

It Is Real and Rational

by Robert Minor

Second part of reply to a critical letter from Mr. J. Hart.

MY CRITIC asks: "Are we committed to a philosophy of What is, is right?"

This question is not all it seems to be. On the face of it it seems to imply a justification of the status quo, and a condemnation of the progressive tendencies inherent in history. This is the side of the question that reactionaries have always seized upon. But Marxism has always understood the matter in a much deeper way.



It is a subject that was much discussed in our country a half-century ago. When I was about 10 years old I read in children's magazines about high school debates on this theme. Usually worded: "Whatever is, is right," this proposition was used to support arguments against the great reform movements of the 1880's and 1890's, the rise of the Knights of Labor and the great mass movement led by Henry George. "Whatever is right" was a hair-splitting "philosophical" contribution by ambitious professors to the effort to induce a young nation to turn away from the struggle to transform itself from something that "is" into something that is in process of becoming and ought to be. And this struggle is, of course, the motive force of life itself.

BUT this proposition as it appeared in our country in the form "Whatever is, is right," and appeared to have but one side, the reactionary side, had already appeared in Europe and had been the center of debate in an even greater struggle. And the proposition was proven to have another, a revolutionary side. Its original form was taken from the words of the great German philosopher Hegel:

"All that is real is rational; and all that is rational is real."

First propounded in 1821 in Hegel's book, *Philosophy of Right*, the proposition that All that is real is rational was used in Germany against the rising democratic movement that was heading toward the European revolution. For two decades the intellectual storms of Europe raged about the problem as stated by Hegel.

But Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, then boys in their early twenties—found in the proposition of Hegel a two-edged sword. It had two sides, one reactionary; the other, in its full connotation, the most revolutionary of all developments of mankind's thinking in modern centuries. Marx began the development of what we now call Marxism just 100 years ago, in 1844, with a criticism of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

As Engels wrote about it many years later:

"No philosophical proposition has earned more gratitude from narrow-minded governments and wrath from equally narrow-minded liberals than Hegel's famous statement: 'All that is real is rational; and all that is rational is real.' That was tangibly a sanctification of things that be, a philosophical benediction bestowed upon despotism, . . ." But the revolutionary potentiality of Hegel's statement would in the end be decisive. "The conservative character of this mode of outlook is relative," Engels said; "its revolutionary character is absolute—the only absolute it admits." For he continued, "according to Hegel everything that exists is certainly not also real without further qualification. . . ." He gave an example:

"In 1789 the French monarchy had become so unreal, that is to say, it had been so robbed of all necessity, so non-rational, that it had to be destroyed by the Great Revolution—of which Hegel always speaks with the greatest enthusiasm. In this case the monarchy was the unreal and the revolution was the real." (Marx: *Selected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 420-423.)

So the proposition that everything that is real is rational (transplanted into America in vulgarized form as "Whatever is, is right")—which seemed at first to protect the decaying, outworn institutions of oppression—was transformed into its opposite: that all institutions become unreal, irrational, and must be removed to give way to more real and rational successors.

The most revolutionary theory of the whole of mankind's history takes as an indispensable part of its foundation the rational kernel that Marx and Engels found in the dialectic of Hegel.

SO Mr. Hart raised an important and useful question. But it is only when we make use of the scientific method produced by a hundred years of development of the modern labor movement and of Marxist theory, that we are able to find a sensible answer to it.

When he speaks of "What is," the phrase can have no sense unless it refers to the course that the United States is taking in this war. If we must speak in such terms, we answer: Yes, this great thing that is, is right.

But the clearer terms would be:

Can anyone seriously believe that the great American state which is performing the most enormous military feat of history with superb success, and has just completed a plebiscite through which it decided to consolidate its alliance with the other strongest power of the earth, the socialist state, and to take those measures necessary to assure that its economic production, raised from 80 billion per year to 170 billion per year for war, shall remain on that high level in peace—which has decided in the same national plebiscite to accept its rapidly growing labor movement into a general national program of collective bargaining and rising standards of living—does anyone seriously think that this huge American power is just now in process of "becoming unreal?"

This is the substance behind the question, "Are we committed to a philosophy of What is, is right?"

My answer to Mr. Hart is that the reality of the course taken by the United States is rational, that its rationality is real.

This lays the ground for replying next Tuesday to Mr. Hart's implied question: Are the American people ready for a change?

Worth Repeating

LEND-LEASE helps our Allies but also helps to win our war, said Charles P. Taft, director of the Office of Wartime Economic Affairs, in a radio address Sunday: What we send to fight in Russia, in France, in Italy or the Far East are all parts of our own war effort. The munitions, food and facilities we receive all over the world as reverse lend-lease are a vital factor in the effective use of shipping. Mutual aid among the Allies on the supply side is as essential to winning the war as mutual aid on the battlefields.