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# On dialectics and Marxism: a philosophy for today.



George Plekhanov

'Dialectical materialism is more than a philosophical system it is a philosophy of action.'

- George Plekhanov.

Here is an explanation of the philosophical concepts which inspired and re-enforced much of the confrontation which occurred between rightist members of staff and myself. The theoreticians of the bourgeoisie, in their many manifestations from the academic to that of the padre who condones imperialism, exhibit a single and constant intellectual position in their opposition to the

philosophical system of the oppressed which is dialectical materialism. The bourgeoisie are compelled to do so by their objective position in the class system of 'late-capitalism'. They are obliged not only to accumulate Capital but must, therefore, also reproduce the system of ideas. This is because ideas are created by the reproduction of the economic or material life of capitalism. In the same way the proletariat are placed in opposition to capitalism and its dominant ideas because they are economically exploited and also oppressed by bourgeois ideology. The masses are therefore drawn into opposition against capitalism and, ultimately, they are the agents of its overthrow:

'The emancipation of the proletariat is the task of the proletariat.'

- Karl Marx

Hence the philosophy of the working class can only be forged in the furnace of the class struggle and its theoreticians must move with the motion of historical necessity which is the inevitability of proletarian revolution. So we can see how Marxist philosophy did not materialise in the minds of Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotsky spontaneously, but rather it was the consequence of the proletariat and its intellectuals learning the lessons of the class struggle.



Trotsky

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), one of a vanguard of Marxist thinkers, maintained that in the process of the development of human ideas:

'Two systems of logic are worthy of attention; the logic of Aristotle (formal logic) and the logic of Hegel (dialectical logic).

- Leon Trotsky.

More than 2,000 years ago Greek philosophers who were exploring the human mind and the natural world discovered the dialectic:

'The ancient Greeks were all natural-born dialecticians and had already analysed the most essential forms of dialectical thought'.

- Fredrick Engels.



Heraclitus

This is clearly illustrated in the work of Heraclitus (540-480BC) who argued that:

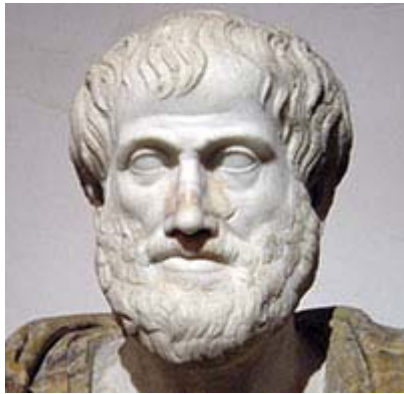
'Everything is and is not, for everything is fluid, is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away'.

- Heraclitus.

We can locate the essence of dialectics, which is impermanence, here in the thought of Heraclitus.

The concept of 'logic' which is derived from the Greek 'logos' meaning 'word' or 'reason' formed the basis on which Aristotle (384-322 BC) constructed the model of formal logic. This became the dominant form for much human intellectual endeavour. He discerned three main laws in formal logic:

- 1) The Law of identity:  $A=A$ .
- 2) The Law of contradiction: A cannot be A and non-A.
- 3) The Law of the excluded middle: A is either A or non-A.



Aristotle

These three principles of logic are the foundation of modern science and mathematics. Aristotle's model of logic dominated Western thought intermittently for about 2,000 years and appears to be 'common sense'. But 'common sense' does not look below the surface appearance of nature and the processes of History. We can begin to perceive the limitations of formal logic and to become aware of the scope of dialectical logic. As Trotsky commented:

'Dialectical understanding is not limited to the problems of daily life, but attempts to

arrive at an understanding of a more complicated and drawn-out process. Dialectical and formal logic bear a relationship similar to that between higher and lower mathematics'.

- Leon Trotsky.

The limitations of formal logic or what Trotsky sometimes called 'vulgar thought' became clear with the rise of modern science. An enormous blow to the bourgeoisie and their lackeys was Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. This theory proved that one species can be transformed into another and that therefore qualitative change outside the static categories of formal logic takes place. Trotsky commented:

'The fundamental flaw in vulgar thought lies in the fact that it wishes to content itself with motionless imprints of reality which consists of eternal motion.'

- Leon Trotsky.

Therefore modern science needed a philosophical system to create a theoretical model to explain its discoveries, this theory is dialectical materialism.

The roots of modern dialectics lie in radical German philosophy which had been inspired by the French revolution of 1789 and the collapse of the old order. The major thinker of this progressive wave was

George F. Hegel G (1770-1831). He studied the Greek dialecticians and combined their insight about the transitory and interconnected nature of reality with German *naturphilosophie* or 'Philosophy of Nature'. His orientation was essentially one of metaphysics i.e. he saw reality as 'ideas' or 'spirit' rather than 'matter in motion'. However Hegel's philosophy of dialectics challenged the mechanistic ideas about motion which had become dominant. For Hegel there were three stages in the dialectical process:

- 1) Simple unity, the object before any change.
- 2) The negation, this is when the object creates its opposite.
- 3) The negation of the negation when the opposites are reconciled in a higher synthesis.



Hegel

Hegel believed everything existed in the mind of God. His whole system was to show how these three moments of the dialectic, described above, are acted out by the 'Absolute Spirit' or 'Absolute Idea', which are ultimately terms for God, in History. The three stages described above became:

- 1) The simple unity of God.
- 2) God creating his negation which is Nature.
- 3) The unification of God and Nature through the development of human consciousness into a higher union.

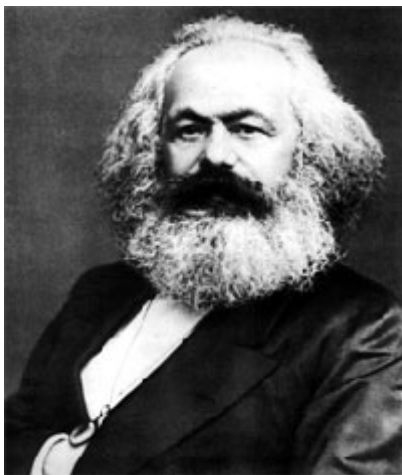
To understand this it is necessary to see it in the context of Hegel's ideas about the progress of human consciousness:

- 1) The simple unity of the isolated human mind.
- 2) The separation of the human mind from nature which Hegel called alienation.
- 3) Unification of the human mind with nature in the higher synthesis with the 'Absolute Spirit' or God.

Interestingly Hegel believed that this higher synthesis of the human mind, Nature and the 'Absolute Spirit' was made possible by his philosophical system. So we can see how Hegel, as a result of the rise of radical German philosophy which was influenced by revolutionary France, created a system of ideas which transcended the limitations of formal logic and 'vulgar thought', but:

'Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought, the real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head'.

- Karl Marx.



Karl Marx

This means that for Marx (1818-1883) reality did not reside in thought or spirit but in the world we see around us i.e. 'outside the head'.

Hegel had advanced the concept of the dialectic; however it was with Marx's critique of Hegel that a major leap in philosophy took place. Marx said:

'The dialectic is standing on its head. It must be inverted in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell'.

- Karl Marx.

It was with this analysis that Marx created the flowering of ideas which is dialectical materialism. This is the philosophy that every class-conscious worker needs in his or her daily battle with bourgeois ideology and is the system of ideas that prepares the path for worker's revolution.

Three basic laws are at the core of dialectical materialism and as a whole they form a coherent system. They comprise of:

'The general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought'.

- Fredrick Engels.

1) The Law of the Unity and Struggle of Opposites.



Lenin

Lenin (1870-1924) summed this up:

'The condition for the knowledge of all processes of life of the world ...in their real life is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites.'

- V.I.Lenin.

Let us consider two consequences of this:

a) 'non-being' must contain its opposite 'being' within itself, in the same way 'being' must contain 'non-being'. Therefore the bourgeois argument for the necessity of a 'First Cause' to set the

clockwork of the universe in motion is unnecessary because 'non-being' or 'nothing' created its opposite 'being' or 'existence' at the beginning of Time.

b) In capitalism the bourgeois and the proletariat are bound together by the system, yet they also exist as material and antagonistic opposites which creates the class struggle.

2) The Law of the Transformation of Quantity into Quality.



Engels

Engels (1820-1895) defines this law:

'We could express this by saying that

in nature...qualitative changes can only

happen with the quantitative addition or

subtraction of motion'.

- Fredrick Engels.

An example of this would be that when heat is applied to water and the temperature of the water changes a quantitative change takes place, but when the water becomes steam a qualitative transformation has taken place. Similarly we can see how a series of quantitative changes takes place in a capitalist society e.g. trade union struggles and how these inevitably lead to a 'dialectical leap' or qualitative change i.e. proletarian revolution. Learning from the lessons of History Lenin developed this position:

'Capitalism creates its own gravedigger, itself



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creates the elements for a new system...without

a 'leap' these individual elements change nothing'.

- V.I. Lenin.

Hence Lenin ascertained that there is no reformist path to socialism, there must be a 'leap', a revolution.

### 3) The Law of the Negation of the Negation.

In capitalism a process called the 'negation of the negation' takes place. This essentially means that the 'thesis' or first aspect of a dialectical contradiction is not destroyed by its opposite or 'antithesis' and some aspects of both the 'thesis' and the 'antithesis' survive within a higher 'synthesis'. The 'negation' is in the class conflict between workers and bosses which creates the 'negation of the negation' that is proletarian revolution and socialism. The result of the 'negation of the negation' is a classless society, a society without contradictions. Marx examined the concept in Capital:

'The capitalist mode of appropriation is the first negation of individual private property based on one's labour. But capitalist production begets with the inevitability of a natural process its own negation. It is the negation of the negation.'

- Karl Marx.



Meinhof

What tactics should revolutionaries pursue? Ulrike Meinhof (1934-1975) argued in 1971:

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'That a pre-requisite for progress and an eventual  
victory of revolutionary forces is the armed struggle'.

- Ulrike Meinhof.

But today the conditions of the class struggle have changed and we must again win the battle of  
ideas, an ideological hegemony, to prepare for the inevitable revolution. Today:

'Dialectics are our sharpest weapons'.

- Fredrick Engels.