

# SALT AND PEPPER . . . By JOEL BRADFORD

## THE PERSISTENCE OF ERROR

THERE can never be any doubt what the essence of Marxism is, for we have Marx's own account of its special nature: ". . . as to myself no credit is due me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society, nor yet the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle, and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular, historic phases in the development of production*; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*." (Letter to Joseph Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852. Marx's emphasis.)

Commenting on this passage, Lenin observes that admitting the existence of a class struggle will not make you a Marxist, nor will even the laudable act of taking labor's side. What makes you a Marxist is your recognition that the class struggle is the vehicle, and the only vehicle, for a transformation of society into socialism. Upon this postulate alone can you discern the broad outlines of your goal and estimate the immediate measures necessary for an advance toward it. A truly Marxist program for any historical period is therefore not merely one which offers humane and enlightened solutions for temporary problems, but one which, if effectuated, will move the whole nation nearer to socialism. Had we no other evidence that this is essential Marxism, we might guess it to be so from the fact that it is, above all others, the doctrine which revisionists first seek to revise.

The nature and effects of revisionism are written large in the history of the Second International. Revisionism always admits the class struggle and always "forgets" to utilize that struggle as the great lever of change. It therefore postpones socialism indefinitely, advocates a gradual and "evolutionary" approach, and tries to conciliate the now contending parties in the interest of some larger unity. It begins to lag behind the masses, and the more it lags, the more it catches up with the bourgeoisie. Historically it is a fact, and (I should venture to say) will always be a fact, that revisionism is a prelude to fascist victory wherever it has great influence.

History repeats itself, but only when men are foolish enough to let it do so. Yet precisely these basic revisionist doctrines underlie Earl Browder's now discarded theory. He, too, "postponed" socialism; he too, espoused gradualism; he, too, tried to conciliate capital and labor "for generations to come." This last he did upon the excuse of national unity in the war, and he thereby removed all the Marxist reasons for fighting the war. For the war was just, precisely because it was the struggle of the world proletariat against the Axis bourgeoisie, and only for this reason could other proletarians unite with "their" capitalists, who, in turn, were forced to unite with the world's first socialist power.

Once you look at things from a revisionist point of view, corruption spreads rapidly and far. For example, the American Communists had to make not one effort, but three, before they could frame a resolution on socialism that bears some resemblance to Marxist theory. The specific proposals of the National Committee resolutions were mostly admirable, but they were not based on a frankly Marxist analysis of the present period, and they showed in no way how the existing balance of class forces was to be changed in the direction of socialism.

Clearly, once you have abandoned Marxism, it is not so easy to return to it. It is but dialectics to observe that, having moved from thesis to antithesis, your further progress will bear the scars of its most recent sojourn. You may confess error, as incidentally I must do. Nevertheless, so long as it remains true that "censure of self is oblique praise," a confession of error will not even vindicate your honesty. Far less will it convince anybody that you are worth listening to. That happy status is something you have got to recover, and this you will never do until you first recognize that you have lost it.

What disturbs me about some American Communists is that they seem as self-assured after confessing error as they were while committing it. They propose to write authoritative articles and give authoritative instruction, just as if it were not public knowledge that for eighteen months they have been fundamentally mistaken. Such an illusion can only end in disaster. At all times you have to *earn* the respect of your neighbors. You must earn it *doubly* when you have been wrong.

How will you earn it? By demonstrating (1) that you know Marxism, (2) that you can analyze existing situations, (3) that you can lead, or at any rate participate in, American popular movements. The proof will lie in what you say and what you do. It will lie in your sympathy and tolerance for people, in your ceasing to proclaim the purity of your motives, in your willingness to admit that maybe there are some things you don't know. And perhaps we can leave it to other people to say whether Marxists are "uncompromising critics of their own work."

Recent issues of *NEW MASSES* have carried admirable letters, which show that many readers have all along been considerably in advance of the contributors. The "Readers' Forum" has been, and is now, by far the liveliest section of the magazine. I hope that this "noble contagion" will spread. Fear of discussion, fear of saying something off the line—this is the very prolongation of original sin, the persistence of error into the third and fourth generations. Our readers, I fancy, are less interested in what we think than in whether we think at all. The present crisis has reduced us to that point where we must prove the mere fact of ratiocination.

Nothing can possibly be gained by putting a good face on a bad situation, especially when we can undoubtedly progress once we have discovered where we are. Failure in this will be the ultimate blindness, and we shall pass out of history as men who thought they followed science, but practiced sorcery.

(A comment on Mr. Bradford's column appears on page 20.)