

SOCIALISM AND PHILOSOPHY

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Socialism and Philosophy by Antonio Labriola

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ANTONIO LABRIOLA

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PHILOSOPHY**

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BY

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SOCIALISM AND PHILOSOPHY

I.

Rome, April 20, 1897.

Dear Mr. Sorel!

For some time I have intended to carry on a conversation in writing with you.

This will be the best and most appropriate way of expressing my gratitude for your preface to my essays. It is a matter of course that I could not silently accept the courteous words which you had heaped so profusely upon me. I could not but reply to you at once and acknowledge my obligation to you by a private letter. And now there is no more need of our exchanging compliments, especially in letters which either you or I may have occasion to publish at some future time. Besides, what good would it do me now to protest modestly and ward off your praise? It is entirely due to you that my two essays on historical materialism, which are but rough sketches, circulate in France in book-form. You placed them before the public in this shape. It has never been in my mind to write a standard book, in the sense in which you French, who admire and cultivate classic methods in literature, use this term. I am of those who regard this persistent devotion to the cult of classic style as rather inconvenient for those who wish to express

the results of strictly scientific thought in an original, adequate, and easy manner. To me it is as inconvenient as a badly fitting coat.

Passing over all compliments, then, I shall express myself on the points which you have made in your preface. I shall discuss them frankly without having in view the writing of a monograph. I choose the form of letters because interruptions, breaks in the continuity of thought, and occasional jumps, such as would occur in conversation, do not seem out of place and incongruous there. I really should not write so many dissertations, memorials, or articles, were it not for the fact that I want to reply to the many questions which you ask in the few pages of your preface, as though you were engrossed in doubting thoughts.*

But while I shall write the things as they come into my mind, I do not intend to lessen my responsibility for whatever I may say here, and shall continue to say. I merely wish to throw off the burden of stiff and formal prose which is customary for scientific exposition. Nowadays there is no petty postgraduate, however diminutive, who does not imagine that he is erecting a monument of himself for contemporary and future generations whenever he consecrates a ponderous volume, or a learned and intricate disquisition, to some stray thought or chance observation caught in animated conversation or inspired by some one who has a particular talent for teaching. Such impressions always have a greater suggestive power by force of natural expression which is a gift of those who seek the truth by themselves or tell others about it for the first time.

*For the better understanding of my letters I append the preface (III) which Sorel has written for the French edition of my two essays (Paris, 1897, Glard et Briere).

We know well enough that this closing century, which is all business, all money, does not freely circulate thought unless it is likewise expressed in the revered business form and endorsed by it, so that it may have for fit companions the bill of the publisher and the literary advertisements from frothy puffs to sincerest praise. In the society of the future, in which we live with our hopes, and still more with a good many illusions that are not always the fruit of a well balanced imagination, there will grow out of all proportion, until they are legion, the number of men who will be able to discourse with that divine joy in research and that heroic courage of truth which we admire in a Plato, a Bruno, a Galilei. There may also multiply infinitely the individuals who, like Diderot, shall be able to write profound and beguiling things such as *Jacques le Fataliste*, which we now imagine to be unsurpassed. In the society of the future, in which leisure, rationally increased for all, shall give to all the requirements of liberty, the means of culture, and the right to be lazy, this lucky discovery of our Lafargue, there will be on every street corner some genius wasting his time, like old master Soerates, by working busily at some task not paid for in money. But now, in the present world, in which only the insane have visions of a millennium, many idlers exploit the public appreciation by their worthless literature as though they had earned a right to do so by legitimate work. So it is that even Socialism will have to open its bosom for a discreet multitude of idlers, shirkers, and incapables.

In this trifling manner I approach my real argument.

You complain that the theories of historical materialism have become so little appreciated in France. You

complain that the spread of these theories is prevented by prejudices due to national vanity, to the literary pretensions of some, to the philosophical blindness of others, to the cursed desire to pose as something which one is not, and finally to insufficient intellectual development, not to mention the many shortcomings found even among socialists. But all these things should not be considered mere accidents! Vanity, false pride, a desire of posing without really being, a mania for self, self-aggrandisement, the frenzied will to shine, all these and other passions and *virtues of civilized man* are by no means unessential in life, but may rather constitute very often its substance and purpose. We know that the church has not succeeded in the majority of cases in rendering the Christian mind humble, but has on the contrary given to it a new title to another and greater pretension. Well now... this historical materialism demands of those who wish to profess it consciously and frankly a certain queer humility, that is to say, as soon as we realize that we are bound up with the course of human events and study its complicated lines and tortuous windings, it behooves us not to be merely resigned and acquiescent, but to engage in some conscious and rational work. But there is the difficulty. We are to come to the point of confessing to ourselves that our own individuality, to which we are so closely attached through an obvious and genetic habit, is a pretty small thing in the complicated network of the social mechanism, however great it may be, or appear, to us, even if it is not such a mere evanescent nonentity as some hare-brained theosophists claim. We are to adapt ourselves to the conviction that the subjective intentions and aims of every one of us are always struggling against the

resistance of the intricate processes of life, so that our designs leave no trace of themselves, or leave a trace which is quite different from the original intent, because it is altered and transformed by the accompanying conditions. We are to admit, after this statement, that history lives our lives, so to say, and that our own contribution toward it, while indispensable, is nevertheless but a very minute factor in the crossing of forces which combine, complete and alternately eliminate one another. But all these conceptions are veritable bores for all those who feel the need of confining the universe within the scope of their individual vision. Therefore the privilege of heroes must be preserved in history, so that the dwarfs may not be deprived of the faith that they are able to ride on their own shoulders and make themselves conspicuous. And this must be granted to them, even if they are not worthy, in the words of Jean Paul, of reaching to their own knees.

In fact, have not people been going to school for centuries, only to be told that Julius Caesar founded the empire and Charlemagne reconstructed it? That Socrates as much as invented logic, and Dante created Italian literature by a stroke of his pen? It is but a very short time that the mythological conception of such people as the *creators* of history has been gradually displaced, and not always in precise terms, by the prosaic notion of a *historical process* of society. Was not the French revolution willed and made, according to various versions of literary invention, by the different saints of the liberalist legends, the saints of the right, the saints of the left, the Girondist saints, the Jacobine saints? Thus it comes that Taine has devoted quite a considerable portion of his ponderous intellect to the proof, as