

EDITORIAL

## SKELTON ON “MARX’S CONTRADICTION”—ACT II.

By DANIEL DE LEON

**T**HE curtain rises on Act II of Prof. Skelton’s melodrama “Marx’s Contradiction” with Frederick Engels occupying the center of, if not the whole stage—and keeping it to the end.

As was stated in the summary of the three acts, Engels is represented challenging everybody, in sight and out of sight, to solve the contradiction that Marx promised to solve in a subsequent volume of *Capital*, a promise which he did not live to carry out. The challenge Prof. Skelton says is made in the second volume of *Capital*, a work that “appeared under Engels’ editorship in 1885, two years after Marx’s death.”

Before proceeding with the consideration of this second act, it is well to place on record that in no legitimate sense is there such a thing as a second and third volumes of *Capital*, meaning, of course, Marx’s *Capital* as the volumes purport to be. Several times, in the previous article of this second series, and also in the course of the first series, “Skelton on Marx’s Law of Value,” these second and third volumes have been referred to. The references were made mainly in citing Prof. Skelton, without further explanation. An explanation would then have been an unnecessary interruption. A short digression will not now break the “thread of the plot.”

Without derogating in the slightest from the eminent services rendered by Engels to the cause of Socialism, or from his ability—on the contrary, with all the veneration that is due to Engels as a founder of scientific Socialism, the two volumes he issued after Marx’s death are not Marx’s.

A man’s works, especially in the instance of a man of Marx’s caliber, consist only of what he issued in his life, or left ready for publication after his life. The IInd

and IIIrd volumes were not published in Marx’s life; more than that, Marx did not leave them ready for publication; worse yet, they consist to a great extent, if not mainly, of rough drafts, of memoranda, sometimes notes, that Engels himself stated in all frankness he had difficulty in deciphering. Of much of the material of these volumes Engels speaks as matter “hurriedly jotted down and partly incomplete in their first treatment” (*Neue Zeit*, 1895, No. 1), and specifically he more than once warns, with regard to some literally reproduced passages, that they are rough sketches which Marx “would undoubtedly have elaborated” had he lived to carry out his design to publish additional volumes to the volume which he did give out.

Not even a man of Engels’ intellectual inches, not even when such a man was in full accord with and the close associate of another, as Engels was with and of Marx, can his version and rendition of that other’s hurriedly jotted-down notes and incomplete sketches be considered the work of that other;—when that other is a man of Marx’s exceptional mental acquirements and powers least of all.

The two volumes issued by Engels are essentially a monument raised to a dear friendship, a pious tribute to the shades of one of the world’s giants. In the British Museum a torn shirt of Shakespeare is preserved with veneration; in the same Museum rough first sketches of Raphael, which the illustrious painter would have burned up, are likewise exhibited with reverence. These are not manifestations of human weakness. On the contrary. Only the healthy and vigorous are grateful. Man can not be too grateful towards those who have helped to uplift his kind. To the grateful, whatever the great have touched insensibly acquires a certain sanctity. As all vice is a virtue carried to excess, the virtue of gratefulness may degenerate into paganism. There is no paganism in the reverence that Engels entertained for Marx’s jottings. For that very reason, no mention herein made by us of “volumes II and III of *Capital*,” is to be construed as a committal to the proposition that we consider the volumes the work of Marx, or him responsible for them, or them the “IIId and IIIId volumes of *Capital*.”

Now, to return to the plot—

The “contradiction” in the general law that Marx had called attention to, and which he attributed, with keen sarcasm, to “experience based upon appearances,”—that so-called contradiction, it will be remembered, turned simply

upon the correct, or incorrect, application of the terms “profit” and “rate of profit,” besides the grasping of “intermediate terms.”

As was shown in the previous Act, “profit,” tho’ it can come from “surplus-value” only, is not, as surplus-value, inferable from the amount of variable capital. A number of sponges may absorb such a large portion of the surplus-value as—were it not for the “intermediate terms”—to raise the mental-optical illusion that “the baker” would have a larger mass of surplus-value than “the spinner”; hence, that the general law of surplus-value was false.

Finally, it will be remembered that Marx promised no solution of any such “Contradiction” for a later volume; indeed could have promised none, seeing he proceeded instanter to elaborate the “solution.”

What, then, was there left for Prof. Skelton to stage in Act II of his melodrama?

Artistic skill in the framing of the melodrama there is not wanting. If Marx furnished no subject for Act II, the foundation for the act was laid by the Professor with admirable artifice.

It will be remembered that Prof. Skelton, after correctly stating the Marxian law on the “rate of profit,” and immediately after stating, with equal correctness the Marxian law regarding surplus-value, to wit, that the same “accrues only on variable capital,” proceeds, without a blush and with charming candorousness, to substitute a false economic proposition as the consequence, and deftly to shove the error into Marx’s shoes, to wit, the proposition that “it would follow then that the rate of profit in different industries would vary with the proportion of laborers employed.”

However deftly the trick was performed, no careful watcher of the Professor’s hands was taken in. The question of the “rate of profits” in different industries is a very different one from the question involved in the “Contradiction” which Marx pointed out, and himself cleared fully up in *Capital*—the Ist, the only volume of *Capital*. It is this wholly different subject that our Professor stages in his Act II; it is this wholly different subject that he, without warrant, represents Engels as referring to in the second volume,—referring to it as the “Contradiction” touched upon by Marx.

Accordingly, when the curtain rises upon Act II, Engels is found filling a role

wholly different from the only legitimate role that Prof. Skelton’s treatment of Act I justified expectation to find Engels in—a role, nevertheless, that, by insensible gradations, the Professor leads the unwary to expect as the originally and justly expected role, and which the {Professor’s citation from Engels} tends to confirm the unwary in believing.

Indeed, Engels challenges the whole pack of Rodbertians, degenerate Ricardians, to show, what had puzzled them, “in what way an equal average rate of profit can and must come about, not only without a violation of the law of value, but by means of it”; indeed, Engels promises to smooth in the next volume the “pons asinorum” (donkey’s bridge), off which the pretentious dullards had slipped, and with whom “to discuss the matter further” he flatly and justly announced his unwillingness.

—And down comes the curtain with a dull thud upon Act II.

\* \* \*

The writer remembers to have seen a performance of Meyerbeer’s opera “The Huguenots,” on a stage, the front arch of which having an exceptionally wide sweep, one of the soldiers killed in the massacre incautiously died too far forward. When the curtain dropped upon the scene it left the soldier on the outside.

From the gloomy mood the audience was in, it was suddenly thrown into one of boisterous hilarity, as the clumsy soldier discovered his plight, wriggled back to life, and, finally, amid roars from the audience, picked himself up and scurried behind the curtain.

When the curtain drops upon Prof. Skelton’s Act II the Professor is left sprawling on the outside. We shall allow him to pick himself up and run behind, because we shall need him for the next Act—and for the epilogue.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
Uploaded January 2007