My Book on the Materialist Conception of History*

KARL KAUTSKY

ABSTRACT

In this brief summary of his magnum opus, Kautsky, emphasizing some of his differences with Marx and Engels, explains history as an ongoing process of man adapting to a changed environment by the creation of tools and social institutions which increasingly dominate him and require further adaptation. Pre-capitalist states are doomed to stagnate or decline, but capitalist societies advance through social revolution, first bourgeois and then proletarian. - J.H.K.

I

WHAT I PRESENT [in my book on The Materialist Conception of History] is my own conception of history. To be sure, it rests on that of Marx and Engels, but it was formed a generation after theirs and in it are elaborated all the experiences and discoveries that became accessible to me in a half-century of continual application of historical materialism. A whole generation has passed since Engels left us, an age full of enormous political, economic, and scientific changes. They confirm and reinforce our conception of history, which has thereby acquired ever more validity. But they have also caused me to modify this conception with respect to certain points. No doubt, Marx and Engels would have done this, too, had they lived until our own time, but it is obviously quite impossible to know in what way they would have done it. Thus, I can only speak for myself, and it is from that perspective that I present the materialist conception of history in my book.

First, I reject its crude forms that hold that men are moved only by their economic interests or that their intellectual and spiritual life is determined only by the material conditions in which they exist. For the intellectual life of an age, the inborn capacities and drives of men are to a large degree determinative as well as the ideas and social institutions they have inherited from their ancestors. But what is new in the intellectual life of a particular period, what they add to inherited human nature and inherited ideas and institutions, that can always be traced back to newly-developed economic conditions. Thus, economic development becomes the driving force of intellectual and social development. To prove this conception valid is the goal of my book.

* This article appeared under the title "Eine Selbstanzeige" in the monthly journal of the Swiss Social-Democratic Party, Rote Revue (Zürich), VII, No. 6 (February 1928), 161-67. It is here slightly abridged, especially at its beginning and end, and translated by John H. Kautsky.
I investigate first the relationship of our conception of history with the materialist world view. That is the principal content of Part I. In Part II, I consider the starting point of human development, the drives that preceded any economic activity, that man inherited from his animal ancestors and that can therefore not be explained with reference to the economy. Then I investigate the driving force of the evolution of organisms in nature. This driving force consists of changes in the surface of the globe that can in the last analysis be traced back to its progressive cooling and shrinking. They cause again and again new and ever more varied living conditions to develop for the organisms that are thereby themselves changed. If these changes favor the preservation of a particular species of organisms, then it will continue to exist. It has adapted itself to the new conditions.

This is true for man as well as for animals. But man develops his capacities, especially his hand and his brain, so far that he can introduce a new factor that lends to human history a character quite different from that of the history of animals. Part III of my book is concerned with this new factor. It is man’s capacity consciously to create new artificial organs in order to adapt himself to a new environment, at first tools, later also social organizations that permit him better to succeed in the struggle for existence under new living conditions. To unconscious natural adaptation in the world of animals there is now added, in the world of man, conscious adaptation through technical and later also social inventions.

But what is the driving force of this technical and economic development that now commences? It, too, rests on adaptation to the environment. It is the latter that creates the problems and provides the means to their solution. New problems and new means appear only when the environment changes. But in human history, we see economic and technical development occurring even when the natural environment does not change. What, then, is the source of environmental change?

To explain the new, the appearance of new ideas, goals, and solutions in the history of mankind along “materialist” lines, that is, with reference to changes in the environment, is impossible as long as these changes are themselves not explained. This has so far not been adequately done. Therefore there predominates in the philosophy of history the assumption of the creative role of geniuses who out of themselves create new ideas and finally cause them to be adopted, a process that is presumed to have no cause and is thus quite supernatural. Our need to know causes rebels against this assumption, but where else is the cause of what is new in man’s environment to be found?

I believe that I have found the cause that produces technical and thus all human progress in such a way that it fits into the total context of nature. That cause is the following: The artificial organs created by man are distinguished from animal organs in that they are not part of his body, but exist outside it. They are thus of an ambiguous nature. They belong to man as his organs and are yet at the same time part of his environment. This matters little as long as the artificial organs are few in number, small, and simple and accessible and