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Marxism's dialectical & historical materialism



How do Marxists Understand the World?

MARXIST WORKERS PARTY

2

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Shaun Arendse, 2015

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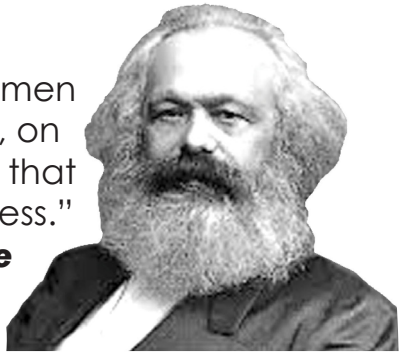
"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."
Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859



Dialectical Materialism: the Foundation of Revolutionary Theory

MARXIST WORKERS PARTY

Part I

Why do we need theory?

Marxism is the revolutionary theory of the working class. It is sometimes called a "philosophy". The word philosophy comes from the Ancient Greek language and means 'love of wisdom'. A philosophy is a system of ideas used to try and understand the world. But today, '***theory***' is a clearer description for Marxism.

The working class has every reason to strive to understand the world. We want to understand our lot in life. We want to understand ***why*** there is poverty, inequality, racism, war and all the other things that make life a struggle for us. As a class in capitalist society we have no vested interests to protect. We do not live by the exploitation of others. In fact we are robbed every day of the wealth we create in the workplace. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose from understanding why this is the case.

But the understanding that Marxism gives us is not simply the 'point of view' of the working class. For example, from the point of view of the working class, bosses are "unfair" and "greedy" for paying low wages when they are making profits; from the point of view of the bosses they "deserve" their profits as they have "fairly" paid their workers the going wage. They tell the workers that they are "ungrateful" to complain and "lucky" to have the privilege of working for them at all! It can appear that society is made up of lots of different 'points of view' with none more 'right' or 'wrong' than any other. If Marxism simply put forward the 'point of view' of the working class it would be no better than an opinion. We would say it is ***subjective***.

But Marxism helps to give us an ***objective*** understanding of the world, especially of society. It arms us with a method to train our thoughts to understand the world as accurately as possible. For example, by explaining the objective relationship between wages and profits that exists independently of anyone's 'point of view', Marxism can explain ***why*** the working class and the capitalist class have these different 'points of view' in the first place. Objectively, profit is simply the unpaid labour of the working class. This is disguised by the payment of hourly wages or monthly salaries which make it ***look like*** workers are paid for all of their labour. Correctly sensing this, the working class's point of view is closer to reality than the bosses!

The search for objective explanations is also the basis of modern science. Science, by asking 'why?' about everything in nature looks for objective explanations all the way back to the beginning of the universe – and beyond! Science allowed us to understand that everything in nature has a history that can be explained.

Karl Marx's breakthrough was to use a scientific approach to explain ***society***. He uncovered the objective processes which explain how society develops. He found these in the development of the productive forces and the class struggle this gives rise to. In other words, Marx showed that the machinery and techniques used to keep society running (the productive forces) and the way people are then organised around them (the relations of production) give rise to different ***classes*** of people. These classes have different relationships to the productive forces and to each other. For example, today the capitalist class ***owns*** the economy; the working class does not. The working class lives by receiving a wage from the capitalists for their labour; the capitalist class lives by the exploitation of the labour of their workers. This gives the working class and the capitalist class their different 'points of view' about different ideas, including what is "fair".

This basic structure of society exists independently of anyone's 'point of view'; it is an objective foundation for explaining society and as Marx said can be, "determined with the precision of natural science". Upon this "real foundation" Marx explained, "arises a legal and political superstructure … to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life". Marxism, by placing the understanding of society on scientific foundations allows us to develop accurate explanations for 'why?' things in society are the way that they are. Lenin, alongside Leon Trotsky the leader of the workers' 1917 Russian Revolution, explained that:

> Marx … extended the cognition [understanding] of nature to include the cognition of ***human society***. His ***historical materialism*** [placing the understanding of society on scientific foundations] was a great achievement in scientific thinking. The chaos and arbitrariness that had previously reigned in views on history and politics were replaced by a strikingly integral and harmonious scientific theory, which shows how, in consequence of the growth of productive forces, out of one system of social life another and higher system develops—how capitalism, for instance, grows out of feudalism [the form of society that came before capitalism in Europe].
>
> Just as man's knowledge reflects nature … which exists independently of him, so man's ***social knowledge*** (i.e., his various views and doctrines—philosophical, religious, political and so forth) reflects the ***economic system*** of society. Political institutions are a superstructure on the economic foundation. We see, for example, that the various political forms of the modern European states serve to strengthen the domination of the bourgeoisie [capitalist class] over the proletariat [working class].

> Marx's philosophy … has provided mankind, and especially the working class, with powerful instruments of knowledge.
>
> *The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, 1895

This is why Marxism is also called ***scientific socialism***. Like any science Marxism has its own method of analysis that teaches us where to look for objective explanations. This method is called ***dialectical materialism***. Once on the scene of objective explanations, Marxism provides us with 'tools' of dialectical thought that help us examine the things we find. These 'tools' are the ***laws of dialectics***. (Both will be explained in Parts II and III.)

There is a further consequence arising from the extension of scientific principles to society. In *Socialism: Utopian & Scientific* Engels said, "that which still survives of all earlier philosophy is the science of thought and its laws – formal logic and dialectics [explained in Part III]. Everything else is subsumed in the positive science of Nature and history." In other words, Engels is saying that the only area of human knowledge left for philosophy is the examination of ***how we think*** about the world. All other knowledge of the world, including society, must be furnished by a scientific approach that looks for objective explanations.

In what way is Marxism scientific?

The basis of science is to collect observations. In some branches of science observations can be made more detailed and precise with experiments in a laboratory. Theories are then developed that connect and explain observations. As our knowledge of the world develops on this basis, theories in turn guide observations by allowing predictions to be made to test them.

Marxism takes the same approach. But Marxism's laboratory is the ***experience of the working class*** throughout history. These experiences are the 'observations' of scientific socialism. In that sense, Marxism is nothing more than a ***generalisation*** of the experiences of the working class. When we talk about a "generalisation" we mean that if we see the same thing happening again and again we can make a rule about it. For example, if we repeatedly see that people who run on the factory floor fall over and hurt themselves, the next time we see someone run we do not wonder what will happen, we simply say "don't run!"

It is the same in history. If we see the working class facing the same challenges again and again in their struggles we can predict that similar challenges will face us today. Likewise, if workers tried certain solutions to those challenges and those solutions failed we must learn from those failures and not repeat them. For example, in every revolutionary situation where the working class has tried to take power, the capitalists have used the state (the police, the army, the courts etc.) to defend their system. When the workers were not prepared for this they were defeated. By applying the Marxist method of analysis to this experience we have created the 'Marxist theory of the state' to explain why this is the case – that the state is not a 'neutral' structure above society, but a state of the ruling class. So in revolutionary situations today we do not wonder what the state will do to us. We organise to defend ourselves. Theory guides our actions and our past experiences allowed us to develop that theory.

Those who say we do not need theory because "you cannot eat theory" are saying that they have nothing to learn from over 200 years of working class sacrifice and struggle. Because what else can we mean by "theory" except this sacrifice and struggle? Those who say "you cannot eat theory" are either arrogant, ignorant or both!

Why is it only Marxists who understand society scientifically?

For the working class, achieving a scientific understanding of society is not an academic exercise or a trick to be mastered so we can sound clever in front of our friends. We want to understand 'why?' in order to change the world. It is Marx's scientific analysis of history, and especially capitalism, that arms the working class with an understanding of how society can be re-organised to meet the needs of the vast majority instead of the profits of a few. For the working class Marxism is a ***guide to action*** in the struggle to create a ***socialist*** society. As Marx said, "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it".

Socialism is not an idea plucked out of the air. It is a prediction based upon an understanding of the limits of the existing capitalist economy. Socialism would replace capitalist ***private ownership*** of the banks, the mines, the commercial farms, the big factories and other big businesses with ***social ownership***. On this basis production for ***social need*** could replace production for ***profit***. In place of the chaos and competition of the capitalist ***market***, socialism would organise a ***democratic plan of production***. This plan would of necessity be ***international***. Upon this economic foundation living standards could be raised enormously laying the basis for society to go forward and develop education, science and culture.

This threat to their class rule is reason enough for the capitalist class to oppose and resist Marxism's scientific understanding of society. But at first glance this still seems strange. After all, the capitalist class are able to accept the breakthroughs in modern science that explain nature. Not least of all because they can use them to make profits in industry, pharmaceuticals, agriculture etc. They even accept that individuals can be understood scientifically with modern psychology and neuro-science.

But the capitalist's class position prevents them from admitting that ***society*** can be understood scientifically. They are threatened by ideas like Marxism which can explain the basis of their rule in private ownership of the economy and the source of their profits in the exploitation of the working class. Even more threateningly for them, it follows that once you explain capitalism as part of a process of historical development there is no need to think that history has stopped with capitalism – society will continue to change; capitalism will not last forever.

But we are not talking about a simple act of deception on the part of the capitalists – that they know the truth and are hiding it. Whilst the best strategists of capitalism have some understanding of the nature of their system, which they use to defend it, in general we are talking about a far more subtle process.

The capitalist class are like a person climbing a mountain without enough rope to reach the top. They convince themselves that they are on the only mountain in the world simply because they cannot get to the top and see that beyond their mountain others stretch on as far as the eye can see. Their position on the mountain blinds them to reality. Like the climber stranded below the top of the mountain, the capitalists' position in society means they cannot admit that their way of organising society is just that – ***their*** way

of organising society. So many different philosophical, religious, economic and political theories develop to explain why capitalist society is 'normal', 'natural' and even 'inevitable'.

Confusing the issue

In our everyday lives, the capitalist's 'point of view' is put forward as 'common sense'. The mainstream media is full of its sloppy thinking. Just turn on any talk radio or television chat show to hear it. You'll quickly hear that people are rich because they "worked hard"; not because they exploited the labour of the working class. You'll hear someone say that "human nature is greedy" to explain inequality; not that there is inequality because of the division of society into one class that owns the economy and one class that owns nothing, forcing them to work for the owners. Elsewhere, people look towards 'entrepreneurialism' and other self-help lifestyle philosophies around motivational speaking and 'leadership'. Ultimately, they all teach an accommodation with society as it is, to not attempt to reach the top of the mountain and see the real horizon.

Some of capitalism's ideological armour is more sophisticated. Capitalist governments must have a certain understanding of society if they are to run a modern economy. Statistics on economic growth, population change, imports and exports, the functioning of different industrial sectors etc. are collected. So too are statistics on poverty, inequality and unemployment. At no point in history have so many social 'observations' been collected! So it is at the level of ***theory*** that the defenders of capitalism must place their armour. They must stop theory from connecting and explaining observations which lead to the objective conclusion that capitalism is a disaster for the vast majority of humanity.

Impossible to avoid entirely, Marxism is presented as 'just another theory'. The university sociology departments (that study society) are crammed full of half-baked confused theories presented like sweets in a pick 'n' mix. You can choose the theory that tastes sweetest to you regardless of its ability to accurately explain society. The clear voice of Marxism in drowned in a wall of noise; connections made by Marx are disconnected. When ideas and theories are treated in this way we call it an ***eclectic*** approach. This approach is standard in the social sciences of capitalist society. Those few academics who do claim to support Marxism more often than not sterilise it by ignoring the revolutionary conclusions that flow from it.

But in capitalist society it is only in the social 'sciences' that eclecticism is allowed to dominate. It is self-evident that certain scientific theories explain nature more accurately than others. The theories best able to explain nature are made standard whilst those less able to are discarded. For example, both a sangoma and a medical doctor can explain a fever in their patient with reference to "their theory". The sangoma will likely explain the fever as caused by evil spirits; the medical doctor a bacterial infection.



But the medical doctor's theory accurately explains what is happening. A correct explanation allows a precise and effective treatment – antibiotics in this example. The sangoma might have accidently discovered a treatment through generations of trial and error, for example by finding a plant which contains the same active ingredient from which the antibiotic is made. Indeed, the medical doctor likely discovered the active ingredient by examining plants traditionally used by the sangoma. But the sangoma would still not understand ***why*** the plant worked without an understanding of its chemical composition; he would only know that it does. One theory is far less accurate at explaining the world than the other. What holds good for science and medicine holds good in society too. Marxism can explain society more accurately than other social 'theories'.

But this is not to say that science is immune to the influence of social conditions – it is not. For example, black slavery in the Americas was rationalized from the seventeenth century by pseudo-scientific theories of race which today are entirely discredited. In failing to understand that any feature of society, such as the existence of exclusively black slaves, required an objective explanation that could only be found in ***social*** conditions, scientists attempted to use the theories they were developing to explain ***nature*** to explain society. The placing of animals in a hierarchy from 'lower' to 'higher' forms was transplanted to society with black people at the bottom of the 'social hierarchy' and white people at the top.

This wrong method continues to this day in the works of many otherwise excellent scientists. But this does not invalidate the scientific method in general as some would argue. It simply demonstrates that a half-hearted search for objective explanations that stops at the door of society will lead to errors.

Another way to dismiss Marxism is to say that because it is old it surely cannot cope with the complexities of society in the twenty-first century. But age cannot be the criteria for determining usefulness! For example, Newtonian physics, which pre-dates Marxism by a century, is still the basis of all modern physics. Leon Trotsky said that, "the criterion for replying to that question is simple: if the theory correctly estimates the course of development and foresees the future better than other theories, it remains the most advanced theory of our time, be it even scores of years old."

A 'European' theory?

Some crude Africanists dismiss Marxism because it was 'invented' in Europe by a white man. They forget that many of the Africanists they look up to, especially leaders of the liberation struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, at least partially based their ideas on Marxism. But Marxism is not an 'invention'. Marxism is a ***description*** of the processes by which society develops just as different scientific theories describe the processes by which nature develops. Those processes exist whether we give them a name or not and regardless of who first described them. Africanists will not be saved from the effects of gravity if they jump from the top of Mount Kilimanjaro just because the theory of gravity was first put forward in Europe!

It is true that it was the social conditions of nineteenth century Europe and the emergence of the revolutionary working class that allowed Karl Marx to develop his ideas. But certain ideas and inventions are the property of the entire human race regardless of their origin. Writing was originally invented in Africa. But since its invention it has been adapted to represent the many different languages of the world. Whilst Chinese letters are radically different to Arabic letters or English letters, the underlying

method of representing the words and sounds of human speech with symbols is the same. Equally, the ***method*** of Marxism can be applied to understand very different societies in different stages of development. It can be applied to understand pre-colonial, colonial and neo-colonial African society just as Marx applied it to understand the different phases of European society.

In reality, the class position of the aspiring black elite that put forward these ideas means they too are stuck below the top of the mountain. Marx's European origins are just their particular excuse to dismiss the revolutionary conclusions of Marxism that threaten their interests in capitalist society.

The Stalinist distortion of Marxism

But this excuse was served-up on a plate by the Stalinist ***distortion*** of Marxism that tried to impose Marx's description of the development of ***European*** class society onto African society. Because Europe had developed from Ancient slave society, through the feudal society of kings, landlords and peasants to capitalism before the working class struggle for socialism began, the Stalinists argued that Africa would 'inevitably' have to follow the same stages before socialism was even thinkable. But the simple fact that European capitalism and pre-capitalist African societies interacted in centuries of slavery, colonialism, exploitation and oppression, interrupted whatever path of development might have been travelled by Africa had that interaction not happened. Africa is now part of the global capitalist system.

This distortion of Marxism was necessary for the dictatorial Stalinist bureaucracy. Their betrayal of the workers' 1917 Russian Revolution led them to fear successful socialist revolutions elsewhere. If genuine socialism based on workers' democracy emerged anywhere else, the Russian working class would be inspired to overthrow them. The idea that a period of capitalism was necessary in the colonial and neo-colonial world became an important part of Stalinist foreign policy to derail revolutionary movements. The South African Communist Party's theory of the National Democratic Revolution gives a 'theoretical' justification for the accommodation the SACP has made with capitalism. Stalinist distortions of Marxism are another way to explain why there is only one mountain. They allow 'Communist' ministers to collect huge salaries, live in mansions and drive BMWs.

The Stalinist method of creating theories first and then demanding that society conform to them is totally alien to genuine Marxism. Leon Trotsky, exiled and murdered by the Stalinist bureaucracy for his defence of the genuine method of Marxism, developed the theory of Permanent Revolution that showed that the path of European development was not 'destined' to be followed by the rest of the world. By starting from the important Marxist principle that ***truth is concrete***, Trotsky examined the colonial and semi-colonial countries and showed that the economic development that had taken place under the leadership of the capitalist class in Europe would have to be undertaken by the working class in the leadership of the peasantry in the colonial world. This was nowhere more the case than in Russia itself much to the later inconvenience of the Stalinists!

Working class theory can pierce capitalism's ideological armour

Once ideas that defend capitalism are in existence the capitalist class uses their control of society, through ownership of the media, control of education etc., to try and impose these ideas on society as a whole. Such ideas become part of capitalism's ideological armour. As Marx observed, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas".

But none of capitalism's ideological defences can ever fully succeed in putting the working class to sleep. Reality constantly forces us to confront the gap between what we are told about society and our daily experiences that contradict it. The experience of our own exploitation and poverty when we can see the huge wealth capable of alleviating it disproves the idea that "all is as it should be". Marxism teaches the working class to make the awareness of this gap, that suspicion that all is ***not*** as it should be, fully conscious. Marxism teaches us to train our way of thinking to penetrate through the fog of confusion that capitalist common sense relies upon and understand how to change society.

But everything in capitalist society tries to prevent workers from doing this. Even the most basic education is denied to many. But then, even the most advanced university education will not teach us how to see through the confused ideas of capitalist society. For that we must look to our own revolutionary organisations to train and educate ourselves. Using the Marxist method of analysis any worker can not only equal, but surpass the level of understanding of any entrepreneur, religious preacher, captain of industry or capitalist politician.

Part II

The Method of Marxism - Dialectical Materialism

Marxism like all ideas is a product of historical development. But no idea comes into existence in a vacuum but develops out of and even expresses itself in the language of ideas it is preparing to replace. On the development of Marxism, Engels explained that:

> Modern Socialism is, in its essence, the direct product of the recognition, on the one hand, of the class antagonisms existing in the society of today between proprietors and non-proprietors, between capitalists and wage-workers; on the other hand, of the anarchy existing in production. But, in its theoretical form, modern Socialism originally appears ostensibly as a more logical extension of the principles laid down by the great French philosophers of the 18th century. Like every new theory, modern Socialism had, at first, to connect itself with the intellectual stock-in-trade ready to its hand, however deeply its roots lay in material economic facts.
>
> *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 1880

When Marx and Engels were writing, the "intellectual stock-in-trade" of Western and Ancient Greek philosophy was more widely known, at least among educated audiences. However, 150 years later the "intellectual stock-in-trade" of Marx's time is not only unfamiliar but sounds like a foreign language. Even many words have changed their everyday meanings. Revolutionaries must struggle to understand these ideas nevertheless. But in this introduction we will leave a basic sketch of the history of philosophy until Part IV and instead introduce dialectical materialism by further developing the more familiar ideas of modern science with which we have begun.

How do we know anything?

To build up our understanding of dialectical materialism we need to ask the most basic question of them all: how do we know anything about the world around us? How do we know where to look for 'objective explanations'? Throughout most of human history people had no idea what even counted as an 'objective explanation' in nature or society. They wouldn't have recognised one if you had showed it to them!

Human understanding of the world throughout history can be described as being like a pair of scissors. One handle represents the world as it actually is; the other our understanding of it. The closer the two handles are together the more accurate our understanding.

People have always tried to fill the gap. But these attempts have never been random. The different 'points of view' of how to fill the gap have been the products of different social conditions just as surely as the different 'points of view' about wages and profits are today.



For example, primitive societies with no science and very little understanding of nature developed supernatural ideas to explain the world, such as the idea that spirits controlled the weather (see Part IV for more detail on primitive religion). With no understanding of what counted as an 'objective explanation' there was no way to determine the correctness of ideas, for example by testing their ability to make accurate predictions. Ideas were made 'independent' by being separated from the social conditions that created them and elevated to the status of objective explanations in their own right. This gave ideas an unchallengeable status as self-evident truths existing outside of history. But this put the relationship between ideas and the world upside down. People wrongly believed that the world should conform to their ideas; not their ideas conform to the world by accurately describing it.

In philosophical language we call this approach ***idealism***. But when we talk about "idealism" in philosophy we should not confuse it with the modern everyday use of the word where we call someone an "idealist" if we think they have 'good' or 'honest' motives for their actions. This is ***not*** what we mean when we talk about idealism in philosophy. Idealism means to elevate ideas to the status of objective explanations and in the process make them ***ideal*** (hence the name) or perfect – in other words abstract (explained further in Part III). This is the same as having a pair of scissors with two right handles – "our understanding of the world" trying to explain "our understanding of the world".

The dead-end of idealism most often takes the form of religion. But even today, with science's search for objective explanations falling short of the door of society, idealism still exists. For example, it doesn't take long to find a lazy journalist who will try and explain the end of South African capitalism's racist apartheid segregation system by saying something like, "the eventual recognition that democratic rights could and should be extended to all races led the apartheid leaders to the negotiating table by the late 1980s".

When you think about it, statements like this ***explain*** nothing. ***Why*** did the apartheid leaders make this recognition? ***Why*** did they change their views in the late 1980s and not for example the late 1960s? These are the questions that need to be answered to ***explain why*** rather than just ***state it*** as a fact. This 'explanation' leaves us with the idea that the apartheid leaders went to bed one night as racists and woke-up the next morning as champions of freedom and democracy.

The unsatisfying explanation of this fictional, but typical, journalist is the result of idealism – of seeing no need to explain changes in ideas because ideas are thought to exist independently of social conditions. But a real explanation for the end of apartheid must start by examining these. In other words we must look at what had changed in society by the late 1980s. The change in attitude of the apartheid leaders was a product of the economic crisis of South Africa, the mass movement of the black working class and the collapse of the USSR leading to the end of the Cold War. These changing social conditions explain why the apartheid leaders made their "eventual recognition" and made a compromise with the ANC, ending apartheid whilst keeping its capitalist economic foundations in place.

From subjective idealism to objective science

Human understanding of the world has grown massively, especially in the past few hundred years allowing the invention of remarkable technology, medicines, industrial techniques etc. that even a generation ago would have seemed impossible. How did society break-out of the idealist dead-end and begin to understand where to look for objective explanations?

The breakthrough came first in our understanding of nature. But how did our understanding of nature change? For example, for most of human history, people woke-up in the morning and saw the sun rise just as you could see the sun rise tomorrow morning. The sun would appear to our eyes and the eyes of our ancestors as almost identical. But our ancestors did not understand what they were looking at. It looked to them as though a ball of fire was circling above their heads. They probably gave the sun a name and said it was a god.

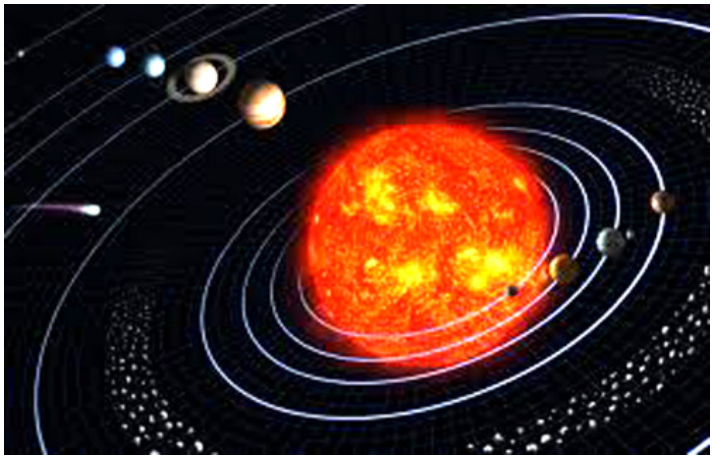


HOW DID EARLY HUMANS THINK ABOUT THE SUN?

But today, we understand that the sun is a star just like billions of others in our galaxy, it is kept burning by a process of nuclear fusion, it is more than 100 times larger than the Earth, it is over 149 million kilometres away and it is the Earth which is in orbit around the sun not the other way around.

But the sunrise still looks the same. We can't see any of these new facts about the sun with our eyes. It is even a leap to understand that the stars we see at night are the same as the 'ball of fire' we see during the day. How were we able to so radically change the way we ***think*** about the sun?

This was possible with the invention of the telescope and its focus on the night sky in the seventeenth century Scientific Revolution.



AND HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT IT TODAY?

Careful observation of the night sky by early scientists allowed them to see things invisible to the naked eye. From observing the orbits of the planets around the sun the scientists were able to explain the 'rising' of the sun as the result of the Earth's rotation. An objective explanation was developed from observation.

That this new explanation for the sunrise was more accurate could be proved by its power to make predictions. For example, based on the new theories of gravity and elliptical orbits worked-out from careful observations, Edmond Halley was able to predict the year that a particular comet would make its next appearance in the night sky. Halley's prediction was correct and it has reappeared every 75-76 years since.

Materialism – the first foundation of Marxism

What was new about science was that it recognised that nature has an objective existence independent of any 'points of view' about it. Science said that only objective observations of the world could provide us with facts. This was a huge breakthrough for human understanding. Modern science established how we should understand the relationship between the world, or at least nature, and our ideas. As Karl Marx said in his second thesis on Feurbach, "the question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question". In other words, the correctness of our ideas about the world must be tested by investigating the things we are trying to understand.

Like science, the understanding that everything in the world has an objective explanation is the first foundation of Marxism. In the philosophical language of the nineteenth century we call this idea ***materialism***. But when talking about "materialism" in philosophy, we should not confuse the word with its modern everyday meaning, where someone is described as "materialistic" if they only worry about buying nice clothes and the latest cell phone. In philosophy, materialism is the idea that the world has an existence independent of 'points of view' about it.

It follows from this that all those things that at first appear to be subjective, such as thoughts and emotions, religious beliefs, morals and values, and all other ideas, in fact have an objective explanation. For example, thoughts and emotions are the products of brains. If there are no brains, there are no thoughts or emotions. The emotions experienced by humans all have evolutionary roots in the primitive mental states experienced by less complex animals. Different beliefs and ideas, such as religious beliefs or political ideas have an objective explanation in the social conditions of the society that created them. As Marx said, "conditions determine consciousness".

Dialectical thought - the second foundation of Marxism

But there is one particular feature of the world that is so fundamental that it must be incorporated into how we think if we are to describe the world as accurately as possible. Nothing in the world is static, unmoving or fixed. Through many different processes everything is undergoing constant ***change***. The second foundation of Marxism is ***dialectics***, or ***dialectical thought***, which describes the constant change in the world.

When the foundations of materialism and dialectical thought are combined we have Marxism's method of ***dialectical materialism***. By recognising processes of change dialectical materialism closely describes the ways in which the world develops allowing us to shrink the 'knowledge gap' enormously.

Dialectical materialism helps us to understand that everything that exists, from the galaxies to the thoughts of our brains are part of a ***spectrum of continuous development***. As Trotsky pointed out, "consciousness grew out of the unconscious, psychology out of physiology, the organic world out of the inorganic, the solar system out of nebulae." All of modern science demonstrates this process of continuous development in nature; Marxism shows that this process does not stop at the door of society but continues right up to the ideas that we are discussing here.

Part III

The Tools of Dialectical Thought

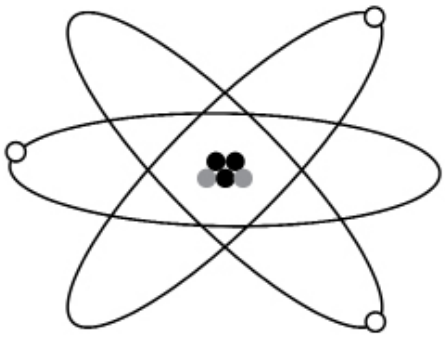
Dialectical materialism is a ***method***. It is not a master key that automatically gives us knowledge about the world. Dialectical materialism simply teaches us where to look for objective explanations. There is no shortcut around finding and studying the facts of all the things that we want to understand, including how things change. But how we organise and connect those facts in order to understand them is crucial.

Models, abstractions and generalisations

The use of models is one method to develop theories to connect and explain observations. In science a model is a way of describing how the world works. Models are simplified ***representations*** that allow us to understand something that maybe we can never even see – to develop a different 'point of view' than our five senses alone allow. The modern scientific model of the solar system allows us to understand far more than if we only relied on what we can see with the naked eye.

Some models 'look' nothing like the thing they describe. For example, atoms make up all matter in the universe, including us. The model of the atom pictured below was intentionally designed to 'look' like the solar system.

RUTHERFORD'S MODEL OF THE ATOM (1911)



SIMPLIFYING REALITY WITH A MODEL

The model shows the three basic sub-atomic particles that make up an atom: a proton and neutron nucleus at the centre (the grey and the black circles) with 'orbiting' electrons (the white circles). The model represents these sub-atomic particles as small circles. But this model is a simplification of an atom to allow us to understand it. For example, electrons are negative electrical charges. Does a negative electrical charge look like a white circle? Almost certainly not. Protons and neutrons can be further broken down into 'up quarks' and 'down quarks'. Do they really look like grey and black circles? Again, almost certainly not.

But nevertheless, leaving aside mathematical equations that allow an even more precise description of atoms, this model provides us with a representation of an atom that gives us an excellent understanding of the chemical elements and the interactions that create all the basic 'stuff' of the universe. Using this model we can make predictions that prove it describes important ways in which matter develops.

This model of the atom is an ***abstraction***. What do we mean by an abstraction? We mean that we are literally removing something from its context in order to simplify it and understand it. This is a powerful tool of thought. Once developed a model can be ***generalised*** as we saw in Part I – i.e. applied to all similar phenomena. For example, we don't need to examine all the trillions of atoms that make up a human body to check that they all fit this model of the atom. We use this model for all atoms until an observation suggests that it is not explaining something. Then we go back to ask 'why?' and develop a more accurate model from more precise observations.

Marxism uses this scientific method too. Marx's epic work, *Capital*, is a detailed examination of how capitalist society works. It is a masterpiece in dialectical materialism. Marx examines the historical development of capitalism, but to describe the different economic processes within capitalism, he often simplifies them in simple abstract models, and even mathematical equations, before returning them to their historical context. Even basic ideas in Marxism make use of abstractions and generalisations, for example, the idea of "the working class". At any given moment, in any given society, "the working class" is composed of different social layers and millions, now billions, of individuals. There are metalworkers, mineworkers, retail workers, office workers, unemployed, etc. Within every sector there is a division of labour and different jobs. There is no one individual who is a 'perfect' example of "the working class". But it is an extremely useful generalisation that helps us understand society.

The limits of models, abstractions and generalisations

Many of the ideas and concepts that we use in everyday life are abstract and generalised models. These crucial 'mental short-cuts' stop us being overloaded with information. But these crucial ways of thinking have two sides to them. Understanding their limits is crucial to ensuring our ideas accurately describe the world. In everyday language people often point out that "it is wrong to generalise". They usually, and correctly, mean that an entire group should not be condemned for the crimes of one individual. But in general philosophical terms it is only ***sometimes*** "wrong to generalise" but it is vital to know when. The point can be demonstrated with the simplest kind of model – a name, or ***label***.

Look at this picture. What is it?



Did you answer “apple”?

And what is this?



Did you answer “apple” again?

We’re using exactly the same label to describe these two apples. Our label treats them as identical. But in fact they’re not identical. They are different shapes and different shades for a start! Now, if you knew that they were in fact different varieties of apple, instead of answering “apple” originally, you could have answered “granny smith apple” and “golden delicious apple”. But that doesn’t quite save us. Then I could have shown you these three “granny smith apples”:



None of them is identical either. They are different shapes, sizes and shades. So whilst the label “granny smith apple” has narrowed things down it still treats very different things as identical.

Day-to-day we can call these different varieties “apple” for convenience with no problem. But the label “apple” is too imprecise if we want to know which apple variety to use to brew a sweet cider or bake a good apple pie – not everything that can be described by the label “apple” can be used successfully!

Can more precise labels help us overcome this limitation? For example, can we give ***this*** apple…



…a completely unique label, for example, “apple 1”? The label “apple 1” applies to ***this*** apple and no other apple in the world. Every observable and measurable property of ***this*** apple that makes it different from all other apples – its size, shape, colour, weight etc. – is described by the label “apple 1”. Does this extreme narrowing down of the label allow it to accurately describe ***this*** apple?

The answer is: only for a fleeting moment. Because all of the features described by the label “apple 1” are undergoing change from one hour to the next and from one second to the next. This apple could only be described perfectly by the label “apple 1” if it did not exist in time. But everything exists in time. Any apple that has been picked from its tree is rotting. Within a shorter or longer period of time, the colour will darken and eventually turn brown. The firm round shape will become wrinkled, deformed and soft. All of the features that “apple 1” describes will no longer be present. Will it still be the same “apple 1”?



Yes and no. If we were to set up a time-lapse camera you could watch the apple rot before your eyes. But what we are left with is not “apple 1” but a “rotten apple”; the first we are happy to eat the second we would not even want to touch. The label “apple 1” becomes useless as describing ***this*** apple after just a few weeks because of the passage of time and processes of ***change***.

But if I hold on to the label “apple 1” I will have to insist that nothing has changed. If I do this I would be treating the label as more important than the thing it is meant to describe. The label becomes removed from its context and becomes entirely abstract. This leads to us treating the world as static and unchanging because our abstract models and labels are static and unchanging. This can take us straight back to the idealism described in Part II.

We are describing here the limitations of ***formal logic***. Dialectical thought is sometimes called ***dialectical logic***. Formal logic is not able to help us understand processes of change; dialectics is. The word ‘logic’ is still used today, usually in appeals to “think logically” about a problem or “apply logic” to the situation. The word comes from the Ancient Greek word ‘logos’, which means ‘reason’. It can help to think of different forms of logic as different methods of reasoning.

Abstract ideas about society

When trying to understand society, abstract labels that do not recognise processes of change have the same effect of confusing us. For example, we know what the ideas of 'justice' and 'fairness' mean in general but unless we place them in a context they are meaningless. The capitalist class's idea of 'justice' is to receive a 'fair' profit from their investments; the working class's idea of 'justice' is to have a 'fair' wage for their labour. But a high wage reduces profits; high profits reduce wages. The same labels of 'justice' and 'fairness' are used to describe different things. If you put a trade union wage negotiator and a factory owner on the TV news to debate each other they will throw the abstract ideas of 'justice' and 'fairness' at each other. Both will feel that 'justice' and 'fairness' is on their side from their own 'point of view' but they are guaranteed to fail to convince each other. So unless the debate moves beyond abstractions and defines 'justice' and 'fairness' by placing them into a context we might as well turn the TV off as we will not learn a thing.

Another example is the label "ANC". This label has been used to describe an organisation that has existed for over 100 years. We use it as shorthand today to refer to this or that latest policy "of the ANC" or this or that latest case of corruption "of the ANC". But when we are looking at the role of the ANC over the past 100 years, the label "ANC" is too imprecise to help us understand history.

For example, from its foundation in 1912 to the 1940s, the ANC was an elite lobby group, petitioning the British king, initially so that black people who owned property would be allowed to vote. In the 1950s and early 1960s with industrialisation, urbanisation and the development of the working class the ANC turned to mass actions such as boycotts and stay-aways. Through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the ANC was banned and existed mainly in exile. This gave it a more secretive and closed character whilst in SA itself the ANC was a ***symbol*** of the liberation struggle fought by other forces such as the students and the trade unions. After 1994 the ANC became the ruling party of a neo-colonial capitalist society. All of these phases of development of the ANC were very different to each other. So, which phase is described by "ANC"? Unless we are clear about which historical context we are using "ANC" to describe we will make mistakes.

One error that arises from the mis-application of the label "ANC" frustrates the youth in particular. For the youth "ANC" means "the ANC after 1994", i.e. a neo-liberal capitalist government; for some of the older generation, particularly in the rural areas, the label "ANC" means "the ANC in the 1980s", i.e. a symbol of the liberation struggle. The leaders of the ANC exploit this mistake in formal logic by the older generation to appeal for support for their anti-working class policies. But millions see through this trick when they say, "this is not ***our*** ANC". This statement is actually a profound philosophical insight! It acknowledges change and the limits of the static label "ANC".

Dialectical thinking

Trotsky summed-up how dialectical thinking helps us to overcome the limitations of static labels. He explained that:

> Vulgar thought operates with such concepts as capitalism, morals, freedom, workers' state, etc. as fixed abstractions, presuming that capitalism is equal to capitalism, morals are equal to morals, etc. Dialectical thinking analyzes all things and phenomena in their continuous change, while determining in the material conditions of those changes that critical limit beyond which "A" ceases to be "A", a workers' state[*] ceases to be a workers' state .
>
> The fundamental flaw of vulgar thought lies in the fact that it wishes to content itself with motionless imprints of a reality which consists of eternal motion. Dialectical thinking gives to concepts, by means of closer approximations, corrections, concretizations, a richness of content and flexibility; I would even say a succulence which to a certain extent brings them close to living phenomena. Not capitalism in general, but a given capitalism at a given stage of development. Not a workers' state in general, but a given workers' state in a backward country in an imperialist encirclement, etc.
>
> Dialectical thinking is related to vulgar thinking in the same way that a motion picture is related to a still photograph. The motion picture does not outlaw the still photograph but combines a series of them according to the laws of motion. Dialectics does not deny the syllogism [the labels of formal logic], but teaches us to combine syllogisms in such a way as to bring our understanding closer to the eternally changing reality.
>
> *A Petty Bourgeois Opposition*, 1939
>
> *[*The "workers' state" Trotsky was referring to was Soviet Russia (or USSR). In this polemic he was defending the Russian Revolution against those petty bourgeois (or middle class) 'revolutionaries' who, scared by the Stalinist degeneration of Soviet Russia had abandoned dialectical materialism and retreated into a form of idealism that attempted to blame "revolutionary doctrine for the mistakes and crimes of those who betrayed it".]*

As Trotsky explains, dialectical thinking does not replace the simple models so necessary for everyday life. Rather it connects them and places them on the spectrum of continuous development. Dialectical thinking means to train ourselves to remember that everything is constantly changing. This allows our thoughts and ideas ever "closer approximations", or descriptions, of the world. By recognising change, the scissor-handles of human understanding are brought that much closer together.

The tools of dialectical thought (described below) are models. Like all models they are a simplified representation of the world that allows us to recognise and understand processes of change. Just as Rutherford's model of the atom is not what an atom really 'looks' like, but a simplified representation, dialectical thought is not identical with the different processes of change but a ***general*** way of ***describing*** them. In that sense, dialectical thinking, like all models, is an abstraction. As Engels explained in *Dialectics of Nature*, "It is…from the history of nature and human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted. For they are nothing but the most general laws of these two aspects of historical development, as well as thought itself." Engels further explained that:

> It is obvious that in describing any evolutionary process as the negation of the negation [one of the tools of dialectical thought explained below] I do not say anything concerning the particular process of development, for example, of the grain of barley from germination to the death of the fruit-bearing plant. For, as the integral calculus also is a negation of the negation, if I said anything of the sort I should only be making the nonsensical statement that the life-process

> of a barley plant was the integral calculus or for that matter that it was socialism.
>
> *Anti-Duhring*, 1877

For example, the transformation of water through the states of ice-liquid-steam, and the development of European society through the stages of Ancient society-feudal society-capitalist society are both examples of change. But a change in the state of water is explained by the energy level of water molecules (thermodynamics); change in society is explained by class contradictions and the class struggle. But for us to recognise that what appear to be completely different things are actually different stages of development of the same thing we must ***think dialectically***. This allows us to recognise that the different states of ice-liquid-steam are different arrangements of water molecules; the different forms of European class society are different arrangements of people into classes based on the level of development of the productive forces. The specific process of change must be discovered, as Trotsky said above, "in the material conditions of those changes".

The word 'dialectic' comes from the Ancient Greek language and literally means "***discussion***". But it is a discussion between people who may have different views to start with but want to work together to find the truth. A discussion recognises the possibility of change. In a discussion people can agree to meet each other half-way just as dialectics can describe how "apple 1" ***becomes*** "rotten apple". So a discussion can be contrasted to a debate. In a debate people think that they alone know the truth. A debate is like the fixed labels of formal logic. There is no way for "apple 1" to become "rotten apple". They don't interact but stubbornly insist that they alone are correct.

The tools of dialectical thought

Marx and Engels put forward three 'dialectical laws' to describe processes of change. They used the word 'law' in its scientific sense which simply means a theory or an explanation for observations. But the everyday use of the word 'law' suggests a law-maker who first makes the law and then applies it to the world. This is of course the opposite of the way that we should understand 'laws' of dialectics. 'Laws' of dialectics are a ***description*** of the processes of development and change in the world.

To assist with clarifying this point, instead of talking about 'laws of dialectics' we can talk about ***tools of dialectical thought***. In the hands of someone trained in their use, tools create useful products from raw material; dialectical thought can turn raw unconnected observations into a useful description of change. Marx and Engels' put forward three tools of dialectical thought. They have old-fashioned philosophical names – they are (1) 'the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa', (2) the 'negation of the negation', and (3) the 'interpenetration of opposites'. But they can be made more memorable by giving them nicknames based on everyday phrases. Engels made the point that, "men thought dialectically long before they knew dialectics" so it is not a surprise that dialectical thought has found an unconscious expression in everyday language.

Tool 1: Change of Quantity into Quality
A.k.a. the straw that breaks the camel's back

Within a limit an addition or subtraction does not change a thing. That limit depends on the process of change being considered. In the language of philosophy, certain changes in ***quantity*** do not affect the ***quality*** of a thing.

We already saw this idea in Part III when we considered the rotting apple. This was an example of a change in quantity leading to a change of quality. In the case of the apple the change in quantity is a subtraction as the apple rots away. The apple is still recognisable as an apple up to a certain point. But there will come a point where the apple has rotted so much that anyone coming across it could not say what it had started out as. The gradual changes in quantity (subtraction) produced a change in quality. From apple to detritus (decomposed organic matter).

An example of how the 'change of quantity into quality' tool can help understand change in society is the emergence of European capitalism from feudal society. In feudal society the role of money in the economy was limited. Most payments were 'payments-in-kind' not requiring money. For example, peasants provided labour in exchange for the landlord's protection and access to his land. As the proto-capitalist merchant class expanded their trade within feudal society the sectors of the economy where exchange was regulated by money instead of payments-in-kind increased. Up to a certain point this expansion did not change the feudal character of society. However once a certain point – a certain quantity – was reached in the accumulation of wealth and power by the capitalist class they were compelled to struggle against the feudal ruling class which was holding them back. In England and France this led to civil war and revolution that put the capitalist class in power. These were the events where quantity changed into quality; capitalism was established as a new quality out of previous changes in quantity. As Marx said, "the new society developed in the womb of the old".

Sudden leaps

A key idea of 'the change of quantity into quality' tool is the idea of a sudden 'leap' when the change in quality takes place. Just how 'quick' the leap is from a human point of view depends on the specific process of change. So boiling water 'leaps' from liquid to steam from our point of view when we see the first bubbles of steam. But 'leaps' in evolution are measured in millions of years. For example, the Cambrian explosion, when a rapid diversity of different animals evolved, took place over the course of 20-25 million years. In evolutionary time this is a 'leap' but from the point of view of a human life it is a million generations! So just like dialectics itself, the idea of a 'qualitative leap', is a useful abstraction but we have to place it in a context and apply it to a specific process of change to know what would count as a 'leap'.

This idea is crucial when applied to society. It helps us to prepare ourselves for rapid changes in society and working class consciousness. This tool allows us to look for changing quantities to predict a later change in quality. Without it social change appears to come out of nowhere. For example, the 2011 Egyptian revolution overthrew the dictator Mubarak who had been in power for decades. Neighbouring Tunisia was going through a revolution but the spark that forced the Egyptian masses to draw the conclusion that they must follow was a rise in the price of bread. This was 'the straw that broke the camel's back'. To many, especially the capitalist media, this seemed to come from a clear blue sky. The day before the revolution began, commentators were no doubt saying how "things never change" and the "working class is too conservative". But armed with 'the change of quantity and quality' tool revolutionaries can prepare for these sudden leaps and not be caught by surprise.

Tool 2: the negation of the negation
A.k.a. nothing lasts forever

In philosophical language, the term 'negation' just means ***ending*** or ***passing away***. From that you can work-out that the 'negation of the negation' – the ending of the ending – is the idea that even something that causes one thing to end, will eventually end itself – nothing lasts forever.

Let's consider the apple again. If left in an open field undisturbed, the pips (seeds) inside the apple will grow into a sapling (baby tree) consuming the apple as food. The apple will be negated by the sapling. But the apple tree that will grow from the sapling will not last forever. It too will be negated, dying at a certain point.

But 'the negation of the negation' does not say that things repeat in an endless cycle. Through each 'negation' development takes place. In the example of the apple the gradual process of natural selection (an evolutionary process of change in nature) will take place. Only those pips that are best able to grow in the climate that year (it may be wetter than average or there may be a drought) will survive. They will pass on that slight advantage to the next generation and the apple tree as a species will change.

Let's use another example from society. In primitive societies land was owned in common (or not owned at all). This was negated by the development of class society which introduced private ownership of land. Marxists anticipate that private ownership will in turn be negated by common ownership. But it will not be the common ownership of primitive societies but socialist common ownership based on a highly developed economy.

Tool 3: the interpenetration of opposites
A.k.a. life is never simple

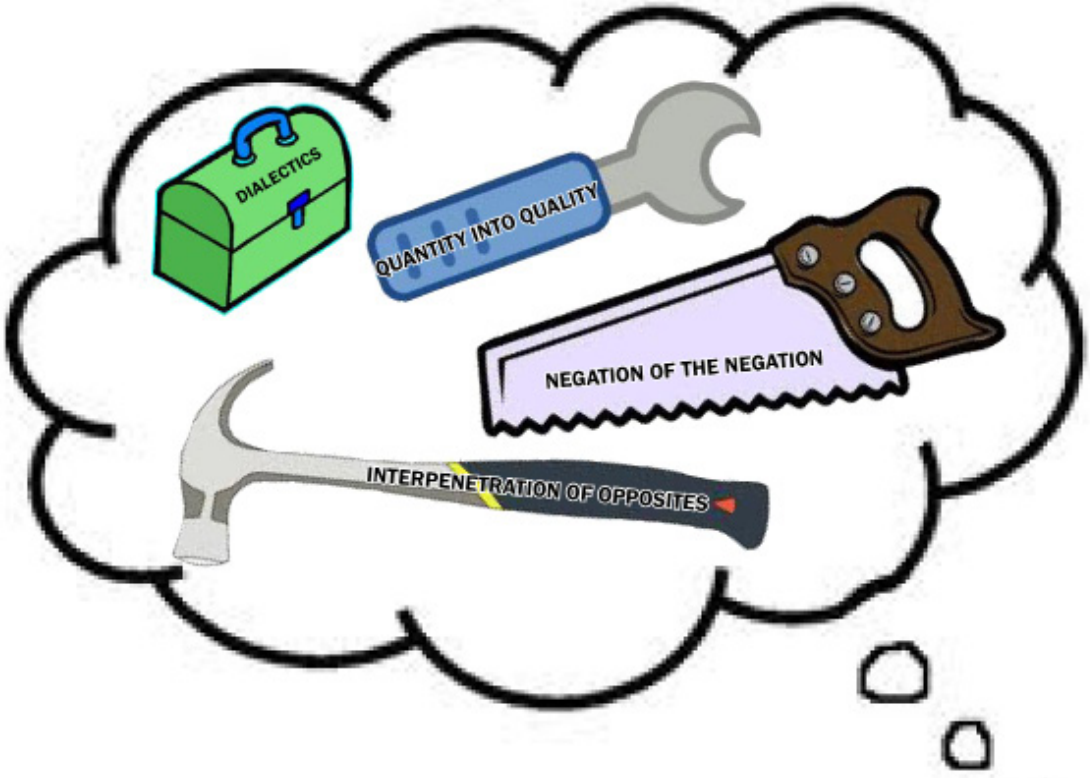
The world is full of opposing forces. In philosophical language we would say that the world is full of ***contradictions***. But opposing forces always exist together. For example, the positive pole of a magnet attracts the negative pole of another magnet. But every magnet has both a positive and negative poll. If you cut the magnet up it always has a positive and negative poll. These opposites exist together – they 'interpenetrate'.

Let's examine the apple. The chemical bonds that hold its atoms together are being opposed by chemical processes causing those bonds to break leading to the rotting of the apple. The forces are in opposition to each other. They contradict each other but are contained within the same object.

In society this presence of contradiction can be seen in the class struggle in capitalist society. There is the contradiction between the interests of the capitalist class to make profits and the working class to receive higher wages; the contradiction between the capitalist class's ***individual*** (or private) ownership of the economy and the ***collective*** work of the working class.

The inter-connection of the tools

Each tool of dialectical though has its own 'specialised' use but they are all interrelated. In other words, to produce a useful product you almost always have to use all three together. You cannot build a piece of furniture with a hammer alone! Tool 3 ultimately connects the other two and can lead us back to them. For example, the accumulation of contradictions at one pole can eventually outweigh the other pole and these changes in quantity lead to a change in quality (Tool 1) negating (Tool 2) the thing we started out with.



THE TOOLS OF DIALECTICAL THOUGHT

Part IV

The Historical Development of Marxism

In Parts II and III Marxism was explained largely as a reasoned (or abstract!) argument. This was done to simplify the ideas in order to introduce them. But Marxism, like all ideas, is a product of ***historical development***. The breakthroughs in thinking that culminated in Marxism were achieved under the impact of changing social conditions.

Religious idealism

The earliest attempts to try and explain the world took the form of primitive religions with the belief that spirits controlled nature. To make sense of dreams, primitive people developed the idea of a 'soul' that left the body. With no knowledge of the brain or the unconscious, this explained why they would always wake-up in the same place even if they dreamed they had travelled the world. Dreams of dead relatives led to the idea that everyone must have an immortal 'soul' (i.e. that cannot die). From this developed the idea that other 'souls', hidden to us when we are awake, are behind all the unexplainable things in the world. This was the origin of the idea of gods and then one god who like all souls was ***eternal*** (had always existed).

The development of the idea of one eternal god shoved a huge rock between the scissor handles of human understanding. To view the world with the idea of 'eternity' means it is unnecessary to look for objective explanations. If something has always existed then there is no need to explain it. But 'eternity' is an abstract idea. You can't find 'eternity' existing anywhere in the world. The idea is nothing but a product of social conditions. But abstract ideas like this were elevated above society as an unchallengeable question of 'faith'. The effect for entire epochs was to prevent the development of even the idea that it was possible to find objective explanations for nature and society.

All religions are therefore a form of idealism. They all say that objective explanations are limited because there is something 'beyond' the world, whether this is an afterlife, a soul, or some form of god. Rather than being understood as a product of society, society is said to be a product of a god, which is nothing but a human idea. Marx explained that:

> Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world…
>
> *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1843

But this was unavoidable in primitive societies with very little knowledge or understanding of the world. That religion still exists in an age of science and Marxism can only be explained if we look for an objective explanation in today's social conditions. Today, people are still trying to make sense of their lives. In capitalist society this means trying to understand why some have so much and others so little. Without a scientific understanding of society, which the capitalist's ideological armour ferociously defends against, this is presented as a case of 'good luck' or 'bad luck'. For the capitalist class religion explains their 'good luck' as a result of them being "blessed". For the working class, religion explains their 'bad luck' as a "test of faith" or "part of God's plan" which they must endure. Any slight improvement in their 'luck' is attributed to God rather than the efforts of working class struggle. Marx explained that:

> Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.
>
> The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.
>
> *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1843

The criticisms of capitalism made by some religious leaders with working class congregations are of course relatively progressive. But ultimately, the entire philosophical framework of religion and its idea of an 'eternal' God, maintains amongst the working class and poor an "illusion about their conditions". It prevents the working class and poor from coming to a real understanding of the causes of their suffering which can only be discovered in the objective social conditions of capitalist society. And it is only on this basis that a real understanding of what is necessary to change society can be made.

Ancient philosophy

Over 2,500 years ago, as society grew more complex with the development of the Ancient city-states of Greece and the Mediterranean Sea area, most of the basic philosophical ideas that would reappear in different forms up to the present day, were first put forward. Formal logic arose in the Ancient world, developed by the philosopher Aristotle.

The revolutionary upheavals that took place in Miletus (modern day Turkey) suggested that enormous change was possible with causes that could be discovered. This allowed anticipations of modern materialism and modern dialectics to emerge. These anticipations were extremely limited due to the social conditions of the time and the level of knowledge of nature and society. For example, they were never brought together. But these ideas were nevertheless able to make their first appearance and push at the boundaries of society's ways of thinking.

However, the eventual collapse of Ancient society led to these ideas being lost for centuries. The new Christian Catholic religion, which dominated Europe from the fourth century, limited attempts to understand the world in the feudal society that emerged.

Scholasticism

In the twelfth century the works of the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle were rediscovered. Many of his works were potentially very useful and were winning followers. Aristotle was a pioneer of a proto-scientific method. He collected observations, albeit flawed and superficial observations, to inform his theories. This was seen

as a threat to Catholicism because it suggested knowledge could be acquired other than by divine revelation – not to mention Aristotle was a pantheist (a believer in many gods)! The Italian feudal lord and Catholic ideologue Thomas Aquinas 'Christianized' Aristotle's ideas in the philosophy called ***scholasticism***. This was based on a mixture of religious idealism and the static labels of formal logic and became an important ideological weapon in legitimizing and defending the feudal ruling class of kings and landowners.

With Aristotle's 'first cause' reinterpreted as the Catholic God, Scholasticism taught that it was necessary to ***work things out*** not to ***find things out***. Through Christian scripture all was revealed. Therefore a comfortable seat in an ivory tower was the only 'tool' needed to understand the world. If the world outside the ivory tower contradicted what the scholastics had 'worked out' through the study of scripture and contemplation of God it was simply ignored – it was the world that was 'wrong'. This is similar to someone today who argues that "human nature is greedy" and continues to insist on this view even when shown hundreds of examples of generosity and solidarity. The relationship between the world and our thoughts remained upside down.

The Scientific Revolution

The seventeenth century Scientific Revolution in Europe began to challenge this way of thinking about the world. Just as in Miletus thousands of years before, seventeenth century Europe was going through a period of social upheaval. The proto-capitalist class of merchants was emerging as a powerful force in society but were coming into conflict with the feudal ruling class of kings and lords. The seventeenth century saw revolution and counter-revolution between these classes disguised as religious conflicts in the English Civil War and the European Thirty Years War.

Already, the proto-capitalist class had re-invented Christianity in the new Protestant religion which challenged the Catholic Church and its philosophical defence of the feudal ruling class as 'divinely ordained'. In its place Protestantism put forward the possibility of a personal relationship with God unmediated by the Catholic hierarchy. This breach in the ideological defences of feudal society suggested that everything that was taught by the Catholic Church should be looked at anew. Whilst the thinkers of the Scientific Revolution never challenged the idea of a God, albeit a reinvented God, they no longer accepted the Catholic dogma which taught Scholasticism as the only way to understand the world.

Materialism re-emerged in the Scientific Revolution but with the new idea that observation could tell us important things about the world around us that could not be 'worked out' from an ivory tower. The invention of the telescope and the microscope and other scientific instruments allowed more detailed and precise observations of nature. The place of the Earth within the solar system was explained and microbes, the tiny animals that cause illnesses, were discovered.

Many of the proto-scientists who made these discoveries were of necessity also philosophers. In the seventeenth century, still dominated by the formal logic of Scholasticism, the new observations could not be explained by the old ways of thinking. Unless they were to be dismissed as 'wrong', the proto-scientists had to put forward ideas on the very nature of knowledge and human understanding. This is not dissimilar to the situation faced by Marxism today described in Part I.

However, the materialism that emerged from the Scientific Revolution, whilst a breakthrough, remained limited. It kept some of the limitations of the old ways of thinking. For example, it was a point of pride of the early scientists that they rejected theory. They did not think it was possible to try and connect their new observations in a larger theoretical framework. They studied things and not their connections.

This early materialism established that objective explanations for nature could be discovered. But it could still not really account for the processes of change in the world. That things changed on a basic level was not in question. But change was seen as mechanical. For example a model of the solar system was developed that explained that the sun, planets and moons worked like the cogs and wheels of a clock. It was not yet understood that the solar system was formed at a definite point in time billions of years ago out of the condensation of gases orbiting the sun. Nor was it understood that the solar system would cease to exist at a definite point in time billions of years in the future when the sun exhausts its fuel. This ***mechanical materialism*** allowed change in space but not in time and therefore only described the most superficial forms of change.

There was still space for God in the new mechanical materialism. God was now the 'great designer'. Once the world was set in motion it was left to run according to God's 'plan'. Modern versions of mechanical materialism include the 'intelligent design' argument that wrongly says God guided evolution to produce humans. But the materialism established in the scientific revolution, limited as it remained, had revolutionary implications.

It was in the next century, as the power and strength of the capitalist class grew that the new ways of thinking about nature were applied to society in the capitalist Enlightenment. Unsurprisingly, the capitalist class discovered that an 'objective' society would be one organised in their class interests. The capitalist class's 'point of view' on ideas of freedom, equality and democracy were turned into abstract ideas and elevated above society in a new philosophical idealism.

Kant & Hegel

Science would continue to push at the boundaries of mechanical materialism as new observations continued to be collected. For example the German philosopher Kant broke with the mechanical model of the solar system with the observation of nebulae (clouds of gas in space) and developed a theory to explain that as they condensed they could lead to the development of stars and solar systems.

In 1789 the capitalist class overthrew the feudal ruling class in France in the great French Revolution. This led to decades of revolution and counter-revolution across Europe. In this period of revolutionary change the German philosopher Hegel re-introduced the Ancient Greek idea of dialectics. The world was changing dramatically and that change needed explanation.

Unfortunately for Hegel, whilst he re-discovered dialectics he was not a materialist. He overcame Scholasticism's static labels by introducing dialectical laws that could describe change. But he did not look for an objective explanation for dialectical ideas in the objective processes of change in nature and society. Hegel believed that dialectical ideas were the cause of change. In other words, Hegel's dialectics were idealist. He replaced God with an "idea" existing somewhere 'beyond' the physical world.

Marx & Engels

In his youth Marx was a 'Young Hegelian' and followed the ideas of Hegel. But he came to realise the limitations of Hegel's philosophy. The key breakthrough that Marx and his co-thinker Frederich Engels made was to take Hegel's dialectic and "stand it on its head". In other words they made dialectics materialist. Marx and Engels explained that the role of dialectical thought should be to describe change in the world and therefore help us understand it. In ***dialectical materialism*** Marx and Engels brought materialism and dialectics together. The weaknesses of these two ideas when standing alone were corrected. It was on the basis of this new philosophy, or ***new method of analysis***, that Marx and Engels were able to go on to develop the scientific analysis of society outlined in Part I.

This breakthrough was not dependent entirely on the 'genius' of Marx and Engels, brilliant as they undoubtedly were. Breakthroughs in the scientific understanding of nature had continued since the Scientific Revolution allowing more and more of the world to be explained objectively. For example Darwin's theory of evolution could now explain change in the animal kingdom overturning a central idea of Scholasticism that taught that animal 'forms' were eternal. That nature could be accurately described with dialectics was becoming ever more obvious.

As with the previous periods of history described above, Marx and Engels were living in a period of revolution and counter-revolution. Disappointment in the wake of the French Revolution had set in when the capitalist Enlightenment ideas of 'liberty' in practice only meant 'liberty' for the capitalists. The working class, the poor, women and black slaves were all still excluded. This led to the emergence of the 'Utopian Socialists' in France and Britain. Just as the capitalist Enlightenment philosophers believed that an 'objectively' organised society would be one organised in the interests of the capitalist class, the Utopian Socialists believed that an 'objective' society would be one organised in the interests of the working class. They thought they could educate the capitalist class about the errors of their ways and help them see 'reason'. They were surprised when the capitalist class's 'point of view' proved immune to persuasion! This is similar to middle class reformists today who think that the capitalist class can be persuaded to treat workers more fairly because it is the "right thing to do".

But the answer to this 'socialist idealism' was being provided by the emergence of the working class as an independent ***political*** force in society. They could speak for themselves! The Chartist movement developed in Britain from the late 1830s demanding political rights for the working class. Strikes developed in the industrial cities in France. Marx and Engels were drawing the conclusion that socialism could only be created by the struggle of the working class against the capitalist class, not by appeals to the capitalist's 'better side'. As Marx and Engels explained in the opening line of *The Communist Manifesto*, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." The 1848 revolutions, the same year in which Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, confirmed this prediction. The working class would increasingly begin to stand on its own, no longer hitched to the capitalist class in the struggle against the feudal ruling class.

All of these developments in society put Marx and Engels' philosophical breakthrough in reach for the first time in human history.

Part V
Summary

The need for the working class to organise a ***revolutionary party*** to overthrow capitalism and create a socialist society is the most important conclusion of Marxism. If dialectical materialism and its tools of dialectical thought allow us to answer the question of '***why?***' things are the way they are, this conclusion, drawn from the experience of working class struggle, answers '***how?***' we will change society. The revolutionary theory of Marxism gives us the firmest foundation for this task. We can make predictions about future developments based on a scientific examination of the past and present. In other words we can develop political ***perspectives*** to base our political programme and strategy and tactics for the class struggle on.

By arming us with an understanding of the objective basis for the struggle for socialism Marxism helps to protect us from being swept away by the inevitable ups and downs of the class struggle. For example, a temporary demoralisation of the working class in the face of a defeat. Whilst working class consciousness is a crucial factor in the struggle for socialism, ultimately the struggle is not based on subjective 'points of view' but on the objective contradictions of capitalism. These contradictions cannot help but find an expression in the consciousness of the working class. By acting as the working class's historical memory it is the task of the revolutionary party to help speed-up the drawing of revolutionary conclusions and point out in the clearest way the tasks necessary to change society.

If humans are "nature made conscious", as Hegel said, then Marxism allows us to develop that consciousness to its fullest. We often refer to the revolutionary party as "the subjective factor" in history. But it is not subjective in the unconscious sense that we looked at in Part I. The revolutionary party is fully able to objectively explain and understand its role in changing society. On the basis of that understanding, our subjective 'points of view' and the actions that flow from them acquire a new power and take on a revolutionary character. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx explained that, "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority." It is Marxism that allows this movement of the "immense majority" to be truly "self-conscious".

A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy



by Karl Marx, 1859

The following is an extract from Marx's preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production.

The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

The mode of production in material life determines the social, political and intellectual life processes in general.

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production, these relations turn into their fetters.

Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.

In considering such transformations, a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can he determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or Philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.

Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production.

No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed; and new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore, mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the task itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.

The Materialist Conception of History

by Frederich Engels, 1890



The following is an extract from a letter written in London by Frederich Engels on September 21, 1890 to Joseph Bloch, the editor of a socialist journal.

According to the materialist conception of history the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted.

If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase.

The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc. – forms of law – and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the combatants: political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma – also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.

There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (i.e., of things and events, whose inner connection is so remote or impossible to prove that we regard it as absent so and can neglect it) the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history one chose would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree.

We make our own history, but in the first place under very definite presuppositions and conditions. Among these the economic ones are finally decisive. But the political, etc, ones, and indeed even the traditions which haunt human minds also play a part, although not the decisive one…

…In the second place, however, history makes itself in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills, of which each again has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life. Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces, an infinite series of parallelograms of forces which give rise to one resultant-the historical event. This again may itself be viewed as the product of a power which, taken as a whole, works unconsciously and without volition.

For what each individual wills, is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed. Thus past history proceeds in the manner of a natural process, and is also essentially subject to the same laws of movement. But from the fact that individual wills – of which each desires what he is impelled to by his physical constitution and external -- in the last resort economic -- circumstances (either his own personal circumstances or those of society in general) – do not attain what they want, but are merged into a collective mean, a common resultant, it must not be concluded that their value equals zero. On the contrary, each contributes to the resultant and is to this degree involved in it.

I would ask you to study this theory further from its original sources and not at second-hand; it is really much easier. Marx hardly wrote anything in which it did not play a part. But especially *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* is a most excellent example of its application. There are also many allusions in *Capital*. Then I may also direct you to my writings, *Herr Eugen Duhring's Revolution in Science* and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, in which I have given the most detailed account of historical materialism which, so far as I know, exists.

Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that younger writers sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasize this main principle in opposition to our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the lace or the opportunity to allow the other elements involved in the interaction to come into their rights.

But when it was a case of presenting a section of history, that is of a practical application, the thing was different and there no error was possible. Unfortunately, however, it happens only too often that people think they have fully understood a theory and can apply it without more ado from the moment they have mastered its main principles, and those even not always correctly. And I cannot exempt many of the more recent "Marxists" from this reproach, for the most wonderful rubbish has been produced from this quarter too.

Political Education Programme

MARXIST WORKERS PARTY

Topic 1
Introduction to Marxism: who were Marx & Engels and what did they say?
Reading 1: Marx the Revolutionary (MWT)
Reading 2: The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism (Lenin)
Reading 3: Ninety Years of the Communist Manifesto (Trotsky)
Reading 4: The Communist Manifesto, Chapters 1 and 2 (Marx & Engels)

Topic 2
How do Marxists understand the world? Marxism's dialectical and historical materialism
Reading 1: Dialectical Materialism: the Foundation of Revolutionary Theory (MWP)
Reading 2: The Preface to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" (Marx)
Reading 3: The Materialist Conception of History (Engels)
Reading 4: How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, Chapter 2 (Rodney)

Topic 3
How is the working class exploited? Introduction to Marxist economics
Reading 1: Capitalism's Big Con: Understanding Marxist Economics (CWI)
Reading 2: Value, Price and Profit (Marx)
Reading 3: Capital, selected chapters (Marx)

Topic 4
Social grants & police brutality – the Marxist theory of the State
Reading 1: The State (Lenin)
Reading 2: The State and Revolution, extracts (Lenin)
Reading 3: Should We Participate in Bourgeois Parliaments? (Lenin)

Topic 5
How can we win the working class to revolutionary socialism? Trotsky's Transitional Programme
Reading 1: The Transitional Programme (Trotsky)
Reading 2: Founding the Fourth International (CWI)
Reading 3: On the Radicalisation of the Masses (Trotsky)

Topic 6
When the working class took power The lessons of the Russian Revolution
Reading 1: The Russian Revolution and the Rise of Stalinism (MWT)
Reading 2: The Lessons of October (Trotsky)

Topic 7
The rise and fall of Stalinism: how and why did the bureaucratic dictatorship fail?
Reading 1: The Rise of Stalinism, (MWT)
Reading 2: The Nature of the Soviet Regime, (MWT)
Reading 3: The Crisis of the Stalinist States, (MWT)
Reading 4: From Perestroika to Capitalist Restoration (CWI)

Topic 8
The socialist revolution in the neo-colonial world – Trotsky's Permanent Revolution vs the SACP's National Democratic Revolution
Reading 1: The Theory of the Permanent Revolution (MWT)
Reading 2: The "New" SACP's Explanation of Stalinism (MWT)
Reading 3: Results & Prospects (Trotsky)
Reading 4: The Right of Nations to Self-Determination (Lenin)

Topic 9
Lenin's theory of imperialism: why was Africa colonized and how is it exploited today?
Reading 1: Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism (Lenin)
Reading 2: The Colonial Revolution (MWT)
Reading 3: A History of Pan-African Revolt, excerpts (CLR James)
Reading 4: Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions (Lenin)

Topic 10
Apartheid and the liberation struggle
Reading 1: The Nature and Tasks of the Revolution (MWT)
Reading 2: Lessons of the 1950s (MWT)
Reading 3: The Soweto Uprising (MWT/MWP)
Reading 4: Tasks of the South African Revolution (MWT)
Reading 5: Letter to South African Revolutionaries (Trotsky)

Topic 11
Africanism vs. Marxism
Reading 1: Class & Race: Marxism, Racism and the Class Struggle (MWP)
Reading 2: Africanism vs. Marxism (MWP)
Reading 3: The Third International After Lenin, selected chapters (Trotsky)
Reading 4: African Socialism Revisited (Nkrumah)

Topic 12
The revolutionary party & democratic centralism – organising a Bolshevik party
Reading 1: Our Organising Principles (MWP)
Reading 2: A Letter to a French Syndicalist (Trotsky)
Reading 3: The Class, the Party and the Leadership (Trotsky)
Reading 4: Tactics & Revolution, selected articles (Lenin & Trotsky)

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