

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

By Innis Out of Marx

As one of the contributors to the Panitch book, *The Canadian State*, so generously reviewed by C. B. Macpherson in your Spring-Summer 1979 number, I suppose I should be grateful. Instead I should like to take this opportunity to bite the hand that feeds. This is a disinterested complaint, since it has nothing to do with my or any other contribution to the Panitch collection, but instead has to do with a passing *obiter dictum* offered by Professor Macpherson on Veblen's reading of Marx.

In discussing Harold Innis' "sardonic view" of Marxist thought, Professor Macpherson tries to lay the blame on Innis' early mentor, Veblen, whose "jejeune and misleading reading of Marx" led Innis to "write Marx off and go on his own way." I am not sure what standards are being employed here, but by the historical standards of early twentieth-century North American academic economics, Veblen's reading of Marx was by no means "jejeune" — it is rather Macpherson's characterization of this reading which is "misleading."

In 1905-6 Veblen published two articles on Marx in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* which amount to a defence of the intellectual solidity of Marxist economics. Veblen understood something about the German idealist philosophy out of which Marx had emerged and also understood that the mechanistic determinism characteristic of much of the contemporary European socialist movement was a perversion of Marx's

own thought: "It is not the Marxism of Marx," he wrote, "but the materialism of Darwin, which the socialists of today have adopted." A survey of academic literature in the English language on Marx at this time will not turn up very much which rivals Veblen's reading. One writer whose grasp of the subject earned the commendation of none other than Lenin was O.D. Skelton, who in his 1911 book on *socialism* cited Veblen as "the most objective and clear-sighted student of socialism."

More interesting evidence comes from another Canadian who preceded Innis at the University of Chicago. Young William Lyon Mackenzie King in 1897 took Veblen's courses, including one on socialism. King may not have been the most penetrating intellect at Chicago, but he was a somewhat unimaginative and thus faithful notetaker. In his typically retentive manner he kept these notes in his possession for the remainder of his life, to be bequeathed at last to the Public Archives of Canada. We have therefore a kind of snapshot of what Veblen taught his students at the end of the last century. King pronounced his lectures on socialism to be "the best I have ever listened to," and while this might seem to be dubious praise considering its source, King's assiduous lecture notes indicate that Veblen was dispensing some interesting insights on the subject. On the economics of Marx, Veblen rather took the great revolutionary's side, both against his mechanistic 'Marxist' followers, and

against such revisionists as Böhm-Bawerk whose critique of *Capital* Veblen thought quite inadequate. Moreover, Veblen's analysis of determinism in Marx was subtle: he pointed out that Marx wrote of the role of the family in history, but the family as reflecting the totality of the historical process. Finally, some of Veblen's criticisms of Marx were by no means "jejeune": he suggested that Marx implicitly viewed man as *capitalist* man and all production as *capitalist* production, thus limiting his capacity to theorize about man in general. This criticism has by no means lessened in relevance in the years since.

My point is not that Veblen developed an outstanding critique of Marx. By the current standards of the international Marx industry, no one will discover new insights by returning to Veblen. But Macpherson's characterization is *ahistorical*, a peculiar failing for someone of his intellectual persuasion.

In any event, Innis was perfectly capable of reading and reflecting upon Marx with or without Veblen's guidance. That he went "his own way" is merely a reflection of the originality of his intellectual imagination. If he moved "closer to a Marxian analysis" in his last phase, this was not merely "unconsciously" but, I rather think, *accidentally*. And if the new political economy is "by Innis out of Marx" this is surely because the Canadian world of the late twentieth century seems fertile ground for a synthesis of two apparently divergent traditions recently resumed in changing forms. That, after all, is what vital intellectual traditions are all about.

Professor Macpherson is perhaps too modest. He himself, as a lonely Marxist voice in Canadian scholarship had something to do with the new turn of the Innisian tradition. But let us lay Veblen's ghost to rest. He was at best only a bit player in the family history of the new political economy.

Reginald Whitaker
Carleton University