, on the contrary, explains why there politics, and here Catholicism, played the principal role."

This passage reveals Marx in his full materialist wickedness. The new discoveries of Bax he declared a generation ago to be phrases universally known. But this kind of talk seems to enjoy immortality, so therefore we will examine it closely once more. According to Bax, in the history of society, sometimes the material conditions, and sometimes "psychic ideological motor forces" have most influence, and he thinks to prove this by pointing to the origins of Christianity; among the first Christians the "material interests" played a quite unimportant part. They were carried along by an unshakable faith.

I should not dream of denying that, but perhaps I may be allowed to ask where the materialist historians have asserted that human beings were guided in their actions solely by material interests, *i.e.*, by selfishness. Bax falls into the grave mistake of confusing material *interests*, which form the conscious motives of the actions of individuals, with the material *conditions*, which underlie a given society, and therefore, also the thinking and feeling of the members of that society.

Hand in hand with this goes another confusion. While Bax puts the material interests of the individuals on an equal footing with the material foundations of society, he transforms the first, *i.e.*, selfishness, into an external influence working on men which he places over against the inner psychological factor. But it is clear that selfishness is just as much to be reckoned with the inner psychological factors as chivalry, altruism, faith, &c.

When, therefore, Bax discovers that mankind are at one time moved by selfishness, at another time by other motives, he does not with that prove what he wishes to prove, namely, that at one time the material, at another the psychological conditions dominate society, but that the psychological motor power is different under different forms of society. The fact which to Bax, thanks to a series of *quid pro quos*, presents the solution, forms just the problem which is to be solved. Why were men in the Roman Empire seized by the idea of flying from the world, by the need for happiness in heaven, by the feeling of internationalism, and equality, and all the other distinguishing characteristics of Christianity? Historic materialism investigates the changes, which took place at that time in the economic structure of society, and at the same time in its political and legal conditions, and finds that these changes sufficiently account for the changes of the psychological motives. I may perhaps here point out that I, in 1885, made the attempt to give a materialist explanation of the origins of Christianity (*Die Enstehung des Christenthums*, *Neue Zeit*, 1885, pp.481ff.) This investigation involved much research. Bax makes a very light job of it. He declares simply that the changes in the psychological motor forces at the time of the rise of Christianity are a result of the psychological motor power which, like Munchausen, pulls itself out of the slough by its own hair, and gives a new direction.

In the meantime, there is a deeper significance in the law which Bax propounds. It seems to me, even though it is little calculated to help forward the study of social organisation in the past, it affords a clue to Bax's methods of writing history.

As a "student" of the writings of Marx and the "performances" of the Marxists he has found not only in the first, but also in the latter, although rated by him so very low, many hints which he does not neglect. But he is not satisfied with that. He has to bring his "thinking capacity," his "psychological motor power" into play; there we come across the inner ideal element. The higher synthesis of the two constitutes Bax's writings. A sample sufficed. In his latest book: *Socialism, its Growth and Outcome* (reviewed *Neue Zeit*, XII, i., pp.630ff.), he attributes on page 92, in agreement with the Marxists the rise of the puritanical spirit in England to the economic development leading to capitalism. He describes the proletarisation of the English agricultural population, and continues:

> "England in this manner paid her tribute to commerce, and paid for it with nothing leas than the loss of that rough joviality, that abundance, and that feeling of self-respect which formerly aroused the admiration of foreigners who suffered more hardship from the feudal system and its abuses than the English."

On page 97, Bax writes quite otherwise:

> "Protestant Puritanism ... is a quite remarkable isolated fact, probably the result of certain peculiar features of the people which have been developed through their conditions ... One must allow that the origin of this (puritanical) spirit is quite as mysterious as its existence is dangerous."

The materialist suggestion which led Bax to look for the explanation of the puritanical spirit in the peculiar capitalistic development of England, therefore, made no too deep impression. On page 92 he explains the puritanical spirit in a perfectly materialist manner; five pages later he

has quite forgotten this, and now the "psychological motor power" comes into its right, and scarcely has Bax made quite clear the joviality of merry old England than he discovers the ground of the puritanical spirit in a dangerous tendency of the English people to gloominess. It is clear. One cannot reproach this style of writing history with being one-sided. Not only does it explain one historic phenomenon on materialist, and the other on idealist, grounds, but explains oven the same phenomenon one time as materialistic, the other time as idealistic – according to the "psychological motor power" under whose influence the intellect of the historian stands at the moment. To that height of "synthesis" we one-sided extreme Marxists can certainly not rise.

Footnote

1. "The family," says Morgan, "is the active element; it is never stationary, but only goes forward from a lower to a higher form in the degree in which society develops from a lower to a higher form. The systems of relationship, on the other hand, are passive; only in the course of long periods do they register the advance which the family in the course of time has made, and we only then notice the radical change when the family has undergone a radical alteration." "And," adds Marx, "it is just the same with the political, legal, religious and philosophical systems."

Note by MIA

1*. This is the start of a debate. Belfort Bax replied in the same journal, Vol.6, No.9, pp.270-275. Kautsky responded to Bax in three articles starting with Vol.6, No.11.

Ernest Belfort Bax

The synthetic or the neo-Marxist conception of history

(1896)

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A scathing criticism from the principal representative of the Marxist conception, or what now-a-days passes for such, calls for an answer from me, because I look on this theory as one of the most important historical truths even if I cannot accept it in its present-day form as the final summing up of all truth. In any case I can bit congratulate myself that Kautsky finds an amusing side to my article. I cannot return the compliment; possibly because Kautsky, as his article shows so evidently, set not with the intention to produce something funny; but wit is apt to have a way much the same as the ghosts at Marathon; it only shows itself to those who do not seek it. It was intention, certainly, to have a quiet and sober debate with the modern representatives of the Marxist

conception of history; it appears, however, that the gods have had pity on me, and have on this occasion bestowed wit on me. Kautsky may possess many great literary qualities, but the faculty of furnishing amusement is certainly not a strong feature in his writing.

I protest, however, most decidedly against being described as an "opponent of the conception of history laid down by Marx," simply because I regard it in its present form as insufficient to explain the whole process of history.

I regret that I added the little footnote to my article, because Kautsky seems to feel insulted thereby, and personalities of that kind throw little light on the controversy. I was of opinion that Marx and from certain expressions which he used, also Engels, would have regarded the materialist conception of history as interpreted by Kautsky, Mehring, and Plechanoff as too stereotyped. Nevertheless, I make Kautsky a present of the whole personal question. As far as I am concerned, Marx, and even Engels, might, be Marxists in Kautsky's sense; the principal question for me, is whether this method suffices to explain the whole history of man in its concrete reality, or whether it requires to be amended in my sense.

Kautsky asserts that the economic conditions form the only variable element in history, while taken by themselves all the other elements are constant, and that they undergo change only in consequence of changes in the former. Here we have, in any case, an assertion which is laid down clearly and in a form which renders it open to discussion. Kautsky's assumption I deny most emphatically. All elements leave their variable and constant sides. As I have often said, the

economic element has through the whole historic period [1] for the most part had the direction of human history, although not always in the same degree.

But there are, even during the historical era, certain, what Kautsky would call “ideological” formations, which can in no way be derived from the economic conditions. To give au example: The history of philosophy in its three principal divisions, of antiquity (from Thales to the neo-Platonists), the middle ages (Scholasticism), modern times (Descartes to Hegel) can in its main outlines in no way be traced back to economic conditions. Although the practical application of philosophical systems and ideas can be partially explained from those facts, we have nevertheless in the main to deal with an evolution in the realm of thought, as can be very easily proved. If Kautsky means to say that philosophy was only then able to flourish, after that civilisation, consequently economic life, was far enough developed to allow that a certain number of people should have sufficient leisure to employ themselves with speculative ideas, that would be a statement no one could take any exception to, but it would clearly be only a negative condition of the appearance of philosophy and not a positive cause of the origin of philosophy in general, let alone of the contents of the same at any given period. If Kautsky further asks, how the original germs of philosophical ideas have arisen, I answer through observation of the operations of external nature and the human mind, the analysis of the conditions of knowledge and consciousness generally. I should much like to read an explanation of but one of the main divisions of philosophy, for example Plato and Aristotle, or gent to Hegel, from one of the neo-Marxists.

Kautsky asks why does it happen that the modern Greeks have produced no Aristotle, no Pericles, &c., in other words why modern Greece is different from ancient; he is of opinion that in reality only the economic conditions have changed, thereby he ignores everything which does not agree with his theory, as for example, that a race, just as happens with individuals, can get old; secondly, the fact of the mixture of races; thirdly, that a large period of the historical development of humanity, not exclusively economic, has taken place in the meantime. All these factors have co-operated in Greece as elsewhere. The Greek spirit, literary, philosophic, and artistic, was manifestly exhausted, long before any real alteration in the methods of production and exchange had taken place. If this exhaustion could be brought into connection with any social factor it would be rather of a political or a religious kind than an economic. Loss of political independence, and the introduction of oriental ideas, and later of Christianity, can well have contributed a great deal to hasten the decay. Moreover, a great many races have passed through Greece, all of whom have left traces behind – Goths, Slavs, Normans, Catalonians, Venetians, and Turks, of whom also many, especially Slavs, have settled there and become quite absorbed in the previous population. The modern Greek is ethnically quite another being to the ancient. Finally, Kautsky, as stated, ignores in his zeal the entire concrete historic development, intellectual, political, and ethical, as well as economic, which has taken place between the ancient and the modern worlds.

The extreme Marxists are, like eels, difficult to get hold of; now they show themselves as holders of quite a harmless commonplace, then again as the champions of a speculative

theory which seems so bold in its one-sidedness that one can scarcely believe that it is seriously meant. The importance of the economic basis for the historical development is, as I have said, denied by no one, let alone a Socialist with any knowledge of history; but to assert that it and it alone is, so to say, the exclusive causal agent in history, contradicts the whole course of historical facts. When one, for the sake of conciseness, ventures to express their theory "in slightly different language," then our extreme friends assert that we have misinterpreted them. I have spoken of "Thought-Reflex," and Kautsky makes a great fuss over it; and yet Engels has often used the expression "psychological reflex of economic processes," and it appears to me quite apt, despite Kautsky's objections. With our extreme Marxists one must, as Hamlet says, "speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us." I can only say that if the materialist conception of history does not signify that which I have said – namely, the thought-reflex of economic conditions in the social consciousness – then it means nothing more than the colourless platitude that for human existence and activity a material basis is required. If one applies this to the individual, it would run something like this: If the poet gets nothing to eat, he must cease to make poems. This most important principle would, however, contribute very little to an explanation of the poetic qualities of a Shakespeare or a Goethe. Such banality, however, I do not ascribe to comrades Kautsky, Mehring, and Plechanoff. Therefore I stick to my concise definition, which seems to me to correspond to the ideas of Kautsky, so far as I know them.

And now let us consider a concrete case of the application by Kautsky of the methods of Marx. Kautsky asserts is his *History of Socialism* that the whole dispute over the

question of the Sacrament in the Hussite wars was simply a "cloak" under which the class struggles of that time were fought out. Now, we will take for granted (it being of no consequence whether in this special case it is historically true or not) that the disputants really believed firmly in the Christian dogma. Now I ask what the word "cloak" in this connection means. That at the same time the class struggles played a part in the formation of the character of the time (*Enstehung des gesammten Zeitbildes*) is self-evident, but if the phrase "cloak" has any meaning it must be this, that the question of the cup [*i.e.*, the custom of the Catholic Church to refuse the cup to laymen in the administration of the sacrament. – Translator's note], *i.e.*, the theological belief of that time, had no independent force in determining the action of those who played a part; in short, if the expression of Kautsky is to mean anything at all, then it can only mean the following: either the belief was sincere and real or a conscious or unconscious hypocrisy as such beliefs mostly are to-day; only in the last case can one with good right talk of a "cloak." Altogether it seems to me that the "economic conditions" of a period play much the same role in the neo-Marxist school – as one may well call them – which the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*) plays in the Kantian philosophy. Even in the rare cases where the economic relations have played a really unimportant part must the economic development be dragged in as the sole cause of the whole. There is a scholastic maxim, "*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*" (Things [beings] are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary), that applies to a certain extent in this case, especially if we alter the sentence slightly, so that it rung, "*Causae non sunt multiplicandae praeter necessitatem*" (Causes are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary), since even when a

psychological explanation of a certain historical event is absolutely sufficient, even then the neo-Marxists postulate a hidden influence of the economic facts.

Kautsky accuses me of confusing the historical development with "the whole of human life." Certainly, I assert that one has the right to demand from a complete theory of historical development that it shall afford a sufficient explanation of the whole of human life, or at least be in a position to give guidance in that direction, seeing that the whole of human life develops itself in history. Further, he accuses me of the "enormity" of confusing "material interests" with "material conditions," but I find that in the application of the materialist conception of history these two ideas cover very much the same thing. In fact, what are the great class struggles which play such a large part in the materialist conception of history? What are they but the struggles of various classes over their opposed "material interests"? Besides this, Kautsky would, in his *History of Socialism*, explain the rapid spread of Christianity in the lower sections of the society of that time by the practice of almsgiving on the part of the well-to-do believers; what is falsely described as Christian Socialism. The material conditions which have determined history can unquestionably be traced in most cases to the material interests of peoples or classes; therefore I consider the indignation of Kautsky over my "enormity" somewhat exaggerated. Further, he accuses me "of having denied to the materialists any of the finer impulses of the human soul"; where he has found that in my article, I do not know, and I do not consider it exactly fair on his part to ascribe idiocy to me which I have nowhere written, and which never occurred to me. Such devices seem to me beneath the dignity of a scientific criticism. I simply

express my doubt whether the method in question as explained by Kautsky can sufficiently explain such phenomena.

No one can demand that anyone should allow himself to be put off with mere phrases when the question is important and unsolved problems. If the neo-Marxists are not able to give a good account of them, I have the right to charge them with neglect of universally known facts (not phrases). It is possible that the Middle ages could not live from Catholicism, or the ancient world from politics; it is also possibly just as true that a poet cannot live from his poetry, but requires a public who recognise him, so that it becomes possible for him to eat and drink; but that does not sufficiently explain his special poetic gift, although I readily allow that by means of an exact enquiry it might be possible to prove that the potatoes, &c., eaten had an influence on the production of his thought. It is simply a *petitio principii* to say, that the method in which they gained their living, explains why here politics, and there Catholicism played the principal role; the controversy hinges on the questions whether the method in which they acquired their living suffices to explain the rôles which politics, and Catholicism – the one at one period, the other at the other have played.

To the, as it seems to me, one-sided conception of history of the extreme Marxists I oppose my “improved method” as follows: – Kautsky asserts that the economic conditions are the only variable element in human development; all the rest are, by themselves, constant or change in consequence of changes in the first. I say, on the contrary, that in the totality of the human development (since human life is continually developing) two principal factors are contained. First, a

psychological motive power, which is determined by its original direction, and by influences of various kinds, among others by reflection, by observation of and impulses from the outer world. This motive force is, nevertheless, taken by itself, variable, and is generally hindered and brought to a standstill by outside influence; it recovers from the check which it received through the external conditions, only gradually, even when it is subjected to contrary influences. Secondly, as the most important of these outside influences during the historical period, the mode of life, i.e., the economic conditions, of classes and of peoples. But that has not always been equally the case. Even the psychological impulse has often found support elsewhere. The action and reaction of both these two factors forms historical evolution; it is possible from certain points of view to treat them separately. Each has up to a certain point an independent development, but regarded as a whole they appear as mutually completing each other in their interaction. The independence and the reciprocal action of these factors both play their part in the historical drama. Kautsky reproaches me with looking on the changes in the "psychological motive force" at the commencement of Christianity as a consequence of the "psychological motive force," which (and here appears a sample of Kautsky's humour), "like Munchausen, draws itself out of the mire by its own hair and goes its own way." That sounds very funny, certainly; nevertheless, I assert that in the psychological element just as clearly an independent development can be to a certain extent proved, as in the economic conditions of society. Both form, up to a certain degree, their own chains of cause and effect; on the other hand, both stand also in interaction with each other in every concrete historical case. In any case the direction of primitive Christianity was not, as Kautsky

asserts, a new one, but it is possible to trace signs of it far back into the earlier stages of thought of the Jewish and Grecian spirit.

Kautsky's wit, which drags its way like a funeral march through the whole article, reaches its climax in the concluding remarks over two passages which he quotes from *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*. Here Kautsky thinks he has made a discovery which will crush me; I can only say that I am in a position to justify both these passages. In general, I agree readily with Kautsky and his friends that the alteration in the English temper at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries is to be traced to the economic revolution which took place then. But there are certain characteristics of the English Protestant movement, which on the Continent, although a similar revolution obtained in the economic conditions – even if this in many localities took place somewhat later – have nowhere shown themselves to anything like the same degree. Where on the Continent does one find the English Sunday, the dogma of the wickedness of dancing, of the theatre, or reading novels? All these peculiarities are not to be explained through a general formula; accordingly, I made the modest suggestion that the Puritanism from which these sprung could somehow or another be traced back to the peculiarity of the mixture of races which produced the English people.

Kautsky thinks that he has discovered another confusion when he says that I, "in that I take the material interest of the individuals as equivalent to the economic foundations of society, change the first, therefore selfishness, into an external factor working on men which is distinguished from

the inner psychological factor." To that I have to reply that I have, throughout, not occupied myself with the material interests of individuals, but simply with the material interests of classes; when the word "individuals" is used that is an interpolation from the side of friend Kautsky. I call the direct influence of the economic conditions on men the external factor; on the other hand, I describe as the inner factor the effect produced by an idea which springs directly from psychological reflection; this inner reflection does not require to have been excited directly by any economic conditions, but the resulting idea may arise from the analysis of the conditions of consciousness in general or through observation of the processes of nature. If Kautsky flings in my face that the application of the expression "outer" and "inner" is arbitrary, I can only point to the fact that many expressions one uses in scientific discussions suffer under a certain arbitrariness. I maintain that the expressions "inner" and "outer" are sufficiently plain when one is not on the look-out for quibbles.

In concluding my reply, I may once more expressly say how highly I esteem the materialist conception of history as an inspiring method, and how much I value Kautsky's writings; the fact that I criticise the theory does not mean that I think at all "meanly" of the conception or those who hold it. If my expressions have called forth this impression, it was certainly not intentional on my part.

With a certain amount of difficulty I have obtained at last a copy of the third volume of the *Neue Zeit*, where the two articles which Kautsky refers to in his contribution are contained. I consider them quite excellent. The first shews almost the same train of thought that I had followed in an

article which appeared in *Justice*, 1884. I have treated the question at greater length in my essay, *Universal History from the Socialist Standpoint* which was first, if I am not mistaken, published in the magazine *Time* in the year 1886. Both, somewhat revised, are contained in my book *Religion of Socialism*. An article on the *Evolution of Ethics* which appeared about the same time in the *Neue Zeit* comprised also something similar. I mention these writings only to show that even the so highly-ridiculed by Kautsky Baxian conception of history can show results which are very unlike those of the High Priest of the neo-Marxian school. The second article from Kautsky is undoubtedly original, clever, and, so far as it goes, also very true. The carrying out of the same leaves my position absolutely untouched. Attention is called in it to the economic and social conditions of that time which afforded a favourable ground for the bringing to expression of ideas that had arisen far earlier in the East and the Graeco-Roman world, and which clearly can be traced back to other ideas which had a still earlier origin. The essence of the matter is contained in the fact that it is not possible either to explain world-historical ideas as the result of purely economic facts, or to trace back economic and political institutions to purely ideologic causes. The first blunder is made, in my opinion, by the neo-Marxist, the second by the old ideological writers of history. Against the last the materialist conception of history has an easy task; with the “world-known” phrases it wins an easy victory. But the neo-Marxian writers do not see that they apply the same category as their opponents, namely, that of cause and effect, and that this category is in the last resort not applicable. The true category of historical research is, namely, that of “action and reaction” (*Wechselwirkung*). Political and economic institutions are, taken by themselves,

no independent whole, which could function as cause, but they are the dependent parts of a whole. By themselves they are nothing. Economic formations make history only in connection with human mind and will; by that is said, that the neo-Marxist. conception of history is wrong in so far as it seeks to reduce human history to economy as the only determining factor. Excogitated little jokes over the deeper meaning of the "Baxian methods of writing history" are not sufficient to dispose of this truth.

Note

1. In the **Neue Zeit**, p.6, is a misquotation: Human Society (Gesellschaft), instead of History (Geschichte).

Note

1*. This article is a response to Kautsky's critique of an article on historical materialism that Bax had written for the for the Viennese weekly **Die Zeit**.

Karl Kautsky

The Aims and Limitations of the Materialist Conception of History

Part I. The Critics of the Theory

(1896)

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My reply to Bax's article in the previous number of the *Neue Zeit* will not be as short as I myself wished. If the continuation of the discussion is to be of value it will be necessary to go into a deeper discussion of some material questions.

It certainly is to me no laughing matter when Bax, without any hesitation,, ascribes to me "interpolations" and "tricks which are beneath the dignity of a scientific criticism." These accusations find their answer in the fact that I have quoted

all the passages which Bax accuses me of falsifying fully and accurately. My readers were therefore in a position to control my criticism.

But if anyone is not justified in raising the charge of false quotation of his words, it is Bax, who as well in the presentation of his own views as in those of others shows a quite astonishing lack of interest in accuracy. That is all the more unpleasant as he has not the habit of quoting verbally the sentences he criticises. He prefers, as he says himself, to give them in "slightly altered language for the sake of brevity." The desire for brevity is very praiseworthy, but I think the necessity for accuracy ought to outweigh that in a discussion.

An example suffices. Bax writes in his reply:

> "And now let us consider a concrete case of the application by Kautsky of the methods of Marx. Kautsky asserts in his *History of Socialism* that the whole dispute over the question of the Lord's Supper, in the Hussite War was simply a 'cloak' under which the class struggles of that time were fought out ... Now I ask what the word 'cloak' in this connection means? If the phrase 'cloak' has any meaning it must be this, that the question of the cup, e.g., the theological belief of that time, had no independent force in determining the action of those who played a part; in short, if the expression of Kautsky is to mean anything at all then it can only mean the following: either the belief was sincere and real or a conscious or unconscious hypocrisy as such beliefs mostly are to-day; only in the latter case can one with good right talk of a 'cloak'."

Thus Bax puzzles himself at great length to find out what I meant by the word "cloak." This expression it is which pains him. What have I in reality written in the *History of Socialism*?

> "In the Catholic Church it had become the custom to give the laity not bread and wine, but simply wine. It was quite in keeping with a theory which aimed at abolishing the privileges of the priesthood, that it also made a stand against this privileged position. The cup, the lay cup, became from, then onwards the symbol of the Hussites. According to the traditional method of writing history, in the gigantic struggles of the Hussite Wars there was nothing more at stake than the question whether the Communion was to be taken under both kinds or not, and the 'enlightened people' do not forget to point out with satisfaction in this connection how narrow the people of that time were and how clear, on the contrary, are the Freethinkers of our time.
>
> "But this presentation of the Hussite movement is just about as wise and justified as it would be if, in describing historically in future centuries the revolutionary struggles of our time, it were to be said that people were still so ignorant in the nineteenth century as to ascribe a superstitious importance to certain colours, so that bloody struggles arose over the fact whether the colours of France should be white or blue-white-red, that of Hungary black-yellow or red-white-green, that in Germany. for a long time everyone who carried a black-red-golden band was sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, &c., &c.
>
> "What the different flags mean to-day for the different nations and parties meant also the cup for the Hussites; their banner, around which they assembled, which they defended to the last, but not the object for which they were fighting."

Anyone can see I have not used the word "cloak," and I have expressed myself fully and clearly enough to exclude all doubt as to how I wish the question of the cup to be conceived. I have nevertheless on my side not the intention to turn the tables and accuse Bax of dishonourable conduct or of intentional interpolation. I will restrain myself from making any such accusation lightly. I have not mentioned the case in order to proceed against Bax in a fit of moral indignation. I note the fact of Bax's indifference to accuracy

only on these grounds, because it is manifested not simply in minor details, but also in the main question, in the presentation of the object of the discussion itself, and thereby gives this its character.

This indifference assumes at times, as I have already remarked "quite a monstrous" form.

I have pointed out to Bax (*Neue Zeit*, Jahrg., 1895-96, No. 47, translated in *Social-Democrat*, August), in my reply to his article in the *Zeit*, that he is guilty of the "quite monstrous confusion of material interests with material conditions." And what does Bax answer?

> "In the developing of the materialist conception of history I find that these ideas more or less coincide ... The material conditions which have determined history are indisputably in most cases to be traced back to the material interests of classes or nations, therefore I consider the indignation of Kautsky somewhat exaggerated."

Not enough that Bax confuses the material interests with the materiel conditions, but he clings fast to his confusion, even after he has been shown that it is absurd.

Can it be that Bax really does not know what is meant by the material conditions of society? These material conditions – that is, the conditions of production – this word taken in the broadest sense of the word; how can anyone assert that that is for the materialist conception of history pretty much the same as the material interests of classes and nations? The difference between the two words is shown by the following consideration: It is, in my opinion, possible, from the material conditions of the Roman Empire, to explain the revulsion from earthly things, and the passionate desire on

the part of the Christians. But it would be monstrous to look behind the desire for death for a material interest! And yet Bax finds that the material condition, "in most cases," are to be traced back to material interests. He would, therefore, explain the methods of production from the class interests, and not, vice versa! According to Bax, it is not necessary to study the methods of production to understand the class interests of capitalists and proletariat, but vice versa. The methods of Political Economy acquire thus a valuable addition.

This indifference to an exact definition of ideas has, however, all the more a disturbing influence on the discussion, in that Bax so determinedly leaves us in the dark as to what his criticism is directed against.

As in his article in the **Zeit**, so in his reply, he persists in maintaining that a difference exists between the historic conception of Marx and Engels, and; that of their followers. Certainly he expresses himself less decidedly than in his first article. In that article he declared in a footnote:

> "No one who knows the theories of Karl Marx, will need to be told that Marx himself was far from taking up such an extreme standpoint in his statement of the materialist conception of history. 'Myself I am no Marxist,' he wrote once; and he would most certainly have repeated his opinion if he had seen the latest performances of the 'Marxists,' Plechanoff, Mehring, or Kautsky."

This time Bax simply says:

> "I was of opinion that Marx, and from certain expressions which he used, also Engels, would have regarded the materialist conception of history as interpreted by Kautsky, Mehring, and Plechanoff as too stereotyped. Nevertheless, I make Kautsky a present of the whole personal question."

That is certainly very kind of Bax, but he is making me a present of something which no longer belongs to him but to the public. The whole of his first article rests on the supposition of an antagonism, between Marx and his pupils. To my reply he repeats this assertion, which is expressed in the title of his second article, and goes through his article like a red trail; but when Bax has to prove this assertion, then he generously makes me a present of the question and himself a present of the answer, not forgetting, however, to drop an obscure hint that Engels, "from certain expressions which he used," would have regarded the materialist conception of history as interpreted by Kautsky, Mehring and Plechanoff, as too stereotyped." Unfortunately, Bax does not give us the least information whether these expressions were oral or written, public or private, what they referred to and – how they ran. As long as he is silent on these points, he must allow me to take for granted that these "certain expressions" have as much in common with a disapproval of my historical methods as a "cloak" with a "flag" or an interest with a condition, all the more, as I am in the happy position of being able to point to certain very distinct utterances of Engels which say just the contrary of what Bax asserts.

Naturally, I do not wish to say that Engels would have subscribed to every word, which I, or any other Marxist – I can here only speak for myself – had expressed. Each of us is an individuality for himself, who makes his own researches independently for himself, and gives an account of them, and none of us is a Marx or an Engels.

But what is common to us is the standpoint, and that is the same as that of Marx and Engels.

If Bax wishes to prove that our application of the Marx-Engels principles is false, he must treat each of us as an independent individuality, and for each one of us specially out of his own writings bring the proof which he wishes to express.

If he wishes, however, only in general terms, as is actually the case, to criticise our common standpoint, then it is absolutely arbitrary for him to set up a difference between us and our masters which we ourselves do not recognise.

Bax thinks, it is useless to trouble ourselves with this, for the whole affair is in the last degree an unimportant personal question. “As far as I am concerned, could Marx or even Engels have been Marxists in the sense of Kautsky?”

Now, it does not appear to me that in the given connection this question is so purely personal. Before one discusses a theory, the subject of the dispute must be clearly defined. But the same lack of precision is developed by Bax, as elsewhere. At one time it is the “neo-Marxist” “extreme” conception, which he is fighting, then again the materialist conception of history in general, but he always carefully avoids pointing out what are actually the opinions which he is criticising. Marx, Engels, each of the “neo-Marxists” have frequently expressed themselves on the materialist conception of history, but Bax does not quote a single sentence to hang his criticism on.

This lack of accuracy, as well in the definition of the subject as in the separation of the concepts, and in the expression, is undoubtedly a serious impediment to all discussion; it is, however, twice as great a disturbance in a discussion of the Marxian ideas.

One of the essential advantages by which Marx and Engels were enabled to make their great scientific discoveries, was their clearness in the division and separation of ideas. Anyone who aspires to be a "Marxist," that is, to work in the spirit of both the mastery referred to, must in the first place aim at this sharpness and clearness.

In reality, things are not so sharply divided as in the abstract; one thing passes over into another, and those who remain on the surface, who want to explain the world of phenomena straight off the reel, easily find that the Marxian idea is one-sided or that it is arbitrary, and does not correspond to reality. Almost every critic of Marx's ideas starts by confusing ideas which he divided; begins, therefore, with a scientific relapse. Some confuse utility value and exchange value, value and price, surplus value and profit. They find that Rodbertus "pretty well," "in slightly other language," says the same as Marx, talk of a Marx-Rodbertus theory of value, and "refute" or improve on this. Again, other authors confuse the animal and social organism, the laws of social development and those of the individual; they do not distinguish between the being of men and their consciousness, between the contents of history and their superficial forms, between material interests and material conditions, and succeed thus with ease in overcoming the one-sided ideas of Marx and to look with pity on the Marxists who have shut themselves up in this "one-sided formula."

Because, however, almost all criticism of Marx's views rests on such a confusion, the discussion which ensues is often unfruitful and many times also unedifying, since to defend the Marxist theories we Marxists have for the most part

nothing else to do than to lay down what Marx or one of the Marxists has really said, and make clear that this is quite different to what the critic had made him say, that, therefore, the criticism was not valid, an occupation which is neither very, amusing nor very suggestive, but one which, owing to the kind of criticism passed on Marxism, one is unfortunately always again and again to take up.

Thus also the discussion with which we are occupied has first to arrive at that place which should be the starting point, i.e., a discussion of what is actually meant by the much debated, abused and so little understood historical materialism. The theme is not new, but it is not simply of academic, as I will yet show, but also of practical importance, and since Bax's remarks will give me occasion to bring, as I believe, some new points of view into the discussion, I hope that it will not be entirely without general interest.

But that demands a special article.

Note by MIA

1. This is a reply to E. Belfort Bax, *The Synthetic or the Neo-Marxist Conception of History*, originally published in **Neue Zeit** – XV. Jahrg. (October 28, 1896) but translated in **Social Democrat**, Vol.6, No.9, June 1902, pp.270-274.

Part II. The Historical Theory

(1896)

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Bax says "Kautsky accuses me of confusing the historical development with the whole of human life." Certainly I maintain that one has the right to demand from a complete theory of historical development, that it shall be capable of giving a fitting explanation of the whole of human life, or sufficient hints to such explanations, considering the whole of human life develops itself in history.

Definite as that sounds, nevertheless, I allow myself to doubt the inviolability of that sentence – that the whole of human life develops itself in history. The functions of the human organism – digestion, procreation, child birth, belong to a certain extent to "the whole of human life" but it will occur to no one to assert that they have developed themselves in the course of history". But quite apart from that, I am not of opinion that we can demand from a theory that it shall explain more than it sets out to explain. If the Darwinian theory gives an explanation of the development of the species of plants and animals, one cannot intense it of being insufficient because it does not in addition explain organic life itself.

One may describe also human society as an organism, but certainly not as animal or vegetable. It forms a peculiar

organism, which has its own laws and its own life. Human life, so far as it is animal life, life of the individual organism, is subject to quite different laws from those of the social life. History has only to investigate the laws of this last.

The object of the materialist conception of history is not to study the universal in human history, what is common to men of all times, but what is historically peculiar, what distinguishes men at different periods from one another. But on the other hand their object is to see what the people of a particular time, nation, or class have in common, not that which divides a particular individual from other individuals with whom he lives and works.

This is in no way altered by the fact that history books hitherto have related to us not the usual, the social, but the unusual and the individual. The materialist conception of history does not allow itself to be guided in its aims by the older methods of writing history.

The materialist conception of history makes no claim to explain the fact and to trace it back without any further ado to economic conditions, that Caesar had no children and adopted Octavian, that Antony fell in love with Cleopatra, and that Lepidus was an impotent weakling. Certainly, however, it believes itself able to explain the break-up of the Roman Republic and the rise of Caesarism.

From that it is clear that Bax has a false idea of the materialist conception of history, when he thinks that it aspires to explain the "special poetic gift of the poet," "the poetical qualities of a Shakespeare or a Goethe." That it neither can nor wishes to do. It may be a defect; but will Bax assert that any other historical conception is in the position

to explain these qualities? I am of opinion it is an achievement not to be despised if the materialist conception of history can explain the extent of the ideas which Shakespeare or Goethe had in common with their contemporaries.

From the existing Marxist literature Bax could have discovered for himself that the historic materialism is not of opinion that genius is directly to be traced back to the economic facts. I may be allowed, in proof of this, to point to my own writings.

In my work on Thomas More I distinguish three factors which influenced his work. In the first place, and that is the most important factor, the general social relations of his time and country, which can be traced back to the economic conditions. Then the special social surroundings, in which More developed, and to that belong not only the special economic conditions, in which he lived, but also the men with whom he associated, whose particular ideas are again to be traced back to factors of various kinds, the traditions which he found, the literature which was accessible to him, &c. But all these elements do not suffice to render quite clear the effect, of the *Utopia*, and the personal peculiarity of More must also be taken into account.

It is clear that the materialist conception of history is by no means so simple and cut-and-dried as some people describe it. As another example, I can point to my work on *Das Kapital*, and the *Elend der Philosophie* (translated as *Poverty of Philosophy* into English).

Besides the general social conditions, in the last resort the economic conditions of their time come in to account for the

results of Marx and Engels, their special surroundings. If More stood there quite apart among Englishmen through his combination of humanism with the activity of a practical lawyer, so Marx and Engels stood apart through their combination of the revolutionary elements which Germany produced at that time with those of France and England. But first when one in addition to that takes their personal gifts into account, is their influence in history to be understood.

Should we, however, view Socialism as a social phenomenon, we will in consequence be able to disregard the individual influences, the more we look on it as a phenomenon where the masses come into account. For a comprehension of the common contents of the collective Socialist movements of the nineteenth century the social relations of the capitalistic system of production are fully sufficient.

The materialistic method is alto indispensable to a right comprehension of the individual in history. We can first grasp his peculiarity if we have found out what he had in common with his time, and what were its leading motives. We can first examine what he gave to his time when we know what he got from it.

Can, however, the individual, according to the materialist conception of history, give anything to society? Does he not simply stand as a recipient in relation to it? Does not the materialist conception of history shut out all idea of a reciprocal influence between the individual and society?

Here we have arrived at the question, what part the man, or if it is preferred the “mind,” the “psychological motor,” the idea, plays in history. For idealist historians the idea is in the

position to lead an independent existence for itself. For us it, is simply a function of the human brain, and the question whether the idea can influence society coincides with the question whether and how this is possible to the individual.

Bax will be very surprised when I declare that I fully agree to the sentence which he holds up against me: “Economic conditions make history only in combination with human mind and will.” I do not agree, however, when he continues: “That is equivalent to saying that the neo-Marxist conception of history is on the wrong track.”

One must have an almost mystical idea of the economic development if one believes that it could make the smallest step forward without the activity of the human spirit. People must, however, not confuse economic development and economic conditions. These are two quite different things.

In the last resort the economic development is nothing more than the development of technique, that is, of the successive inventions and discoveries. What are these other than the “alternate working” between the intellect and the economic conditions?

Historic materialism, far from denying the motor force of the human intellect in society, gives only a special explanation, and one different from that hitherto accepted, of the working of this intellect. [1] The mind governs society, but not as master of the economic relations, but as their servant. They it is that set the mind the problem which it has to solve at the time. And, therefore, it is also they that determine the results which it can and must achieve under given historical conditions The immediate result which the human intellect achieves with the solution of one of its

problems can be one which it has wished for and foreseen. But each of these solutions must produce effects which it could not foresee, and which often contradict its intentions. The economic development is the product of the alternate working between the economic circumstances and the human intellect, but it is not the product of the free and unimpeded activity of mankind arranging the economic conditions as seems to them good. Every solution of a technical task confronts us with new tasks. The surmounting of every natural barrier confronts us with new barriers which we have yet to surmount; the satisfaction of any want produces a new want. Every technical advance brings, however, new means to accomplish new tasks.

But not only that. No technical alteration, no alteration of the methods of production or of life is possible without reaction on the relations of men to one another. A certain sum of technical progress will continually imply new conditions of labour and life, which are incompatible with the prevailing organisation of society, with the ruling principles of law, morality, &c.

Technical progress creates not only new problems for the discoverer and inventor, but also for the organisers and leaders of society; problems whose solution is continually rendered difficult owing to the might of tradition, mostly also owing to lack of knowledge and insight, and, in societies with class antagonism, also owing to the interests of the classes who derive an advantage from the existing state of affairs, but which in such cases will be finally forced on owing to the interests of the classes whose interests lie in the new order and always owing to economic necessity.

Societies which do not possess the requisite strength and insight to carry out the adaptation of social organisation to the new economic conditions rendered necessary must decay.

In the beginnings of society the Darwinian mode of unconscious development, the survival of the best adapted organisms and the disappearance of those who could not adapt themselves, prevailed. But the farther we proceed in history the more does man control nature, the more do men react consciously to the suggestions, which the economic development gives them; so much the quicker and more striking does this progress, so much the easier do the arising problems come to the consciousness of men and so much the higher developed are the methods of consciously solving the new problems, so much the more does the social revolution cease to be simply instinctive, and begins to be conceived through ideas, through aims which men set themselves, and finally through systematic research.

Tim connection between the economic conditions, which place humanity before their problems and produce the means for their solution, and the thereby produced intellectual activity of mankind, becomes always more complicated, the more embracing and complicated both the spheres in which this activity proceeds, the sphere of nature controlled by man and the society, and the more intermediaries obtrude themselves between cause and effect. Out of the originally purely empirical attempts to render the one or the other natural force serviceable to man, natural science finally developed itself; there enters the division of labour between the men of theory and of practice, between the men of research and these who apply the results, which

latter themselves are always subdividing into different groups and categories. And so it is the case in society. The social philosopher separates himself from the politician, and politics and social philosophy themselves again split into subdivisions. By the side of the practical legislator comes the legal expert, by the side of the preacher and custodian of morality comes the moral philosopher, &c.

Each of these activities separates itself from the other, believes that it lives an inner life of its own apart, and forgets that its duties, and the means to their performance, are in the last resort laid down for it by the economic conditions of society.

Bax is of another opinion.

> "The history of philosophy," he says, "is in no way, in its principal developments, to be traced back to economic causes. Although the practical application of philosophical systems and thought can partially be explained on that ground, we have, nevertheless, in the main to deal with a revolution in the realm of thought, as is very easy to be proved. Kautsky possibly wishes to explain that philosophy can only flourish after civilisation, including the economic development, is sufficiently advanced to allow that a sufficient number of men possess sufficient leisure to give themselves up to speculative thought, that would be self-evidently only a negative condition of the appearance of philosophy, and neither a positive cause of the origin of philosophy in general, let alone the contents of the same at various periods. If Kautsky further asks how the original germs of philosophical ideas have arisen, I answer through observation of the proceedings of external nature and the human mind, and from analysis of the conditions of knowledge and consciousness."

Not so harmless, as it is made out by Bax, is my assertion. I claim by no means that the relation of philosophy to the

economic conditions of their time lies simply in the leisure which these conditions allow to the philosophers for the observation of nature and the intellect, and for "thought-revolutions." No, the philosopher still gets something more from society.

In the first place, it is remarkable that Bax mentions, among the objects of philosophy, simply external nature and the human mind, but not society itself. In my opinion, philosophy occupied itself up to now partly with the investigation of nature – in which I also reckon the human mind – partly with the investigation of society. That a philosopher can draw his ideas about human society only from society itself, and that the structure of a society at any period is to be explained from its economic conditions, I do not need to explain any further, but from that it follows already that a very important part of philosophy is by its very nature traceable back to the economic conditions and not simply to be explained through a "thought-revolution," or a formal-logical development.

How does it stand, however, with natural science? Bax traces this back to simple "observation of the proceedings of external nature." But with that one does not get very far. The savage can also observe, and he observes, as a rule, the proceedings of nature much more sharply than we. But that does not make him a philosopher. Only so far as the observation of nature leads to the mastery over nature does it attain to an investigation of nature. What distinguishes the philosopher from the savage is not the fact of the observation of nature; the distinction consists in this: For the savage, nature is something self-evident, to the philosopher she is a riddle. The simple observation shows us

only the "how" of the proceedings of nature. The philosophical research of nature commences first with the question of "why." Man must first, to a certain extent, have cut the navel string, which bind him to nature; he must, to a certain extent, dominate nature, have raised himself over her, before he can think of the mastery over her. And only in the degree in which the mastery of man over nature extends itself, in which technical progress advances, does the field of scientific research of nature extend itself. The philosophers would not have got very far in their "thought-revolution" without telephone, and microscope, weighing and measuring instruments, laboratories and observatories, &c. These produce not only the means of solving the problems of natural science, they produce the very problems themselves. But they themselves are the results of the economic development – results which through man again become the cause of further progress. The development of the natural sciences goes hand in hand with the technical development – this word being understood in its widest sense. Under the technical conditions of a time the tools and machines are not solely to ho understood, The modern methods of chemical research and modern mathematics form integral parts of the existing technique. Let anyone build a steamship or a railway bridge without mathematics! Without the mathematician of to-day capitalist society would be impossible. The present position of mathematics belongs just as much to the economic conditions of the present society, as the present position of the technique of machinery, or the world-commerce. It all hangs together.

The development of natural and social philosophy is, therefore, bound up in the closest manner with the economic development. The economic conditions of the time give the

philosopher not simply the necessary leisure for his observations, but something more: the problems which stir the age and wait for a thinker to solve them, and the means of solution.

The direction in which this solution has to move in every single case is laid down once for all with the elements of the solution. That is not to say that it is always forthwith clearly recognisable to everybody. The problems, namely, those of society, and only with these have we to do, although, *mutatis mutandis*, it is valid also for the progress of natural science, are concerned with highly complicated phenomena.

Certainly, with the economic development, the aids to and methods of research increase, but in the same degree do also the objects of research become more complicated. The statesman and philosopher of the Middle Ages had not the means or methods of modern statistics at his disposal; but he had only to deal with small peasant and town communities, which each lived for itself, was easy to superintend, and was only brought into contact with the rest of the world through a commerce utterly insignificant. To-day the statesmen and economists have to deal with a commerce which embraces the most important elements of the production and consumption of the civilised states. So complicated are the phenomena which have yet to be explained, the tasks which have to be performed, that it is for the individual, as a rule, impossible to recognise all their aspects, and therewith to find what is in all points the right explanation and solution. Although there can be only one solution of a problem, yet we see innumerable solutions brought forward, from which each one draws one or other element of the question into account. On the other hand,

none are the elements of the same. Therefore, the variety of opinions about the same subject among men, and among those even who stand on all equal height of knowledge and capacity. One cannot understand the other, not for this reason, that one is stupider than the other, but because, in the same thing the one sees something quite different from the other.

Differences in intellectual capacity produce naturally also differences of opinion, but in the mass of mankind these differences of capacity are very unimportant. But what is very different among men, is their standpoint, which means in other words, the social position from which they approach the questions of their time. And these differences increase with the progress of the economic development. The differences of the position of the individuals in the society postulate not only differences in the development of their capacities and in their knowledge, but also in their traditions, therefore prejudices, and finally in their interests – personal and class interests.

In spite of all individual distinctions, the standpoint from which the mass of the members of a particular class approach a particular question is nevertheless a fixed one, and therewith is also given the direction in which it looks for a solution. This standpoint is, however, to be traced back to the economic conditions of the society at the time; through these conditions will not only the problem be given, and the direction in which alone it can find a solution, but also the various directions in which the various classes and sections of society look for this solution.

In the whole period which up to now has been subjected to the scientific investigation of history no class has ever succeeded, and still less any individual, in finding a complete solution of one of the social questions.

The right and only possible solution, which emerged from the struggles of interests and opinions, was always different from any one aimed at and sought by the various classes, parties, and thinkers. But we find continually that those classes whose interests coincided with those of the necessary development are more open to the truth than others whose interests stood in opposition to this. And, while the ideas and views of the first always came nearer to the real solution of the whole problem, the other exhibited a tendency to get further and further removed from it. Here we are arrived at the point where we can see how far the individual can modify the development of society. He can invent no new problems for it, even if he is occasionally in a position to recognise problems there, where others have hitherto found nothing to puzzle them. He is in respect of the solution of these problems confined to the means which his time offers him. On the other hand the choice of the problems to which he applies himself, that of the standpoint from which he approaches their solution, the direction in which he looks for it, and finally the strength with which he fights for it are not, without qualification, to be ascribed to the economic conditions alone; for, besides these, also the individuality asserts itself with that particular energy which it has developed, thanks to the particular nature of its talent and the particular nature of the special circumstances in which it is placed. All the circumstances here related have influence, even if not in the direction of the development, nevertheless on its march, on the form in which the result, finally

inevitable, is brought about. And in this respect individuals can do for their age a great deal, a very great deal. Some, as thinkers, when they acquire a deeper insight than the people around them, emancipate themselves more than these from the inherited traditions and prejudices, overcome the narrow class vision.

The last may sound curious in the mouth of a Marxist. But in fact Socialism rests on an overcoming of the narrow class vision. For the short-sighted bourgeois the social question consists in the problem, how to keep the workers quiet and contented; for the short-sighted wage-worker it is simply a food question, the question of higher wages, shorter hours of labour and assured work. It is necessary to have overcome the narrowness of one as well as the other, to attain to the view that the solution of the social problems of our time must be a more embracing, and such a one as is only possible in a new social order.

Certainly, that is not to say, however, that this higher knowledge of the Socialists is the complete knowledge, and that the new society will not perhaps develop quite other forms than we expect.

The thinker who overcomes the class tradition and class narrowness places himself on a higher position and thereby discovers new truths; which means that he comes nearer to the solution of the question than the average individual, therefore, he cannot reckon on the applause of all classes. As a rule, only those classes will agree with him whose interests coincide with the general development – very often not even those, if the thinker has raised himself too much above his

surroundings. In any case, interest has wonderful powers of sharpening the intelligence.

But it is not the thinker alone who can shorten the path of development, and can lessen its sacrifices. The artist who grasps the truths discovered by the thinker and expresses them in a manner that is at once clearer, more attractive, more rousing, more inspiring; the organiser and tactician, who gathers the scattered forces and applies them to concerted action, they all can hasten and help the development.

I have spoken of organisers and tacticians. To these belong not only the politicians, but also the generals. It has become the fashion in democratic circles to look down somewhat on the general and on war, as if it were quite without importance for the development of humanity. That is the reaction against the historical conception of the royalist of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, traces of which even to-day are to be seen in the historical works of men capable of forming an opinion, that all progress starts from the monarchs, and that wars are the most important and beneficial events of their reigns.

That is nonsense. But it is a fact, that hitherto among the most powerful levers of revolution, that is, the forcible hastening of the social development, has belonged war, and that the generals who won the victories for the cause of revolution are to be named among the first of those who have promoted the cause of human development.

Certainly, the number of those generals, who have opposed the development, and retarded it through their victories, would be probably much greater. But in the camp of the

reactionaries and those who hinder the cause of the development are not only to be found generals, but also politicians and legislators; and not a few philosophers and artists have been drawn into this camp. No more than the reactionary tendency of the majority of officers in modern times should our opposition, on the grounds of principle, against militarism cause us to undervalue the influence of military genius on the process of previous historical development.

Still another democratic prejudice must be pointed out, which people only too readily seek to justify by means of the materialist conception of history; the dislike to the conferring of honour and distinction on individuals, what they reject as a “worship of personality,” “authoritarianism,” &c. These are the war cries which we have inherited from the petty bourgeois democracy, and which on account of their beautiful sound are still current in our ranks, although they avail for nothing more than to give the Anarchists an argument against us.

It is certain that every individual is a product of circumstances; that he inherits the peculiarity of his organism all is indebted for his particular development to the special surroundings in which he has been thrown.

Genius is, therefore, not responsible for the fact that it is genius. That is nevertheless no ground why any public-house Philistine should have the same importance and interest for me as a thinker who has mastered the knowledge of his century, and who has infinitely extended my insight, or that I should pay as much attention to the opinions of a political recruit as to those of an experienced politician who, during a

lifetime, has given proofs of his capabilities through numberless victories.

We do not need to excuse ourselves for our “worship of personality” if we revere the memory of a Lasssalle or a Marx; if we oftener ask to hear a Bebel or a Liebknecht than a Smith or Jones, and we have need to protest heatedly against the reproach that we have leaders. Yes, we have leaders, and it depends in no infinitesimal extent upon the quality of our leaders whether our way to victory is longer or shorter, rough or smooth. But not only the reverencing, but also the antagonism to individual persons, is not incompatible with our materialist standpoint. People say, readily: “We do not fight persons, but against the system.” But the system exists only in persons, and I cannot attack it without attacking persons.

I cannot abolish the system of monarchy without deposing the person of the monarch. I cannot end the capitalist method of production without expropriating the person of the capitalist. And if anyone among our opponents stands out through his special ability, power, hostility, or inflict special damage on us, we must fight this person in particular. That is in no way incompatible with our materialist conception of history. In the present we are not simply historians, but in the first place fighters. Our materialist conception puts us in a position to understand our opponents, but not in order that we should cease to fight them. The materialist conception is no fatalist conception. Only in battle, in battle against a hostile nature, a hostile people, a hostile class, hostile opinion, the hostile individual, does the individual come to complete development.

But not only the fighter in the present, also the writer of the history of the past will never be able to entirely ignore individual people, if he wants to portray the exact manner is which the historic development has proceeded under particular circumstances, and in so far will he find that the materialist conception of history alone does not suffice.

But only in so far as the sphere of the materialist conception of history reaches, is the investigation and description of the historical development a *science*. So soon it leaves this territory, it becomes simply *art*, which also requires to lay a foundation through the materialist method if it will win a sure foothold.

We see now clearly what this can achieve and will. It starts from the principle that the development of society and the views prevailing in it are governed by law, and that we have got to look for the motor power of this development and the ultimate ground of the same in the development of the economic conditions. To each particular stage of the development of the economic conditions correspond special forms of society and ideas.

To investigate these laws and connections is the most important and fundamental work of historical research. This accomplished, it is comparatively easy to comprehend the particular forms of the development in particular cases.

In this sense I conceive the materialist conception of history, and if I have not wholly misunderstood Marx and Engels, this conception is wholly in their sense.

But if it gives any pleasure to anyone, they can call it neo-Marxist.

The principal point is naturally the question whether it is right. The answer to that must be given by the practice, the application of the method.

A further article will give a few additional illustrations, in which we take Bax's criticism as a starting point.

Footnote

1. Marx points out that a critical history of technology does not yet exist, and remarks farther:

"Darwin has interested us in the history of natural technology, i.e., in the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which organs serve as instruments of production for sustaining life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man, of the organs that are the material basis of all social organism, deserve equal attention? And would not such a history be easier to compile since, as Vico says, human history differs from natural history in this: that we have made the former, but not the latter? Technology discloses man's modes of dealing with Nature, the process of production by which he sustains his life, and thereby also lays bare the mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them. Every history of religion even that fails to take account of this material basis is uncritical. It is in reality much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion than conversely it is to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestialised forms of these relations. The latter method is the only materialistic and, therefore, the only scientific one." (**Capital**, Vol.I, Eng. trans., p.367.)

Part III. The Application of the Theory

(1896)

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Every theory must be founded on facts. But, on the other hand, a methodical investigation of facts is not possible without a fixed theoretical standpoint. The appearances of reality are so many-sided and complicated that the empiricist, pure and simple, loses himself hopelessly in them. The way through the endless brushwood can only be found by him who has previously acquired a wide outlook, and who knows how to distinguish between the essential and the unessential, the accidental from the typical, the general from the particular, the real cause from the occasion. Therefore the methodical investigation comes after and not before the theory.

A new theory can only arise when certain new facts become known, or previously known facts appear in a new light, facts which are so striking and characteristic that they, at a given state of theoretical thinking, force at least the genius to a new conception of things. Through the laws acquired by generalisation we arrive at a new theory.

Every theory is in the beginning defective, for it arises before we have attained to a systematic investigation of the whole of the facts which it wishes to explain. Exactly as aid to this investigation has it to prove its worth.

It is, therefore, no valid objection to a new theory when the fact is brought against it that it had not explained all phenomena to which it is applicable. The number of the phenomena which it has not yet explained, and still leaves to be explained, shows only its comparative youth and the limited number of its representatives, but can never be used as a proof against its soundness.

For this there is only one test – the criticism of the theory where it comes to be applied. By its fruits must it be known, and must be judged by what it has performed, not according to that which it ought to have performed.

If, for example, the Marxists or the neo-Marxists have as yet written no materialistic history of philosophy, that does not prove in the least that philosophy is not dependent upon the material conditions of society. Despite the youth of the materialistic method, and despite that its originators, and since then, almost without exception, all its younger students, were no well-to-do professors who could apply themselves exclusively to the theory, but were fighters for the cause of the proletariat, has this method already been brought to application in the most various fields of history. There is, therefore, no lack of opportunities to apply to it the only test which is decisive, and to enquire whether it can explain better than any historical theory hitherto brought forward those facts of history whose explanation it has attempted. That is the question, and not “whether man can regard it as final truth or not.”

But so many opponents as the materialist conception of history has already found, still no serious attempt has been

made to apply this proof to the historical achievements even of only one of the pupils, let alone the master.

But one can turn the tables, and apply the above proof to the performance of our opponents. This shall be attempted in the following manner. We take two examples which come handy, which friend Bax has given in his reply. By these it will be seen how far his method is superior to that of the neo-Marxists, whether it is more fruitful than this.

> "Kautsky asks," remarks Bax in his reply, "why, if that is so, the modern Greeks have produced no Aristotle, no Pericles, &c.; in other words, why modern Greece is different from ancient; he is of opinion that in reality only the economic conditions have changed, thereby he ignores everything which does not agree with his theory; as, for example, that a race, just as happens with individuals, can get old; secondly, the fact of the mixture of races; thirdly, that a large period of the historical development of humanity, quite apart from the economic, has taken place in the meantime. All, these factors have co-operated in Greece and elsewhere. The Greek spirit, literary, philosophic, and aesthetic, was manifestly exhausted long before any real alteration in the means of production and exchange had taken place. If this exhaustion could be brought into connection with any social factor, it would be rather of a political or a religious kind than an economic. Loss of political independence, and the introduction of Oriental ideas, and later of Christianity, can well have contributed a great deal to hasten the decay. Moreover, a great many races have passed through Greece, all of whom have left traces behind; Goths, Slavs, Normans, Catalonians, Venetians, and Turks, from whom also many, especially Slavs, have settled there and become quite absorbed in the previous population. The modern Greek is ethnically quite a different being from the ancient. Finally Kautsky ignores, as stated, in his zeal, the entire historic development, spiritual, political, and ethical as well as economic, which has taken place between the ancient and the modern time."

In the first place, I must say that I asked quite another question than Bax makes me ask. I have in my first reply to Bax (in No.47 *Neue Zeit*), thrown out the question, which of the three elements that control human affairs, the human organism, nature, and the economic conditions of society, had changed since ancient times. I explained that the first had not altered, and its power of thinking is the same, as in Greece; the brain-power of an Aristotle is scarcely surpassed, just as little the artistic talent of the ancients. Also nature has not altered. “Over Greece laughs to-day the same blue heaven as at the time of Pericles.” But the society has altered; i.e., in the last resort, the economic conditions. These are the variable factors of human development.

It is clear that is quite different to the question as stated by Bax. This divergence can be regarded as a striking illustration of his accuracy, so often mentioned. Bax’s obstinacy is a thing to be wondered at. To accuracy he makes no claim. Scarcely have I spoken the names Aristotle and Pericles, at once Bax confronts me with the question why Greece has to-day no Aristotle or Pericles to show. Yes, still more, he already hears me give an answer to that and learns from me that essentially “only the economic conditions have altered,” and not the whole society with them. In the meantime, this kind of criticism has in the above case one advantage. It causes Bax to set out the grounds which, in his opinion, explain why Greece has ceased to produce men like Pericles and Aristotle, to show what are the causes of the decay of Greek philosophy and art.

There Bax has a series of causes to hand which are to make the economic quite superfluous. As first and principal he gives the mixture of races which has taken place in Greece.

Now, I am very far from denying that the race peculiarities exercise a certain influence on the way in which the historic development proceeds. But this influence must not be over estimated, as the upholders of the modern theory of heredity are ready to do. The human organism has shown itself to be one of the most adaptable organisms, and certainly the human brain belongs to the most adaptable and most variable human organs. In any case, if the Greeks had intermixed with the Botucudos or the Patagonians, this might, at least temporarily, have paralysed their artistic and philosophic capacities. The peoples whom Bax names, Germans, Slavs, Spaniards, Italians, are, however, certainly not to be counted among those who lack all philosophic and artistic aptitude. Perhaps one can say this of the Turks, but these came first in the fifteenth century to Greece, and have had only a small influence on the racial existence of the Greeks. But even the other peoples arrived too late in Greece to explain the artistic and philosophic decay. This began in the fourth century B.C.; the first invasion of the Goths came in the third century A.D. At that time Greece was completely decayed.

The mixture of races in this relation therefore explains nothing. If I had really occupied myself with the question which Bax as a matter of fact first raised, then I should have had every reason to ignore the fact of the mixture of peoples.

But Bax has a second consideration to bring forward, which I, by my never-written discussion of a question which I never put, “have left out of account,” naturally because “it does not fit in with my conception,” namely, the fact “that a race, just as happens with individuals, can get old ... The Greek spirit was manifestly exhausted long before any real

alteration in the means of production and exchange had taken place."

It is doubtless "evident" that the "Greek spirit" was exhausted when the degeneration of the Greek philosophy and art began. This "exhaustion of the spirit" is, however, nothing else than a somewhat poetical way of describing the fact of the degeneration. I could just as well say "evidently the Greek spirit was completely degenerated, when the degeneration of the Greek art and philosophy began." So evident that is to me, I hope I shall be excused if this exhaustive explanation "does not fit in with my conception."

Equally right is Bax when he assumes that the assumption that a race gets old just like an individual "does not fit in with my conception." Does Bax wish to say, by that, that the social organism is an organism of the same kind as the animal, so that the laws of one are without any further ado applicable to the other? Then I would call attention to the peculiarity which the race possesses, in contrast to the individuals, the renewal of youth. The French nation under Louis XV had become very senile. The steel bath of the great Revolution made them young again and gave them giant strength. Also in our own time we have seen that the Japanese nation, which also gave many signs of senility, was rejuvenated by a similar, certainly a weaker, steel bath, and has forced itself into the row of the growing and promising peoples.

The old age of a people is also nothing else than a poetical and therefore not quite exact description of the fact of its social decay. With that kind of phrase we explain practically nothing.

Finally, have I as third consideration in the explanation of the decay of the Greek spiritual life "ignored in my zeal" the whole concrete development between ancient and modern times.

That I said nothing of all that in my article, I must in any case allow, but I may beg Bax to ascribe that not to my zeal but to the circumstance that I have undertaken to answer this question simply according to his imagination and not according to the reality.

I am, namely, of opinion that everything depends upon the concrete development. But unfortunately Bax leaves us at the decisive point without help, and contents himself with an obscure reference to the loss of political independence and the degrading influence of Christianity, but himself ascribes to the factors only the hastening, not the cause, of the decline.

What, then, does the improved method of Bax offer us as the cause of the decline? Nothing, nothing at all.

Now, let us attempt, if not to treat exhaustively – for which we have no room and for which a weekly review is not suitable – at least to give an outline of the article already by Bax criticised even if not written by me over the downfall of the Greek spiritual life, to see whether we, with the factors which Bax has ignored, will not have better luck.

In the first place our business is to exactly define the task. The spiritual decline of Greece begins in the fourth century B.C. If one is to lay bare the roots of the same, they must not be looked for in phenomena which came first at a later period, but only in phenomena which were already at work

in the fourth century. If one is to learn to comprehend why Greece in later centuries did not produce an Aristotle or a Pericles, then one must first know the reason why Greece at one time brought forward an Aristotle and a Pericles. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the period of the bloom of Greek culture as well as the period of decline. This is limited to a few generations of mankind, to one century.

The century between Greece's greatest philosophers: Heraclitus the dark (circa 500 B.C.), and Plato (born 429 B.C.), and Aristotle (born 385 B.C.), saw also Greece's greatest historians, Herodotus and Thucydides; its greatest dramatists, Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes; its greatest masters in the field of the plastic arts, Phidias and Polygnotos. The fourth century B.C. sees still other great performances in these fields as after-effects of the great movement of the fifth century B.C. but already commences the decline, fast and irresistible.

Now that we have exactly defined the phenomenon to be explained, let us examine the economic movement, which coincides with the above movement in respect of space and time. There we find that the flourishing period begins with the Persian wars (492-479 B.C.) and ends with the Peloponnesian (431-404 B.C.). Each of these wars inaugurated an economic revolution. Up to the Persian wars the economic, and also the intellectual, centre of gravity of the Greeks lay in Asia Minor. It is noteworthy that Albert Lange, the great opponent of materialism, explains the philosophy of the Greeks of Asia Minor (and also of the Magna Graecia) quite in materialist fashion. Certainly, only because the facts forced him to that, not from materialistic zeal. He says

> "If we cast a glance to the shores of Asia Minor in the centuries that immediately precede the brilliant period of Hellenic intellectual life, the colonies of the Ionians are distinguished for wealth and material prosperity, as well as for artistic sensibility and refinement of life. Trade and political alliances, and the increasing eagerness for knowledge, led the inhabitants of Miletos and Ephesus to take long journeys, brought them into manifold intercourse with foreign feelings and opinions, and furthered the elevation of a freethinking aristocracy above the standpoint of the narrower masses. A similar early prosperity was enjoyed by the Doric colonies of Sicily and Magna Graecia. Under these circumstances, we may safely assume that, long before the appearance of the philosophers, a freer and more enlightened conception of the universe had spread among the higher ranks of society."

It was in these circles of men – wealthy, distinguished, with a wide experience gained from travel – that philosophy arose. (Lange: *History of Materialism*, English translation, pp.7 and 8.)

The victory of the inhabitants of Greece proper over the Persians transferred the economic centre of gravity from the east coast to the west coast of the Aegean Sea. It brought not only enormous booty for the Greek peasants and sailors who up to then lived for the most part in very simple circumstances; it brought it also about that the victors, after they had warded off the attack, passed over to the offensive. This was not, however, the business of the peasant clinging to the soil, but the quick-moving sailor. The commercial town, Athens, won the lead in the struggle; and she attained to the mastery over, and exploitation of, the Aegean and the Ionian – indeed, also of the Black Sea. The exploitation was in part direst, by means of the tribute of the conquered islands and coasts, in part indirect; while Athens sought as far as possible to monopolise the Greek trade, which was

grown to a world commerce, an intermediary between East sad West. Enormous treasures were gathered in Athens; an unheard-of economic awakening was the result, but also an awakening of the arts and sciences. Athens became the centre in which the most brilliant intellects of Greece gathered together, to which they dedicated their services. Nowhere did artists and thinkers find such favourable conditions to develop themselves and exercise their activity, nowhere such plentiful suggestion as there.

It was not the riches alone which offered these conditions; that was also to be found elsewhere. But never and nowhere in antiquity did an economic revolution, as I have just described, proceed with such rapidity, or so immediately, as in Athens of the fifth century B.C. Nowhere, therefore, did it give such a powerful impulse to thought and imagination, the philosophic and artistic capacity; nowhere were such unheard of successes so unexpectedly won; nowhere was the population so full of confidence and bravery which communicated itself to the artists and thinkers and forced them to attempt the most difficult problems.

The wealth which flowed to Athens did not remain, as elsewhere, confined to the narrow circle of a ruling aristocracy. Athens was a democratic community, the collective body of citizens had a share in the economic awakening, as well, however, in the intellectual. Nowhere found thinkers and artists such a public as in Athens. But if the thinker and the artist make their public, so the latter also, *vice versa*, and to a still greater degree, make the former.

To all this must be added the fact that Athens at the beginning of the Persian wars already stood at the head of contemporary civilisation. That was not the case, for example, in Rome, whose development was similar, when not quite so concentrated as that of Athens. The Romans came to the eastern basin of the Mediterranean as barbarians, as upstarts, who at best came up to a civilisation already existing, which they could not at once carry independently farther and surpass. In Rome the wealth brought in consequence of the policy of conquest and exploitation might bring forward lovers of art, collectors, scholars, and compilers, but not original philosophers and artists as in Athens.

But when Rome had assimilated the culture of the East, then her economic development had already arrived at the period of decline, and then the Roman world empire could not produce anything more on the intellectual plane – than Christianity.

Rome, therefore, could never do in the domain of intellect what Athens had done, but even for the latter the economic development proceeded in the same direction as that of Rome.

The wealth which, since the Persian wars, flowed to Greece, destroyed the old system of barter, and money became the medium of exchange. On the land the peasant got into debt and was ruined; in the place of the peasant came big estates, worked by slaves. The country was depopulated. The mass of the people crowded to the cities. By the side of the rich, growing ever richer – merchants, speculators, usurers, big landlords, fortunate generals who returned home loaded

with booty – was crowded an ever-growing mass of the "submerged tenth." The old virtues disappeared, the characteristics of the new classes asserted themselves. In the place of a feeling of solidarity came venality, instead of valour came cowardice and effeminacy. The citizen-soldier who fought for his own hearth was supplanted by the mercenary, who served him who paid best.

All that led in Greece, as in Rome, to general social decay. But in Greece the decline did not spin itself out in a process lasting for centuries, as in home, hat it was just as unexpectedly brought on through a catastrophe in war as the awakening by a victory.

In Athens, the centre of the economic revolution, the corrupting influences of the new economic conditions made themselves first and most strikingly felt. But Athens became the centre of the hatred of the whole of Greece. So much the more the use of money developed, and the "submerged tenth" increased, so much the more increased the economic pressure on the subjects of Athens, so much the greater also became the covetousness of the reactionary peasant cantons for the treasures of the world-city. Neighbours and subjects made alliance, and in a desperate struggle destroyed for ever the world-power. This thirty years' war exhausted and laid waste the whole of Greece, and thanks to the declining tendencies of her economic development, she never again fully recovered. Soon she became the booty of foreigners, who drained her; the world-commerce, the trade between East and West, took paths which led past Greece, and thus it remained economically without importance till the present day.

Those are the most important facts, to which I should have had to point if I had really undertaken to explain the decay of the Greek intellectual life from the materialist standpoint. I think these facts speak clearly enough for themselves. As well in the rise as in the fall, the economic development took the lead and the intellectual development followed it truly. The connection between the two is, however, too close for the *post hoc* in this case not also to be a *propter hoc*; this will be more evident when one goes more into detail than is here possible. Beside this, the same parallelism is also elsewhere observed, therefore it is no mere chance.

I must leave it to readers to decide whether anybody who arrived through the materialist conception of history to a knowledge of this parallelism still feels the need to look to the mixture of races with Slavs and Turks, or even to the "exhaustion of the Greek spirit" and other desperate means, to make the intellectual decay of Greece comprehensible.

With the second historical example, in which we compared the Bax method with the materialist method, we can express ourselves more briefly.

In my reply in No.47 of the *Neue Zeit*, I had accused Bax of inconsistency, in that he, in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, traces the loss of the mediaeval love of life and the rise of Puritanism in England on one occasion to the economic development, and a few lines later to the peculiar spirit of the English people.

> "In general I agree readily with Kautsky and his friends that the alteration in the English temper at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, is to be traced to the economic revolution which took place then. But there are certain characteristics of the English Protestant

> movement which, on the Continent, although a similar revolution took place in the economic conditions – even if this in many places took place somewhat later – have nowhere shown themselves in anything like the same degree. Where, on the Continent, does one find the English Sunday, the dogma of the wickedness of dancing, of the theatre, or reading novels? All these peculiarities are not to be explained through a general formula, accordingly I made the suggestion that the Puritanism from which these sprang, could somehow or other be traced back to the peculiarity of the mixture of races which produced the English people."

Here again, therefore, the mixture of races plays a part. But, unfortunately, even this time it does not come at the right time to explain anything. The mixture of races with the Greek people commenced 500 years after the commencement of that phenomenon which it, according to Bax, was to account for. The racial mixture in the case of England was already completed in the twelfth century – at the end of the eleventh century the last great invasion of England, that of the Normans, took place. It comes, therefore, about 500 years too soon to account for the English Puritanism of the seventeenth century. Between this mixture and Puritanism lies exactly the period of merrie England. We materialists are in the first place inclined to look for the cause of the peculiarities of an age in the conditions of the same. Can it now be that the England of the seventeenth century was only distinguished from the rest of Europe through its mixture of races, so that we must ascribe the English Puritanism to this?

If we look closer, we find at once a very striking and important peculiarity of England in the seventeenth century. It is for England the most prominent fact of the whole century: The Revolution of 1642-1660, that is the rule of the democratic classes, small shopkeepers, peasants, and wage-

workers. This phenomenon is quite unique in the whole of Europe during the seventeenth century, since everywhere else the feudal absolutism won the upper hand, and the democratic classes were completely crushed.

Just as well known is it that Puritanism was not a characteristic mental tendency of the whole English people, but the mental tendency of special classes, and indeed of those very classes who in England, in opposition to the rest of Europe, attained temporarily the upper hand during the seventeenth century.

But if one looks still closer, one finds still more. If Puritanism was the mental tendency not of the English people, but of particular classes in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, neither was it anyway simply in England characteristic of these classes, but in the whole of Europe.

As Bernstein and I were at work on the second volume of the *History of Socialism*, we were not a little surprised, when we, quite independently of each other, in all Socialistic-Democratic parties and currents at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times found exactly the same puritanical views, in often quite ludicrous agreement. What Bernstein found in England, I found among the Bohemian Brothers, among the followers of Münzer, the Anabaptists, and the Mennonites. We came to the conviction that this agreement was no chance one, but a historical necessity. Puritanism is a necessary method of thought of particular classes under particular conditions. As during the Middle ages, with their almost universal system of barter, “live and let live” is the maxim of peasants, small

bourgeoisie and wage workers, so these classes succumb at the commencement of the capitalist method of production to a gloomy Puritanism, and, indeed, the more, the faster, and more incisively the economic and the corresponding political development makes itself felt the more lively is the reaction of the lowest classes against it. But because Puritanism, although it came up also in the rest of Europe, only got the upper hand in England, could only there force itself on society, explains itself after what has been related.

This very phenomenon, which Bax with his "improved method found so completely insoluble, that he for the solution of the problem took refuge in a completely arbitrarily conceived peculiarity of an already many-centuries-old mixture of races, forms for us one of the most brilliant corroborations of the materialist conception of history.

And this fruitfulness and accuracy has been shown in all departments in which we have tried it, be it the research of the past or in the understanding of the present.

It serves the latter purpose rust as well as the former, and therein lies its practical importance, therein its great importance not only for the Socialist engaged in research, but also for the fighting Socialist, and for that reason the materialist conception is no simple question for the learned, but a question of interest for all.