

# Books

## Marxism in Our Time by Isaac Deutscher

(Ramparts Press; 312 pp.; \$5.95)

W. R. Campbell

The late Isaac Deutscher, who authored the material which his wife has collected and edited to produce *Marxism in Our Time*, was the harbinger of the revitalization of Marxian thought which spread across Europe nearly a generation ago. Deutscher was a member of the vanguard which struggled against the vulgarization of Marxist thought. In fact, it was this struggle which mediated his magnificent biographies of Trotsky and Stalin. Deutscher was not, however, "the foremost modern Marxist scholar," a claim made for him by his publisher, significantly enough, on the dust jacket of the book under review. In fact, the most apparent weakness of our author's trilogy on Trotsky lay with his attempts to second guess the former commander of the Red Army. And no one seriously concerned with such analysis should prefer Deutscher to, say, Garaudy, Novack, Schaff, Kotarbinski, Kolakowski, Petrovic, or even Barbu, Macpherson or Cornu.

It was axiomatic for Marx that a philosophical foundation must be provided for the revolutionary work of the Communist movement. Yet, in the title essay of the present work, Deutscher claims that "Marxism is a way of thinking, a generalization growing out of an immense historical development. . . ."

What is meant by a "way of thinking" comes clear in an essay entitled "Discovering Das Kapital." "Slowly at first, but then irresistibly," says Deutscher, "I was entranced by the style of *Das Kapital*. I realized why

its author never bothered to offer his readers a systematic exposition of the principles of dialectics. . . . He evidently preferred to apply these principles rather than expound them; and how right he was!" Cautiously now, he continues: "Dialectics is indeed the grammar of Marxist thinking. But just as one shows one's mastery of grammar not in reciting its rules, but in living speech, so one shows one's grasp of dialectics not in mulling over its formulas, but in coming to grips with specific large and vital issues in history and contemporary affairs."

Deutscher is committed to what he refers to as classical Marxism; a way of thinking which is dialectical. Moreover, though abjuring the gauche, he insists that dialectics is reducible to a formula. But a formula is merely the method by which a certain sort of information is ascertained. Does Deutscher really wish to argue that Marxism at its best is nothing more than a method creatively articulated?

There is something of substance in such a position. Still, it is a fact that the dialectic was not original with Marx. Consequently, it makes me uneasy to assume that anyone would wish to be taken seriously when claiming that Marxism is merely a way of thinking.

So, Deutscher did not intend that such a statement should be taken literally. It may be presumed that he meant to say that Marxism is this special way of thinking applied to a characteristic subject matter. But what was the subject matter which

he had in mind? It is when this question is asked that the lacunae in Deutscher's argument make their appearance.

Deutscher did not take the young Marx seriously. Instead, he was one of that peculiar breed of men who imagine that on or about 1848 Marx was overcome by either epiphany or a miasmatic fog and, like the apostle Peter, transcended, or at least subordinated, his former self. Yet, it was precisely during these early years that Marx functioned as a speculative thinker, and it is to his theory concerning man's place in the cosmos, developed during this period, that he referred when he insisted upon the necessity of providing a philosophical ground for all practical undertakings.

Ironically, Deutscher, well aware of the divorce between theory and practice which characterizes what he calls vulgar Marxism, asserts that "classical Marxism offers deep historical insight into the workings of capitalism, and broader still, into man's relation under this system with other men, with his own class and other classes, his relationship and attitude towards the technology of his age." But, there is an important omission here which undermines Deutscher's claim to stand with classical Marxists. It is an omission predicted by his depreciation of the young Marx. Deutscher either forgot or ignored the fact that Marx's analysis of the human condition begins and ends with his concern over man's estrangement from nature. For Marx, it was the character of this primary estrangement from nature which drove the dialectic through the articulation of the secondary modalities of its expression that so fascinate Deutscher. (In this sense, "classical" Marxism is concerned with the human circumstance first and with capitalism only secondarily as the mode in which primal estrangement is articulated within a certain epoch.)

Our author reminds us that Trotsky spoke "of three basic tragedies—hunger, sex, and death—besetting man." For Deutscher, "hunger is the enemy that Marxism and the modern

labor movement have taken on." They have made this commitment rightly inasmuch as "hunger or, more broadly, social inequality and oppression, have hugely complicated and intensified for innumerable human beings the torments of sex and death as well."

This may be true, but it is superficial. At issue for Marx was the despair which individual human beings experienced when nature interposed between them and select others impediments to the effective expression of positive emotions. In effect, Deutscher is claiming that the fuel of the dialectic is the hunger of some. This is correct, as far as it goes. However, it was Marx's notion that the hunger of which Deutscher spoke was mediated by love. Hunger was motivationally relevant for some men not because it occurred within their own bodies; rather, hunger motivated some men toward its amelioration because it occurred in others who were loved by them.

Anxious to assert "a contrast between classical and vulgar Marxism by analogy with the way in which Marx spoke of classical and vulgar economy," Deutscher claims for classicism "Marx, Engels, their contemporaries, and after them . . . Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky, [and] Rosa Luxemburg. . . ." Why? For no other apparent reason than that, unlike the vulgar Marxists represented by "the different varieties of European social-democrats, reformists, Stalinists, Khrushchevites, and their like," they continued to think of value as based on human labor, and they never demurred from analyzing the condition of the working class.

Now it is certainly true, on balance, that the figures mentioned did focus their attention in this manner, but this coincidence practically exhausts their similarity. And as a result, the nature of classical Marxism seems perversely vague. It is hardly comforting to recall that Lenin, upon reading Hegel for the first time during his last year, remarked that at last he understood Marx. Worse still, for those who would discern the es-

entials of this classical Marxism, is the fact that, at no time in his life, was the philosophical materialist Engels able to grasp the meaning which Marx attached to his notion of materialism. Indeed, it was by virtue of his ineptitude that Engels came to call Marx the Darwin of social history. It was an appellation which appealed to Deutscher. But Darwinism is not dialectical.

Darwinists do not take fitness to be an abstract standard applied to all species of life as they occur in a changing environment; rather, the notion of fitness is supposed to be embodied in a species which, by virtue of this reification, is taken as definitive of the standard itself. But this is precisely the sort of vulgarity which Marx attacked in his critique of its first instance in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. (It is a vulgarity occasioned by the inversion of a normal subject predicate relationship, e.g., Socrates is human—Human is Socrates.) As if to exemplify this point in the most convoluted manner imaginable, Deutscher announces in the opening lines of the penultimate paragraph of his title essay: "I have no doubt that despite the very ugly scenes between Moscow and Peking, *the social systems* of those countries are more intelligent and more progressive than their leaders. The social system will force the leaders into internationalism even if they are the most chauvinistic idiots under the sun . . ." (italics added). Such a reification is only a magnificent obsession.

This notion of internationalism is further explicated in the transcript of a lecture which the editor includes under the title "On Internationals and Internationalism." There we learn the following: "Socialist internationalism sprang from two sources: one was the practical experience of the workers who felt that they had to cooperate with each other across frontiers and boundaries in order to defend their interests, their wages, and their working condition. On a different plane, however, the history of political ideas in Europe provides another source of socialist internationalism, one that links up, as it

were, with bourgeois cosmopolitanism of the French revolution and of the various bourgeois political movements that followed in its wake." The author goes on to argue that "there is a historical affinity between bourgeois cosmopolitanism and what we call proletarian internationalism; paradoxically that affinity does not rule out, but in fact presupposes, also a conflict between the two." It has been the Internationals which have mediated this conflict and which have been wrecked by their inherent conservatism. Nonetheless, while "the Internationals come and go, internationalism remains the vital principle of a new world."

Similarly, in what seem to be the three most revealing essays of this work—"Marxism in Our Time," "The Roots of Bureaucracy," and "On Socialist Man"—Deutscher makes much of what may be called Marx's assumption of material abundance: "an abundance of goods, an abundance of means of production and a relative or even an absolute abundance of means of consumption, an abundance of human skills, of tools, of abilities, of experience, of resources, and abundance of culture." He goes on to argue that inasmuch as Marx took it for granted that material abundance was both the necessary and the sufficient condition of political freedom, it is possible to explain—by assuming that the Communist revolution will take place "within a mature capitalist bourgeois society"—why the masters of Marxist thought failed to concentrate on an analysis of the nature of post-capitalist man, the bureaucratic phenomenon, and the issue of political freedom.

Since penury is the necessary and sufficient condition of enslavement, and since the bureaucracy is a marginal phenomenon manipulated to maintain a relative deprivation beyond its utilitarian justification, it follows for Deutscher that, come the revolution, the bureaucracy (which he suggests is "roughly parallel" to the state) will be divested of its repressive functions. The state will then appear to wither away and freedom will become manifest.

Such considerations compel Deutscher to allow that "the Marxist prognostication of socialism has so far really to some extent been falsified by developments"—but only in one respect: "socialism has so far won not in any of the advanced capitalist societies but in the backward ones. . . ." And regimes generated under such circumstances, lacking abundance, must therefore be repressive.

Yet with this argument, quite paradoxically, Deutscher has provided a most potent justification for the Stalinism he detested. For if it can be demonstrated that Stalinism telescoped the time "normally" required for a society to sponsor material abundance and that it did so in an incomparable manner, then no voice which represents sanity would ever dare protest against Stalinism's "excesses."

It is by reason of this contradiction—apparently endemic to his argument—that Deutscher is forced into the absurdity of the systems analyst whose plaint goes something like this: "But for the people who make it up and for the leaders who make it work, the system would be perfect." I believe it was in the satirical Soviet journal *Krokodil* that a cartoon character was made to complain that capitalist societies are characterized by man's exploitation of man. "Yes," sighed his cohort, "we are more fortunate; here the situation is just the reverse."

Deutscher's mistake is characteristic of what I understand to constitute the essence of the vulgarization of Marx's thought. He assumes that there is something absolute about the notion of material abundance. Such is not the case. The character of abundance is always determined by an act of human consciousness or, better, consciencing. Whatever the wealth at my disposal, I am necessarily destitute if I would obtain more than its worth can comprehend. However little its worth, I may be wealthy if I would obtain less. Given conditions far short of abundance, human beings, when they are being human, can disown

every predilection which philosophical materialists take to be definitive of human motivation.

Still, Deutscher had the last word

when he said: "It seems to me—such is the bitter dialectic of our epoch—that Marxism is in ascendancy and decline simultaneously."

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