

Dialectical Materialism

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It was probably the German worker Joseph Dietzgen who first put together the words dialectics and materialism and designated dialectical materialism as the new philosophy of the proletariat. Marx and Engels recognized in this combination the correct expression of what constituted their "best tool," their "sharpest weapon": Engels took it up in his book *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of German Classical Philosophy* (the title of the fourth section is Dialectical Materialism). One can consider that from this moment, even before Plekhanov and Lenin spoke of "dialectical materialism," it rigorously designated Marxist philosophy.

I. Dialectical Materialism, Historical Materialism and the Proletarian Conception of the World

Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of History:

The Marxist doctrine is first of all a science to which Marx gave the name historical materialism. This science, of which *Capital* presents the first objective realization, in the form of a systematic exposition, is a science in the strict sense, although in an absolutely new sense: it is defined in relation to a material object; it determines the limits and the laws which permit it to constitute that material object as an object of knowledge, by means of practical demonstration and verification.

This object is not "history" in the empirical sense, the evolution of human societies, the "past," but the totality of modes of production which have appeared (and will appear) in history, their function and the forms of transition form one mode of production to another. The science of history presents itself as the theory of modes of production because it is "the mode of production of material life which conditions the process of social, political and intellectual life in general." (Marx). Even if Marx in *Capital* only analysed the laws of operation of the capitalist mode of production, essentially present in the structure of *Capital*, by giving short and incomplete indications of other modes of production, the science which he inaugurated rightfully renders account of all the historical forms of production, thus of all social formations.

One can then ask how historical materialism distinguishes itself from theories of universal history, in other words from philosophies of history, particularly those developed in the nineteenth century, the model of which was Hegel's. The confusion of the Marxist science with philosophies of history has been nurtured by interpretations which identify the scientific work of Marx with a kind of consciousness of the historical "present." From this they say that the science of history is represented in *Capital* by a theory of the capitalist mode of production, in other words, of the mode of production dominant in the societies of which Marx was a contemporary. From here, to conceive of historical materialism as only

the expression of this "present," the historical present of Marx himself, it is only a small step, easily taken. Then the work of Marx presents itself as a delayed application, a resurgence of the Hegelian conception of history: "consciousness by the present of itself;" History itself historical, it has as its only objective the epoch which saw its birth, it reflects it and gives it sense.

This historicist conception of historical materialism presents it as being only a philosophy: an expression of the times, and of a certain type of historical practice, it reflects their general orientation, it enables one to be aware of them, indeed to be disengaged from them, without one being able to discern in it what it takes from practice (determination of a manner of action) and what it takes from theory (knowledge of objective laws). Then Marxism is only a philosophy of historical practice.

What this interpretation fails to recognize is above all the scientific status of the theory in *Capital*. It does not express an epoch's consciousness of itself (it is sufficient, to be convinced of this, to know how Marx's epoch received it), but the necessary knowledge of a determinate class which alone is capable of using it in the practice of transforming the world. From specific demonstrations in *Capital* the general concepts and methods can be extracted which permit the analysis, equally specific, of all the modes of production, without being limited in any arbitrary time frame; without being widened to a timeless frame, eternal and finalized, of universal history which would give an unavoidable ("fatal") framework to the progressive moments of its realization. If this true knowledge of the laws of history can only develop when articulated on a concrete political practice, that of the proletariat, the viewpoint of which it represents in history of the sciences, it cannot be collapsed into that practice. The problem of the relation of Marxist science to philosophy and to revolutionary practice is then apparent.

The Death of Philosophy:

In a cursory reading of the works of Marx himself the question of the relation between the science of history and philosophy seems to resolve itself very simply and very brutally. Historical materialism is not a philosophy because it suppresses philosophy. This suppression has been interpreted successively as a realization, as a liquidation, and as a limitation.

The realization of philosophy in political action, in the proletariat, in "practice" in general, which reduces Marxism to a form among others of utopian socialism. This is the philosophical interpretation running through the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point however is to change it."

The liquidation of philosophy: this is the apparent lesson of the *German Ideology* where, by their own admission, Marx and Engels "settled accounts with their former philosophical consciences." (Marx, Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). A liquidation so radical that it was not made public: "We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of mice all the more willingly since we had achieved our main purpose: self-clarification." The new rigorous science of history was to permit the reduction of ideas to facts of which they were the representation: if one knows how to speak the fact themselves one can avoid detouring through the ideologies which present them inside out, one can do away with philosophy, generator of illusions to the degree to which it pretends to substitute itself for reality and impose on it its laws. This radical conception of the death of philosophy, which appeared in the work of Marx in 1845 seems definitive: after that date Marx no longer wrote on philosophy, although all the works of his youth were marked,

in contrast, by his classical education in philosophy; he consecrated all his time to the preparation of *Capital* and the organization of the workers' movement.

The limitation of philosophy: Marx's philosophical silence no longer had the sense which was anticipated in the *German Ideology*: if Marx himself never returned to philosophy except by allusion, it was with his agreement and certainly his collaboration that Engels did so (1873: the beginning of preparation of *Dialectics of Nature* which was never published; 1878: the publication of *Anti-Duhring*). Here it appears that philosophy must not be suppressed but limited: "The Marxist conception of history puts an end to philosophy in the realm of history, just as the dialectical conception of nature made all natural philosophy both unnecessary and impossible. It is no longer a question anywhere of inventing interconnections from out of our brains but of discovering them in the facts. For philosophy, which has been expelled from nature and from history, there remains only the realm of pure thought (so far as it is left): the theory of the laws of the thought process itself, logic and dialectics." (Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*).

In these conditions philosophy, along with the sciences of nature and of history from which it is separated received its own field (in contradiction to a thesis of the *German Ideology* which said: "philosophy ceases to have a milieu in which it exists in an autonomous manner) and a program. But at what a price! By the fact of the limitation which constitutes it as an autonomous discipline, it disappears as philosophy in order to become a science along side the others, the science of "pure" laws, of thought, the dialectic as logic.

The New Conception of the World:

Nevertheless Engels' philosophical work cannot be reduced to this definition, a definition which contradicts the Marxist conception of history, and yields to all the philosophical notions of a "science of sciences." Like most of the formulations present in the *German Ideology* it is only a symptom of the difficulty which one confronts in defining Marxist philosophy.

How did this difficulty arise? First, from the fact that Marxist philosophy was constituted after the science of history, therefore in an apparent lag in relation to the theoretical revolution effected by Marx: but it cannot be otherwise because there can be a new philosophy only on the basis of a new science. The constitution of historical materialism in the years 1850 to 1870 overturned the field of existing knowledge and this overthrow produced effects in philosophy. But such effects were not produced mechanically: they had to correctly reproduce the very particular conditions which had allowed for the development of a Marxist science of history: this science was only possible from the point of view of the proletariat, the only social class capable of appropriating historical materialism and using it to guide its revolutionary practice. Marxist philosophy first of all has as its objective the theoretical representation of the proletarian conception of the world.

According to Marx the dominant world view of an epoch is the world view of the dominant class: at the moment in which *Capital* was published it was the bourgeois conception of the world. But this conception can be dominant only in relation to another conception of the world, itself dominated, which is that of the proletariat. Lenin developed this distinction in his *Critical Notes on the National Question*: the dominant ideology of an epoch is realized in a definite system (and the philosophies which represent it are its most systematic representation) while the dominated world view only exists in the state of dispersed or implicit elements. If Marxist philosophy or dialectical materialism is a philosophy of a new type, it is because, drawing support from a science of which the adversaries of the proletariat

are ignorant (in every sense of the word), it is "proletarian ideology organized into a dominant ideology."

II. Dialectical Materialism and the History of Philosophy

The new exists only in relation to the old: therefore the question is immediately posed of the relationship of the new philosophy to those which preceded it. Dialectical materialism is not the death of philosophy, since it is still philosophy (if not "a" philosophy): in a certain way the history of philosophy continues with it. However it contributes in another way to break with that history since it puts an end to a certain type of philosopher, and rejects in its totality the philosophical tradition which preceded it.

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A Theory of Philosophy:

Nonetheless previous philosophy always remained an object of study for Marx, Engels and their successors. It is outside of this philosophy that dialectical materialism finds its basis but in the full knowledge of its nature and the distance which separates them. "In every epoch and also therefore in ours, theoretical thought is an historical product, which at different times assumes very different forms and, therewith, very different contents. The science of thought is therefore, like every other, a historical science, the science of the historical development of human thought." (Engels, old preface to *Anti-Duhring*).

The philosophies which represent the dominant ideologies of class societies are not illusions, appearances which only need to be criticised for them to disappear. They are material constituent elements of the structure of the societies in which they appear such that they can be scientifically analysed, in their limits and in their specificity. Philosophical analysis then coincides with historical analysis: it is necessary to determine the material conditions, non-"philosophical" by definition, in which certain philosophical effects are required and are themselves effective.

The sense of the traditional question: "what is philosophy?" is thus completely modified. It ceases to be a philosophical question, the first question of philosophy, and becomes a scientific question, a question of historical materialism, which treats philosophy as a material element of the history of societies. Since this philosophical activity does not develop in an autonomous atmosphere, "the pure element of thought," it is dependent on a non-philosophical theory. This theory does not supercede philosophy, nor does it take its place, it is an integral part of historical materialism, and by this is distinct form dialectical materialism. But the existence of this theory contributes, from its first results, to transform the practice of philosophy: it gives it a new field of application and a new content.

III. The Theses of Dialectical Materialism

Dialectical materialism can be presented by means of several elementary theses: the first affirms that the entire history of philosophy is determined by the struggle between two tendencies, two camps: materialism and idealism.

Materialism and Idealism:

The history of philosophy is, in appearance, the succession and contradiction of philosophical systems: unlimited diversity which cannot be reduced to a principle of explanation unless that principle substitutes itself for philosophy itself, to represent it in its totality (this is what Hegel did in inventing a system which replaces and comprehends all the others). This diversity in the history of philosophy is only on the surface: it hides an extremely simple process, which is the contradiction between two principles: the idealist principle and the materialist principle.

A preliminary remark is necessary: what enables us to understand philosophical history is the contradiction between two principles and not the struggle between systems of doctrines. The existence of philosophy in the form of systems is an effect of the domination of the idealist point of view over the materialist point of view. The domination of the materialist point of view would surely do away with philosophy as a system and give it a radically new form.

A second remark: the two principles realize (or represent) two points of view, two camps. In the final analysis these two viewpoints are those of antagonistic social classes: this is what enables us to understand that through all the history of class societies, in which new forms of class exploitation have succeeded one another, the same contradiction has been at work in the history of philosophy. The play of this struggle--the material struggle and the non-material conflict of ideas which leads to the absolute domination of one viewpoint over another--excludes the possibility of a "third way": the contradiction cannot be resolved by the synthesis of the two elements which compose it. Any such synthesis, if it is present, can only be a camouflaged version of idealism, and must be denounced as such (thus Duhring was criticised by Engels, the empirio-criticismists criticised by Lenin). The philosophical struggle cannot be compromised: it represents a "party position" in the domain of theory. (See Lenin: *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, chapter four).

Being and Consciousness:

The second thesis of dialectical materialism consists of the affirmation of the primacy and independence of the real in relation to knowledge of it, of being in relation to thought: "Materialism in general recognizes that real objective being (matter) is independent of consciousness, of sensations, of human experience. Historical materialism admits that social existence is independent of the social consciousness of humanity. In both cases consciousness is only the reflection of being, at best an approximately true (adequate, perfectly exact) reflection of it." (Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, chapter six).

The world is material; it is the only reality: thought is itself a material process, it does not develop in an autonomous space, it only has sense in relation to other material processes, of which it is so much knowledge, the reflection of them.

This necessitates an initial clarification: the real is independent of consciousness; it invariably exists outside of it. This does not mean that dialectical materialism institutes a new form of dualism: on the one side being, on the other consciousness. The independence of being in relation to consciousness is not reciprocal: consciousness is not independent of being, on the contrary, it is dependent on it, in its content and in its forms.

A second remark: the fundamental thesis of materialism: matter is anterior to thought, expresses the simple but immutable principle of matter as that to which all reality in the last instance is reducible. This philosophical category of matter, which has an absolute value, cannot be confused with the concepts of matter which the history of the natural sciences has produced and whose validity is always relative to the given state of knowledge. This is precisely why such a category is inseparable from transformations in our knowledge of nature and history because it permits the representation of what is absolute in this knowledge: the objectivity which manifests itself in its successive relative stages.

A third remark: the notion of "reflection" does not introduce a supplementary philosophical category. It explains the relationship between being and consciousness in a particular context: "The movement of thought is only the reflection of real movement, transported and transposed into the brain of man." (Marx, *Capital*, volume one). This expresses at the same time the exteriority of being in relation to consciousness and the interiority of consciousness in relation to being. It must not be interpreted mechanically: it does not signify that consciousness imitates being, that it repeats it, in some automatic manner. At the same time there is not an identity between the terms which it connects, for it indicates a separation, a difference: "The image can reflect more or less faithfully the object, but it is absurd to speak here of an identity." (Lenin). The forms of consciousness have specified effects; they cannot be reduced to the conditions which produce them. A fortiori the idea of reflection is not the germ, or the watchword of a theory of knowledge, of a "scientific" theory of "mechanism" or "processes" (psychological, sociological, epistemological) of knowledge. Such a theory is totally excluded by dialectical materialism.

Metaphysics and Dialectics:

Dialectical materialism, in the first place, is inseparable from the affirmation of the dialectical character of matter. The essential property of matter is movement: it is only itself in its transformation, its alteration. This means that matter is not a substance, "nature" as a finished and eternal totality, but a process: "Nature in the final instance proceeds dialectically and not metaphysically; it does not move in an eternally identical circle which perpetually repeats itself, for it knows a real history." (Engels).

The direct opposite of the dialectic is metaphysics. Metaphysics conceptualizes finished entities, eternal objects, sufficient in themselves, incapable of transformation; it reflects them as detached, isolated from each other, that is to say, as absolutes. The metaphysical conception of matter is therefore ahistorical, unilateral. It culminates in a mechanical representation of nature and it sees there only an aggregation, an arrangement of parts or qualities, independent and unalterable; it reduces it to an abstract composition. Metaphysical materialism makes nature an idea: it is idealism.

The dialectic is defined as the opposite of metaphysics: no natural phenomenon can be understood dialectically if one is conscious of it in isolation, outside of the organic relations which link it to other phenomena: it has no existence outside of these relations which engage it in an incessant process of transformation. In this way the barrier which separated nature and history in classical philosophy is abolished: there is in history only natural facts and reciprocally everything in nature is historical.

Consequently the dialectic is not only a procedure, a method of representing matter: it is not itself an abstraction, an approach imposed on nature and which can be considered independently of it. "The fundamental principle of the dialectic is that abstract truth does not exist, the truth is always concrete." (Lenin).

The Problem of Contradiction:

The fourth thesis of dialectical materialism can be formulated beginning with the concept of contradiction. "In its proper sense the dialectic is the study on contradiction in the very essence of things." (Lenin, *The Philosophical Notebooks*). "Dialectics is the teaching which shows how opposites can be and how they happen to be (how they become) identical, under what conditions they are identical, becoming transformed into one another, why the human mind should grasp these opposites not as dead rigid but as living, conditional, mobile, becoming transformed into one another." (*Ibid.*). "Contradiction is present in the process of development of all things; it permeates the process of development of each thing from beginning to end." (Mao Tsetung, *On Contradiction*).

This does not mean that the dialectic is reducible to a theory, a metaphysics of the contradiction. Only concrete, interdependent contradictions exist; each corresponding to specific conditions. "In contradictions the universal exists in the particular...the particular is born out of the fact that each contradiction has its own specific character." (Mao Tsetung). Thus each contradiction is concrete or material: the contradiction is not between ideas but between things; it is identical with matter itself; an idealist dialectic is necessarily metaphysical.

The law of contradiction implies the existence of opposites. They oppose each other, they exclude each other: all reality, all "unity" is determined by the concrete conditions of this struggle; "one divides into two." Reciprocally the opposites cannot exist in isolation from each other: they mutually condition each other, transform themselves into each other, under determinant conditions: a unity of opposites. "It is because the unity of opposites obtains only in given conditions that we have said unity is conditional and relative. We may add that the struggle between opposites permeates a process from beginning to end and makes one process transform itself into another, that it is ubiquitous, and that struggle is therefore unconditional and absolute." (Mao Tsetung). Nature and history can no longer be reduced to a unique and unifying principle which seeks to put an end to contradictions and would interrupt them in the movement of transformation.

The Criteria of Practice:

The fifth thesis of dialectical materialism bears on the problem of practice. "Practice is higher than (theoretical) knowledge, for it has not only the dignity of universality, but also of immediate actuality." (Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*). "The dialectical materialist theory of knowledge places practice in the primary position, holding that human knowledge can in no way be separated from practice and repudiating all the erroneous theories which deny the importance of practice or separate knowledge from practice." (Mao Tsetung, *On Practice*). Objective truth exists only in relation to material reality: this relationship is provided by concrete social practice, which therefore serves as the foundation or criteria of knowledge.

Knowledge begins with practice, it must return to practice: a theory has objective significance only if it is united with a practice which it organizes and transforms. Marxist theory presents us with an excellent example of this since it is linked to the revolutionary workers' movement in serving to guide it: "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." (Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*).

The classical presentation of theory and practice is thus completely overturned: there is no longer the separation of theory and practice, the subordination of practice to theory as well as the subordination of theory to practice, the union of theory and practice. Theory no longer has an independent status: like consciousness, which is only a form of matter, it is only a practice among other, linked to them in the conditions of a concrete conjuncture.

The conditions which determine theory (knowledge) are practices. Inasmuch as theory is itself a process, a practice, the conditions which determine it are found within theory itself. This is why the thesis of the criteria of practice stands in opposition to pragmatism, which, resting on the idealist ideological notion of the separation between theory and practice, assigns to theory criteria external to its practice. The criteria of truth.

What is new in Marxist philosophy? It demarcates itself not only from other philosophies by the principles which enable it to constitute itself, but above all by the use it makes of these principles and by the function which it attributes to them: the transformation of its content coincides with a transformation of the form and the status of philosophy.

The principles of dialectical materialism in fact concentrate within them all theoretical truth or validity. They are indemonstrable, irreducible theses: they do not found a new philosophical system, that is to say an assemblage of complete arguments, autonomous, closed, "true," within ideal limits purely theoretical, which is fixed to its demonstration. All the truth of the theses of dialectical materialism lies in their objective, which is to render possible, in the domain of the constituted sciences and in that of ideologies, the adoption of a position, a demarcation between the viewpoints of the two great antagonistic classes.

Thus explained the initially negative, critical, polemical character of this philosophy which presents itself not as a doctrine, but which applies itself from the beginning to concrete situations, in disentangling in theoretical or ideological production, that which corresponds to materialism and dialectics, and that which corresponds to idealism and metaphysics, and in unmasking the forms of compromise which pretend to be above these distinctions.

From this point on philosophy ceases to be a "theory" along side of others: it concretely assures the unity of theory and practice, by putting itself in the service of practice, by becoming itself a direct practice. This is the new function of the philosophy of the proletariat: to represent the revolutionary practice of the proletariat in the domain of theory.