

FROM THE EDITOR

It may be utopian on my part, but for a number of years I have been hoping that in the world of scholarly activity some device could be found whereby certain demonstrable truths or untruths could be labeled and become widely and quickly known. Thus we might narrow and restrict the areas subject to rehashing and pointless controversy. By this I obviously do not mean that views and interpretations should become fixed, standardized, and unalterable—reexamination, reopening questions is the life of scholarship—but simply that we, especially fledgling students, would not have our energies and attention diverted fruitlessly. For example, I have found it helpful to learn that “the terms ‘thesis, antithesis, synthesis’ . . . occur nowhere in Hegel’s writings.” (On this point see George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* [New York, 1961], page 7, note 2.)

I gather that it took a great deal of time, and some quite advanced mathematics, before the tempting efforts to trisect the angle and square the circle were rigorously demonstrated to be unachievable (under the classical set of ground rules). But this was a great gain in enabling people (excepting determined eccentrics) to turn their attention to more promising and rewarding pursuits.

Now, it is doubtful that in the social sciences and humanities we are likely to arrive at such definitive results, although I have a hunch that the same use of the technique of the rigorous “negative proof,” if applied to some of our efforts to make extensive extrapolations about future Soviet behavior and politics, might produce some salutary results in demonstrating what we are *not* going to know about social phenomena of that size and complexity.

Actually, however, my ambition is a more modest one and may be illustrated by two examples. Last spring a colleague in diplomatic history commented on the continuing and widespread belief that the breakdown of German-Soviet negotiations in the autumn of 1940 was the cause for the order for Operation Barbarossa. This view seems to stem from the fact that the publication, by the Department of State in 1948, of selected salient documents on Nazi-Soviet relations between 1939 and 1941 had the one event following directly upon the other. There is, however, ample evidence (provided by Gerhard Weinberg and others) that in fact Hitler was contemplating, and beginning to make plans for, an attack upon the Soviet Union immediately after the fall of France in the summer of 1940 and for reasons that had nothing to do with subsequent Soviet-German disputes about Bulgaria or other issues. A second case: the Katyn forest massacre of Polish officers in World War II was, when it was first learned of, a real mystery. Who did it? In many books it is still regarded as unresolved, but by now it appears quite clear, whatever one’s preferences might be, that the evidence adduced (by Zawodny and others) demonstrates that it was a Soviet, not a German, act.

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Quite evidently nailing down these two particular episodes by no means solves the enormously complex problems of the background to the German-Soviet conflict of 1941 or the tortured pattern of Soviet-Polish relations in those times. But at the very least it does narrow the limits of serious and responsible discussion and debate; it enables us to avoid certain ranges of erroneous interpretation. In brief, it helps us make headway in the fearfully difficult task of ascertaining the meaning of events in those years.

I daresay that each reader has some similar example that he could produce—and we should welcome such information—combined with his periodic irritation at finding, in popularizations, textbooks, and even serious works, misstatements or simple errors of fact that should long since have been laid at rest. (When will we ever get the point across that the “N.” in the name N. Lenin was not an initial for Nikolai?)

The problem, of course, is partly one of time lag, of having such findings filter their way outward. But surely there ought to be some way to hasten this process. While there is a certain charm in finding basilisks and manticores in bestiaries, they really have no place in contemporary scholarship. I hesitate to suggest a “syllabus of errors,” but a reference work of “correctives” (with loose-leaf supplements) would be a nice thing to have on one’s library shelf.

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