

Book Reviews

AN EXPOSURE OF FALSE PHILOSOPHIES

In Defence of Philosophy. Against Positivism and Pragmatism. By Maurice Cornforth. (260 pp. Lawrence and Wishart, 12s. 6d.).

IN THE years before the war, under the impact of the progress of the U.S.S.R. and world developments confirming the correctness of Marxist views, interest began to be aroused among progressive intellectuals in the general outlook and philosophy of Marxism. They began to take notice of dialectical materialism as an important subject ignored by the schools.

At the same time, many of them who were attracted by Marxism politically were inclined to be sceptical or contemptuous of its philosophical basis because they were pre-occupied with the claims of the then latest development in philosophy known as logical positivism which had special attractions for natural scientists. This school, centred in Vienna and linked with the mathematical analysis of Russell, put forward claims to rise above the battle of systems in philosophy, whether idealist or materialist, and to present a new scientific approach which did away with all 'metaphysics'. Dialectical materialism was condemned out of hand as not being in accord with this modern scientific outlook.

Since then there has been a variety of developments of this trend in philosophy, both in Europe and America, each claiming to be an improvement on its predecessor and a thorough criticism of all these tendencies has become desirable. Such a comprehensive account is now available thanks to this work of Maurice Cornforth, who in his latest book deals fully with all the allied varieties of positivist philo-

sophy going by such names as logical positivism, logical empiricism, semantics, semiotic and pragmatism.

Anyone who has read Cornforth's earlier book on *Science and Idealism*, of which this may be regarded as a continuation, will know that he can expect a clear and factual exposition of the trends analysed, a sharp analysis that lays bare the fundamentals of the various views and a trenchant criticism that exposes the weakness of these new 'systems' and their inadequate efforts to hide the old basis of idealist philosophy on which they actually rest and the anti-scientific and anti-social conclusions to which they give rise. This criticism is not merely destructive. Cornforth calls his book *In Defence of Philosophy* precisely because he shows the necessity of a general philosophical outlook, which these authors imagine they have superseded, and point by point contrasts their views with those of dialectical materialists, to a general exposition of which, moreover, he devotes two special chapters. This involves some repetition but makes the book particularly valuable for those who are new to the subject. It is by no means easy reading, but this is largely because of the deliberately invented jargon of these philosophers, who multiply new terms to give their views an appearance of novelty and scientific analysis which conceals the poverty of its philosophical basis.

Essentially all these new trends are off-shoots from the school of Mach and empirio-criticism, which Lenin thoroughly analysed in his classical work *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. Lenin concludes by summing up 'four standpoints from which a Marxist must proceed to form a judgment of empirio-criticisms'. These are, in effect: its theoretical foundations compared with those of dialectical materialism, its place in relation to the other schools of philosophy, its connection

with the views of natural scientists and its relation to the struggle of parties in philosophy.

Cornforth carries forward Lenin's exposure from all the standpoints, providing a valuable guide to these later developments of Machism that have cropped up in the forty odd years since Lenin's work. Their starting point is the attempt to reduce all philosophy to a logical analysis of language in order to get rid of the inescapable 'metaphysical' basis of positivism. But the attempt failed. Schlick, Wittgenstein, Carnap each in turn convicted his predecessors of 'metaphysics' and corrected the system only to become more deeply entangled in discredited philosophical idealism.

Cornforth devotes much space to the various fashionable new developments of 'semantics', the 'Analysis of meaning', and shows how in every field, in 'pure' philosophy, in the physical sciences and in sociology and politics, they give rise to reactionary conclusions.

A considerable chapter is devoted to pragmatism as a peculiarly American trend of positivist thought. Cornforth explains clearly that the pragmatic view of truth as depending, not on the correspondence of our ideas with the laws of the objective material world, but on their 'practical cash value'—as William James put it—leads straight to subjective idealism. But he gives the pragmatists too much credit, perhaps, in saying that pragmatism 'has thrown off much of the negativity and pessimism of European empiricism' and that its 'emendations of the traditional positivist empiricist position have, at first sight, much to recommend them' on the ground that it conceives man as an agent in practical interaction with his environment.

It may be noted that already Lenin in his work mentions pragmatism in a footnote and points out that 'the difference between Machism and pragmatism is as insignifi-

cant as the difference between empirio-criticism and empirio-monism'. From the very start pragmatism was a reactionary ideology hostile to materialism and specially concerned with justifying religion. The later developments of pragmatism fully confirm this and its flourishing in America, as Cornforth shows, is bound up with its special rôle as the characteristic philosophy of American imperialism.

In his final chapter Cornforth answers the possible charge that he has not recognised the positive features of the advance contributed by the new philosophies and sums up the general reactionary nature of these developments, which more and more tend to reflect the moral and intellectual disintegration of capitalism in decay.

In contrast to this Marxism is a living creative doctrine, the scientific world outlook of the proletariat, a mighty weapon for tackling the problems of the real world, of the

"Oh shame and double shame if we march under such leadership as this in an unjust war against a people who are *not* our enemies, against Europe, against freedom, against nature, against the hope of the world."

William Morris

wrote these words when he campaigned, in 1877, for peace with Russia, for friendship with the Bulgarian people. The full story is told in the current issue of

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development of society and human knowledge. In a discussion on philosophy in the U.S.S.R. in 1947 A. A. Zhdanov pointed out that the system makers in philosophy 'forced on living human knowledge conclusions that were dictated, not by real life, but by the needs of their particular systems. This philosophy was useless as an instrument of practical influence on the world, as a means whereby the world could be known'. This applies with full force to all the logical positivists and semantic obscurantists.

C.P.D.

A SURVEY OF THE 19TH CENTURY

England in the Nineteenth Century. David Thomson. (251 pp., Pelican Books, 1s. 6d.)

THE writing of popular history has many pitfalls, and Mr. Thomson, in this volume in the Penguin History series, has fallen into most of them. The authorship of any history for the general reader demands a close and intimate knowledge of the period concerned, an obvious point which would not have needed saying but for the impression from this book that Mr. Thomson has a very imperfect acquaintance with the 19th century in England. Mr. Thomson is a Liberal. For him the 19th century must be understood as the decent and relatively painless realisation of the liberal-socialist idea. The fact that the ordinary people had to fight and struggle for elementary political and industrial rights finds no place in his account. But it is not only or even mainly because of the facile philosophy that lies so obviously upon the writing that this book must be dismissed as a shoddy piece of work, but for the many errors of fact and the multitude of mis-statements.

Here is a selection of the factual mistakes. It was the 1851 not the

1831 Census that showed Britain half-rural, half-urban (p. 11) and Mr. Thomson, in a slipshod way, speaks of the country being half-agricultural, half-industrial, which is by no means the same thing; the 1802 Factory Act applied only to pauper apprentices and not to child labour in general, and the 1833 Act was not Shaftesbury's but Althorp's (p. 47); Chadwick, through his committee of doctors, first investigated the insanitary conditions in East London in 1838 not 1842 (p. 134); to write that the death rate fell between 1851 and 1871 conceals the fact that the death rate was higher in the '60s than it had been for most of the '50s (p. 137); elementary school fees were not all abolished in 1891 (p. 135) for there were still over 600,000 paying fees in 1902 and completely free education did not come until 1918; the scale of old age pensions in 1909 was not 5s. per week, but a graduated rate of 1s. to 5s. according to income below £31 a year (p. 200). Much more serious than these elementary mistakes is Mr. Thomson's misrepresentation of certain of the crucial movements and trends of the century, thus, to say that the 1867 Reform Bill was 'directly the result of the competitive party system' is to make nonsense of the history of the '60s and to ignore the central part which the working men played in their own enfranchisement; to suggest that 'Trade unionism, so far as its internal structure was concerned, had almost to begin again in the '50s' is completely to underestimate the influence of the movement in the first half of the century; to write 'The worst phase of sweating and of severe hardship was over before 1850' eliminates the evidence, to mention only two examples, of the Children's Employment Commission of the '60s and Booth's investigations of the last decades. Marx and Engels, of course, had no influence upon the English labour movement, the economic basis of imperialism is dismissed in a sen-