

From: Dr. John Lewis

NOTES ON JACK LINDSAY'S PAPER ON

"MARXIST THEORY OF CULTURE"

1. It is not clear why the text of the whole paper is Childe's statement. Actually, Childe's statement is false. It implies that Marxists believe in automatic change, which is not true. Secondly, it implies that "an economy is hampered from change by an ideology", whereas "an economy" changes, that is, develops and declines, and the ideology based on that economy hampers the change to another economy, but the ideology which represents the new social tasks helps the change to another economy. If Jack Lindsay had taken as his text some quotations from chapter 4 of the History of the C.P.S.U.(B.), he would have saved himself a great deal of trouble.
2. So that when Jack Lindsay presents this text as disquieting, this is only because he has not seen through its falsity. If he had seen through it, he would most definitely have "shrugged it aside".
3. The "all too simple relation of economics and politics" has never been tolerated by Marxism, but only by those with "all too simple" an understanding of Marxism.
4. Engels did not modify Marx in the critique. Those who think so are simply tilting at windmills and one can say with Engels that "what all these fellows lack is dialectic".
5. Jack Lindsay presents Engels and Marx as pointing out "that certain changes went on in the cultural levels at the same time as the changes in the economic sub-structure" ... "Both changes were governed by the same law, which they were content to trace out in the sub-structure". This is a completely false presentation of Engels and Marx. First, changes in the economic sub-structure lead to social revolution, and with it the forcible overthrow of the super-structure which belonged to the old sub-structure. This is a condition for the development of the new sub-structure on which is built a new super-structure. The super-structure has not its independent changes, but "is more or less rapidly transformed" by the social revolution, not by any inner process.
6. At the foot of page 3, the whole of Marxist philosophy is thrown overboard in favour of Freud.
7. I cannot follow the argument about psychological science and imperialism. However, that paragraph seems to be only by the way.



8. Near the foot of page 4, Jack Lindsay reaches the conclusion "the mental fact is basic. But so also is the tool." Here we have two basics. In short, once again we see emerging the dualism which is already present in point 5 above, dealing with the parallelism of the sub-structure and the super-structure. What is wrong with this whole paragraph? The fact is that neither the mental fact nor the tool is basic. In the beginning was the deed. Concrete material activity to secure the means of life is basic. Mental activity appears in association with this when a nervous system and brain have developed. Similarly, the tool is not basic but the result of a long process of deeds.
9. The statement that mind is basic is "proved" by the argument "since the mind is a necessary factor in every human activity, it cannot be called a secondary factor". This statement shows that Jack Lindsay has not understood what all the pother is about. The question of whether mind is secondary to matter as primary has nothing to do with the question whether mind is associated with every human activity. Marxism regards matter as primary in the philosophical sense that it exists independently of mind but that mind does not exist independently of matter.
10. At the foot of page 4, Jack Lindsay proclaims that "the unconscious elements" were always just as important as "the purposive conscious elements". This is apparently meant as a corrective to the one-sidedness of idealism, and is a part of the whole build up which later sees salvation in the reconciliation of Marx and Freud.
11. On page 5 there is a long and complicated argument which starts off by the statement, "I shall call super-structure by the easier term of culture". Lower down it is said "super-structure tends to make one think of the institutional levels rather than of the process and nature of culture". The whole argument is intended to cut out the social relations and the institutions to which they give rise, and at the same time to divorce culture in the sense of artistic activity from its basis. As a result of this the whole of the following pages takes no account of the actual growth of knowledge and social experience, but flutters off into excursions of the mind into the stratosphere of mental frolic.
12. On page 6, Marx and Engels are presented as suggesting that "the individual is a mere reflection of the economic mechanism plus social relations" and also that "there is no element of personality or anything that we can call freedom". It is true that lower down he says he does not think Marx and Engels really meant this, but nevertheless he puts down this solemn indictment of Marx and Engels as economic determinists. Of course, they spent a great part of their life defending themselves against this charge, but evidently Jack Lindsay does not know about this.



13. Starting off by saying that a book which Lenin considered should be an essential part of all Marxist study is "a very shallow essay", Jack Lindsay comes to the conclusion that a "reflection cannot be real" and that therefore Plekhanov is also simply a mechanical materialist. Naturally, he can only do this by never having understood the issue on which Plekhanov was writing.
14. On page 7, Jack Lindsay says that Engels "rejects the economic factor as the sole determining factor". One thing that is quite certain is that Engels was not here referring to the mind versus matter question at all. He is referring to geographical environment and similar factors - see History of the C.P.S.U.(B.), page 117.
15. As to Engels' letters, naturally there is nothing in these which denies the thesis that culture is not determined by productive activity in a mechanist way. In fact, Plekhanov's "shallow essay" tries to prove this thesis.
16. On page 9, Jack Lindsay asserts "if you subtract body as primary, you get mechanism". Once again, only if you have not understood what it is all about.
17. Lower down, ritual and work are said to be in dialectical relation. What is dialectical relation? Or to put it another way, what relation is not dialectical?
18. On page 10, the secret comes out, that "production and culture are in a dialectical relation of conflict and unity, and if that is so, then one is being continually transformed into the other". Would Jack Lindsay hold that the working class and the capitalist class are being continuously transformed into the other?
19. On page 14 again Jack Lindsay discovers that Marx was not mechanistic, and this is then transformed, at the top of page 15, into a refutation of what Marx plainly says - that the material relations of production are the basis of the super-structure. Maybe this is due to the word "life" in the text from which he quotes. In the critique the same phrase is used and the usual translation is "being". The point is, it is experience, and that experience centres on the production of the means of life. But it is not life in the sense of mind as against matter.
20. On page 16 Jack Lindsay says, "We can never win over the masses while our psychology is ultimately one which reduces men to dummies and automata". Quite so. Marxism has always fought against automatism. It is a figment of Jack Lindsay's brain that Marxism has anything to do with this "psychology".



If the detailed consideration of points ends here, it is not because the rest is all right. But it is in the main a re-iteration of the same outlook as in the previous pages. And when we reach the "Propositions", certain implications are made clear.

Proposition 2 (p.21): "In dialectical unity both sides are equally necessary and therefore neither is prior, e.g. body and mind in the human being." This is the same misunderstanding as before of what the philosophical issue is; but behind it lurks the "proof" that the fundamental thesis of historical materialism is wrong.

This becomes clearer in the series of propositions that follows, up to point 7, when the "dialectical unity" of historical materialism and Freudism is indicated, and the "remedy" to historical materialism suggested - the synthesis of Marx and Freud.

Apparently this will lead to the "adequate theory of culture" demanded from a reluctant Marxism in point 8.

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It can be said, in summing up, that Jack Lindsay has failed to understand the materialist conception of history, and in his attempted presentation of it commits all the errors that critics have committed in the past and that have been dealt with not only by Marx and Engels, but also by the "shallow essayist" Plekhanov, by Lenin and by Stalin.

Why was this started up by Jack Lindsay? Because he feels the need for "an adequate theory of culture", because he disagrees with the materialist conception of history, because he is, philosophically, an idealist and not a materialist.

The materialist conception of history - like all aspects of dialectical materialism - has a materialist basis, and the whole of Marxism stands or falls with that. But if Jack Lindsay had really studied Chapter 4 of the History of the C.P.S.U.(B.) he could not have misrepresented it in the way he does.

In so far as the materialist conception of history presents a theory of culture, it is a general approach, an indication of the basis from which more detailed studies can be made, just as the materialist conception provides a general approach to studying in detail, say, the English Revolution of 1640, but does not provide an "adequate theory" in the sense that it explains everything.

If Jack Lindsay wants to develop an "adequate theory" about culture, in the sense of getting a better understanding of its genesis and development, the starting point is not to remove the general approach indicated by Marx, but to use this approach in the study of actual manifestations of culture. Dialectics at best is

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