

Sherman Heights
Woodbury, Conn.

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Dear Mattick,

I read Pannekoek's "L. as philosopher" clear through, and now, rereading, I take down a few notes and remarks, you might compare with your own observations.

like to
A major shortcoming of the essay is that it does not consider the published notes of L. on Hegel etc. which contain some really lucid remarks, better stuff than what the professors have to say. To be sure, L. was not a philosopher, in the sense of somebody competent and trained in dealing with particularly complex and open problems of the "superstructure" (a bad misnomer, by the way, which makes the "basis"- "superstructure" relation much too mechanical and onesided). But L. had more or less informed hunches that vary in significance with the material and method and man he is dealing with. Conversing with Hegel he becomes quite eager and intense, while a Mach lowers his point of view into fairly pedantic schoolmastering (with little overall mastery of the problems discussed). The tone and style of Marxian controversy has unfortunately, set by the master himself, Marx, in this querulous and haughty manner (which for Marx was a substitute for communication, nothing very admirable, but so easy to imitate by the lesser men, also by Engels, not to speak of the "clerks" for "dialectics").

In the chapter "Marxism" the author is on very shaky ground. The representation is quite hacknayed and tautological. He for instance explains "experience" by "power of thought to draw conclusions from his experiences" which then regulate behaviour; so that behaviour explains behaviour. The remarks against Engels is valid. Also that practice is the "test" but not the sole criterion of truth. "The philosopher in his secluded study" is an abstraction; and an abstraction for which the author should have some degree of respect since he has no use for the "practical" current politics either (which he sees exclusively as power-politics). Marx nowhere (in my knowledge) has said that "the truth of thought is nothing but the power and mastery of the real world". Marx was by far too profound a thinker to identify power over the means of production with the end and purpose of a humanized life itself. The tendency of the author to decide what is and what is not "Marxian" (for instance his apparent readiness to consider "Marxian" only the more technical economic theories of Marx, and to disconsider the young Marx) deprive him of points of view that he could have used with advantage and truthfully against Lenin. He is against dogmatism and middle-class thinking; but proves most vulnerable in both respects.

In the whole chapter "Middle class materialism" one does not know whether the author is reporting on what the "middle class" thinkers thought or whether he is advancing his own superior thought. In either case the performance is very poor, historically and systematically. His power of making valid generalizations is simply too limited in content and method. One feels that he does not really know what he is talking about. Therefore his very terminology, the use of such terms as "basis", "superstructure", "science", "ideology" etc. is loose and hacknayed. When he says, pg. 16, that physical processes differ "only" in complexity, and that "ultimately" everything must be explained "by the dynamics and movements of the atom" P. seems to identify himself fully with the...

he later wishes to punish Lenin for. Such sentences are most emphatically "metaphysical". It is the metaphysics so common among scientists that ~~turn~~ the particular phase of laboratory methods into "the" principle of explanation, explaining everything from one single point of view; which is not an explanation but an explaining away. The last hypothesis of science has little chance of being a revelation of the origin of life itself. The correction of this dogmatism offered on pg. 18 (comparing middle-class materialism and Historical Materialism) is valuable, but shortwinded; and could be carried and had been carried forward much more incisively, most brilliantly by Ernst Bloch and Max Raphael, to a lesser degree by Horkheimer and Co. (Institut fuer Sozialfaelschung). Most likely the author did not have this material at his disposal; which makes a difference subjectively only, not objectively as to the rank one occupies in the universal discussion going on everywhere on these matters.

On Dietzgen as a thinker P. exposes himself to the most curious remarks when he puts him not only on a level with Marx but over and above Marx who eventually has not even "understood the essence" of Dietzgen. Dietzgen has undoubtedly fine moments, f.i. taking the world of qualities (colors etc.) seriously that have been so recklessly degraded as subjective and secondary by bourgeois thought ever since Galileo etc. But Dietzgen merely chances upon such light; he cannot support ~~xxx~~ such remarks nor can he expand them over and above the aphoristic phase. At best he is clever; but the average level is below any possible comparison with even the worst parts of Engel's Naturdialektik (the publication of which with so much trumpeting was painful enough). In his haphazard method Dietzgen is not even "dated" (as positivism is dated); he is, in a jolly and thunderous way, like the Reiter ueber dem Bodensee", only that he never understood even retrospectively on what territory he was moving. Speaking of "middle class materialism", well, his relation to materialism is like the relation of Hans Sachs to music.

The central chapters that follow, on Mach, Avenarius, Lenin; on what Lenin said that Mach said, on what P. said Lenin ought to have said that Mach said it or did not say it.... frankly, most of this is most uninteresting and, objectively, not on the level of the problems involved. True, Lenin's summaries are often crude enough; but so are the theories he criticizes. The whole discussion as here stated by P. is thoroughly obsolete. And it makes little difference whether or not Lenin has understood Mach's misunderstanding, or whether he has merely misunderstood Mach's partial understanding of a more classical misunderstanding in one point or another. As controversies of this type go Lenin is fairly accurate; and to argue somewhat half-heartedly for Mach only because Lenin argued wholeheartedly and a little monomanically against Mach really does not add to an enlightenment on the problems itself. P. reproves Lenin for having written not a philosophical treatise but a political pamphlet. But what ~~else~~ else does P. do here? The really interesting points he raises later and once in a while inbetween could have been stated quite separate from the Mach-Lenin controversy. It is like complaining about a taxidriver's bad taste in tuning in the car-radio; and then to state from a point of view of historical fatalism that the driver also wrecked the car, as if these events were taking place on the same level and as if they were organically related. The only logical link, Lenin was reckless in controversy and reckless in politics, is extremely thin and academic.

Indeed, Historical Materialism can advance the problems of epistemology; only P. had not advanced them at all, apart from some more general remarks that resemble the few lucky hunches of Dietzgen. The brief he is holding in favour of Mach's theories (at the end of pg. 40) is really rather innocent of science and philosophy. Einstein had the bad luck of using Machian terminology when he generalized epistemologically; this

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is nothing very flattering for Einstein, who, in matters of theory of knowledge, morals, religion etc. is not much different from the point of view of an advanced boyscout.

pg.42 ff, all this so called "introjection" business of Avenarius, stated by, criticized by Avenarius, reported by P., has a few bright as

moments within a fairly obscure and confusing discussion. True, "ignorance is no argument" (as P. states against Lenin, who has supposedly misunderstood some passage of Avenarius; but also half-knowledge is not particularly helpful in matters of Lenin as philosopher. The author pleads all the time against identification of materialism with mechanical concepts; fine. But why then does he argue against Lenin's acceptance of the theory that also consciousness is a form of energy? (pg.53).

pg.55 the author defends Mach's "principle of economy" as "scientific"; says that "Marxists should find sympathy" with this principle. But author ignores that this principle is eminently bourgeois, did not exist before and will vanish ~~with~~ capitalism. Lenin's argument against the

with economy-principle is a little abstract too; but even with his incomplete reasoning he is more right than the author with his highhanded school-mastering on pg.56. Somebody indeed here is very "naive".

pg.59: the case against Einstein's theory of space and time is by no means closed. The Nazi-professors may still be proven to have been right against Einstein; not because they were Nazis but because Einstein has argued from too special and pointed an angle. Theories "universally adopted by scientists" are the least absolute and stable thing in the world, as the history of science proves abundantly. What is the use of distinguishing between middle class materialism and historical materialism if one does not sustain this distinction and substantiate it in practical instances?

pg.60, footnote: I take it from one of the last issues of "Science and Society" that Einstein's theory is no longer branded as counter-revolutionary (which was silly enough; while the new acceptance may come too late, scientifically speaking).

pg.63: here he scores a good and sharp point against Lenin, where the latter's acceptance of the Buechner and Co. in all "more elementary questions of materialism" proves him very vulnerable indeed. The same goes for Lenin's sympathy with Haeckel, which is hackneyed enough.

The discussion of "religion versus reason", as inherited from bourgeois opposition to feudal religion, pg. 63ff, has some good germs which, by the way, are quite out of tune with the authors apparent acceptance of middle-class materialism on pg.15. That Haeckel was anti-socialistic in his political opinions does not prove anything against Haeckel as a scientist; Haeckel is scientifically incompetent. This alone counts; also in relation to Lenin's acceptance of Haeckel. A good question: "what class-fight was this"? -pg65. -But it is impossible to ignore Lenin's criterion of class and social relation in his arguments. Even if he does not state the problem specifically, it underlies all his reasoning.

67: Marx's views on theory of knowledge certainly did not grow into something "entirely different from Hegel and Feuerbach" -if one knows enough about Hegel and Feuerbach.

67: thesis: "the working class has little use for natural science, the instrument of ~~the~~ its foe". but all classes, interested in control of

nature, must use this instrument; there is no other instrument. One can use it for different ends; for instance, without or even against the "economy principle" that P. had just accepted in toto. ~~xxxx~~ Social science without natural science is impossible; they are complementary, not contradictory. Author himself has taken the "scientific" view point only too literally, accepting a particular phase of research as a generally valid principle of philosophical criticism.

pg 68. He has ~~blamed~~ blamed Lenin (correctly, in so far as the Western problems are concerned) that he saw everything in terms of the Russian antithesis "religious and scientific thinking". But all the further remarks pg 68ff prove, that Lenin was right, in and for Russian matters. The western-European problematic, as reflected in Hegel, Lenin has dealt with more concretely in his commentaries to Hegel - which ~~pgx70~~ P. leaves out completely. This is not Lenin's mistake.

pg.70: distinction between "specific Russian Marxism" and "real Marxism" is as -unmarxian as can be. True, the Russian Revolution (also the Chinese and Indian revolutions) are partly "bourgeois" in the actual economic content. Since the bourgeois class was not developed strongly enough to carry out its own revolution with its own ideology, it needed the proletarian-agrarian assistance. This proved full of traps and contradictions for both social groups. But it cannot disprove Lenin as the leader of this specific phase of the Russian Revolution. The tautological scheme of argumentation, used here, "Lenin was at heart a bourgeois -even if a materialistic bourgeois as compared with and opposed to the idealistic bourgeois-; hence in his thoughts and deeds he cannot go beyond the bourgeois", really leaves little to argue about. Once one assumes that class-origin is decisive for ~~xxxx~~ behaviour-pattern then one cannot complain that a bourgeois behaves like a bourgeois. Then Lenin behaved as he behaved; and was right. This P. actually states, speaking of the specific issue in question: "In this action Lenin of course was entirely right" (72). But why then the whole show before? Only to make the point that Russia is not Germany etc.?

I am more in sympathy with the spirit (not the letter nor the specifics) of the last chapter. But if we are really expected to wait until "every man knows from his own judgment what to do", we'll never get anywhere. What if the capitalistic conditions make it physically and intellectually impossible for the single worker to think for himself? Is leadership obsolete and hopeless only because leaders tend to abuse their power? Must we wait for "pure" conditions in which "real" Marxism can be realized? Does the renouncing of political action and organization under present specific conditions prevent us from the actual consequences of these very conditions left to themselves and to the organized murderers? What can be more abstract and academic than the implied notion that politics itself is "middle class"?

The set of criteria in P.'s pamphlet as well as in much of what I have seen in your articles seems to consist of the following major assumptions:

1. in politics there is only the ruthless and irrational will to power.
2. the spectator is always right, and his "marxism" is "real"; the
3. specific actors of history are always wrong.
3. The speculative political rationalism is more revolutionary than practical politics.

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But what allows one to impose such an arbitrary scheme upon the actual events? without even considering the consequences of such an attitude? The consequences happen to be in favour of the least hopeful tendencies of capitalistic reaction. Also, with such arbitrariness one destroys one's own activity, capacity to think and act. Even the best critical intentions turn into sulkingness and resentment, which exhaust and paralyze one's social "Eros" (so to speak). Everything from the point of view of this anarchistic scepticism looks equally perverse and wrong, even if there are degrees of perversion and impurities. The confusion between politics and morals is so self-destructive because it also confounds means and ends. we are living in the very center of hell today; the means that lead eventually out of hell are still hellish themselves. Please understand: I am all for criticism, of everything. But I dislike nihilism very much which practically increases the hell. Also it leads straight to blindness before the real differences there are between Belzebub and Lucifer for instance.

Meanwhile I much sympathize with the "council" idea, and I think you and your friends have got something there. I'll be anxious to see more of "New Essays", and perhaps also to see you yourself sometime, when time permits.

we had a very hard winter, from the point of view of climate and health and income. All our energies are spent to carry on the job, the family, and the sending of as many packages as possible to Europe. This latter activity is all practical immediate advice I have to offer. So you see I am a poor and questioning man myself.

Your sincerely

John P. ...