Chapter Twenty-Seven

Prediction and Politics

What the bourgeoisie therefore produces is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels)

As Marxists we do not hope for this or that, we confidently predict… (Any sectarian group)

I cannot follow your habit of regarding economic inevitables as unworthy targets for opposition. (Peter Sedgwick)

History is on our side. (Any politician when drunk)

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From Marx and Engels to the present words such as ‘inevitable’, ‘must’, ‘cannot’ and their logical kith and kin have been nourished among socialists. It is perhaps worth disentangling the different strands of truth and error here in order to make sure that the maximum of sense is combined with the minimum of rhetoric. I have therefore in this article attempted to provide a revolutionary child’s guide to the use of these words. The paradox for socialists is that

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1 Marx and Engels 1973, p. 79.
whereas the socialist message began with explaining to working people that the social order under which they lived, and in which they are excluded from social and economic power is not inevitable but that their own choices and agency could begin to play a part in transforming social relations, too often socialists have ended by asserting that the overthrow of the existing social order is inevitable, and even mechanically inevitable. A liking for physical analogies and metaphors has not helped. 'The wheel of history is still revolving forwards' cried Dimitrov in the dock at Leipzig.\textsuperscript{3} Trotsky in Their Morals and Ours could write of 'the deep conviction that the new historic flood will carry them to the other shore'.\textsuperscript{4} But do the predictions that we make about the future history of human society ever resemble the predictions that we can make about eclipses, tides, wheels and mechanical systems? In order to answer this question we must first inquire about the nature of such predictions.

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All systems of physical objects, larger than sub-atomic particles, are governed in their behaviour by laws such that, given an initial state of the system, we can confidently predict what future states of the system are going to be; provided, that is, that nothing interferes with the working of the system. Hence, even in nature, no future event is simply inevitable; it is at most inevitable that such and such an event should occur, if none of an indefinitely large class of other events occurs. The light put to the fuse does not make the explosion of the gunpowder inevitable, except on condition that in the intervening period rain does not extinguish the flame, Britain does not sink beneath the sea, and so on. Yet it is clear that, for many systems, we can be perfectly certain that there will be no such intervention. We do predict tides, eclipses, earthquakes and the like with perfect confidence.

Are social systems like physical systems? One central difference can be brought out as follows. If I learn what laws the particles in a physical system obey, I do not thereby affect the operation of those laws, but I may have taken a first step towards altering what happens in the system. Learning the laws of

\textsuperscript{3} Dimitrov 1960, p. 80: ‘The wheel of history moves on towards Soviet Europe, towards a world Union of Soviet Republics.’
\textsuperscript{4} Trotsky 1973, p. 52.