

JOSEPH DIETZGEN, THE PHILOSOPHER OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY.

BY THE EDITOR.

AMONG the philosophers of modern times Joseph Dietzgen is little known partly because he was not a professional philosopher but, scientifically considered, a self-taught man, partly because his interest lay in the practical issues of life, for he was with all his soul a devoted adherent of the labor party. Hence he has been called the philosopher of socialists or of social democracy.

Joseph Dietzgen* was born December 9, 1828, at Blankenberg, a little town on the Sieg, a small river flowing into the Rhine a few miles above Cologne. The place is possessed of romantic traditions and a natural beauty. The ruins of an old castle are still standing, and the mountainous landscape is covered by woods and vineyards. His father was the owner of a tannery and in 1835 he moved to Uckerath, a small village in the neighborhood. In Uckerath Joseph attended the public school, and for a short time was sent to a Latin school in Oberpleis. He learned tanning in the tannery of his father, but he always had an open book with him while at work, for he was greatly interested in literature, political economy and philosophy. In 1848 he for the first time became conscious of his radical tendencies, and forthwith considered himself an outspoken socialist. In his philosophical ideas he was strongly under the influence of Feuerbach, and in his socialist convictions he followed closely Marx and Engels. Carl Marx visited him at his home on the Rhine and became his friend. At the socialist Congress at the Hague in 1872, which Dietzgen attended as a delegate, Marx introduced him with the words: "Here is our philosopher."

In 1849 Dietzgen came to the United States and made himself

*The data of Dietzgen's life are taken from a short biography written by his son as an introduction to the German edition of *Das Wesen der menschlichen Kopfarbeit*.

thoroughly familiar with the country. He partly tramped through the States, partly traveled on canal boats, from the East to the Mississippi, and from Wisconsin down to the Gulf of Mexico. He returned to Uckerath in 1851 and married a deeply religious Roman Catholic orphan of Westphalia. Their married life was extremely happy in spite of the difference in their convictions. He educated his children well, but he never succeeded in establishing the financial conditions of his home on a solid foundation. In Winterscheid he opened a grocery, combined with a bakery, which he conducted for some time with success:

In order to improve his condition he returned to the United States in 1859, where he founded a similar business in Montgomery, Alabama, but the war of secession ruined the enterprise, and when some of his friends had been hanged for their sympathy with the North he left Alabama in 1861 and returned to Winterscheid where he resumed his former business.

In 1864 he saw an announcement in a paper which called for an expert tanner to conduct the imperial tannery at St. Petersburg. He applied for the place and was accepted. Though the position was good and the Russian government was greatly pleased with his work, he disliked Russian conditions to such an extent that he left St. Petersburg and returned to Germany. He settled in Siegburg and conducted the tannery of his father which he had inherited, but he was not successful in business. The growing industry concentrated the tanneries into a few hands and made it more and more impossible for the small tanners to compete.

At the same time Dietzgen continued his propaganda for the social democratic party, and in 1878 when Hödel and Nobiling had made their unsuccessful attempt to kill the emperor he was indicted for treason and held for a long time without bail. This ruined his business and in June, 1884, he left again for the United States where his oldest son had preceded him in 1880.

In New York he took part as the coeditor of *Der Sozialist*, a German socialistic paper, and in 1886 he made his home with his son, who in the meantime had settled in Chicago. This was the year of the labor troubles in Chicago which culminated in the Hay-market riot. The arrest of the leading anarchists followed and their organ, the *Chicagoer Arbeiterzeitung*, was left without an editor. Dietzgen stepped in and offered his services without remuneration. He had been attacked by the Chicago anarchists because he did not agree with them on some labor questions, but he was not the man to bear a grudge against others and his helpful assistance was now

fully appreciated. He died suddenly of heart failure at the home of his son, April 15, 1888. A few moments before his death he had taken an active part in a conversation on the socialist problem.

A champion for the labor party, he was convinced that a final settlement would be impossible without a revolution, but in spite of the militant character of his convictions he was personally an amiable and lovable man. This appears for instance in a letter to one of his sons in which he gives him the following advice: "In your judgment against others and your surroundings be never harsh, but always humane. In order to act in an amiable way one must think amiably. Virtues and faults always cling together; even the villain is a good fellow, and the just man sins seven times every day."

Dietzgen had only the common education of a tradesman; nevertheless he had read a good deal and besides his native German was familiar with French and English. He wrote his first book, "The Nature of Human Brain Work," in St. Petersburg, and he expressed his conviction that in order to succeed in its demands the labor party must not only have a definite, particular platform, but must also be based upon a sound philosophy. In Siegburg he developed a great literary activity by contributing a series of articles on economical and political questions to the Organ of the German socialists, *Vorwärts*. He also contributed at various times to the *Volksstaat*, *Sozialdemokrat*, *Neue Gesellschaft*, *Neue Zeit*, and the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*.

In 1880 he wrote "Letters on Logic" and the "Acquisition of Philosophy," meaning by the latter the matured fruits which philosophy has produced for mankind, and which he recommends social democrats to utilize. His books have been published in Stuttgart by J. H. W. Dietz's successor, and an English translation of them has appeared in Chicago from the publishing house of Charles H. Kerr & Company.

In order to characterize Dietzgen we present an extract from a summary of his philosophy by Anton Pannekoek, who has written an introduction to his work, *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy*, the English version of *Das Acquisit der Philosophie*. Pannekoek says:

"In times of primitive communism, the conditions of production were clear and easily understood. Things were produced jointly for use and consumed in common. Man was master of his mode of production and thus master of his own fate as far as the superior forces of nature admitted it. Under such conditions, social ideas could not help being simple and clear. There being no clash between personal

and social interests, men had no conception of a deep chasm between good and bad. Only the uncontrolled forces of nature stood like unintelligible and mysterious powers, that appeared to them either as well meaning or as evil spirits, above these primitive little societies.

“But with the advent of the production of commodities the picture changes. Civilized humanity begins to feel itself somewhat relieved from the hard and ungovernable pressure of fickle natural forces. But now new demons arise out of social conditions. ‘No sooner did the producers give their products away in exchange instead of consuming them as heretofore, than they lost control of them. They no longer knew what became of their products, and there was a possibility that these products might some day be used for the exploitation and oppression of the producers—The products rule the producers.’ (Engels). In the production of commodities, it is not the purpose of the individual producer which is accomplished, but rather that which the productive forces back of him are aiming at. Man proposes, but a social power, stronger than himself, disposes; he is no longer master of his fate. The inter-relations of production become complicated and difficult to grasp. While it is true that the individual is the producing unit, yet his individual labor is only a subordinate part of the whole process of social production, of which he remains a tool. The fruits of the labor of many are enjoyed by a few individuals. The social cooperation is concealed behind a violent competitive struggle of the producers against one another. The interests of the individuals are at war with those of society. . . .

“Such were the impressions out of which thinking men were obliged to fashion their world-philosophy, while, at the same time, they were members of the possessing classes and had thus an opportunity to employ their leisure for a certain self-study, without, however, being in touch with the source of their impressions, viz., the process of social labor which alone could have enabled them to see through the social origin of their ideas. Men of this class, therefore, were led to the assumption that their ideas emanated from some supernatural and spiritual power. . . .

“These successive changes of their theories are embodied in Grecian philosophy, in the various phases of the Christian religion, and in the modern systems of philosophy.

“But we must not regard these systems and religions for what they generally pass, that is to say, we must not think them to be only repeated unsuccessful attempts to formulate absolute truth. They are merely the incarnations of progressive stages of better

knowledge acquired by the human mind about itself and about the universe. It was the aim of philosophical thought to find satisfaction in understanding. And as long as understanding could not wholly be gotten by natural means, there remained always a field for the supernatural and incomprehensible. But by the painstaking mental work of the deepest thinkers, the material of science was ceaselessly increased, and the field of the supernatural and incomprehensible was ever more narrowed. And this is especially the case since the progress of capitalist production has promoted the persistent study of nature. For through this study the human mind was enabled to test its powers by simple, quiet, persistent and fruitful labor in the search for successive parts of truth, and thus to rid itself from the overirritation of hopeless quest after absolute truth. The desire to ascertain the value of these new truths gave rise to the problems of the theory of understanding. The attempts to solve these problems form a permanent part of modern systems of philosophy, which represent a graduated evolution of the theory of understanding. But the supernatural element in these systems prevented their perfection.

“Under the impulse of the technical requirements of capitalism, the evolution of natural sciences became a triumphal march of the human mind. Nature was subjugated first through the discovery of its laws by the human mind, and then by the material subordination of the known forces of nature to the human will in the service of our main object, the production of the necessities of life with a minimum expenditure of energy. But this bright shining light rendered, by contrast, the gloom which surrounded the phenomena of human society only the darker, and capitalism in its development still accentuates this contrast, as it accentuates and thus renders more easily visible and intelligible all contrasts. . . .

“Capitalism is now approaching its decline. Socialism is near. And the vital importance of this transition in human history cannot be stated more strongly than in the words of Marx and Engels: ‘This concludes the primary history of man. He thereby passes definitely out of the animal kingdom.’ The social regulation of production makes man fully the master of his own fate. No longer does any mysterious social power thwart his plans or jeopardise his success. Nor does any mysterious natural force control him henceforth. He has investigated its effects, understands them, and presses them into his service. For the first time in his history he will then be the ruler of the earth.

“We now see that the many centuries that filled the history of

civilization were a necessary preparation for socialism, a slow struggle to escape from nature's slavery, a gradual increase of the productivity of labor, up to the point where the necessaries of life for all may be obtained almost without exertion. This is the prime merit of capitalism and its justification, that after so many centuries of hardly perceptible progress it taught man to conquer nature by a rapid assault. At the same time it set free the forces of production and finally transformed and bared the springs of the productive process to such a degree that they easily could be perceived and grasped by the human mind; this was the indispensable condition for the control of this process....

"A new system of production sheds its light into the minds of men already before it has fully materialized. The same science which teaches us to understand and thereby to control the social forces, also unfetters the mind from the bewitching effects of those forces. It enables him even now already to emancipate himself from traditional superstitions and ideas which were formerly the expression of things unknown. We may anticipate with our mind the coming time. And thus the ideas which will then dominate are already even now growing within us in a rudimentary form corresponding to the present actual economic development. By this means we are even now enabled to overcome the capitalist philosophy in thought and to soberly and clearly grasp the nature of our spirit as being dependent on matter."

Dietzgen's philosophy is naturally onesided, his sympathies being strongly engaged in favor of his class. He looks upon the world as if its whole purpose was to produce the social democratic party. He suffers from two illusions, both of which are quite common in reformers. First, he looks upon the primitive condition of mankind as a paradise, and further upon the final state to be attained as a millennium. We believe that if he had lived in the times of that primitive communism which he extols as a kind of paradise, he would have found that then life was as hard as, if not harder than, it is in the present age of the much denounced *bourgeoisie*, and even if we could abolish private possession of capital and have all capital confiscated by the community we would always have leaders, presidents, bosses, and those who are led, who have to do the bidding of others, the multitudes of the people, the captains of industry, and the laborers; and so long as the world stands the different interests of society will lead now and again to struggles more or less bitter according to conditions.

It stands to reason that with the advance of civilization and the

progress of social prosperity the contrasts between the classes and the conflicts between clashing interests will be less furious and more considerate. Nevertheless they will remain, and it is not to be expected that we shall ever have a condition in which the masses as such will have the supreme command of social conditions, especially the distribution of wealth.

Since the beginning of history there have been differences of opinion. We have anarchists, who seek the solution of the social problem by the abolition of all law and order, who clamor first of all for freedom; and we have socialists who as a principle of reform proclaim the maxim that the individual ought to submit to the behests of society, who for the sake of order would sacrifice liberty. Between these extremes society has developed in obedience to both, and the history of the world has realized a constant increase of liberty, together with a constantly greater assurance of order. In this sense both parties, socialists and anarchists, have constantly approached more and more nearly to their ideal, but the time will never come when either anarchy or socialism will be completely actualized. Society is always a compromise between the two. Private control of capital has so far been the most successful method of social arrangements. All social enterprises have failed because they have absolutely lacked the greatest possible incentive for economy and prudence, which is the reward earned by the results of one's industry and thrift.

It is probable that in the course of the future development of society poverty will more and more disappear, and even unskilled labor will be able to gain a comfortable living. The result will be that the laborers themselves will take part more and more in the possession of the general wealth of society. They will develop into small capitalists, and thus their own interests will be engaged to preserve the accumulation of wealth. Nevertheless we believe that as struggle is necessarily a feature of life so the conflicting interests of society will continue to adjust themselves by occasional struggles.

We look upon Dietzgen's philosophy as a noteworthy attempt to reconstruct philosophical knowledge from the standpoint of the laborer, and especially the socialist, but nevertheless we believe that this partisan philosophy is not of an enduring nature, and if further developed will only serve to prove that philosophy is a world-conception which must take account of all classes, of all parties, of all races, and of all the different interests of human society.