

BOOK REVIEWS

Marx and Engels on the Civil War

THE CIVIL WAR IN THE UNITED STATES, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. International Publishers. \$2.50.

RECENT American historians, writing when the lapse of time has permitted detailed research and mellowed judgment, are only now beginning to grasp the broader social significance of the American Civil War. Sixty-seven years before the appearance of Professor Charles A. Beard's *Rise of American Civilization*, in which the historian made a significant contribution by designating the Civil War as the Second American Revolution, Marx and Engels were already depicting in the pages of the New York *Daily Tribune* and the Vienna *Presse* the revolutionary sweep of the conflict in all its astounding variety. These articles, forty-two in all, as well as extracts from sixty-one letters between Marx and Engels, have been collected and issued in book form by International Publishers. The volume, an event of first importance in the field of American history, comes with the freshness and force of a new interpretation to take its place, virtually as a discovery, alongside the other great historical classics of Marx and Engels.

Like their other writings which became historical classics, the analysis of the Civil War by Marx and Engels was formulated as the events were taking place. Although written under the pressure of journalism and of the need to cover separate events as they occurred, these articles, brought together as they are in this volume, achieve an essential unity of interpretation rarely to be found even in a book written as a study. They probe into every important phase of the conflict, uncover the basic moving forces of the period, and show the historical movement as it developed and matured.

In the first article on the Civil War which appeared in the *Tribune* on October 11, 1861, Marx laid low the argument common in the British press that because the North had not inscribed abolition of slavery on its banner, it was not deserving of the support of the anti-slavery men. His reply to this argument, which the Palmerston government used to excuse its own interventionist activities on the side of the Confederacy, remains of great importance for the interpretation of the American conflict, because most American historians have been unable to escape its effects and even Beard spends pages of academic discussion on this point without coming to a satisfactory conclusion.

Marx makes the acute observation that if the North did not include the abolition of slavery as its principal aim at the outbreak of the conflict, the Confederacy had left no doubt that it was fighting for the preserva-

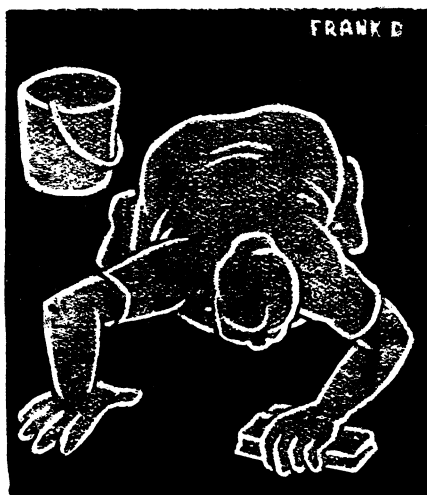
tion and the extension of the slave system. And here a distinction of major importance, which has not yet been made by any American historian, emerges from the reading of the articles and the letters as a key contribution of the Marxian thought. Marx made it clear that slavery as the prime cause of the conflict should not be confused with the problem of how the question of slavery expressed itself in the form of a political program. Implicit in his analysis is the concept that history is a movement, completely innocent of any static or abstract qualities and rights. Thus, from the beginning, Marx recognized that it was slavery which had divided the American republic into two opposing social systems and that in the final outcome the very existence of slavery was at stake. But he did not expect to find this clearly expressed in the political slogans of either side in the conflict. It takes time for popularly accepted political programs, especially in the period of quick transition, to mature to the point where the whole historical movement is expressed in them. However, he was certain as early as the end of October 1861—before the North had taken any decisive steps in this direction—that “events themselves” were driving “to the promulgation of the decisive slogan—emancipation of the slaves.” And with complete confidence in the final outcome, seeing far ahead to the national and international significance of the American events, Marx without hesitation and with great enthusiasm took his position on the side of “the highest form of popular self-government till now realized” in its battle with “the meanest and most shameless form of man’s enslaving recorded in the annals of history.” To the “leftists” of those days—the advocates of socialism conceived as a lifeless dogma—this appeared as “counter-revolutionary” as the Communist support of the people’s front in the fight against fascism appears today to the Trotskyist ideologists; and as is the case with the Trotskyites, the

“leftists” of 1861 aligned themselves with reaction.

Another contribution which serves as a key to the understanding of the development of the conflict, is Marx’s distinction between two phases of the war, the constitutional and the revolutionary. In reply to Engels’s impatience, after the first humiliating military defeats, with the bungling manner in which the North was handling the “lousy slave oligarchy,” Marx explained at the turn of the year 1861 that it took time for the unwieldy and still very young democracy to gather its forces for decisive conflict under a clearly formulated program. He was certain that the war would pass from its constitutional into its revolutionary phase, including emancipation and the arming of the Negro by the North. And with this would come a people’s army, enthusiastic warriors and the waging of war under a unified, reliable command according to a strategic plan. In its main outlines, this was the essence of the subsequent course of development. In this connection, Marx’s clear characterization of Lincoln’s policies—wavering, tending to submit to the pressure of the slave-owners of the border states, hesitating before each new advance, but *nevertheless advancing with the course of the revolution*—illuminates not only the role of the “great emancipator,” but also casts light upon the basic weakness of the forces gathered on the side of the North.

Marx’s and Engels’s understanding of the essence of Johnson’s policy, to mention but another of the many keys offered in this volume to the understanding of the period, proved to be fully justified by the events which followed. They recognized immediately after he became President that Johnson’s policies would lead to a restoration of the power of the former lords of the South and that without Negro suffrage, nothing could be done to oppose him. And here again they predicted correctly that the reactionary interlude would be replaced by a revolutionary phase which during its duration would see the social transformation of the South and the rapid rise of the labor movement.

Aside from these and other far-reaching interpretations, the articles and letters abound with revealing historical comparisons and pithy generalizations on the movements and relations of classes. Prediction of separate events in the American conflict reveal the thoroughness with which Marx and Engels studied the situation. Two years before General Sherman’s famous march to the sea, Engels wrote that the first Union victories in Tennessee and Kentucky should be followed up with a frontal attack upon Georgia, which he termed the “key to Secession.” If this were not done then, wrote Engels, the student of military strategy, the war would drag on for a number of years, lacking a general strategical



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plan. General McClellan, at the beginning of the conflict commander-in-chief of the Union armies, Marx and Engels considered a brake upon the revolutionary development of the war. About him Marx very aptly observed that "next to a great defeat he feared nothing so much as a great victory," and when Lincoln finally found it possible to get rid of McClellan, he hailed this as a sign of the developing momentum of the revolution. On the other hand, Engels early recognized the military resourcefulness of Generals Grant and Halleck, and praised them highly for their waging of the war on the western battle front. Marx also proved to be correct when in the midst of the Palmerston-inspired war-racket of the London press at the time of the Trent case, he told his readers that war between England and the Union would not break out because of the increasingly important role of American wheat on the English market and the large British investment in American industry.

Equally penetrating is Marx's judgment of personalities. To give only a few: General Fremont as "a rival of candidates for the presidency in the future and an obstacle to the makers of compromises in the present"; Seward as a "republican Richelieu" who attempted to impose himself on Lincoln whom he "took for a republican Louis XIII," and Seward's policies as "a repulsive mixture of greatness of phrase and smallness of mind, of mimicry of strength and acts of weakness"; Wendell Phillips's abolition speech at the beginning of the war as of "greater importance than a battle bulletin."

This volume will startle many who have as yet failed to grasp the essence of the Marxian method. They will be surprised to find how remote this historical analysis is from the stiff, mechanical method of economic determinism. For here, above all else, is history as a living process, expressing itself not in the simplified patterns of cause and effect but as the sum total of the interaction of many elements, of which the economic movement is the most elemental and decisive. Here there is nothing that is absolute (states' rights, for example); everything is relative to the broader historical movement of the period. And here, in writings gathered almost three quarters of a century after they were written, is an expression of the full richness and variety of the historical experience of a decade in our history.

The value of this volume is enhanced by the editorial work of Richard Enmale, who supplied careful and extensive notes explaining the numerous events mentioned in the writings, short biographical sketches, an efficient subject index, and an informative introduction. It is to be welcomed as a sign of the growing maturity of our Marxian school of history that this volume has been prepared so efficiently by an American historian.

This is a source book in the best sense of the word: a source not only of new interpretative materials but of a whole philosophy of history in its concrete American application.



John Hollier

It needs to be studied and mastered as a guide to the illumination of our present problems through the illumination it casts upon a decisive turning point of our past.

JAMES S. ALLEN.

Academic Yes-Men of Capitalism

LIBERALISM FACES THE FUTURE, by Clarence R. Skinner. The Macmillan Co. \$2.

DICTATORS AND DEMOCRACIES, by Calvin B. Hoover. The Macmillan Co. \$1.50.

THE great work of presenting capitalism as a system beneficial to all men was done by the revolutionary liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their task was comparatively easy, since it involved the glorification of a faith in a changing and more promising world. The liberals of today are called upon to defend a record instead of a promise, and the record of capitalism has been getting worse from year to year. Under the circumstances, they can either repeat old slogans and catch phrases in an effort to becloud this record, or appeal to the state to see to it that the victims of exploitation find it very hard to free themselves from the yoke fastened upon them by the apostles of liberalism. In most cases the liberals do both, as is demonstrated by the authors of the two books under review.

Dr. Skinner has a great reverence for capitalism. He fears for its safety and for that reason thinks that the social order needs overhauling, but he insists that the reconstruction be effected on "sane and progressive foundations" inspired by liberalism. But what is liberalism? The author defines it as that system or attitude which is opposed to illiberalism. This apparent begging of the question betrays a deeper insight than most liberals are candid enough to admit. For it is true that liberalism, historically considered, came to mean what it does through *opposition* to certain things. Briefly stated, they were the things the removal of which gave capitalism a chance to develop to the extent that it did.

Dr. Skinner extols the abstract, formal rights of individuals which take the place of privilege, but he fails to reveal the all-important fact that since all those rights derive