

The Idealist Revision of Marxism: The Ethical Socialism of Henri De Man

The Negation of Marxism

From the beginning of this century, revisionism was an important factor in the rise of fascism, though historians have generally failed to recognize the importance of this factor. Indeed, one could hardly give a satisfactory explanation of the fascist phenomenon without reference to the stages of development of the crisis of socialism. From the Dreyfus affair until the time of Munich, the growth of the fascist ideology was the chief manifestation of the tremendous difficulty that socialism experienced in responding to the challenge of capitalism. One kind of revisionism—that of Bernstein and Jaurès—led to social democracy, while another kind—that of Sorel, Déat, and De Man—led to fascism. Both shared a desire to go “beyond” Marxism and both were agreed in regarding Marxism as an incomparable tool of historical analysis—an ideal conceptual framework for the arrangement of history—but not, unless radically altered, a real agent of political change.

In the interwar period, the revision of Marxism was associated in French cultural circles with the name of Henri De Man. The attack on Marxism found in the work of this Belgian writer was a reflection of the idealist revolt of the first decades of this century. In this respect, De Man’s thought was a continuation and development of that of Georges Sorel. It deeply influenced Marcel Déat, who began to apply De Man’s ideas in the sphere of French politics. At the other end of the political spectrum, the neo-idealist rebellion of Thierry Maulnier continued the tradition of Maurice Barrès, and these two streams of neo-idealism

fused in a synthesis that, at the end of this second prewar period, assumed the form of fascism.

At the beginning of the thirties, De Man was regarded as one of the foremost theoreticians of European socialism. A true cosmopolitan who expressed himself with equal ease in Dutch, French, German, and English, this prolific writer wrote in whichever language seemed to him most appropriate to the subject and circumstances. He was one of the very few people in European politics—perhaps the only one—who had lived for a long time in foreign countries, including the United States, and was able to pass from one cultural environment to another and feel perfectly at home everywhere.

Born in Antwerp in 1885, this son of a great Flemish bourgeois family joined the socialist *Jeune Garde* on 1 May 1902. At that time, he was closer to Karl Liebknecht than to Jaurès, and unfavorably disposed toward Millerand. The young De Man threw himself body and soul into socialist activities. His studies were badly affected as a result, and his family was only too pleased to see him leave in 1905 for the University of Leipzig.

The following years were all-important for De Man's intellectual development. While pursuing his studies in Leipzig with distinction, he participated in the ideological ferment that the long struggle against revisionism had given rise to in the German social-democratic movement. After spending some time in England, where he gained a certain respect for bourgeois democracy, he accepted the invitation of Émile Vandervelde, the rising figure in Belgian socialism, to become the director of the new Workers' Educational Center. In August 1914, he took part as an interpreter and enthusiastic supporter in the mission of Hermann Müller and Camille Huysmans in Paris, sponsored by the Socialist International, to attempt—at the last minute—to prevent the war. Three years later, however, artillery lieutenant De Man, fresh from the trenches, went on another mission—to Russia, where, together with Vandervelde and Louis de Brouckère, he attempted to persuade the Kerensky government to continue fighting. Immediately afterward, he was sent by the Belgian government to the United States. These two experiences played an important role in his ideological evolution.

In the years before the war, De Man contributed to the formation of the Marxist left in Belgium as the leader of the Walloon (French-speaking) section. Here he came into contact only with Marxist orthodoxy in its strictest form, as represented by Kautsky. However, it should be pointed out as significant for his later development that, before be-

coming a "scientific" socialist, De Man passed through a phase of ethical socialism,¹ and later, during his stay in England, he published a series of articles in the celebrated German socialist journal the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* that Karl Radek described as already constituting the beginning of a heresy.²

There is no doubt that the first cracks in De Man's orthodoxy appeared before the war. The readjustments and modifications of position that were already noticeable around 1910 were the beginning of a prolonged process of change that lasted until 1926, when *Zur Psychologie des Sozialismus* was published. Already in the prewar period, De Man had questions about the schematic nature of the Marxist interpretation of social and cultural phenomena.³ During the war and after, he became interested in psychology and acquainted himself with the new tendencies in psychoanalysis, and, as he himself said, well before the end of the war he had come to the general conclusion that the motives that underlie human nature, derived from instinct and only slightly modified by habit and education, are much broader than is allowed for by Marxist theory.⁴ Thus, when he came to publish his comprehensive criticism of Marxism in 1926, he made his starting point the problem of motivation.

The war had a profound effect on De Man. As he wrote in his "fragment of spiritual autobiography," as he called it, the war had superimposed itself on "an intellectual crisis that lasted for about twenty years." Already before the war, he said, "the sharpest bones of my orthodoxy began to lose their edge."⁵ His experience was similar to Sorel's. Like Sorel, he claimed to have moved toward revisionism under the influence of his practical contacts with the labor movement and especially the syndical movement.⁶ "The developments of the last ten years have only brought to its culmination a crisis that has been in the making for a long time," he said.⁷

While the importance of the war as a factor in bringing about these changes ought not to be minimized, it should be pointed out that, on the one hand, post-1918 Marxism betrayed symptoms of crisis that are not to be explained solely by the difficulty of adapting to new conditions and that, on the other hand, if the war accelerated the process of the revision of Marxism, its influence was crucial only for people who already tended to nonconformity, such as Lagardelle, Hervé, and De Man.

It was the prewar "leftists," the people who throughout their careers remained on the fringes of the movement and the organized socialist parties, or born opposers like De Man, whose ideas were most affected by the war, just as later it was the nonconformists of socialism, commu-

nism, and the other left-wing factions who had the greatest difficulty coping with the intellectual crisis of socialism. Those who resisted best, on the other hand, were the most orthodox elements, the absolute die-hards, because they had no willingness to venture. However, in the case of De Man, it was not only the war that made him question Marxism but also the German experience of the twenties: he felt that Marxism, far from arresting the decline of the social-democratic movement, actually encouraged it with its materialism.⁸

Throughout the first thirty years of this century, the German Social-Democratic party played a crucial role in the history of European socialism. Its collapse and the breakdown of the Socialist International shed a new light on the Marxist phenomenon. This distressing experience widened still further the cracks of nonconformity that, even before 1914, had appeared on the polished surface of orthodoxy. De Man's theoretical writings thus reflect a revision of the philosophical principles of Marxism that went far beyond the experience of the war: the very essence of the system was questioned and not merely a given set of circumstances. Immediately after the war, De Man took the trouble to note down his reactions as he experienced them, producing a book of great interest, although one should always be conscious of his state of mind when he wrote it. He wrote the book in English, calling it *The Remaking of a Mind*. A more concise version appeared in French under the title *La Leçon de la guerre*.⁹

This book tells us that from that "tragic test" of an "ordeal by fire," the First World War, De Man learned one all-important lesson: the proletariat is not a revolutionary force and socialism is not an idea that can change the world, for it is not one of those truths for which people are willing to die. On the other hand, it must be recognized that millions of human beings unflinchingly risked and sacrificed their lives not only for the sake of the nation but also for other ideas of lesser importance. For De Man, one essential fact overshadowed all the others: the laboring masses in England, America, and France had consented to make far greater sacrifices for ideals such as the autonomy and inviolability of nations, justice in relations between states, and the self-government of peoples than they had previously made when material class interests had been at stake. From this he drew two major conclusions: that economic circumstances alone are not enough to explain every historical development, and that socialism cannot be realized outside the framework of political democracy. He wrote, "I no longer believe that to achieve socialism it is enough for us to appeal to the class interests of the

industrial proletariat while ignoring the contribution we can receive from certain interests and certain ideas that are shared by the entire nation and the whole of humanity. I no longer believe that the struggle of the proletarian parties that remains the chief means of realizing socialism can be successful without certain forms of collaboration between classes and parties.”¹⁰

Similarly, De Man declared that he was now convinced that socialism could not take the form of a simple appropriation of all the major means of production by the state without a profound change in the methods of management and without the stimulus for the whole economy represented by competition between independent enterprises and full remuneration for work. He said, “I believe in a socialism that is nearer at hand, more certain, more realistic, more pragmatic, more synthetic—in a word, more human.”¹¹

Well aware of the true significance of his criticisms, he concluded, “So that there should be no doubt about my apostasy, I shall call it: the revision of Marxism.”¹²

This revision of Marxism comprised, on the one hand, a total support of liberal democracy, regarded as a *sine qua non* for the emancipation of the working classes, and, on the other, a repudiation of Marxism in the purest style of late-nineteenth-century national socialism. Marxism, he said, had been too strongly “imprinted with the socialism of Germany and Russia”¹³—two countries where the lack of democratic institutions had deeply affected the workers’ mentality. As for bourgeois democracy, its present decadent condition, in which it gradually abandoned the traditions connected with its revolutionary origins as its fear of a labor revolution increased, should not lead, thought De Man, to a condemnation of the principles on which it was founded.¹⁴

Thus, De Man’s socialism had now become inseparable from the idea of liberal democracy. In fact, it was already a new socialism, closely connected not only with the liberal ideology (De Man spoke enthusiastically about the “immortal principles of 1789”)¹⁵ but also with the existing social and political order. To the socialism of rebellion had succeeded a socialism of acceptance: the legitimacy of the bourgeois order was no longer seriously contested. The impression gained by the reader of *La Leçon de la guerre* is that the new socialism simply wished to take over the bourgeois order, improving it, modernizing it, and adapting it to the requirements of the period, but without any genuine revolutionary intention.

This retreat from Marxist orthodoxy took place in two stages. At

first, in the name of liberty, revolutionary socialism withdrew to the most moderate positions of social democracy, and then, when Marxism was well and truly dead and buried, the old liberal principles were abandoned in favor of a strong state with a directed economy. The idea that private property and the profit motive were the generators of economic activity was retained, but everything was now placed under the control of an authoritarian government. This was the substance of the Pontigny proposals that accompanied the Labor Plan (*Plan du Travail*) in 1934; it was also the meaning of neosocialism.

The revisionism of the interwar period meant the end of the socialist utopia, or—to use the celebrated Sorelian expression—the end of the revolutionary myth. This was precisely the issue that, throughout the thirties, so deeply divided the socialists from the neosocialists, the orthodox from the revisionists. Claiming adherence to the facts—above all the fact of national existence—the new factions, readopting the positions of the national socialists of the 1880s, relinquished forever the dream of a proletarian revolution.

Did anything at all remain of Marxism? The element that, according to De Man, still gave Marxism some value was its usefulness as a method of scientific analysis. Its value, like that of any other instrument, depended on the way it was used. The method itself, said De Man, was “far from having become unusable,” although if it was to retain its validity, it would have to be continually revised in the light of new circumstances.¹⁶ This recognition of the necessity of adjusting the Marxist formulas to suit new conditions led, however, to the realization that changes would have to be introduced that would be as far-reaching as those that, for instance, the natural sciences had effected in the theories of Darwin. What remained of Marx was first, the idea, of lasting merit, of an evolution subject to scientific laws, and then, and most important, the method of using economic facts to explain the great forces of historical progress.¹⁷

Having stated this, De Man claimed that, after the First World War, his conception of Marxism developed in “a more liberal and realistic direction.”¹⁸ It was henceforth closely connected with parliamentary democracy, which he regarded as a necessary condition of socialism. Like Déat, De Man saw himself as belonging to the tradition of socialists such as Jaurès who never separated the cause of political liberty from that of economic emancipation and who sought for the proletariat the heritage of the great “bourgeois” revolutions.¹⁹

Such were the reflections that the end of the First World War suggested to De Man. In the fall of 1920, after a second stay in the United

States, he became principal of the *École Ouvrière Supérieure* (Workers' School of Higher Education), remaining in that post for less than two years. The leaders of the party were only too pleased to see the departure of this man who, known both for his personal worth and for his doctrinal nonconformity, could prove to be a dangerous rival.

De Man was constantly at odds with the leadership of his party over his disagreement with their belief that Belgian socialism should fall into line with Poincaré's *revanchisme* (a policy of "getting even" with Germany). In 1922 he once again left Belgium and went to live in Germany, where he remained for ten years. From 1922 to 1926 he taught at the Labor Academy at Frankfurt am Main. There he wrote his most famous work, *Zur Psychologie des Sozialismus*, known in French as *Au-delà du marxisme*. Translated into thirteen languages, this book was enormously successful, and made De Man the most talked-about and controversial political writer of the decade.²⁰

The book had one fundamental objective: it envisaged quite simply "the liquidation of Marxism."²¹ De Man demonstrated his "opposition to the fundamental principles of Marxist doctrine" by choosing, for the title of his book, "the formula *beyond Marxism*" rather than any of those "more lukewarm expressions, such as *revision, adaptation, re-interpretation, etc.*, that attempt to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds."²² At the same time, to forestall the criticisms of those who might hope to weaken the impact of his arguments by turning the discussion of fundamental issues into a criticism of classic Marxist texts, he declared himself uninterested in discovering Marx's original intentions, and he hardly cared what any given statement of Marx's had meant at any particular moment. What mattered now, he said, was not an evaluation of the "dead Marx" but of "living socialism." De Man made no attempt to avoid difficulties, and he was careful to make his intentions plain. What he had intended in this book, he said, was to make a comprehensive criticism not of Marx's doctrine²³ but of the whole collection of value judgments, affective symbols, collective wishes, principles, programs, and forms of action that constituted Marxism and still existed in the labor movement.²⁴ Since Marx, he said, had created his doctrine solely as a basis for action, any part of his thought that had not survived in Marxism could presumably be overlooked.²⁵ However, he continued, "in order to say *after* Marx, I must first say *against* Marx," and, in order to overcome the error that Marxism had turned into, "one should not go back to it; it is enough to go beyond it."²⁶ Finally, he said that this whole development would eventually lead to a "new synthesis."²⁷

Au-delà du marxisme was, as De Man himself maintained, a “settling of accounts” with his Marxist past.²⁸ It was followed by a work that complemented his criticism of Marxism: *Le Socialisme constructif*, a collection of texts introduced by the report that De Man presented to the Conference of Heppenheim in 1928.²⁹ This conference, which was attended by many of the leading intellectuals of the day, including Paul Tillich, Eduard Heimann, Adolf Löwe, and Martin Buber, attempted to define the principles of a socialism characterized “by a deeper concern for spiritual values.”³⁰ De Man summed up their conclusions in a series of propositions that have come to be known as the propositions of Heppenheim.

The book that De Man considered his best, however—and one whose importance in the history of ideas is at least equal to that of *Au-delà du marxisme*—was his last work, *L’Idée socialiste*, a positive exposition of his revision of Marxism. In many respects, this was his major work, the one in which he attempted to resolve the problems raised in *Au-delà du marxisme*. “It was an attempt,” he said, “to situate socialism within the evolution not only of the economy and of institutions but of the ideas that make and unmake civilizations.”³¹

This was a tremendously ambitious scheme, expressing a desire to find the very core of the socialist idea and to situate it in a vast philosophical, psychological, and historical canvas. *Au-delà du marxisme*, comprehensive criticism of Marxism though it was, did no more than state the problem—establishing, in particular, that beyond all considerations of class interests, movements, and institutions is some other element more deeply rooted in human nature, an element connected with our instinctive and emotional life before it ever reaches the state of consciousness. *L’Idée socialiste* was an answer to the question raised in the last chapter of *Au-delà du marxisme*: If socialism is a belief based on certain value judgments, from where do these value judgments proceed, what do they consist of, and to what do they conduce?³²

If in spirit and intention *L’Idée socialiste* was quite similar to *Au-delà du marxisme*, in style and context it was vastly different. De Man’s last book was written in the shadow of the rise of nazism, and the preface to the original edition was dated January 1933. The book was published by Diederichs, in Jena, at the time of the final collapse of the German left. As the Nazi movement had made anti-Marxism its rallying cry, De Man saw fit to answer with a challenge: “If anyone forces me to choose between Marxist and non-Marxist labels, giving the word ‘Marxist’ the sense that the opponents of the socialist labor movement give the term,

he will receive from me an unequivocal answer: unhesitatingly, I take the side of the most decided Marxists.”³³

On 10 May 1933, this book was burned in front of the city hall of Frankfurt. By the summer of 1940, however, after ten more years of going “beyond” Marxism, such a reaction on De Man’s part had become unthinkable. De Man now enthusiastically welcomed the conquest of Europe by Nazi Germany.

The Revisionist Philosophy

De Man’s critique of Marxism did not question the importance of Marx in the development of the social sciences: without Marx’s influence, he said, they would be half a century behind.³⁴ Nor, he said, should one deny the importance of Marx’s contribution to the analysis of the capitalist system. However, De Man felt that if one wanted to move forward, one would have to accept the principle that the rule of the “relativity” of ideologies applies even to Marxism. One must therefore “go beyond Marxism,”³⁵ and, to liberate oneself from it, one has to free oneself not only from Marxist conclusions but also from the Marxist way of thinking.³⁶ Accordingly, he attacked the very basis of the system: “economic determinism and scientific rationalism.”³⁷

Moreover, De Man believed that a truth is always bound up with its particular period, and that, like any other system of ideas, Marxism was conditioned by the circumstances of the period that gave rise to it. As those circumstances had radically altered, the conviction that Marxism had ceased to be true became part of the truth of our period.³⁸

The starting point of De Man’s critique of Marx was what he called Marx’s “theory of motive forces,” which “made the social action of the masses spring from a recognition of their interests.”³⁹ All Marx’s economic ideas and political and tactical opinions, said De Man, were based on the assumption that human actions are guided above all by economic interests. This “recognition of economic interests as the foundation of social activity”⁴⁰ underlay what De Man regarded as Marxism’s most important and original achievement: “the creation of a doctrine that combines in one unique conception the idea of socialism and the idea of class struggle.”⁴¹ Thus, Marx assailed the legal and moral foundations of the present forms of society, using as his starting point the “motive forces of interest and power conditioned in industrial workers by the capitalist milieu.”⁴² Thus, the founder of scientific socialism could claim to have discovered a new justification for socialism, based,

unlike utopianism, on the objective observation of reality.⁴³ Finally, claimed De Man, the economic hedonism that underlies the Marxist conception of class, of class interests, and of class struggle and the determinism that disregards the psychological process whereby economic necessities are transformed into human goals⁴⁴ give Marxism its “non-ethical” character.⁴⁵

But that, thought De Man, is precisely where the weakness of the system lies. For Marx, the very idea of socialism is brought into existence by class struggle, or, that is to say, by a necessary consequence of capitalism; it does not therefore represent a value judgment. Socialism, according to Marx, will come about not because it is just but because it is inevitable: it will result from the necessary victory of the proletariat in its class struggle.⁴⁶ Thus, one no longer needs any moral arguments to justify socialism; it is enough to recognize causes and effects. And the great question that then arises, said De Man, is whether socialism, basing itself on Marx’s causal theory, is able to become what it seeks and ought to become. De Man gave a clear answer: socialism can only be the product of moral decisions that rest on foundations anterior to any historical experience.⁴⁷

While rejecting Marxism on account of its “mechanistic,” “automatic” character, De Man nevertheless recognized that “ethical judgment existed in Marx, and that he merely, so to speak, concealed it.”⁴⁸ De Man claimed that Marx took great care to dissimulate his ethical intentions, for had he revealed them he would have undermined the scientific character of his system. Thus, one can find traces of his ethical convictions only in his writings dealing with the political events and problems of the day, where the expression of his feelings was essentially a concession on Marx’s part to what he regarded as the immaturity of his fellow cofounders of the First International and to the presumed immaturity of many non-Marxist forms of European socialism. However, in the scientific works, where he expounded his doctrine without any thought of their immediate political effect, “his value judgments have to be looked for almost by psychoanalysis.”⁴⁹

If Marx’s work has this character, said De Man, it was because Marx “borrowed from his master Hegel a belief in ‘the cunning of reason.’”⁵⁰ Through its attempt to satisfy needs created by the capitalist environment, through its struggle for class interests, through its struggle for surplus value with the purchasers of the labor capacity of the industrial worker, the proletariat became subject to an inevitable process, created by the rise of capitalism and fostered by the development of the forces of

production. If there was any room for choice, it was only that of recognizing the inevitability of that evolution, but—and here is where, according to De Man, the “cunning of reason” comes in—this same principle of inevitability, operating according to iron laws, directs historical progress toward a goal worthy of being pursued in itself: the abolition of classes and an end of exploitation and oppression. This, then, is how “the cunning of reason” operates: by means of material interests, power struggles, and conflicts of interest, the ideal comes to pass through a perfectly natural process.⁵¹

Such, said De Man, was Marx’s general intention. The father of scientific socialism had a moral end in view, and his doctrine was a brilliant attempt to utilize to that end the efforts that capitalism had directed toward a material goal. In the heroic period of socialism, said De Man, this was a fruitful and reasonable approach, quite simply because “the motives of the combatants *were* in fact moral. Only fervent supporters of an eschatological ideal of justice then had the spirit of sacrifice necessary for the slightest struggle for the most immediate material goals.”⁵² That was why a spiritual end could be embodied in a material means: for the socialist who fought on the barricades, who schemed, or who made sacrifices or risked martyrdom simply by participating in the struggle for political power, the ends and means were the same. It was then both possible and logical to present socialism in the simple guise of a struggle for class interests while being fully aware that this was only a historical expedient.

Marxism, however, which “had counted on the cunning of reason, itself became victim of the ruse of interest.”⁵³ De Man claimed that the socialist movement, having grown into a mass movement directed by a class of professionals and fragmented into national parties each defending the interests of its own members, now entered a phase in which the means increasingly became ends in themselves. He said that a spirit of opportunism threatened to transform the socialist conquest of the institutions of bourgeois society into a conquest of socialism by those institutions. This situation Marx could not have foreseen, just as he could not have foreseen the *embourgeoisement* of the proletariat. He could not have foreseen that, once it had reached maturity, Marxism would give way to “opportunistic reformism and an adoption of bourgeois culture,”⁵⁴ any more than he could have known that his deterministic philosophy would serve the interests of a “bureaucratic conservatism” and above all justify the resistance of the professional politicians to all tendencies of renewal within the movement.⁵⁵ In the same way, said De

Man, the theory of surplus value shows how futile it is to attempt to understand social realities through purely economic reasoning.⁵⁶

The conclusion, then, is obvious: the modern world does not need a patched-up, reformed version of socialism, but a totally new socialism, one that can “emancipate us from this dependence of man on his technical and economic means of existence,”⁵⁷ that “abandons the fundamental Marxist position of determining all ideologies by the class to which one belongs,”⁵⁸ that ceases to be preoccupied with causes in order to concern itself with value judgments.⁵⁹ This new socialism could take the form of a “conciliation between Marxism and ethical socialism.”⁶⁰ “Whatever is still vital of Marxist anticapitalism”⁶¹ should be preserved, though it should not be forgotten that socialism is much more than anticapitalism,⁶² for in all socialism there is “an impulsion—a striving toward an equitable social order—that is eternal”⁶³ and that belongs to the socialist way of thinking, just as it does to the spiritual origins of the bourgeoisie. De Man said that this impulsion could not be better described than by the term *humanism*.⁶⁴

Accordingly, De Man defined socialism as “a manifestation, which varies according to period, of an eternal aspiration toward a social order in conformity with our moral sense.”⁶⁵ De Man often returned to this definition, each time adding something new. Socialism, he said elsewhere, “is always justified by moral norms that claim universal validity. . . . All socialism is a morality applied to social phenomena, in which the moral principles are more or less deliberately borrowed from the beliefs of the civilization of the period.”⁶⁶ Or, again, socialism is “the subordination of egoistical motives to altruistic motives.”⁶⁷ And finally: “At the origin of every socialist concept is a moral judgment born of faith.”⁶⁸ Thus, socialism is really a “way of feeling and thinking as ancient and as widespread as political thought itself.”⁶⁹

This was how the idealist revolt in European socialism expressed itself in the interwar period, with a socialism totally liberated from Marxism came into being. Regarded as totally independent of its historical context, of economic forces and social structures, and consequently of capitalism, socialism appeared as “a deep, powerful and eternal current”⁷⁰ whose history “began at least with Plato, the Essenes and the first Christian communities.”⁷¹ This history continued with the popular communistic movements of the Middle Ages and the Reformation and, passing through the utopias of the Renaissance and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, extended to the mass movements of the twentieth century.⁷²

It should be pointed out that the idea of ethical socialism, of an "eternal" socialism, was widespread in the period 1920–35. De Man could not ignore Spengler, and it was the German historian who, just after the Great War, declared, "We are all socialists whether or not we know or desire it. Even the resistance to socialism takes a socialist form."⁷³ Spengler was speaking precisely of "ethical socialism," or, in other words, "the maximum generally accessible of a sentiment of life seen under the aspect of finality."⁷⁴ Elaborating his thought, he added, "Ethical socialism is not, despite its immediate illusions, a system of compassion and humanity, peace and solicitude, but of will and power."⁷⁵ This socialism, which, developed by Fichte, Hegel, and Wilhelm von Humboldt, "had its time of passionate grandeur around the middle of the nineteenth century," came to its end in the twentieth, when an "interest in current economic questions" was substituted for "an ethical philosophy."⁷⁶ De Man took the same line, and concluded that Marxism was responsible for that situation. Thus, his struggle for an ethical socialism in the name of an eternal socialism was not only a fight against Marxism but also an attempt to replace Marxism with another form of socialism. It was for the sake of an ethical socialism that De Man began the drift to the right that brought him, a few years later, to hail the Nazi conquests, which he saw as the greatest victory ever won over materialism.

Another exponent of an "eternal" socialism was the Italian syndicalist Arturo Labriola. It was in his journal *Avanguardia socialista* that in the first years of the century the violent opposition to the reformism of Turati took shape, preceding by a generation De Man's struggle against Vandervelde and Déat's attack on Léon Blum's old SFIO. Twenty years later, after passing, like De Man and Déat, through a phase of militant nationalism during the Great War and before returning to Italy as a display of solidarity with his country during its conquest of Abyssinia, Labriola, then in exile in Paris, acknowledged the special character of Italian revolutionary syndicalism: "We would consider socialism rather as an instrument for the transformation of the country than as an end in itself," he wrote, adding that "our point of view was strictly Italian, perhaps even a little nationalistic."⁷⁷

In 1932, Labriola wrote a book with the revealing title "Beyond Capitalism and Socialism." In it, he too preached the doctrine of an eternal socialism: "All the societies that history has known have been the theater of manifestations of socialism," he said.⁷⁸ From the ancient world to Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella and modern so-

cialism, said Labriola, we find “in the development of socialist thought a continuity that we have no right to deny.”⁷⁹ Thus, “socialism is old”: it is “old as a doctrine; it is old, terribly old as a movement; it is old in its aspirations.”⁸⁰ Moreover, he claimed that “it is by no means established that there is a relationship between capitalism and socialism,” and one must therefore conclude that “if socialism in its ideals, its movement and its politics is not a product of the capitalist phenomenon, the whole problem of the significance of socialism has to be reconsidered.”⁸¹

There was thus a whole current of socialism in the thirties that envisaged a socialism without Marx, a socialism without capitalism, a socialism independent of every class consideration, a socialism that was simply an aspiration toward “a just society, a fraternal society.”⁸²

For De Man, then the most important representative of that school, the value of Marxism lay far more in its contribution to our understanding of capitalism than in what it actually brought to socialism,⁸³ for socialism is not, “properly speaking, a product of capitalism” but a “human disposition” characterized by “a certain determination of the meaning of judicial and moral values” that can be understood only by going back to the social experience of the feudal regime and the master craftsmen, to the morality of Christianity and the principles of democracy.⁸⁴ It involves not merely the question of salaries or the distribution of surplus value but a vast number of factors that create a “social inferiority complex” and pose a cultural problem.⁸⁵ The essential motivation of the labor movement, wrote De Man, “is the instinct of self-esteem.” It is “a question of dignity at least as much as a question of interest.”⁸⁶ In De Man’s view, the determining factor is not the fact of selling one’s market value but the social circumstances in which that sale takes place—the lack of cleanliness and social protection, the instability of the way of life, the insecurity and joylessness of the work, the dependence on employers.⁸⁷

In other words, if living and economic conditions and social relationships can be established that assure the proletariat and other workers cleanliness, stability, security of employment, and dignity, socialism as understood by the Socialist International ceases to have any *raison d’être*, especially as De Man defined socialism “as the product of a personal will, inspired by a feeling for rightness and probity.”⁸⁸ Socialism, he said, “existed before the labor movement, and even before the working class,”⁸⁹ and was not born “out of a victorious class struggle.”⁹⁰ Socialist thought, like any other kind of thought, originated in an almost infinite variety of different intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic emotional

reactions: "Ideas are created by people and are not the result of a parallelogram of social forces," said De Man.⁹¹ As his thought matured, it developed in a direction commonly taken since the end of the nineteenth century: toward a conception of socialism that involves no change in social and economic relationships and aims not at revolution but at a "fraternal society," a social order based on the "altruistic instincts" of the "real man."⁹²

Indeed, the idea that "the concept of exploitation is ethical and not economic"⁹³ played a major role in the development of the fascist philosophy both before and after the First World War. It underlay the negation of the "mechanistic and materialistic conceptions that have been an obstacle . . . to the ethical development" of the proletariat "and its sense of solidarity."⁹⁴ De Man considered a doctrine that bases workers' solidarity on class interests historically and psychologically indefensible and even practically harmful.⁹⁵ Class interests, he believed, "do not create ethical motives,"⁹⁶ and socialism cannot combat bourgeois egoism with labor materialism and hedonism.⁹⁷

For, in the final analysis, socialism for De Man "is a faith. It is a passion,"⁹⁸ and not a science. ("Scientific socialism is as absurd as scientific love.")⁹⁹ Social science cannot predict the future, since it "*has no need* to know it except insofar as concerns present activities."¹⁰⁰ For that reason—and here one seems to be reading a text by Sorel—"it is enough that socialism should believe in its future."¹⁰¹ One encounters here the kind of reasoning found in *Reflections on Violence*: socialism, thought De Man, cannot be a mere collection of abstract ideas or a mere logical deduction from the present state of the economy. Such a deduction, he said, "would give it no *image*," whereas it is precisely the capacity to provide an image that makes a socialist vision of the future conceivable.¹⁰² De Man was well aware that he was invoking the Sorelian notion of a myth.¹⁰³ Just as the idea of a general strike was only a myth that symbolized the collapse of the capitalist order, so, he maintained, the basic notions of so-called "scientific" socialism—social revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat—were mere myths, symbols of belief,¹⁰⁴ which constituted, precisely, the very foundation of politics: the "masses' need to believe."¹⁰⁵

Sorel's revision of Marxism thus contained the seeds of the revision undertaken a generation later by De Man. If one reads it carefully, one finds that chapter 4 of *Reflections on Violence*, the central chapter of the work, anticipates several ideas expressed by the Belgian writer.

Openly declaring his intentions, Sorel, indeed, was the first to at-

tempt a genuine revision of Marxism that touched the foundations of the system. De Man's position was in fact very close to that of Sorel and his school with regard to both theory and political action. Indeed, the French and Italian revolutionary syndicalists had traced exactly the same path that De Man was to follow. All the objects of De Man's criticism—determinism, opportunism, reformism, bureaucratization, bourgeois values, utopian verbalism, the disregard for humanistic values¹⁰⁶—had already been attacked by the rebels of the turn of the century. Their criticism, too, was a functional criticism arrived at as a result of their own engagement in socialism, and they also concluded that the doctrine itself was responsible for these errors. Sorel, Michels, Lagardelle, and Labriola, before De Man, had associated the decadence of left-wing political movements with their doctrines.

Both Sorel and De Man, each in his own time and place, rebelled against the grotesque form of Guesdism and Kautskyism that forced Marxism into a mechanistic and narrowly economic straitjacket that at the same time concealed an opportunistic practical policy. Both objected to the transformation of socialism into a bureaucratic social-democratic movement, devoid of soul and grandeur: there was nothing they disliked more than politics as practiced by politicians—the politics of parties, of professionals, of electoral contests and parliamentary debates. However, if Sorel always succeeded in keeping his distance from anything that remotely savored of politics, De Man finally, at the age of fifty, accepted a ministerial post, though he never sought a parliamentary mandate. The struggle of these two men against a petrified Marxism, frozen into antiquated formulas, was only one aspect of their search for a new socialism that remained the great goal of their endeavors.

Thus, the true connecting link between the thought of Sorel and that of De Man was that form of revisionism that aimed at divesting Marxism of its materialism, determinism, and hedonism and replacing these with various forms of voluntarism and vitalism. Sorel was the first to seek to correct Marxism, placing at the heart of a system conceived as fundamentally mechanistic and rationalistic a voluntarist vision of the world and a new explanation of human nature. Sorel claimed that the deep forces guiding humanity were those of the unconscious, and that mankind moved forward in the light of myths and images.¹⁰⁷ In his *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel had been influenced by the psychology of Gustave Le Bon, and De Man, similarly, based his ideas on the authority of Freud. "The root of all our action is our instincts," he wrote,¹⁰⁸ repeating a formula that Barrès had coined a generation earlier. De Man was

here echoing the words of the thinkers of the beginning of the century. "There is an emotional and affective current involved in the principle of the formation of an idea," he said again.¹⁰⁹ Further on, one seems to hear the voice of Vacher de Lapouge, the social Darwinist who had also been a socialist: "The moral consciousness," De Man wrote, "is an impulse of the subconscious. It is derived from a feeling of solidarity with the species that is as deeply rooted in our physical organization as the gregarious or maternal instinct in animals."¹¹⁰

De Man, however, included in his analysis another idea, unknown to the generation of 1890, namely, that the same experimental sciences that prove the dependence of our spiritual life and the processes of the conscience on the instincts demonstrate that the most powerful forces in man are his moral feelings. Thus, in the human subconscious is an irrepressible need for consideration and self-respect.¹¹¹ De Man could therefore claim that the findings of psychology allow us to conclude that socialism has a truly scientific foundation. Psychology thus corrects, complements, and sometimes, by divesting it of its material content, even replaces Marxism. In psychology, De Man finally found a discipline that he could successfully oppose to historical materialism.

Psychology, said De Man, provides an entirely new conception of man; it creates a veritable cultural and ideological revolution. The importance of Freud, he said, is comparable only to that of Marx, and the point of contact between the new psychology and socialism can be seen in the fact "that this psychology, with its individualization of man, has at the same time overcome his materialization."¹¹² From Freud De Man took the idea of the complex; from Adler he took two ideas, that of the importance of human society for the creation of the values that man requires, and that of the significance of the sense of inferiority.¹¹³ As he wrote, "The chronic discontent of the working class . . . is only one particular aspect of a vast number of causes that bring about a social inferiority complex. . . . If one states the problem in this way, one realizes that the essential motivation of the labor movement is the sense of self-respect; or, to put the matter less prosaically, it is a question of dignity at least as much as a question of interest."¹¹⁴

Looking back some ten years later, De Man declared that in psychology he had discovered a discipline "that made the conscious ideal spring from the subconscious motive force, the doctrine from the will, the aim from movement, and the idea from suffering."¹¹⁵ Even if, as has been argued, De Man's use of social psychology is ethically inspired,¹¹⁶ even if it is his moral aspirations that lead him to make such an analysis and

reach such conclusions, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that this development contributed greatly to the crystallization of the fascist ideology. A glorification of the "doctrine of the will" and the cult of "movement" was at the heart of the meaning of the intellectual revolution represented by fascism.

Already in *Au-delà du marxisme* De Man was well aware that the approach "that seeks behind the motives of economic interest the deeper psychological causes that inspire them . . . saps at the root . . . not only the Marxist interpretation of the labor movement but also the Marxist interpretation of political economy."¹¹⁷ This is the heart of the problem: to Marxism, that "child of the nineteenth century" with its principle of "mechanical causality," De Man opposed "syndicalist voluntarism";¹¹⁸ to a system characterized by "determinism, mechanism, historicism and economic hedonism" he opposed a "socialist science" that is "pragmatic, voluntaristic, pluralistic and institutionalistic."¹¹⁹ As De Man pointed out, this conception went back to Proudhon, and he claimed that it was far more proletarian in its idea of revolution than was Marxism. For Marxism, said De Man, class struggle was in the final analysis only the realization of an idea conceived by intellectuals and imposed *a priori*, whereas "for Proudhonism, movement is itself the source of a constant *a posteriori* creation of ideas," and its concept of revolution was based on the idea of "direct action" by the workers in the social and economic spheres.¹²⁰ De Man often went back to Proudhon, to stress the great debt that socialism owed to Marx's pet aversion.¹²¹ Like Sorel, the "social" Maurrassians, and all the socialists who moved toward fascism, he appreciated Proudhon's "socialism with an earthy flavor."¹²²

It was no accident that, here again, De Man's development was very close to Sorel's before him. A revision of Marxism through the introduction of voluntarist, vitalist elements produced similar results in both cases. In the end, one obtained an ideology that still claimed to be socialist but whose meaning had changed profoundly. "What is all-important in socialism is the struggle to achieve it," wrote De Man in *Au-delà du marxisme*.¹²³ What really counts in socialism, he said, is movement, and if one really wants to move ahead, one should "simply say: in the beginning was action."¹²⁴ One should also, once and for all, jettison "the theory of superstructure," with its assumption "that ideas merely reflect interests."¹²⁵ One should make it quite plain that "egoistic enjoyment separates men, sacrifice unites them,"¹²⁶ and that, finally,

“the aim of our existence is not paradisiacal but heroic.”¹²⁷ No fascist ideologist has stated it better.

The idea of “joy in work” is important in De Man’s thinking. For him, the fact that in modern times the major processes of production are in the hands of people who obtain no satisfaction from their work constituted a grave danger to civilization.¹²⁸ He considered this lack of satisfaction “a cause of discontent at least as important as the diminution—problematic in any case—of their resources,”¹²⁹ maintaining that factors such as personal satisfaction, “human dignity,” and “professional capability”¹³⁰ are infinitely more important than those connected with the ownership of the means of production or the distribution of wealth. He gave psychological, affective, and emotional problems a greater role than economic problems, and held that aesthetics play at least as important a part in people’s lives as economics. De Man’s point of view seems to imply that it may be possible, by satisfying the workers’ psychological requirements, to avoid having to tackle structural problems inherent in the modern economy.

De Man also maintained that man’s foremost aspiration is to express in his work his most personal values. Thus, he claimed that all the social problems of history “are but different aspects of the eternal social problem that in the final analysis exceeds and epitomizes them all: how can a human being find happiness not only *through* his work but *in* his work?”¹³¹ The full significance of this revision of Marxism is now clear: it merges quite easily into the fascist view of things.

There were other elements in De Man’s revisionism that lent themselves even better to fascism. “The motive forces of the masses are essentially emotional,” De Man wrote, taking up the old formula of Gustave Le Bon.¹³² For that reason, the masses, like “Panurge’s sheep,” “will always feel the need to run after a leader, who represents in their eyes all that they would like to be.”¹³³ This process of identifying with an ideal self, he felt, is quite natural, in the same way as the social difference between the leaders, with the status they necessarily have, and the masses is natural. It is therefore a mere fiction that the leaders of a socialist party, for instance, are simply representatives of the will of the members.¹³⁴ It follows that any society, whatever its structure, and any organization, needs leaders. A socialist society would not be different: it, too, would have its hierarchy, its powerful figures and natural inequalities. In a sense, De Man took up the tradition begun by Pareto, Mosca, and Michels at the beginning of the century: like the founders of the social

sciences who had so deeply shaken the foundations of parliamentary democracy, De Man doubted the possibility of the existence of a socialist society in which the relationships between people would differ from those that prevail in capitalist society. The cardinal importance that De Man gives to psychological factors, to individual motivations, to all that is unchanging in human nature, considerably diminishes the difference between a socialist society and a nonsocialist one.

The same applies to the idea of equality. "The desire for equality and the need for inequality, far from being mutually exclusive, condition each other," De Man wrote.¹³⁵ Just as there is a "desire for equality," so there is a "need for inequality,"¹³⁶ and the most powerful of the forces pushing the masses toward socialism is "the instinctive and immediate need of the lower classes to diminish social inequality." This "socialist demand for equality," he said, "is at once the compensatory representation of an inferiority complex" inherent in the working-class condition¹³⁷ and the product of "the instinctive self-esteem" of Western man.¹³⁸ However, the social instincts of Western man at the same time require that every society "should have a *superior* class" that can provide an example of a desirable state, and it is for this psychological reason that "no society is possible without an aristocracy."¹³⁹ This aristocracy can take many forms: the European gentleman and the mandarin of ancient China and the Soviet party official are only different aspects of the same phenomenon.¹⁴⁰ In the final analysis, thought De Man, "the social inferiority of the working classes" is due neither to a lack of political equality nor to the existing economic structures "but to a psychological condition" arising out of a chronic feeling of insecurity and, above all, out of their own belief in this inferiority.¹⁴¹ At the same time, De Man believed that it became increasingly clear that while engaging in a struggle of interests with the bourgeoisie, the workers considered bourgeois existence enviable and desirable, and, to the degree that they approached it, they came to resemble their adversaries.¹⁴²

That, said De Man, is why there is no such thing as a proletarian culture. Such an idea is a mere fabrication, the product of the hostility against bourgeois culture that characterizes the socialism of the intellectuals. The way of life of the bourgeoisie has a great influence on the proletariat, and the desire for respectability leads the working classes to accept the moral norms of the privileged classes.¹⁴³ The specific character of the proletariat is thus only a delusion, an invention of the theoreticians. Was not Marxism itself the creation of a "haunter of libraries, a stranger to practical life and above all to the life of the workers"?¹⁴⁴ For

De Man, Marxism was exactly what democracy had been for Maurras: a “vapor.”

A pronounced elitism was thus a major aspect of this revision of Marxism. De Man himself detested the bourgeoisie: he declared that the atmosphere of bourgeois society had “become unbreathable to him,”¹⁴⁵ but he knew that in some spheres—in the formation of taste, for instance—there is generally no individual progress, “but a progress through generations in the course of which one inherits culture like property.”¹⁴⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville might have spoken similarly, but then the author of *Democracy in America* did not claim to be a socialist. It is true that Michels also professed such ideas, as did Mosca and Pareto. When such an elitism is superimposed on a more or less pronounced negation of parliamentarianism and bourgeois values and on a contempt for a regime based on universal suffrage, there can be no doubt of the result.

Further, De Man claimed that for a very long time the proletariat had not lived in conditions resembling those of 1848. Today, organized in syndicates and enjoying universal suffrage, compulsory education, and an extensive social legislation, the workers, while permitting themselves to be beguiled by the Marxist illusion, “would have many things to lose by it that represent to them a part of the country.”¹⁴⁷ First of all, he said, the workers had gained some influence in the state, and, still more important, “their influence has become more and more identified with the consolidation of the state itself.”¹⁴⁸

De Man thought that it was in fact the role of the working class, rather than the great industrial and financial monopolies, the stock exchange, or the banks, to be the support of the state. Here the Belgian socialist leader came once again to a conclusion of great significance: “The more that socialism becomes the vehicle of the idea of the state, the more it also becomes the vehicle of the idea of the nation that is embodied in the state.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, the way was now clear for a new form of socialism. This new conception of socialism could lead to social democracy or to some kind of parliamentary labor movement, or it could lead to the position held by national socialism. This was all the more possible because, as De Man insisted, in modern times “all the interests of the workers are not necessarily opposed to those of the employers”:¹⁵⁰ there is a solidarity of interests between workers and industrialists, and the fate of both depends on the policies of their political and military leaders, the international situation, and foreign competition.¹⁵¹ On the other hand, said De Man, to the degree that the working class “in-

creases in strength and assumes more responsibility,"¹⁵² it finds itself increasingly drawn into conflicts between states. In this way, "the workers of different countries once more become competitors in this same sphere of immediate economic interests, which in the last century was expected to become more and more unified as a result of the continuous expansion of the world capitalist economy."¹⁵³

Capitalism, then, had not played the role that Marx had assigned to it, and the world had not assumed the simple form that the father of scientific socialism had envisaged. Internationalism had remained an empty word; neither general pauperization nor polarization had taken place, and the middle class had not been driven into the proletariat by a concentration of capital. The social structure of the peasantry had remained essentially the same, and the rise of the new middle class had compensated for the decline of the old middle class of the precapitalist period. Numerically, the craftsmen and the independent merchants had been more than replaced by the office workers, the civil servants, and the people in the liberal professions. De Man showed that when one of these classes declined, it happened on a collective and not an individual basis. The loss of social independence affected the whole class: the peasants, for instance, ran into debt; the new middle class experienced increasing insecurity owing to a decrease in employment opportunities; and the former middle class lost its position through the melting of capital and large incomes.¹⁵⁴

This was the new problem to which De Man addressed himself. He was extremely conscious of the diversity of classes and groups in modern society, of the pluralism of interests that could no longer be expressed in terms of the traditional Marxist dichotomy. He believed that the great issue of the thirties was the danger of the proletarianization of the middle classes, both urban and rural, and a revolt on their part against having to sink into the proletariat—a revolt that expressed itself "on the one hand in anticapitalistic sentiment and on the other hand in antiproletarian sentiment."¹⁵⁵ It was here, he claimed, that one could find the psychological key to this response to a growing proletarianization that comprised both a hatred of capitalism and a hatred of proletarian socialism.¹⁵⁶ Because reformist socialism in its existing form had little to offer them and communism seemed to them abhorrent, the middle classes went over to fascism.¹⁵⁷ This, then, was the new situation that had to be faced, as De Man saw it. He therefore proposed a third way between orthodox socialism, which excluded the middle classes, and the fascism into which they were slipping.

That third way was intended to provide an answer to the challenge posed by the European crisis—at once a crisis of the economic system, a crisis of the political regime, and a crisis of society. That answer was “planism”—the celebrated De Man Plan, which was followed by various similar schemes in France. Planism, however, went far beyond an *ad hoc* solution to a given problem, for in fact it constituted a dimension of revisionism, and the revisionism of De Man, followed by that of Marcel Déat, was, for the socialism of the time, the most thoroughgoing example of anticonformist thinking of the interwar period. Where political theory was concerned, it was an original experiment of great importance. Between the parliamentary, democratic socialism concerned with universal suffrage and the rules of the game on the one hand and liberalism on the other, this experiment envisaged a third solution: a socialism for all classes based at once on anti-Marxism, the negation of capitalism, and the integration of the proletariat into the national community. Planism, to be sure, can be combined with any political ideology that does not claim to be an extreme form of liberalism, and, essentially, there is no reason why it should lead to fascism. It did not do so after the Second World War, for instance, but in the thirties, when it was presented as an alternative both to democratic socialism and to liberalism at the same time as integrating corporatism and political authoritarianism, planism made an important contribution to the molding of the fascist outlook.