

DAILY PEOPLE

VOL. 12, NO. 294.

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 1912.

ONE CENT.

EDITORIAL

SKELTON ON MARX'S LAW OF VALUE—I.

By DANIEL DE LEON

WE have promised a series of articles on *Socialism, A Critical Analysis*, a 300-page book issued by "O.D. Skelton, Ph.D., Sir John A. MacDonald Professor of Political Science, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada," and we published, a week or so ago, the initial article of the promised series, a sort of overture, preface, or introduction to the series. The initial article was entitled "Skelton's Ney and Sheridan." It afforded a bird's-eye inside view into the structure of the "Critical Analysis." To-day we take up a more concrete and fundamentally economic Marxian principle which the "Critical Analysis" analyzes and imagines it makes short work of—the Marxian law of value.

Prof. Skelton's refutation of the Marxian law of value is presented in such tangle-foot style that it can not be really enjoyed and profited by without first decomposing it into its constituent elements. The decomposition and subsequent synthesis we shall present in five or six successive articles, of which the present is the first, under the above head.

As starting point, and subject for subsequent demonstration, the law of value, as enunciated by Marx, and later to be presented in its fullness, but here briefly stated is:—

The value, exchange value, of commodities is determined by the amount of socially necessary labor-power for production crystallized in them. Actual exchange does not always take place by that standard. The perturbations of the market, due mainly to varying supply and demand, one time sends the price up above, other times sends it down below the value. Value is the center towards which current prices gravitate. Hence "value" and "price" are different things, though they may, and periodically and in the long run do coincide.

The Marxian law Prof. Skelton scoffs at with an abundance of facile and, often, prettily turned sentences—the scoffs we may ignore; and he “refutes” the Marxian law with a series of labyrinthian argumentations, buttressed up with the needed buttresses. The buttresses involve not reasoning. They involve only issues of fact, facts, the distortion of which our Professor tumbled into (we wish to think unintentionally) as necessary to prop up the labyrinthian architecture of his argumentation. Let the field be first cleared of the buttresses.

As to the first—

Prof. Skelton asserts (p. 124) that the identification of “value” and “price,” in other words, a conception that flies in the face of the Marxian law, “is the view which prevailed among both the advocates and the critics of Marxism till the publication of the third volume.”

The statement is so astounding that one breaks off at that place, and anxiously looks down to the foot of the page for some reference in substantiation. That “the critics of Marxism” ever, before and after the publication of the so-called third volume of *Capital*, and life without end, have identified, that is, confused, “value” and “price” we know. For them Marxism is no more responsible than it is for Skeltonism. What Marx so frequently called “Vulgar Economists” are too shallow to comprehend the cleft there is between “value” and “price,” and have ever tripped there, a, to them, veritable “pons asinorum” (donkeys’ bridge). But, “the advocates of Marxism”!?! Which of them? Where? When?

Vainly does one look over Prof. Skelton’s pages for an answer. Neither in footnotes, nor in text is the slightest trace to be found. Look up and down the page; back of it; in front of it; hold it to the light and seek to see through it;—nary an answer to the question, What advocate of Marxism, where and when, had, until the publication of the third volume, said anything to justify the assertion that he “identified” the Marxian concepts of “value” and price”?—nary a reference to, or the shadow of a citation of, an utterance by an advocate of Marxism to substantiate Prof. Skelton’s assertion, a necessary buttress for the Professor’s argument though the assertion is.

No wonder! There is none such advocate of Marx who ever did as charged.

Indeed, had the eyes of O.D. Skelton, Ph.D., Sir John A. Macdonald Professor of

Political Science, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada,—one can not help lapsing into contrasting the length of title with the shortness of knowledge of the title's bearer—had Prof. Skelton's eyes not been kept shut by the anxiety to carry off the \$1,000 prize offered by the firm of Hart, Schaffner & Marx of Chicago for the best essay against Socialism, a prize that his book carried off, he would have found instances in abundance of just the opposite of that which he so positively asserts.

For the benefit of Prof. Skelton, etc., we shall perform upon him free, gratis, and for nothing, the oculist operation of prying his eyes open.

The so-called “third volume” of *Capital* that Prof. Skelton mentioned, as quoted above, was published in 1894. Down to then, according to Prof. Skelton, the view that “value” and “price” were identical was the view which prevailed among the advocates of Marxism themselves.

Now, then, in the preface, written by Frederick Engels, to Marx's refutation of Proudhon, entitled in the English translation *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Twentieth Century Press, London, edition), the following passages occur:

“The value of commodities is determined by the labor exacted by their production. But it is found that in this wicked world commodities are bought sometimes above, sometimes below, their value, and besides, there is the relation to the variations of competition. As the rate of profit has a tendency to maintain itself at the same level for all capitalists, the price of commodities tends also to sink to the value of labor, through the intermediary of supply and demand.” (p. VII)¹

Again, and speaking of modern society where the production of commodities is carried on for sale or exchange:

“The continual deviation of the price of commodities in relation to the value of commodities is the necessary condition by which alone the value of commodities can exist. It is only by the fluctuations of competition, and following that, of the price of commodities, that the law of value realizes itself in the production of commodities and that the determination of value by the labor time socially necessary becomes a reality.” (p. XIII)²

These citations should do.

¹ [Pg. 15 of Kerr edition.—*Editor.*]

² [Pg. 21, Kerr edition.—*Editor.*]

One thing now remains to be established under the head under consideration—what was the date of the Engels preface containing these passages, which so far from identifying, explicitly distinguish “value” from “price”? The preface is dated, London, October 23, 1884—fully ten years before “the publication of the third volume.”

Fact is that—since Marx's precise establishment of the scientific law of value, precisely distinguishing between “value” and “price”—no scientist in economics, hence, no “advocate of Marxism” ever incurred the shallow and slipshod bourgeois reasoning of identifying “value” and “price.”

—And there goes buttress No. 1.

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