

Selsam's New Book On Marxist Philosophy

PHILOSOPHY IN REVOLUTION

by Howard Selsam. International Publishers. 160 pages. \$2.

By BEN LEVINE

Howard Selsam, who directed the Jefferson School of Social Science from beginning to end, has just published a book summing up the philosophy he taught in the school's courses. In this period of sober reevaluation, when the basic principles of the Socialist movement are being reexamined by Socialists and Communists throughout the world, a book of this sort should be welcome, even though much of it goes over well-known ground.

Selsam entitles his book "Philosophy in Revolution" by which he means, as it is stated on the book jacket, that he proposes to tell "how Marxism transforms philosophy from differing ways of interpreting the world into a way of changing it."

Philosophy, Selsam emphasizes time and again, is a participant in the class struggle, whatever philosophers themselves may say. The working class, being the class whose mission is to end all exploitation, and thus to end all class struggle, must be equipped with a philosophy cleared of all mysticism and delusion. It must be completely objective, materialistic and scientific. Truth must be its aim, but it must be a fruitful truth, not a dead, metaphysical game played for its own sake.

From there, Selsam outlines the struggles of materialism against idealism, in chapters entitled "Matter and Mind," and "Knowledge, Practice and Reality." In the small space at his disposal, he has packed his material as tightly as the nucleus of an uranium atom, requiring close attention and constant re-reading.

His capsule outlines of the philosophies of Descartes, Locke and Spinoza are the fruits of a lifetime of study. They should stimulate an interest in these pre-Marxist philosophers.

But while Selsam pays credit to the genius of these thinkers, he tends, in his conclusions about them, to give the reader the impression that because they made certain concessions to idealism and religion they have nothing valuable to give us that can't be found in the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.

The great Marxist thinkers themselves had no such illusions. They read the writings of past and contemporary philosophers, and so did Selsam, but unfortunately a generation of socialists and communists has been so imbued with the truth and strength of dialectical materialism as to shut out from their minds the contributions of non-Marxist philosophers.

The result has been that many people, complacently riding along in the vehicle of a perfect system that they had been taught to regard as Marxism, found themselves in the position of the deacon in the wonderful one-horse shay," which went to pieces all at once on encountering a stone in the road. The stone in the road in the present case, of course, was the Khrushchev document and the unpleasant revelations of crimes in the lands of socialism.

I think we still have much to learn from the rationalists and skeptics of past centuries, and not only, as Selsam says, because of the "immeasurable light" they "shed on man's historic struggles to understand and master the world" but also because they can help us solve our present problems, if we take into account, of course, the historic context in which they are written.

The final chapter of Selsam's compact book is called "Towards a Scientific Materialist Ethics," and this chapter I found the most interesting for what it says, but dis-

appointing for what it omits.

Selsam gained great distinction long ago for his courage in tackling the most difficult problem in Marxist philosophy, the problem of ethics, in his book "Socialism and Ethics." In this chapter he repeats his brilliant work.

The reader, however, has a right to expect even more in view of the shock of events following the 20th Soviet Communist Party Congress. Yet nowhere in this chapter or in the entire book is the name of Khrushchev even mentioned, and the only hint that Selsam has read the newspapers of the last 12 months is in his statement: "One cannot say today that socialism can commit no crimes or that no crimes can be committed in socialism's name," and in his 150-word comment that the crimes arose out of particular historic conditions and were provoked by external enemies.

Such violations, Selsam adds, "are inimical to the cause of socialism and endanger its very success."

But this comment is not enough in a book written today by a philosopher whose greatest emphasis is that philosophy cannot maintain a calm Olympian above-the-battle attitude, and does not fear the muck and dust of everyday life.

"A fool can ask more questions than a wise man can answer," but the reader, I insist, has a right to ask such questions as:

How does it come about that Stalin, in his lifetime looked on by millions as the greatest living practitioner of dialectical materialism, could perpetrate the grievous crimes that the Soviet leaders accuse him of?

If "truth and nothing but the truth" is the aim of a working-class philosophy, why have the Soviet leaders not yet carried out their promise to release the archives telling the full truth about the political trials in Stalin's regime? Why do the Soviet leaders still hide the full truth about the horrible executions of Jewish leaders?

Such questions, of which there are many, should be discussed in a chapter called "Towards a Scientific Materialist Ethics."

It is embarrassing to say the least, to realize that John Dewey, who is roundly denounced by Selsam for his pragmatism and his philosophy of expediency, should be the one who insisted that the issue in the "purge" trials was one of objective truth, while we Communists in general at that time justified the trials on the ground of expediency, regardless of whether all the rules of evidence were scrupulously followed.

And speaking of Dewey, it seems to me, that in the sobering climate of today, some mention might be made of his spirit of rationalism. Had American Marxists paid more attention to that side of the writings of James and Dewey, they might have avoided turning the Marxism they inherited from Marx, Engels and Lenin into such a closed system.

Selsam apparently thinks he proves how wrong Dewey was when he quotes him as saying: "Planned public policies, initiated by public authority, are sure to have consequences totally unforeseeable—often the contrary of what was intended."

Engels could have written this sentence.

Marxists, even under socialism, must always be on guard for the "unforeseeable," and must leave their systems of thinking open for the unexpected.

We can criticize the bourgeois rationalists for ignoring the class struggle, but we should, especially in the present period, imbibe from them something of the spirit of inquiry.

Certainly in the Soviet Union,

(Continued on Page 7)

S SELSAM

(Continued from Page 6)

where even if the class struggle has ended, sharp differences of opinion will always remain, philosophers and statesmen can profit from reading such a remark as this by W. H. Lecky, the 19th century bourgeois rationalist.

"When a charge is brought against any politician, men naturally turn to his reply before forming an opinion, and they feel that any other course would be not only extremely foolish, but also extremely dishonest. This is the spirit of truth as opposed to the spirit of falsehood and imposture, which in all ages and in all departments of thought has discouraged men from studying opposing systems, lamented the circulation of adverse arguments, and denounced as criminal those who listen to them."