

A NOTE ON A DURKHEIMIAN CRITIC OF MARX:

THE CASE OF GASTON RICHARD

'Of all the criticisms which Richard addresses to Marx, the strongest seems to me that which limits itself to placing in relief the gap which separates the fundamental proposition of the system and the observations on which it rests.'

E. Durkheim (1897)

Among the members of the Durkheimian School, Gaston Richard was the only writer who wrote extensively on socialism and historical materialism (1894: 1903a; 1903b; 1909; 1910; 1912; 1914, for the pre-war period). In this long list of publications, the discussion of these topics did not always play the central role, but socialism and/or historical materialism were worthy, though often distorted contenders. It is reasonable to assume that Richard's early interest in Marxism was not altogether stamped out by his association with Durkheim; after all, Richard accepted only in part the theoretical framework of Durkheim, and he was always a maverick in the *Année Sociologique* group.

Richard, who chronologically was Durkheim's peer, began to show an interest in Marxism at a very early stage in his academic career. In a long review article published in 1894, he tried to demolish Engels' *The Origins of the Family* (which had only appeared recently in a French translation), alleging that the book was not constructed on the basis of a scientific method. The main thrust of his argument revolved around a critique of Engels' use of ethnographic materials to reconstruct prehistoric societies. More specifically, he maintained that the social and cultural institutions of the Iroquois could not be used to provide us with the missing link of the type of social organization preceding the Greek, Roman and Celtic *gens*. Richard asked himself whether Engels' proofs were based on scientific induction or on vague analogies, since if sociology was to become a

positive science, with a status equal to that of experimental psychology or biology, it could not be based on subjectivism, faith or a philosophy of history. Engels' method was not scientific, concluded Richard, because he arbitrarily substituted ethnographic documents for historical ones, the study of lower societies for that of the distant past of mankind. There should be two different though complementary sciences: history and ethnography. Only when the construction of both disciplines had been achieved could one think of bringing them together for comparative purposes. The final conclusion drawn by Richard was that the so called 'materialist theory of history' lacked the true requisites of a positive social science.

Of course, Richard was only voicing some of the criticisms against evolutionism that were being put forward at the time. He was partly right, but the question is too complex to be discussed here. On the other hand, on the basis of Engels' book he projected the same criticisms onto Morgan and Marx. He was eager to point out logical inconsistencies in Marxism, but his arguments are often superficial. For example, he blows out of proportion the analogy between the bourgeois/proletariat relation and the husband/wife relation because, he says, the husband provides for the wife - but if the comparison were to hold the wife should be providing for the husband. Of course, he is apparently forgetting two things, namely female labour outside the household and domestic labour. When he ventures any sort of alternative explanation to Engels' theories, as in the case of the position of women in Ancient Greece, he emphasizes a rather legalistic conception of history, which can be explained by his own background (his doctoral thesis, published in 1892, was entitled *De l'Origins de l'Idée de Droit*). In spite of all these criticisms, it is fair to say that Richard's review shows a certain familiarity with the ethnographic materials and it is based on a detailed consideration of Engels' book.

Le socialisme et la science sociale, published in 1897, is Richard's major contribution to the study of historical materialism and socialism. The book was successful both in France and abroad, to the extent that by 1899 a second edition was required. It was widely reviewed - among others by Lafargue (1896), Durkheim (1897) and Simiand (1898) - its reception being mixed, following basically political lines. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *Le socialisme* became for a short, though decisive period, one of the anti-socialist Bibles - though Richard and his sympathisers (including Durkheim) maintained that it was an objective and scientific study. I have discussed elsewhere (Llobera 1981: 230-2) the paramount conclusions that Durkheim extracted from the book, i.e., that Marxism is not a science, and that there is a 'gap which separates the fundamental propositions of the system and the observations on which it rests' (Durkheim 1897: 138).

The book is constructed on the assumption that the doctrines of Marx and Engels constitute the essence of modern socialism, and hence Richard dedicates little space to previous socialist

writers. As a conception of history Marxism is equated with 'economic materialism', and an attempt is made to refute its claims to scientificity. Marxism aims at explaining a great variety of facts, from the domestication of animals in pre-historic times to the establishment of the International in the present day. It is basically a naturalistic and deterministic theory, which tries to put forward a general law allowing us to deduce the social facts of the future from those of the past, a conception of history in which the role of the individual is rather limited. Richard also pointed out that the practical conclusions drawn by Marx and Engels are invalidated by the fact that they are prior to their theoretical studies; in other words, their socialism preceded their conception of history.

On the basis of an examination of *Capital I* and other works of Marx and Engels, Richard put forward the following points:

1) Marx's theory is not original; it owes a lot to his predecessors and particularly to Proudhon (for the critique of the theory of value), Lasalle (for the iron law of wages), List and Roscher (for the idea of a self-propelling economic process), Morgan (for the analogy between the communism of the North American tribes and that of the prehistoric ancestors of civilized humanity) and Hegel (for the idea of necessary return to the starting point, which for Marx was not the *Geist*, but communism). In conclusion, the elements had been laid down by his predecessors; Marx's sole task was to produce the synthesis.

2) The outstanding contribution of Marx is to have reduced all problems of modern society to the question of the nature and formation of capital. However, the two proofs that Marx provided to explain capital accumulation by surplus labour or surplus value, the one abstract and deductive (the labour theory of value), the other analogical (surplus labour is a hidden and intensified form of *corvée* labour), are both shown to be wrong. On the one hand, Richard maintained that the profits of capital do not originate in the surplus labour of the worker, but in the co-operation introduced by capitalism; on the other, he emphasized the non-economic aspects of the evolution of Western civilization, concluding that the wage labourer is not the descendant of the medieval serf, but of the 'gilded' craftsman.

3) Marx's use of the comparative method is defective because he does not distinguish social types. For him, evolution is seen as a series of moments which succeed each other, here a bit early and there a bit late, but without any major variation. Marx fails to see that variation and adaptation to different environments are the very features of a scientific evolutionary theory. Instead of using observation and comparison, Marx engages in premature abstraction, as is the case when he uses England as *lieu classique* to illustrate his theory and then generalizes from the English experience to other parts of Europe.

4) Marx's materialism is unvarnished; ideas are purely a consequence of the economy. Historical development is uniformly dominated by economic materialism. History can be explained only by reference to the material needs of human beings. These

determine the mode of production and exchange, which in turn reflect themselves in the legal and political system.

It is hardly surprising that the socialist establishment reacted quite negatively to Richard's book. Lafargue's invectives and sarcasms characterised his review article published in Sorel's journal *Le Devenir Social*. Durkheim's review was rather neutral, without attempting to correct any of the multiple blunders which Richard incurred in his interpretation of Marx's theory and particularly of *Capital I*. This only suggests either that Durkheim was not aware of the misreadings, or that he decided to keep them to himself. From a scientific point of view, either alternative is dismal. Even Richard himself was aware of the limitations of his book. Two years after its publication, and in a letter (which I have recently discovered) addressed to his intellectual mentor Emile Boutroux, Richard admitted that his work was superficial and surmised that this might explain its success. Of course, a perceptive spirit such as that of F. Simiand could not miss the weaknesses of Richard's book. (The fact that his review was published in the first issue of *l'Année Sociologique* confirms Besnard's idea (1983) that, at the beginning, the Durkheimians were not a close-knit group.) Simiand emphasized the fact that Richard's discussion of 'economic materialism' was far from thorough, and that consequently he failed to confront its philosophical principles. Simiand also objected to a number of Richard's misinterpretations of *Capital I*, and in particular to Richard's suggestion that Marx favoured the analogy between serf and wage-labourer and reduced the transition from feudalism to capitalism to a purely economic matter. As for the question of using England as a classical example for the development of capitalism, Simiand indicated that Richard failed to see the distinction between history and theory. In his *Preface* to the first edition of *Capital I*, Marx had already foreseen this problem when he said that he was dealing not with England but with the capitalist mode of production, the former being only the classic ground where the latter had developed; and he added that in the social sciences the force of abstraction was the appropriate scientific approach. With hindsight it would be possible to demolish Richard's presentation of Marx's ideas. But I have limited myself to what an informed reader of that time - Simiand - could have already perceived. Richard mentioned neither Sorel nor Labriola, and had he been familiar with these authors he might have avoided the mistake of taking the works of Ferri and Loria as expositions of the Marxist doctrine.

Between the publication of his *magnum opus* on socialism and the time of his break with the Durkheimian School around 1907, Richard published relatively little on Marxism. In his *L'idée d'évolution dans la nature et dans l'histoire*, published in 1903, he repeated some of his early stereotypes on Marx and Engels, emphasizing, for example, that 'economic materialism' was a monist conception of history in which the primacy was given to

production. In approaching the problem of theories of revolution, he concluded that the idea of class struggle was one of the two sociological explanations available, though he personally found more convincing Jhering's 'legal struggle' theory. He was prepared to accept, however, that a synthesis was possible, and he quoted approvingly Gumpłowicz's idea that both theses were not incompatible. More interesting from our point of view is his *Notions élémentaires de sociologie*, published the same year, and reprinted at least twice before 1910. This book is a sort of sociology primer, and it is interesting to see that, in contrast to his 1912 book, he did not consider Marx as one of the authors who had contributed to the development of sociology. He referred to socialism as a premature attempt to develop an applied sociology, and as one of the reasons why our discipline was so discredited.

His book *La femme dans l'histoire*, published in 1909, provided Richard with an opportunity to criticize Engels as a representative of the naturalist theories that, in their attempt to explain the transition from mother-right to father-right, had ignored collective consciousness and had relied exclusively on external factors - or, more precisely in Engel's case, on the transformation of production. Richard went to great pains to provide an alternative theory based on the importance of religious and moral beliefs. He suggested that the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy is always associated with the appearance of ancestor cults. He based his demonstration on the fact that all transitional societies can be characterized by the presence of those cults, and that one can observe how these cults modify mother-right in favour of father-right. The supposed historic defeat of woman is in part a dramatic effect created by Engels; women never had much power and in any case lost it very gradually.

In 1910 Richard contributed to a collective book on the topic of morality and the social question. In his paper he made use of the famous letter that Marx sent to Mikhailovsky in 1877, but which was not published till 1888. In this letter Marx objected to any attempt to transform his 'historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historio-philosophical theory of the general path every people is fated to tread'. Now Richard interpreted this passage as meaning that Marx had renounced his scientific theory in favour of a political stand, and he praised his moral fibre, so rare those days among socialists.

I have already mentioned that in his major sociological treatise, *La sociologie générale et les lois sociologiques* (1912), Richard considered Marxism ('economic determinism') as one of the three major existing sociological theories, along with consensus theory and the theory of social forms. He dedicated a full chapter to the examination of the basic assumption of the theory of 'economic determinism'. At the beginning of the chapter he nuanced some of his early formulations on the subject, suggesting for example that the materialist conception of history

was independent of any metaphysical materialism. Having come across some of the letters written by Engels in the last few years of his life, Richard accepted that 'economic determinism' did not exclude interaction between the different spheres of society - thus economic causality was decisive but not exclusive. Unfortunately, most of the chapter is focused on the objective of debunking the idea of economic law in many of the early economists. The major thrust against historical materialism is not through a detailed examination of the works of the founding parents, but on the basis of Stammler's *Wirtschaft und Recht nach der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung* of 1906, which tried to demonstrate the importance of legal factors in history. Against 'economic determinism', which considers the legal system as a product of social co-operation, Richard can say with Stammler that it is not a result of, but a factor contributing to, the development of co-operation. The use of Stammler's book for the reconstruction of historical materialism is as unfortunate as the use of Loria and Ferri. It is a pity that Richard was never aware of Weber's critique of Stammler (published in 1907) - he might have found him less reliable (Weber 1977).

In his last book published prior to the war, *La question sociale et le mouvement philosophique au XIX^e siècle* (1914), 'scientific socialism' is subjected to the same barrage of criticism that we have seen up to now, namely lack of originality, reductionism, not meeting the canons of science, etc. Richard concludes that historical materialism, or any other naturalist and objectivist sociology for that matter, cannot tell us how the future will be. Scientific socialism is an impossible dream. The only correct attitude towards the social question is the reformist one which will bring change through social legislation and will be the work not of violent socialist parties, but of enlightened minorities.

In conclusion, Gaston Richard's presentation of historical materialism was simplistic and occasionally even grotesque, though in his later writings showing a better understanding of some of the Marxist standpoints. Today his name is only known to a few specialists (Pickering 1975: 1979), after having been condemned to the 'dustbin of history' for daring to rebel against the Durkheimian School. And yet his book *Le socialisme et la science sociale* was Durkheim's main source of inspiration in effecting his devastating 'refutation' and rejection of Marx's historical materialism (Llobera 1981).

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