

The Story of My Life

GA 28

Chapter XXVIII

At this difficult time of my life the executive committee of the Berlin Workers' School came to me with the request that I should take charge of the courses in history and practice in “speaking” in the school. I was at first little interested in the socialistic connections of the school. I saw the beautiful task offered me of teaching mature men and women of the working class, for few young people were among the “pupils.” I explained to the committee that, if I took over the teaching, I must lecture entirely according to my own views of the course of evolution in human history, not in the style in which this is customary according to Marxism in Social-Democratic circles. They still wished to have me as a teacher.

After I had made this reservation, it could no longer disturb me that the school was a Social-Democratic foundation of the elder Liebknecht (the father). For me the school consisted of men and women of the proletariat; the fact that the great majority were Social-Democrats did not at all concern me.

But I obviously had to do with the mental character of the “pupils.” I had to speak in forms of expression to which I had till then been quite unaccustomed. I had to familiarize myself with the forms of conception and judgment of these persons in order to be in some measure understood.

These forms of conceptions and judgments came from two directions. First, from life. These people knew manual labour and its results. The spiritual Powers guiding mankind forward in history did not enter into their minds. It was for this reason that Marxism, with its “materialistic conception of history,” had such an easy way with them. Marx maintained that the impelling forces in the historic process are merely economic-material forces, those operative in manual labour. The “spiritual factors” are considered merely a sort of by-product which arises from the material-economic factors – as a mere ideology.

A craving for scientific education had long before grown up among the workers. But this could be gratified only by means of the popular materialistic scientific literature. For this literature alone dealt in the forms of conceptions and judgments known to the workers. Whatever was

not materialistic was written in such a way that the workers could not possibly understand it. Thus came about the unspeakably tragic fact that, while the developing proletariat desired knowledge with the most intense craving, this craving of theirs was satisfied only by means of the grossest materialism.

It must be confessed that half-truths are imbedded in the economic materialism which the workers take from Marxism as the “materialistic conception of history.” And these half-truths are just the thing they easily understand. If I had taught idealistic history to the complete ignoring of these half-truths, the students would have found involuntarily in the lack of these materialistic half-truths the very thing which would have repelled them in my lectures.

I therefore took as my starting-point a truth which could be grasped by my hearers also. I showed that to speak of a mastery by the economic forces up to the sixteenth century, as Marx does, is nonsense. That from the sixteenth century on the economic first comes into a relationship which can be conceived in a Marxian way; and that this process then reaches its climax in the nineteenth century.

In this way it was possible to speak quite as a matter of fact of the ideal-spiritual impulses in connection with the preceding periods of history, and to show that in the most recent times these had grown weak in comparison with the material-economic impulses.

In this way the workers arrived at conceptions of capacities for knowledge, of religious, artistic, and moral impulses in history, and abandoned the habit of thinking these mere “ideology.” It would have been senseless to resort to polemics against materialism; I had to cause realism to arise out of materialism.

In the “practice in speaking” little could be done in this direction. After I had discussed at the beginning of each course the formal principles of lecturing and speaking, the pupils made practice speeches. Inevitably they then brought forward what was familiar to them from their materialistic nature.

The “leaders” of the labour unions did not at first trouble themselves at all about the school, and so I had a perfectly free hand.

It became more difficult for me when the teaching of the natural sciences was annexed to that of history. There it was especially difficult to ascend to true conceptions from the materialistic conceptions dominant in science, especially among its popularizers. I did this as well as I possibly could.

Now, however, my teaching activity was extended through the sciences among the workers themselves. I was requested by numerous workers' unions to lecture on natural science.

Especially was instruction desired concerning that book then creating a sensation, Haeckel's *Welträtsel*.¹ In the positive biological third of this book I saw a comprehensive handbook on the metamorphosis of living beings. My general conviction that mankind can be led from this side to spirituality I held to be true also for the workers. I connected my reflections with this third of the book and said often enough that the other two-thirds must be considered worthless and really ought to be cut out of the book and thrown away.

At the celebration of the Gutenberg jubilee I was entrusted with the festival address before 7,000 type-setters and printers in a Berlin circus. My manner of speaking to the workers must therefore have been found congenial.

With this activity destiny had once more transplanted me into a piece of life into which I had to submerge myself. I came to see how the single souls among this workers' group slumbered and dreamed, and how a sort of mass-soul laid hold upon men, revolutionizing their conception, judgment, bearing.

But it must not be imagined that the single souls were dead. In this respect I was able to look deeply into the souls of my pupils and of the whole workers' group. This brought me to the task which I set myself in all this activity. The attitude toward Marxism was not yet what it became two decades later. Marxism was still something which they elaborated with complete deliberation as a sort of economic gospel. Later it became something with which the mass of the proletariat were apparently obsessed.

The proletariat consciousness then consisted of feelings which manifested themselves like the effect of mass suggestion. Many of the single souls said again and again: "A time must come in which the world shall evolve spiritual interests; but for the present the proletariat must be freed by purely economic means."

I found that my lectures wrought much good in their souls. Even that element was taken up which contradicted materialism and the Marxian conception of history. Later, when the leaders learned of my way of working, they fought against it. In a gathering of my pupils one of these "minor leaders" spoke. He made this statement: "We do not wish freedom in the proletarian movement; we wish rational compulsion." Because of this the desire arose to drive me out of

the school against the will of my pupils. This activity gradually became so burdensome to me that, soon after I began my anthroposophic work, I dropped it.

It is my impression that if the workers' movement had been followed with interest by a greater number of unprejudiced persons, and if the proletariat had been dealt with understandingly, this movement would have developed quite differently. But we have left the people to live in their own class, and we have lived in ours. The conceptions of each class of men held by the others were merely theoretical. There was discussion of wages when strikes and the like forced it; and all sorts of welfare movements were established. These latter were exceedingly creditable.

But the submerging of these world-stirring questions into a spiritual sphere was wholly lacking. And yet only this could have taken from the movement its destructive forces. It was the time in which the “higher classes” had lost the community feeling, in which egoism spread abroad with its fierce competitive struggles – the time in which the world catastrophe of the second decade of the twentieth century was already being prepared. Side by side with this, the proletariat evolved the community sense in its own way as the proletarian class-consciousness. It took up the culture which had been developed in the “upper classes” only so far as this provided material for the justification of the proletarian class-consciousness. Gradually there ceased to be any bridge between the different classes.

Thus by reason of the Magazine I was under the necessity of submerging myself in the being of the citizen, and through my activity among the workers in that of the proletariat. A rich field, wherein one could knowingly experience the motive forces of the time.

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