

Chapter 1.

Why Revolutionaries Need Marxism

Revolutionaries regard themselves first and foremost as practical people dedicated to changing the world. They are rightly suspicious of those who merely talk about the injustices of apartheid and the evils of capitalism and never seem to translate their words into action. "By their deeds ye shall know them" is an old saying which admirably echoes the emphasis which Marxists themselves place upon the importance of putting things into *practice*: of constantly testing everything we say and do according to the standards of real life itself. *Why then should we bother ourselves with the study of philosophy?*

Philosophy raises questions about the nature of the world, the concept of truth, the basis of morality, and above all, the relationship which exists between our ideas and objective reality: how can all this possibly help us in waging class struggle? After all, it was Marx himself who declared that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it"^[1], and there are those who claim that this supports the argument that since revolutionaries are concerned with *changing* the world, they can and should do away with philosophy altogether.

To show why philosophy is important and why we need to make a thorough study of Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism, in particular, we must first tackle the question of

(i) Revolution and the Need for Theory

Those who imagine that all revolutionaries need to do is *act*, forget that action on its own is not enough. (Strictly speaking, it is not even possible). No matter how passionately we hate oppression and wish to see things change, there is only one force capable of eliminating colonialism, capitalism and reaction, and that is the oppressed and exploited masses led by an *organisation* of revolutionaries. The organisation of a popular movement, the organisation of a disciplined communist party around a political programme able to unite and coordinate various forms of struggle and direct them towards a common goal, is essential.

Yet once we talk about a movement, a Party and a programme we are not simply talking about action, we are talking about action which has been *thought out*, for the only way in which anyone can plan activity and produce a programme is through revolutionary thinking — the development of revolutionary theory which, if it is properly worked out, does not hold back our practical activity but rather serves as a compass which enables us to move in the direction we want to go. This is why Lenin correctly argued in his classic work, *What Is To Be Done* that

the role of vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory^[2]

for the more difficult and dangerous the tasks facing revolutionaries, the more developed and carefully worked out their theoretical perspectives need to be. Take a way of illustrating this point, the South African Communist Party's programme, *The Road to South African Freedom*. While the iniquities of the whole apartheid system may be pretty obvious, the strategy and tactics needed to eliminate them, are not. The programme analyses the particular struggle in South Africa in the whole context of the African revolution; the special character of the colonial-type oppression from which the African, Coloured and Indian people in South Africa suffer; the role of the national democratic revolution as the vital first *step* along the road to socialism, and the importance of carrying through immediate proposals if a democratic South Africa is to be developed and consolidated. This programme is not simply the product of years of revolutionary experience in southern African conditions: it is the product of years of experience *translated into revolutionary theory* so that the people can be shown that the ideal of a democratic and liberated South Africa is not simply a beautiful dream but is a realistic and attainable objective which can be worked and planned for, step by step.

But if we require revolutionary theory so that, in Lenin's words, we can substitute "science for dreams,"^[3] why do we need a special philosophical outlook as well? Why do we need to base our theory upon the principles of *dialectical materialism* which is the only logical and consistent philosophy a communist can possibly hold?

To answer this question, it is important that we understand

(ii) Philosophy as the Basis of All Our Thinking

The construction of a theory is like the construction of a house; if it is to stay up, then

not only must the walls be sound, but also the foundations, and it is to the realm of philosophy we must turn if we want to make sure that our theory has strong foundations. For the truth is that *all* theory, even if it has only been worked out in relation to one particular problem, is rooted in philosophy, some overall view of the world, and even if we are unaware of the existence of this underlying “world outlook,” it is there nevertheless, serving as the basis, the very foundation upon which all thought and activity rest.

But why should this matter?

It matters because in the last analysis, policies and action which are based upon a false or inadequate philosophy can only lead us into defeat and despair, for even if we hit upon a particular policy which is correct in itself — for example, the need under South African conditions to conduct armed struggle — unless the philosophical basis of our policy is *also* correct, we will make serious mistakes in carrying it through.

To explain. Dialectical materialism as the philosophical outlook of the Communist Party, enables us, as *The Road to South African Freedom* puts it,

to understand the world as it really is — and how to change it.^[4]

And there are in fact two inter-related elements involved here:

firstly the need to understand the world as it really is — which is, broadly speaking, a *materialist* approach, *an* approach which treats the world as a material force in its own right that exists independently of what we may think it or like it to be; and

secondly the need to understand this material world, either in nature or society, *as a* world of interconnected change and development, a world of universal conflict and contradiction between what is old and dying and what is new and struggling to be born — an approach we call *dialectical*.^[5]

Fused together into a single philosophy, dialectics and materialism enable us to increasingly change the world once we have understood the laws of motion which are at work in its development. *Dialectics* alerts us to the need for change, *materialism* to the importance of bringing this change into line with the objective circumstances which actually prevail.

Supposing, for example, we misapply dialectical materialism by stressing dialectics at the expense of materialism, what is likely to happen? We will come to imagine, as ultra-leftists typically do, that our mere desire or “will” to change things is much more

important than the actual conditions which have to be changed. The result? A tendency to pay insufficient attention to the precise character of the situation in which we find ourselves, the kind of popular support which exists at a particular time for a particular action, the real balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy, etc.

This kind of mistake, though based in philosophy, may have and on occasion has had, practical consequences of the most damaging kind.

For example, on October 1, 1965, some leaders of the Indonesian Communist Party took part in a suicidal coup intended to oust reactionaries in the armed forces. Ignoring the real political conditions in the country and isolated from the broad masses both within and outside the party, the result was an unmitigated disaster. The right-wing were able to seize the initiative and unleash one of the worst waves of counter-revolutionary terror ever seen. Literally hundreds of thousands of communists and democrats lost their lives.

Our own movement in South Africa, initiating and guiding the transition to armed struggle in the early 1960's, failed to sufficiently fore-see and prepare for the enemy's viciously brutal response to the new methods of struggle, and our ranks suffered many a grievous loss at that time. The strategy and tactics were correct, and certainly not adventuristic, but in their execution, enthusiasm for action was not matched by accurate anticipation of the likely consequences.

But what of the opposite side of the problem, the tendency to stress the materialist element of our philosophy at the expense of the dialectical? This error arises out of a tendency to be confused over the question of

(iii) Philosophy and Our “Experience”

Materialism as a popular and democratic philosophy existed long before Marx and Engels developed it into a dialectical outlook. In its stress upon an independent and material world which ideas reflect, materialism accords with what is often called our “experience” or common sense — indeed, so much so, that some argue that “with all their years of political experience,” they don't need to worry about the principles of dialectical materialism as a guide to their struggles.

Yet while this experience is always valuable and certainly preferable to the fanciful notions which pseudo-revolutionaries may carry around in their heads, on its own it is by no means enough to ensure that our activities meet with success. Experience and common

sense may discourage revolutionaries from undertaking actions which are rash or ill-considered, but they may also prevent us from undertaking any revolutionary action at all!

For example, when in 1950 leading members of the Communist Party of South Africa decided in the face of the impending Suppression of Communism Act, that they had no alternative but to simply dissolve the party, some communists, both among the leadership and the rank and file, actually wrote off the possibility of forming a new party underground because of the dangers and difficulties this involved.

The point here is that if we stress the materialist component of our philosophy at the expense of the dialectical, the result will not be ultra-leftism but its twin opposite — right-wing opportunism: the tendency to overestimate the strength of the enemy so that the superficial appearances of the moment are mistaken for the deeper trends at work in historical reality. Indeed, legalistic illusions which stem from an insufficiently *dialectical* approach to politics, may even lead to the kind of unprincipled compromises which make short term gains, but weaken the movement as a whole. The willingness of Buthelezi and other former supporters of the liberation struggle to work within the Bantustan system is a different sort of example of this, for although it seems a “realistic” policy, it in fact involves underestimating the forces building up beneath the “surface” of South African society which will sweep the whole, rotten, fraudulent Bantustan scheme away. These forces beneath the surface can only be understood if we think both materialistically and dialectically so that we see the world in a process of constant change.

Of course, simply studying the theory of dialectical materialism will not in itself ensure that serious mistakes are not made, for the essence of Marxist philosophy is that it has to be *practically* applied. Errors of an ultra-leftist or right-opportunist kind arise not merely out of a failure to learn about dialectical materialism — they also arise out of the failure to get to grips with the question which must now be considered, that of

(iv) Philosophy and the Concrete Study of Concrete Conditions^[6]

What has been said so far about the importance of philosophy as a weapon in the class struggle should not be taken to mean (as the Maoists seem to think) that everything can be found in a little Red Book which instantly opens all doors with its simple answers.

Marxist philosophy must be understood as a *guide to action* and not as some kind of

self-contained system of ideas which can be used as a substitute for the actual task of carefully studying the real world. The general principles of dialectical materialism act as a framework to assist us in our search for the laws of development at work in a particular situation so that we become more sharply in tune with the precise features of objective reality and understand how they fluidly interrelate as a process of change. The stress placed upon the importance of the national liberation struggle as the *particular* form of the class struggle to be waged under present South African conditions is a good example of the creative application of Marxist philosophy to a specific situation. One of the great achievements of Communists like Moses Kotane was that he immediately grasped (as Dr. Yusuf Dadoo puts it)

the need to indigenise Marxism so as to give it meaning for the millions of our workers and peasants.^[7]

for it is the specific feature of the South African situation that there can be “no working class victory without black liberation and no black liberation without the destruction of capitalism in all its forms.”^[8] The general principles of Marxism-Leninism have to be concretely *applied* and it is simply not good enough to speak in the abstract about the contradiction between worker and capitalist as though this is all the class struggle involved!

Lenin put the question well when he said that

it is not enough to be a revolutionary and an adherent of socialism or a Communist in general. You must be able at each particular moment to find the particular link in the chain which you must grasp with all your might in order to hold the whole chain and to prepare firmly for the transition to the next link...^[9]

For this is the essence of the dialectical materialist approach: to discover both the *particular* links in the revolutionary chain and to work out how these links fit together *as a whole*, so that the constituent elements in the struggle — “the African revolution,” “the national democratic revolution” and “the struggle for socialism” — are properly integrated into a coherent and overall revolutionary strategy.

Under no circumstances can dialectical materialism serve, as Engels once put it, “as an excuse for not studying history”^[10] or as a pretext for skating over the complexities of a particular situation. Indeed, why this is so will become clearer once we understand the character of

(v) Dialectical Materialism as a Philosophy of a New Type

Marxism is the first philosophy in history to thoroughly grasp the inevitability of change and the dynamic and historical character of nature and society. For the Marxist, in the words of Engels, “nothin is stable except instability, nothing is immovable except movement”^[11]: in fact, the only thing which cannot alter in the universe is change itself! No wonder the white supremacists in southern Africa fear Marxism like the plague itself, for like all ruling classes, they wish to believe that their privileged way of life will last forever!

This stress upon movement and contradiction as the basic force in the universe makes dialectical materialism unique as a philosophy and sets it apart from the various philosophies, popular and ruling class, which preceded it;

To elaborate this point, it will help to distinguish

- (a) philosophy as it has existed from time immemorial, as a way of looking at the world and understanding it in general terms; and
- (b) philosophy as it has been conceived of by ruling class philosophers who have sought to work out their theoretical principles in a purely abstract way in a world which seems remote from the experience of the people and their social activities.

Philosophy in the *first* sense is part of everyday thought and speech and (as we have already seen) all our ideas have a basis in philosophy whether we are aware of this fact or not. Indeed, this kind of philosophy existed long before people calling themselves “philosophers” arrived on the scene, and in its earliest forms, for example in primitive communist society, such philosophy had a quality and a richness which was lost in those countries where people began to philosophise in an abstract and over-specialised way. when A. Lerumo comments that

the forms of primitive communism existing in Africa before European conquest embodied cultures, values and traditions in many ways far superior to those of the representatives of capitalism who invaded and destroyed them . . . ^[12]

This point also applies to the vivid and lively tradition in early philosophy where ideas about truth and morality, nature and the universe were expressed through song and dance, story-telling and drama and in the democratic popular assemblies — a part of the living

fabric of social practice itself.

Of course this kind of philosophy suffered from the fact that it was limited and parochial (as common sense often is today) and naturally reflected the narrow basis of tribal society, but at least it had the virtue of being in touch with popular feeling and social needs.

How did philosophy acquire its reputation as a body of thought remote from the world of reality?

The historical division of society into antagonistic classes brought the development of the division of labour to the point where manual and mental activities became sharply segregated from one another. Only the slave worked with his hands, only the gentleman exercised his mind! The philosophical product of this social division was the development of *idealism*: the theoretical outlook which places the spiritual world above the world of matter and looks upon reality as the immutable work of an Ideal Creator, an attitude which has always formed the dominant current in ruling class thought.

Although this kind of idealism seems to be so remote from reality that it is simply irrelevant to political struggle, in fact its very “remoteness” and abstraction serves the ruling class as an important ideological weapon

(a) in its efforts to perpetuate the division of labour between workers and those who are supposed to think for them — hence the notion that “ideas create reality”; and

(b) as the philosophical basis to its propagandist assertions that exploitation and class divisions are part of a divine and timeless order which nothing can change.

When Dr. Malan replied to a demand for democracy and an end to apartheid presented by the ANC in 1952, by saying that the differences between white and black “are permanent and not man made”^[13], he unconsciously revealed the *practical* role which idealism plays in defending racism and exploitation by placing them above the forces of historical change. In other words, his argument demonstrates how important it is that we not only embrace a philosophy of the new type, but continue to struggle against philosophy of the old, ruling class type, for the origins of this philosophy in the division of labour and its role in perpetuating class barriers and all forms of prejudice reveal that even the most metaphysical philosophy helps reactionaries in the class struggle. That is

why we must fight it!

Of course it is true that viewed historically, idealist philosophy has played a part in developing human reason and thought, but its significance must not be exaggerated, for dialectical materialism not merely incorporates into its outlook the best of ruling class philosophy (for example, Hegel's brilliant theory of dialectics), but it also draws upon the popular and democratic tradition of philosophy as it has existed from earliest times — that form of philosophy which is intrinsic to all our thought and action and which is part and parcel of everyday life.

Dialectical materialism, that is to say, creatively combines *both* forms of philosophy we have referred to in a synthesis and that provides a philosophy of a new type. While it tackles the basic questions which the ruling class philosophers were the first to present in a universal way — the nature of our ideas and their relation to reality — it does so, not in some abstract or speculative manner, but only in the light of our knowledge of history, our experience of the class struggle and the latest developments in the world of science.

Dialectical materialism is the only philosophical outlook which enables us to approach the world dynamically, concretely and in a way which helps us link up particular problems with the struggle to liberate society and mankind as a whole.

It is therefore the natural and logical philosophy for all revolutionaries who have completely dedicated themselves to this struggle and have nothing to fear from change.

Notes

1. *Theses on Feuerbach*, No. XI, as an appendix to *The German Ideology*, (Moscow/London, 1964), p.647
2. *Collected Works* 5, (London/Moscow, 1961), p.370.
3. *Fredrick Engek*, *Collected Works* 2, (Moscow/London, 1960), p.20.
4. *The Road to South African Freedom*, p.8.
5. The term *dialectics* was originally used by the ancient Greek philosophers to denote a method of debate and discussion in which the truth was reached when one thinker disclosed the contradictions and divisions in the argument of another. In this way, a position was turned upside down and forced to change!

- 6.** In an article in the journal *Communism*, Lenin speaks of “the very gist, the living soul of Marxism” as “a concrete analysis of a concrete situations” *Collected Works* 31, (Moscow/London, 1966), p. 166.
- 7.** Introduction to B. Bunting, Moses Kotane, *South African Revolutionary*, (Inkululeko Publications, 1975), p.1.
- 8.** *Ibid.*
- 9.** *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Government*, *Collected Works* 27, (Moscow/London, 1965), p. 273.
- 10.** *Engels to Schmidt*, 5/9/1890, *Selected Correspondence*, (Moscow, 1953), p.496.
- 11.** Engels made this comment in the article on Turkey in 1853, cited by M. Loewy, *Marxists and the National Question*, *New Left Review* 96, pp. 84-85.
- 12.** *Fifty Fighting Years* (Inkululeko Publications, 1971), p.3.
- 13.** Moses Kotane, *op. cit.*, p.183.

Chapter 2.

What Is Dialectical Materialism?

In a previous article on “Philosophy and Class Struggle” it was argued that dialectical materialism is the only logical and consistent philosophy for a revolutionary today to hold. Understood concretely and applied creatively, dialectical materialism has a crucial role to play in helping revolutionaries formulate their strategy and tactics in such a way that they reflect the needs of the situation and take all the relevant factors into account.

Those who stress materialism at *the expense of* dialectics in their political practice will ignore the pressures for change steadily building up (witness the dramatic street battles in the South African cities and townships since June this year), while those who see *only* dialectics and neglect materialism, inevitably overlook the concrete realities of the situation and the particular stage of the struggle.

This is why a proper understanding of dialectical materialism is a necessary part of our correct political practice; it furnishes the Communist Party and the liberation movement with an essential weapon in the on-going struggle and is a vital ingredient for success.

My basic objective in this article is to show that dialectics and materialism — the two aspects of Marxist philosophy which give it its name — form the two halves of a single whole. Just as a chemist mixes hydrogen and oxygen to form water, so Marx and Engels reworked the theories of dialectics and materialism which previous thinkers had developed, in order to create a revolutionary philosophy of a new type. For the first time in history a materialist theory of the universe was worked out which was thoroughly *dialectical* in character, and a conception of dialectics developed that was squarely based on *materialism*.

The result is a highly explosive revolutionary mix!

To explain how this took place and why it was necessary, we must first of all get to grips with

(i) Materialism Vs. Idealism: the Basic Question of Philosophy

It is sometimes thought that a “materialist” is a person who simply looks after his own selfish interests whereas an “idealist” is one who is prepared to sacrifice for a worthwhile cause. Yet, if this were so, it would be the conservatives of this world who are the “materialists” and the revolutionaries who are moved by “idealism”!

In fact, of course, “materialism” and “idealism” do not refer to vague moral attitudes of this kind. They are terms used in philosophy to describe the only two basic interpretations of the world which can be consistently held.

Everyone who studies the world around him has to find the *origin* of things. What causes things to move, or to act or to behave in the way they do? Are the forces spiritual in origin or are they produced by the material world?

Some years ago a Calvinist minister ascribed earth tremors in the western Cape to the growing disquiet of the Almighty towards modern forms of music and dress! Whereas a *materialist* seeks to explain the world of society and nature according to the material conditions and processes at work, the *idealist* believes that events take place because of the existence of spiritual forces or “ideas”.

An idealist might argue that apartheid in South Africa has been brought about by the “ill-will” or “evil intentions” of white people who don’t wish to face up to reality. For a materialist, on the other hand, this “ill-will” or “evil intention” still needs to be explained, and the real reason for apartheid is not to be found in people’s heads but in their pockets, in that *material* system of capitalist exploitation which makes apartheid highly profitable for financial investors, factory owners and the giant farms. It is here that the roots of the system lie.

We often talk about the way in which for example “anti-communist ideas” weaken our movement by creating divisions in its ranks and this of course is true. But we must never forget that these anti-communist “ideas” don’t simply fall from the skies: they reflect and arise out of the material interests of monopoly capitalism and unless they are firmly rebuffed, they are likely to make an impact on those whose stake in society, however small, makes them vulnerable to anti-communist scare-mongering

Thus we can say that whereas idealism looks for an explanation of

the world in terms of the “ideas”, “intentions” or “will” of people, materialism considers that the source of all events and actions is to be found in material causes or, as they are sometimes called, “the laws of nature.”

It is true that cruder forms of idealism ascribe things in the world to the “will of God” whereas more subtle forms of idealism put the cause down to the ideas which exist in the heads of individuals on earth, but in neither case do idealists seek an explanation in material reality.

Whereas idealism believes that the ideas in people’s heads exist outside of and independently of the world of matter, materialism contends that people’s ideas, like all other aspects of their behaviour, are the product of material causes and can only be properly understood when these causes are discovered.

Materialists in fact argue that man was neither created by God nor is his origin a sheer mystery. He developed out of the world of nature through a long process of evolution and his ideas are the product of the mental activity of his brain, itself a highly developed and complex form of matter.

This does not mean that materialists are not concerned about people’s ideas. On the contrary, materialists are the only people in the world who are able to explain them properly. What materialism rejects are not ideas, or their immense importance in influencing the course of events. Rather it is the *idealist* theory of ideas which materialists challenge, because this treats ideas as mystical forces that somehow exist independently of material reality.

It is true that many people generally look for the causes of events in material rather than spiritual forces while retaining beliefs about the world of the supernatural or some other “autonomous” realm of ideas. But this merely means that they are not being philosophically consistent. The fact still remains that it is impossible to hold that matter is the product of mind (the idealist position) while at one and the same time contending that mind is the product of matter!

Materialism and idealism offer interpretations of the world which are irreconcilable. Which of the “two great camps”, as Engels called them,^[1] we choose still constitutes today, as in the past, the basic question of philosophy.

But why should it matter? What political consequences are likely to follow if we opt for one camp rather than the other?

To answer this question, we must turn to consider the question of

(ii) Materialism as a Rational and Democratic Outlook

If we ascribe, as the idealists do, events and actions to the will of God or to the ideas which people carry around in their heads, everything which happens is either a mystery or some kind of accidental “change of heart”. To argue that events do not ultimately have *material* causes means of course, that they cannot be scientifically examined or rationally understood.

This is why idealism is not only mystical but generally conservative and elitist in character. To look for the source of movement in the world solely to people’s “ideas” or the power of their “will” is to ignore the practical experience of the mass of ordinary people as they go about their daily lives — the real force which moulds our thought. Differences in outlook appear for the idealist, not as particular reflections of a given set of material circumstances, but as the product of mystical forces which nothing can change. Plato, the ancient Greek idealist, believed that men viewed the world differently because they had been “made” differently — he likened them to different metals like brass, iron and gold — and these were “differences” which nothing could change. The men of “gold” — a philosophical elite — were naturally intended to rule over the cruder multitudes of brass and iron — the unfortunate many! Is it surprising that Plato’s idealism has often found a sympathetic hearing among apartheid’s supporters? Racist nonsense about the “genetic” differences which are supposed to make some “races” more intelligent than others is simply the logical product of the idealist’s search for “causes” which lie beyond our control, and cannot be rationally understood.

For materialists, people are the product of their material circumstances and their “human nature”, their outlook on life and their general psychology reflect the conditions under which they live and work. To change people you must change their circumstances. If, as the materialist argues, we draw our knowledge and character from our practical experience of the material world, then not only is everyone able to learn from life and play their part in running society (a democratic view which rejects the need for mystical “fuehrers” to govern the “dumb” masses), but changing our material conditions of life can rid society of poverty, crime, exploitation, war and all the other evils which conservatives blame on “human nature”. Marx and Engels comment that if **man is shaped by environment, his environment must be made human**^[2], and proceed to add that “the teaching of materialism” is “the teaching of real humanism and the *logical* basis of *communism*”.^[3]

For materialism is the only philosophy today which can rationally explain the world of nature and society and thus enable people to control their own lives and rid mankind of

the injustices, inequalities and exploitation of capitalism.

But how is such a philosophy of materialism to be developed? Before materialism can serve as “the logical basis of communism”, it must solve the problem which I now wish to consider, the problem of

(iii) Metaphysics and Mechanics in Earlier Materialism

In primitive communist or tribal societies, people generally explain movements in nature and relationships in society according to “spiritual” forces at work in the universe, but it is worth noting that the old legends and customary practices contain many germs of materialism in the way that they carefully mirror the features of objective reality.

It is however only when trade and advancing technology open up the world, as it were, that science develops, demonstrating that what people had thought of as “spirits” is simply the movement of matter in the universe which can be studied and understood. This discovery led early philosophers in many parts of the world to assert that the universe was solely composed of hard, material particles, out of which all forms of life, including human consciousness, were constructed.

Although theories like this were a great advance, the materialist outlook which they expressed was incomplete and inconsistent. Early Greek philosophers, for example, saw changes in the world as the result of shifting combinations of “atoms”, but these “[”]bricks of the universe” were themselves immutable. This static feature of their theory Marxists call “metaphysical” because these basic material elements in the universe were thought of as something “above” change and hence to all intents and purposes, “divine”.

This problem was also evident in the materialist outlook of the great 17th and 18th century thinkers in Western Europe. Although they were able to deal many crippling blows to the mystical and hierarchical concepts held under feudalism (the “divine right” of kings, for example), the leading science of their time was *mechanics* and we call them *mechanical* materialists because they treated nature and society as if it were some giant machine. This helped them to understand how things “worked” but was unable to explain their origins and how they had *developed*. It was simply assumed that some god-like force had set the world in motion, and it had never basically changed since!

Yet change was precisely that feature of the universe which it was more and more difficult to ignore. The rise of capitalism graphically demonstrated this. As Marx and

Engels wrote,

constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones^[4]

and this made a great impact on the natural sciences. As Engels has noted, the discovery of the cell, the transformation of energy and the theory of evolution named after Darwin^[5] showed that movement in the material world was not merely machine-like, but embraced many *different* forms of matter-in-motion, encompassing heat and light, electric and magnetic tension, chemical combination, life and finally human consciousness. All the new sciences pointed to the importance of development and change. It was no longer necessary to bring in some metaphysical force from outside to explain why new elements were continually arising and old ones passing away.

The time had come to bring materialist philosophy into contact with

(iv) The Theory of Dialectics.

It is one thing for natural scientists to increasingly use concepts of change and development in their scientific work, quite another for these ideas to be worked out systematically as a *general* world-outlook so that they can be consciously used to help us understand all areas of reality, including of course developments in society. This is why Marx and Engels turned to the work of a great idealist philosopher, Hegel, who had developed the theory of dialectics as an overall philosophy.

This theory of dialectics can best be understood in opposition to what we have called “metaphysics” and the main features of the theory can be formulated as follows:

Whereas metaphysics sees the world as a complex of things, dialectics examines these elements as part of an interconnected whole in which everything is related to and determined-by everything else.

Thus for example: a dialectical approach does not simply observe that Africans in South Africa are oppressed by the pass laws, work for starvation wages, farm the worst land, live in terrible housing’ conditions etc. Each of these elements is *related* to the other and can only be properly understood as part and parcel of the *whole system* of apartheid which links them together.

Whereas metaphysics sees the world statically, looking simply at things as

they are, dialectics is concerned with things in motion, as a process, ceaselessly coming into being and passing away.

Thus for example: it is not enough just to see how apartheid “works” today. We must understand how it *developed*, how the people lived before apartheid, the great struggles they fought against those who came to steal their land and destroy their institutions, how apartheid was developed as a response to an awakening African national consciousness, etc. Understanding how apartheid arose is essential to an understanding of how we can get rid of it, for the world is continually changing, and a dialectical approach highlights the *fluidity* of every situation.

Whereas metaphysics regards change as an accidental occurrence, brought on by some chance event from outside, dialectics sees change as a natural and necessary force which comes from within.

Thus for example: the mounting tide of anger and protest against oppression in South Africa which has so dramatically hit the headlines over recent months is not, as the Justice Minister seems to think, stirred up by *outside* agitators who have managed to *accidentally* escape the security police and their numerous spies. It is an inevitable development that springs from *within*, as a necessary part of that struggle which has taken many different forms and reached many different peaks, ever since the racist oppression began. Like all change, it can only be properly understood as the necessary outcome of a developing situation: it is not merely some dramatic explosion which accidentally “happened”. It is true that outside conditions may “spark” off events so that they take place at one particular time rather than another: but these *external* circumstances “condition” the event, whereas the real cause of its development comes from within.

These features of the theory of dialectics form the basis for a number of general laws of dialectical development which Hegel was able to work out. Marxists consider these general laws to be of great importance for they elaborate upon and help to clarify the features of dialectical theory as noted above.

We turn therefore to briefly examine

(v) The Laws of Dialectical Development

Engels considered that these laws can be reduced in the main to three :^[6]

(a) The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa

This law expresses the fact that change in nature and society does not simply involve a slow and continuous increase or decrease in the growth of things. At a certain point, new *qualities* emerge as a sharp “break” with the past or “leap” into the future occurs. Bourgeois thinkers often say that “there is nothing new under the sun” as though all we can do is to arrange different hands from the same old pack of cards! Marxists disagree. Just as in nature gradually decreasing or increasing the temperature of water (a change in *quantity*) causes it to turn into something quite different, ice or steam (a change which is *qualitative*), so in life generally, gradual changes of degree which do not affect the essence of a thing reach a point when the *thing itself* changes its character and a new entity emerges.

Thus in South Africa for example, for a long period of time the old tribal systems slowly disintegrated as the people were forced to leave their homes and work down the mines, on the farms and in the factories, until a “leap” occurred and a new identity was born. People now saw themselves not merely as Tswanas, Zulus, Xhosas, etc. but as Africans, a *qualitative* change in the people’s outlook. This made it possible on the one hand to form the ANC as a *national* political organisation and for the ANC, once formed, to fight for the development of a national consciousness among wider and wider sections of the people. This qualitative change in the people’s outlook giving them a new sense of identity did not simply take place “overnight”: it had been building up gradually, bit by bit, for many years before. But changes in degree do not take place for ever: a point is reached when they become changes in kind and something *new* is created.

But what causes this change to build up in this way? This aspect is focussed upon in

(b) The law of the unity and struggle of opposites.

We have already noted that change arises from *within* things as a necessary part of their development. The elements which make up an object in nature or in society are at once connected with one another and at the same time, in a state of constant struggle or, as we often say, “contradiction”. Everything therefore constitutes a “unity of opposites”. Capitalists for example, cannot exist without exploiting wage workers, while these workers cannot survive without selling their labour power to a capitalist. They are at once “united” — for each depends upon the other — but as the class struggle shows, they are

also “opposites”, for this unity is manifest through an ongoing struggle.

This is an important law of dialectics because it helps to identify the reason why everything in the world must continue to develop. Of course, not all “struggling opposites” or contradictions should be looked at in the same way and Marxists generally distinguish between *antagonistic* contradictions, when a struggle cannot be resolved without victory for one side and defeat for the other, and *non-antagonistic* contradictions, when differences are resolved in a way which leaves all the constituent elements intact. Thus, whereas under capitalism, the contradiction between worker and capitalist is an antagonistic one, under socialism, contradictions remain but with the gradual disappearance of classes, antagonism dies out.

At all times, in other words, the unity and struggle of opposites continues, for without the operation of this law in nature and society, no real change could take place at all.

But what is the relationship between the old and the new as change occurs? This is demonstrated by

(c) The law of the negation of the negation.

Negation in dialectics, as Engels has pointed out, does not mean simply saying no, or declaring that something does not exist, or destroying it in any way one likes.^[7]

“Negation” involves the movement of something from an old stage to a new *and higher* stage, so that the elements of the old are carried forward *and reworked* into the new. Just as capitalism “negated” feudalism by using the former serfs and craftsmen in its new labour force, so socialism “negates” capitalism by building upon its social production and advanced technology. When we speak therefore of the “negation of the negation” we do not merely mean that something has changed twice over. We mean that there has been a *spiral* development upwards, carrying the past into the future, remaking it in the process.

Negation therefore has a *negative* side which conservatives ignore when they think that there is no real “break” in development, so that, for example, they forget that the African worker who has spent years of his life living and working in the cities, struggling with his comrades for more money, better conditions and the right to belong to a trade union, is a very different sort of person from his grandfather or grandmother who lived in a tribal community farming the land in the period before colonialism. Ironically white

supremacists are often acutely conscious of the force of this “negation” when they argue that Africans are supposedly too “primitive” to understand the complexities of trade unionism and would therefore use their trade unions as political weapons in the struggle against apartheid! But if negation has a negative side, it also has a *positive* side, which anarchists and ultra-leftists ignore when they fail to see that revolutionaries must build upon the traditions of the past, carrying over what is healthy and democratic and discarding what is backward and reactionary. This is clearly a crucial task for African revolutionaries to undertake.

Hence the law of the negation of the negation helps us to understand change *both* as a break with the past and yet at the same time, a development from it. Having looked briefly at the three general laws of dialectical development, we are now in a position to consider my final point relating to

(vi) Dialectics and Materialism: the Marxist Synthesis

Just as earlier materialism was weakened, as we have seen, by metaphysical and mechanical ideas, so the theory of dialectics and its laws of development as conceived by Hegel suffered from one insoluble problem. Hegel was an idealist and hence treats dialectics as movement in the realm of ideas or as Hegel conceived it, the development of a “World Spirit”. Contrary to his theory of dialectics which looks at the world as a process of *infinite* development, the Hegelian “World Spirit” was assumed to have a “beginning” (the reason for which no one could explain) and “an end” (which quite arbitrarily had come to rest with the creation of the capitalist system!). It is not too difficult for Marxists to see that the earlier materialists were not *completely* materialist and the earlier dialectical thinkers were not *consistently* dialectical, because in both cases, the uncritical acceptance of a system of exploitation and the division of society into classes made these philosophers unable and unwilling to see everything, including “human nature” and private property, class privilege and social inequality, subject to the necessary forces of *change*.

Marx and Engels were able to bring dialectics and materialism into a fruitful synthesis because they were the first thinkers in history to base their philosophy on the revolutionary needs and aspirations of the working class, the only class in history which has absolutely nothing to lose from change. This is why other sections of society, the peasants, shop-keepers, intelligentsia, small traders and housewives, who will also benefit from revolution need to ally themselves with the working class and its Communist Party

and follow the philosophy of the working class, dialectical materialism.

As early as 1845, Marx and Engels commented that

the standpoint of the old materialism is “civil” (or bourgeois) society; the standpoint of the new is *human* (or communist) society . . .^[8]

for the “new” materialism is dialectical materialism and dialectical materialism is the only philosophy which, in guiding us in the long and difficult struggle to win a national democracy, build socialism and enter into the epoch of communism, will always welcome change.

Notes

1. “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy”, Marx, Engels, *selected Works*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p.604. This is an invaluable piece to read for anyone seeking to learn more about the development of Marxist philosophical thought.
2. “The Holy Family”, in *Collected Works 4*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p.131.
3. Ibid.
4. “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, *Selected Works*, op. cit., p. 38. In Africa the effect of these expanding waves of capitalist production was traumatic. As one writer recalls, “the 15th century hurled at us the economic and adventurous restlessness of Europe, and subsequently the mania called the ‘Scramble for Africa’ shuddered the sub-continent. The sheer physical impact of the assault was enough to stagger the edifice of tribalism. I can almost see my infinitely great-grandfather, leaping to his feet on a rock and gaping at a sailing ship seeking harbour — all his patriarchal dignity forgotten, as he exclaims, ‘Hau!’ “ — Can Temba, “The Bottom of the Bottle,” *Africa South in Exile* 1961, p. 53.
5. Engels expands upon these points in his introduction to the *Dialectics of Nature* and in his chapters on philosophy in *Anti-Duhring*.
6. *Dialectics of Nature*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), p.63.
7. Cited in *The Fundamentals of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy*, (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974), p.153.
8. “Theses on Feuerbach”, reprinted as an appendix to *The German Ideology*,

(Lawrence and Wishart, 1965), p.653.

Table of Contents | Marxism in Africa

Chapter 3. Marxism and the Theory of Knowledge

Previous articles have dealt with the importance of dialectical materialism in helping revolutionaries both to formulate and to put into practice scientific strategies for change. It is now necessary to examine more closely the area of Marxist philosophy which tackles the question of knowledge and ideas, how they arise, and how we assess the thorny issues of truth and falsehood, appearance and reality, freedom and necessity

It is true that these sort of questions are often very much “taken for granted” and not considered worthy of serious study, particularly by those who feel that they have enough on their own hands with the day to day pressures of political struggle. Yet it is important to remember that the objective of this political struggle is *revolution* — a far-reaching change in our present way of life and world outlook — and if a social revolution represents, in the words of Marx and Engels, “the most radical rupture with traditional property relations”, it is hardly surprising that

its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas. ^[1]

We can only eliminate apartheid and white supremacy, establish a national democracy and prepare the road for the advance to socialism if reactionary ideas in all their forms and at all levels are consciously combated. This ideological struggle — a crucial part of our political work — requires more than simply understanding what is wrong with this idea or that idea. It also requires an overall understanding of what ideas *themselves* are, how they develop in society, what makes them true or false and how we can effectively make use of them in our political struggle.

The events of June 16th in Soweto have unleashed a mighty wave of protest, demonstrations, strikes and street battles — an intensification of the struggle which makes it all the *more* important that we have a clear-headed conception of where we are going and what we want to achieve. In the ringing words of the ANC newsletter circulated shortly after the events,

It is time to hit back at the enemy with everything we have got. It is time to be more

skilful and strike at him in small groups so as to vanish quickly. It is time to hit where he is weak and least prepared. Let us avoid concentrating in big numbers and deprive him of visible targets. ^[2]

Vital practical advice in the conduct of revolutionary struggle, but advice which can only be properly heeded and carried through to the full when we are able to speedily identify our mistakes and work effectively to rectify them. In this, a correct theoretical approach is crucially important, and although general philosophical study may seem remote from the burning issues of the day, in fact an overall grasp of the nature of knowledge and theory can only assist in putting our revolutionary ideas on to a firm and consistent basis.

Indeed, just how politically relevant questions of what we call “the theory of knowledge” really are, will become evident as I turn to examine:

1. The Development of Ideas in Social Production

How do ideas arise and what are they? For thousands of years people have observed that men, unlike animals, have a unique ability to *think* and religious people have explained this capacity by saying that God created man “in his own image” and thereby endowed him with certain qualities which animals do not have.

Marxism, however, as the scientific theory of the working class, focusses its attention upon material *production* in order to explain the development of human thought, for while it is always possible, as Marx and Engels put it, to distinguish men from animals “by consciousness, religion or anything else you like”,

they themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. ^[3]

The activity of production requires the evolution of the species to the point in which man’s immediate ancestors began to adopt an upright posture, to develop manual dexterity, vocal cords capable of articulating speech sounds, and a complex nervous system in the brain, so that the formation of abstract ideas becomes possible. Indeed, the simplest act of production — the manufacture of stone flints, for example — is only possible if there is the coordination of all mental and manual faculties. To make something, we not only have to use our

hands, we must also be able to identify the objects in our environment, and describe them with words and ideas to those with whom we cooperate, for production is and always has been, a *social* activity. This means — the question which concerns me here — we must develop the capacity to *think*. Just as natural evolution enables us to understand how it became *physically* possible for men to actually produce their means of subsistence, so the act of material production makes it possible to explain why men need to think as a necessary part of their social activity as producers. In a famous passage on “The Labour Process” in *Capital*, Marx comments:

a spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. ^[4]

The use of ideas is an essential part of the activity of production, for as Marx adds,

at the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement.

It is true that we are able through our imagination to conjure up ideas which bear no obvious connection to the external world, and it is for this reason that idealists argue that ideas exist as “other worldly spirits” originating in a world all of their own. In fact, there is no mystery about the origin of our ideas, even in their most fantastic and unreal form: all ideas arise as a necessary part of our social activity, our relationships to one another and to the world around us. Because our outlook on life has its roots in the way we produce, Marxists reject all attempts to explain the differences between people simply in terms of their religion, nationality or “race”. The thoughts people have, the culture they develop, the society they build, arise in the last analysis from their activity in social production.

But if the roots of our ideas are to be found in the world of material production, what relationship do the ideas in our head bear to the objective world of reality? This is a vital question to answer if we are later to tackle the whole question of “truth” and “falsehood”. To explore it more fully, it is necessary first to go into the problem of:

2. Ideas as a Reflection of Objective Reality

In an immediate sense thinking is of course the activity of the brain as “matter which thinks” but the brain itself only functions as part of human activity in general, relying upon the stimuli it receives (via the nervous system) from our practical contact with the world at large. In fact, without this practical contact with things around us, we would have no ideas at all: the brain would remain a mere fossil, embryonic and undeveloped.

It is because the *source* of our ideas lies in our social activity — the relationships we have with other people and surrounding nature — that the character of our ideas takes the form of *reflections* in our minds of the objective world outside of us. It is obvious that a peasant farmer whose life is spent herding cattle in some remote district of the Transkei will have a very different outlook on life from someone who lives in one of the large townships on the outskirts of Cape Town or Johannesburg. The small shopkeeper who works by himself with the help of his family will see things quite differently from a man who has to work in a large factory or down a mine. If the practical experiences of people differ, so too must their ideas because these ideas are basically a mental *reflection* of the world around them.

It is true that this concept of ideas as a reflection of reality is some times taken to imply a rather static concept of the mind as a “mirror” which passively “reflects” the objects around it, and it is argued by some philosophers that if this is the case, then in fact we would never be able to acquire any real knowledge about the world our ideas reflect, since all we would have would be a series of images, often contradictory in character in the way, for example, that a penny is sometimes circular, sometimes elliptical, sometimes large, sometimes small: it all depends on how you look at it! Now this argument, that if thought reflects reality then the real world simply “lies in the eye of the beholder”, rests upon a completely mistaken attitude to the way our mind actually works and produces its reflections of external reality. The fact is that ideas only arise as part and parcel of our living *practice*. They are not drawn “mirror like” from the world in a passive way, but are derived solely from the practical activity through which we discover things, learn to identify them and understand how they work, “opening them up”, so to speak, altering their character, even making them ourselves so that we are able to understand what life is *really* like. The “sceptical” position which questions whether the real world actually exists outside of our reflected images, wrongly assumes that thinking simply involves “contemplating the world from afar”. Of course this is how the activity of thinking may appear to bourgeois philosophers who live off the wealth which others produce, but it is not how

thinking actually takes place.

It is important here that mental reflection — the basic property of human ideas — should not be confused with mere “sensations” or “impressions” as they are sometimes called. A *sensation* simply refers to a stimulus that our senses receive from the outside — a reaction by our body to extremes of hot and cold, for example — whereas a mental *reflection* involves some degree, however minimal, of conscious *understanding* so that we can identify objects through language and express our thoughts through speech. The first is an instinctive activity which we share with animals; the second is a specifically human act which has to be *learnt* through social practice. Naturally as people develop they become able to perform many quite complicated acts — like riding a bicycle, driving a car, writing their name — almost unconsciously, but all these activities have had to be learnt through practice: they develop as the result of an infinite number of daily experiences which our mind continually reflects.

Indeed, this concept of an idea as a reflection of the real world is vital if we are to tackle the question of

3. Distinguishing Truth from Falsehood

If ideas arise in our minds as reflections of the external world, then the extent to which these ideas are true or false depends upon the accuracy with which they reflect or “reproduce” in our minds, the relationships, processes and objects of outside reality. But how can we tell? How can we say, for example; that the ideas of a factory worker may be more valid or truthful than those of a shopkeeper or farmer when all ideas derive from the particular experience of those who hold them?

The answer lies, once again, in the question of *practice* — in the *active* way in which we develop our ideas. It is because our knowledge is being continually put to practical use through production, in waging the class struggle, in performing scientific experiments, that we find, as the well known saying has it, that “the proof of the pudding is in the eating”.

When our plans fail, when our experiments back-fire, when our way of life crumbles, when our strategies are wrecked, we soon discover which ideas match up to the outside world and which do not! We learn the truth by continually testing our ideas in practice — the practice of operating a machine correctly, of

producing a leaflet which expresses the mood of the people at a particular time, of successfully hitting the enemy “where he is weak and least prepared” etc. — and because our ideas enable us to change the world through an infinite variety of practical activities, we learn in this way how things really function, what is true and what is false.

But if we judge the validity of our ideas by the extent to which they accurately reflect external reality, how do we account for the existence of ideas which are false? If, in fact, all ideas derive from practical experience and there is no other source (despite what idealists think), why should these ideas not *always* reflect the real world correctly?

The problem is that “truth” and “falsehood” are not the simple black and white categories that they sometimes seem: the Calvinist “dominie” may imagine that everything his bible tells him is *absolutely* true and that everything someone else’s bible says is *absolutely* false, but the fact is that once we remember that *all* ideas are drawn from our practical experience of the world, it is clear that even when ideas are *basically* false, they will still contain elements of truth in them, and even when ideas are *basically* true, they will still have elements which are false. Why? Because all ideas, without exception, represent some kind of reflection of what is going on.

Take the concept of apartheid as an extreme example. This concept is regarded by the vast majority of people in South Africa and by world public opinion at large as one of the most deceitful and warped political and social policies ever to be implemented in modern times. And yet, although it is obvious to millions of progressive people that “separate development” is merely a cynical justification for denying democratic rights to the black people who live and work in an *integrated* economy, to a minority of die-hard reactionaries and white supremacists, apartheid appears as a “moral”, even divinely ordained, solution to the country’s “problems”. Why should this be? Looked at from the standpoint of the Marxist theory of knowledge, the answer can only be that the doctrine of apartheid is not merely a distorted theory of society, it is a distorted theory which *reflects* a warped and distorted way of life. The theory is inhuman because the practice is inhuman. For the financier who wants to draw vast profits without any “problems”, for the capitalist who wants a supply of cheap labour which can be turned on and off like a tap, for the labour aristocrat who wants to keep his job and privileges at his fellow workers’ expense, in short, for all who look upon the black people of South Africa as mere objects to be exploited, the doctrine of

apartheid has a perverted logic which reflects one of the cruelest forms of capitalist exploitation anywhere in the world.

This is why eliminating apartheid is not, as liberals seem to think, merely a question of a “change of heart” or a “change of mind”; on the contrary, it is because distorted ideas must reflect a distorted reality that a revolution is required which will radically restructure the social relations of production in South Africa, nationalising the major industries and restoring the land to the people, so that the exploitation of one class by another — the material roots of racism and apartheid -can be checked and then eliminated. To change false ideas we need to alter the conditions which give rise to them. This is the Marxist approach to the question of truth.

It follows that just as false and reactionary ideas contain superficial elements of the “truth” in them, for they exist as the reflections of a real world, so likewise do ideas which are basically correct, contain elements of distortion and one-sidedness. The truth, in other words, is both absolute *and* relative. It is real and yet never complete. This is why serious revolutionaries *constantly* find it necessary to observe and study, to investigate both theory and reality. Political consciousness needs to be advanced by conscious effort as a regular part of political struggle.

Precisely because we acquire our knowledge through our practical experience in the objective world, this knowledge is always developed as part of an on-going process of discovery, in which, as Lenin puts it, “incomplete, inexact knowledge becomes more complete and more exact”^[5]. We continually *deepen* our understanding of the real world as science advances, technology improves and our understanding of politics and society grows, and yet, although our expanding body of knowledge increasingly *approximates* to objective reality, nonetheless, as Engels stresses,

Each mental image of the world system is and remains in actual fact limited, objectively by the historical conditions and subjectively by the physical and mental constitution of its originator. ^[6]

Such images or reflections are *absolutely* true to the extent that they correctly reproduce elements of an objectively real world, but they are also of necessity *relatively* true in that the knowledge of any one individual, like the collective knowledge of all mankind, can never be more than a *part* of an infinite world which is always changing and developing. This unity of the absolute and the

relative holds also of course for our Marxist world-outlook, for while the basic principles of dialectical materialism are true and correctly reflect reality, their truth is dynamic rather than static, for these principles are continually being applied to new circumstances and in new conditions. New aspects of Marxist theory — like the concept of a non-capitalist path to development for the countries of the third world — develop to take account of new situations and possibilities in a changing world. This is why all our ideas have a relative as well as an absolute side to them. Political tactics which may be correct at one time — like the ANC’s policies of peaceful resistance pursued until the end of the 1950s — have to be altered as conditions change: the resort by the Nationalist government to acts of bloody repression like Sharpeville and the introduction of police terror and torture on a massive scale, all made it necessary to develop a strategy of armed struggle. What is true at a particular time is not necessarily true forever.

In order to understand more of what is involved in this process of *deepening* our knowledge of the world through the progress of science, technology and the class struggle, I turn now to briefly examine the question of:

4. Scientific Knowledge and the Movement from Appearances to Reality

Marxists argue that all our knowledge arises through the activity of our senses and the impressions which our mind receives from the outside world are generally called sensations or, to take another word philosophers commonly use, *perceptions*. But although these perceptions form the basis of our ideas — and we can only develop thought through the action of our senses — on their own, perception or sensations, as already noted, are not *ideas* in the strict sense of the term. Ideas only emerge when perceptions develop into what we may call *judgements* (where we “conceive” as well as “perceive”) so that objects around us can be named and described. Indeed, even the simplest words in our vocabulary involve an element of “abstraction” or “conception” for the word “chair”, for example, requires us to be able to identify *all* chairs, irrespective of shape, size and location. Learning to speak, therefore, involves more than “perceiving”: it involves learning to *think*.

The movement of perception to ideas, of sensations to “judgment” is often called the movement of our thinking beyond “appearances” to “reality” — a penetration beyond our first “impressions” of what things are like to a correct understanding of their reality: how they arise, develop, and relate to other things

around them. Indeed, this movement of our thought beyond “appearances” is the precondition for knowledge as a science, for the development of a serious and systematic body of ideas.

Marx makes the point that our everyday experience “catches only the delusive appearance of things”^[7] whereas scientific investigation looks towards the inner connections and relationships which explains why things develop as they do. Appearances may be highly misleading as we know from the fact that whereas the earth *appears* to be flat with the sun moving around it, in *reality*, exactly the opposite is true. We can only go beyond superficial and often deceptive impressions by, as it were, “digging beneath the surface” so as to probe the underlying reality — a method which Marx employs with great skill in *Capital* by showing that the exchange of one commodity for another simply appears to be an exchange of “things”, whereas in reality, people have to enter into social relationships to produce the commodities. “Behind” the rosy appearance of the Cape apple or the glittering golden Kruger-Rand lies the “hidden” misery of sweated labour and low wages, just as the labour contract in which worker and capitalist “mutually agree” to exchange wages for work masks the brutal realities of exploitation. The acquisition of knowledge is a process, therefore, as Lenin describes it, of going “endlessly deeper” from appearance to essence, from essence of the first order, as it were, to essence of the second order, and so on *without end*”^[8] and indeed it is precisely this restless search for the truth beneath appearances which makes it possible for us to learn from mistakes and adjust our plans so that they reflect more accurately the realities of the situation.

Thus we find that the South African Communist Party was able during the Rand strike of 1922 to grasp the importance of the class contradiction between the miners and the government but failed to penetrate sufficiently into the *particular* nature of this contradiction. Hence while the party was critical of the racist attitudes of the white miners, it still neglected the interests of the African miners and the importance of taking a vigorous stand in support of equal pay and conditions. As Lerumo comments,

these omissions cannot be ascribed only to the objective conditions, but also to the theoretical analysis made at the time. ^[9]

Indeed, it was only with the experience of the 1922 strike, a better understanding of the reactionary character of the S.A. Labour Party (which had been misleadingly compared to the Labour Party in Britain) and the growing African influence in the party, that a more precise understanding of the character

of class contradictions in South Africa came to prevail. The “appearances” of white labour militancy had proved highly deceptive.

The importance of always searching for the reality beneath appearances brings me to the final point I want to consider in outlining the Marxist theory of knowledge and that is,

5. Freedom as the Understanding of Necessity

When we look superficially at what I have called the “appearances” of things, the world appears to be governed only by chance and accident. As we probe beneath the surface, we begin to understand how things are related to one another so that what initially seemed to be accidental now reveals itself as the work of *necessity*, the inevitable result of the forces at work. Thus a worker may think in the first instance that he is exploited simply because he has a “bad” employer, but further experience and study teaches him that all employers exploit their workers because exploitation is a *necessary* rather than accidental feature of the capitalist system. Reality can only be scientifically understood when we discover the “laws” or necessary forces which make things what they are.

This does not mean, however, that because everything is *basically* determined by laws of development there is no room in the world for accidents. On the contrary, just as reality always presents itself to us as a particular and often deceptive appearance; so the basic laws of motion at work in any particular process or situation can only realise themselves through a particular set of circumstances, the *precise* formation of which, is always *accidental in character*.

Thus we can say that while the great eruption of protest and demonstration that began in Soweto on June 16th 1976 was no accident in the sense that it was the *necessary* product of unbearable oppression, the particular character of this protest — against the compulsory use of Afrikaans in the schools — was “accidental” in that many other grievances could have served equally to spark off the protest. In fact, of course, the widespread actions of solidarity with the fighters of Soweto throughout the country show that it was not simply the language question which was under attack. It was and still is the whole system of apartheid itself.

While therefore all relevant factors need to be taken into account when we

examine things, the accidental aspects of an event can only give us the surface causes or superficial reasons. A *scientific* analysis requires that we try to discover the laws of development at work which enable us to explain why an event or process is necessary and inevitable.

But if it is true that everything which takes place must be understood in terms of the “inner, hidden laws” which work themselves out through the “surface accidents”, how can we have any place for “freedom” or “free will” in our theory? Indeed, many critics argue that it is absurd to see, for example, a revolution as historically inevitable, a *necessary* product of social forces, and yet organise and mobilise the people to bring this revolution about.

In fact this contradiction between “free will” and “necessity” only exists for those who cannot understand that *real* freedom requires us to exercise a real *control* over the world around us and the only way in which we can extend our mastery over the forces of nature and society is through a clear-headed understanding of the laws of development, the forces of necessity which are actually operating. How else can we bring about change, so that what we *want* to happen does in fact take place? To change anything, whether it is a faulty machine or an unjust social order, we must understand why it is what it is: the forces which *determine* it. This is why the Communist Party and the ANC base their strategies for revolutionary change upon a close and careful analysis of the historical laws which govern the development of apartheid and white supremacy. Understanding the way the system necessarily works is a precondition for getting rid of it altogether! Indeed, the more ambitious our plans are to liberate society, the more soberly and scientifically we need to examine laws of necessity which affect the situation. One is essential if we are to achieve the other.

This is why a thorough grasp of the question of “freedom and necessity”, “appearances and reality”, the nature of truth as a reflection of the objective world is so important at this particular time. For who can deny that the dramatic developments since June last year are compressing into months and weeks — even days — lessons which in more “normal” times take years to learn? In the great challenge facing the liberation movement in the days which lie ahead, the Marxist theory of knowledge has an important role to play, for never before has it become so important to scientifically analyse events and be crystal clear about where we are going.

Notes

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- 1.** “The Manifesto of the Communist Party”, Collected Works 6, (Moscow/London, 1976), p. 504.
 - 2.** The African Communist, 4th Quarter, 1976, p.12.
 - 3.** “The German Ideology”, Collected Works 5, (Moscow/London, 1976), p. 31.
 - 4.** Capital 1, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), p.178.
 - 5.** “Materialism and Empirio-Criticism”, Collected Works 14, (Moscow, 1972), p.103.
 - 6.** Anti-Duhring, (Moscow, 1962), p.57.
 - 7.** “Wages, Price and Profit”, Selected Works in one vol, (Moscow/London, 1968), p. 209.
 - 8.** “Philosophical Notebooks”, Collected Works 38, (Moscow/London, 1961), p.253.
 - 9.** Fifty Fighting Years, (Inkululeko Publications, 1971), p.52.
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Chapter 4

The Materialist Theory of History

What are the forces at work in society which bring about revolution? How can we explain the dynamics of social change? Why do we say that social and political upheavals are *inevitable* in class-divided societies?

These are vital questions for revolutionaries to think about today. At a time when the imperialist world is desperately trying to “damp down” the explosive contradictions in southern Africa and deflect the course of the liberation movements into harmless, neocolonial channels, a scientific understanding of the nature of revolution is essential indeed, for the world of political struggle is a harsh one and it is not enough to tackle questions of social change simply in terms of what we would “like” to see happen or may “dream” about. Effective leadership of the forces of liberation rests upon an ability to creatively combine a careful and continuing analysis of particular events (e.g. the struggles of Soweto and the developments since June 16th, 1976, the twists and turns of U.S. strategy towards Zimbabwe and Namibia), with an *overall* understanding of the nature of revolution itself and the reasons for historical change.

It is because communists seek to link the particular with the general in this way that they can claim, in the words of the *Manifesto*, to “always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole”: if they form an advanced and resolute section of the movement, that is because theoretically

they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement. ^[1]

A precise understanding of particular events must be linked to an understanding of history and society itself.

Previous articles have looked at the principles of dialectical materialism and the way in which Marxist philosophy helps us understand the world in general: what must now be tackled is the way in which we relate dialectical materialism to the social development of man — the study of what is generally called “historical materialism” or “the materialist theory of history”. An analysis of this theory must

begin with a consideration of

(i) The Nature of Men as Social Producers

All theories of society and history must operate with some conception of “human nature” for they are theories which seek to explain what happens in *all* societies and what determines the way people behave. It is sometimes said that Marxists do not believe in human nature but this is only true in the sense that we reject any conception of a static or unchanging “human nature”, for we know that people’s ideas, behaviour and institutions are continually changing — that human nature can be found in many different forms. But the question still needs to be posed: what is it about men and their society which makes this change both possible and necessary?

It is the fact that human beings have to *produce* all the things which they need in order to survive: they cannot simply “live off” nature in the way animals do. The animal, as Engels notes,

merely *uses* his environment and brings about changes in it simply by his presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, masters it. This is the final, essential distinction between man and other animals ^[2]

and it is only in terms of such a distinction that we can understand man’s historical “nature” as a being who produces.

But do not some animals, particularly the higher primates like apes and chimpanzees, use their hands to build nests, grasp sticks and even hurl stones at their enemies? The truth is that human beings, even at the most primitive technical stage of their development, can accomplish something which no ape has ever been seen to do and that is to make *tools* with which to produce and to use their tools to *alter* the world around them in a conscious and deliberate way.

Mankind, Engels was to say,

must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc; ^[3]

and this need to produce is described by Marx and Engels as

a fundamental condition of all history, which, today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. ^[4]

But why should this approach to history be called “materialist” in character? It is materialist

(a) because the activity of production itself brings people into direct and continuing contact with the forces of nature (or the world of matter); and

(b) because production is necessary to human survival whether people are aware of this fact or not. -Hence Marx often refers to production as a “material” process which people enter into independent of their will”. ^[5] With the development of classes in society so that a privileged few do the “thinking” and an exploited majority have to create the wealth, the materialist basis to human existence is obscured by the philosophers and priests, etc. rather in the way that many white people in South Africa don’t think very much about the importance of production and what it involves because they have black servants and employees who do the real work for them! Nevertheless material production is the most important fact of human life and it explains why

(c) men can only be understood as individuals who survive in a *society*. Production is essentially a collective activity in which people have to work together so that when we speak about social production, we necessarily refer to the *relationships* which people enter into when they produce. Even the “Robinson Crusoes” and the hermits of the world can only live in isolation because they have first acquired the ability to think, speak and produce by working in society.

But in order to explain how the nature of men as social producers affects the way they act in society, we need to look more closely at the two aspects which constitute the production process:

(ii) Productive Forces and the Relations of Production

The activity of production involves first and foremost the making of tools or the development of technology whether we think of the manufacture of spears for hunting or computers for programming. This technology includes not only the tools or machines themselves but all the raw material, technical skills and know-how which go into making and using them and it is described in Marxist

theory as a *force of production*. It is obvious that every time a fresh invention is made, these forces of production change accordingly.

Tools whether simple or sophisticated have to be operated by people and since people must enter into a definite set of relationships in order to produce, the “forces of production” are necessarily linked to the “relations of production”. Since the way in which we relate to one another or cooperate in production depends upon the kind of technology we are actually using, we may say therefore that

the relations of production into which people enter are determined by the forces of production which they have created.

As Marx puts it

social relations are closely bound up with productive forces . . . The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist.

[6]

Thus, for example, in hunting societies in the stage of “primitive communism”, everyone works together as a team and there is insufficient wealth produced to allow some to sit idly by while others do the work for them. The collective way in which people work together determines the collective or communal way in which they share out and own the wealth they produce. Productive forces determine the relations of production.

What happens when these productive forces change so that hunting gives way to agriculture and some individuals can accumulate, by fair means or foul, more wealth than they actually need? The relations of production must also change for, to put it simply, a herd of cattle can be owned privately in the way that a herd of buffalo cannot. It is now profitable to systematically plunder your neighbours, make them work for you as slaves, and develop private property in crops and cattle.. A clan or tribal society owning the means of production in common is gradually transformed into a society divided into classes: the wealth produced by one group is owned by another and although the development of class antagonisms and exploitation had not developed to any significant degree in much of pre-colonial Africa, the changing relations of production can ultimately be explained by changes taking place in the productive forces. Every change in these forces — whether we think of the invention of the plough to till the land or the spinning jenny which mechanised the weaving loom — must transform production relations.

Indeed, it is the dramatic change in the forces of production brought about by capitalism so that thousands of people work together in mines and factories using highly advanced technology, which makes it not merely possible but ultimately *necessary* for private ownership to give way to social ownership and in conditions of growing abundance for *everyone* to at once take part in production and yet at the same time, enjoy a life of security and freedom. A socialist and communist society cannot however simply come about because people “want” it: new forces of production alone make it possible. This is why it would be naive and utopian to try to establish socialist relations of production — where the means of production are owned in common — in a society where most people were still individual handicraft producers or peasant farmers working small plots of land in isolation from one another. The relations of production must, in Marx’s words, be “appropriate to a given stage in the development of their forces of production” ^[7]

It is only on the basis of developed industry and cooperative and collective agriculture that socialism can be built, and since most African countries who have recently freed themselves from imperialist and neocolonial control suffer from serious technological backwardness, they need to pursue policies of non-capitalist development in order to create the forces of production necessary to sustain socialist relations of production. In South Africa itself, however, things are rather different, and following the national democratic revolution, the mechanised agriculture and developed industrial base (already created by the capitalists) would make it possible to build socialism much more rapidly.

Although, as we have seen, the forces of production in any society determine the relations of production and changes in the relations are only possible because of changes in the productive forces, it should not be thought that these changes occur smoothly and automatically. In fact, the very opposite is true particularly when we are speaking of societies divided into antagonistic classes. Here not only do the relations of production “lag behind” changes in technology, but the production relations actively resist the need to adapt and change, they become obsolete and outmoded and enormous pressure has to build up in society before the transformation of production relations can take place and they are brought into line with the altered production forces. In fact, it is precisely this pressure which builds up to force old production relations to adapt to the new forces of production that is the real cause of every social and political revolution.

In Marx’s words,

at a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into

conflict with the existing relations of production . . . from *forms* of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. ^[8]

Thus we can now formulate the basic propositions of the materialist theory of history by saying

(a) every alteration in the way a society produces (its forces of production) brings about a change in the way people cooperate in production (the production relations) and because changes in technology are natural and unavoidable in all societies, we can describe the need for the relations of production to adapt to the forces of production as the *most basic law of human history* — the real explanation for all social change. But

(b) because the development of exploitation, class divisions and the institution of private property arises at a particular stage in history, the adaption of the relations to the forces of production cannot take place “gradually” and “continuously”. A revolution is needed in order to take power out of the hands of one class and vest it in another in order to make it possible for the relations and forces of production to once again correspond.

To understand more clearly why it is that class divisions have the effect of obstructing the adjustment of productive relations to productive forces, it is now necessary to introduce into the theory, the concepts of

(iii) Basis and Superstructure

When people enter into a particular set of production relations, they do so through the entire range of social institutions which function to regulate, justify and protect these particular relations. Just as the forces of production cannot exist in the real world without the people who cooperate in a definite way to work them, so the relations of production only develop because men are also members of a family, are guided by a morality and sometimes a religion, accept certain cultural values, and in class-divided societies, have their lives ultimately regulated by the coercive machinery of the state. And just as productive forces determine the relations of production, so for their part, the production relations constitute what we call the economic *basis* of society which determines all the social institutions and ideas which make these production relations possible — the

decisive force which moulds “the general process of social, political and intellectual life”. ^[9]

Marx describes this economic basis as “the real foundation” of society upon which, as he puts it, there

arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. ^[10]

Marx uses the term “superstructure” to describe society’s institutions and ideas because he argues that these aspects of our life do not simply dwell in a self-contained world of their own but have their *origin* in the way we relate to one another in the realm of material production. They are a “superstructure” because they can only be understood, in the last analysis, in terms of a society’s economic “basis”.

Thus, for example, it is not simply a “coincidence” that in South Africa you have the vicious exploitation of the black people in the factories, mines and farms existing “alongside” a political system which denies them any say in the government of the country existing “alongside” social and religious prejudices which claim that inequality is “natural” and that “races” should be kept apart. Nor is it enough to simply note that all these facets of apartheid “hang together” and are related. The fact is that it is not the ideas of a few eccentric professors from Potchefstroom or Pretoria which have brought about the nightmarish policies of “separate development” — it is the demand for cheap black labour by the industrialists, mine owners and the big farmers. In so far as economic realities come into conflict with pet schemes of this or that apartheid ideologue, it is the ideas and not the realities which suffer! It is the basis which ultimately determines the superstructure. It is not, as Marx says,

the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. ^[11]

The secret of every society is to be found neither in its politics nor in its ideas but in the precise character of its production relations and it is only by studying these that we can ultimately explain why a society has the kind of culture, family structure, political system and “spiritual life” that it does. This is because it is the role of the superstructure in a class-divided society to justify and protect, to entrench and institutionalise a privileged and oppressive way of life so that the owners of the means of production — the ruling class — try to *fossilise* the kind of production relations which favour their interests and prevent these relations from

smoothly adapting to the ever-changing forces of production. This is why an oppressed people in fighting for their freedom cannot merely transform obsolete relations of production without at the same time radically altering the entire political and ideological superstructure which is rooted in and serves to perpetuate economic exploitation.

It is sometimes thought (usually by the critics of Marxism) that concepts like “productive force” and “productive relation”, economic “basis” and ideological “superstructure” refer to easily separable slices of reality so that one can actually point to a “basis” in one part of society and a “superstructure” in another. This in fact is not so. In the real world, technology and social relationships, economic, cultural and political institutions all inextricably interpenetrate and the concepts which historical materialism employs have been separated out in the form of an *analysis* in order to produce a scientific theory of change.

Indeed, the very need for a scientific theory of change arises from the fact that what *really* happens when societies develop or revolutions occur should never be confused with what the people taking part in the events may *think* or *imagine* is going on. The distinction between the “basis” and “superstructure” makes it possible for us to distinguish the real roots of a revolution — the conflict between society’s relations and forces of production — and the events of the superstructure: the arena of politics and ideology in which, as Marx says, “men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out”. ^[12]

This does not mean that the superstructure can be ignored for the political and ideological factors of the struggle help us to understand why events take the particular form they do. Thus, for example, in analysing the rebellion in Soweto, we need to examine the political events very carefully, taking note of what the young revolutionaries are saying and thinking, what the reactionary police chiefs and white politicians imagine is going on, how the Bantustan ‘leaders’ view the events, what the reaction of business opinion is, at home and abroad, to the new mood of protest and defiance, etc. All these aspects of the “superstructure” require our attention, but if we wish to penetrate to the heart of the situation we must follow Marx’s advice and

distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of a natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out, ^[13]

From the superstructure we learn how the particular ideas and personalities,

parties and politicians shape the event so that it turns out the way it does: from the basis we find why the event *really* occurred in terms of the underlying, deeply rooted causes which exist “beneath the surface”, as it were. In the case of Soweto, the political and ideological aspects of the situation explain the role of the protests against Afrikaans, Bantu education and the whole system of white domination; but for the basic cause of the explosion we must look to the vicious economic exploitation upon which the apartheid system rests — the unbearable poverty, insecurity, joblessness and inflation, sanctioned by racial discrimination and protected by the machine guns and barbed wire of a ruthless dictatorship. The superstructure *expresses* the struggle as people battle in the streets, refuse to go to work and join the ranks of the liberation movement: the basis actually *explains* it as the uprising of the African, Coloured and Indian people who are robbed by a racist white minority of the wealth which they collectively produce. While millions work in the mines, factories and on the farms, a clique of monopoly capitalists privately own South Africa’s immense riches — this is the root of the conflict, and of the protest, struggle and movement towards revolution, for it is here, in the economic basis of society, that the relations and forces of production collide with a raw and searing intensity. It is here that the events have their real source.

The fact that the economic basis of a society provides us with the *ultimate* cause of its development does not and cannot mean that it is the *only* cause of social development, for this would imply, for example, trying to study capitalism in South Africa without taking account of the way in which the army, police, courts, judges, administration, propaganda are used by the ruling class to keep them in power. A basis and superstructure must always be examined *together*, for the superstructure not only arises out of a given basis but *reacts* back upon economic developments and decisively influences them. Is it not clear that the battery of racist laws in South Africa — a *political* factor -gives economic exploitation its peculiarly vicious form? No account of development is possible unless all the political, ideological and cultural factors are carefully considered, for the economic causes cannot be meaningfully understood “on their own”.

The colonial character of South African society, the influence of Calvinism and Cape liberalism, the heritage of popular struggle against conquest and enslavement, the awakening of a national African consciousness — all these aspects of the superstructure help to explain why capitalism and the fight against it has developed as it has in the South African context. To simply ignore these aspects on the grounds that only economic factors “count” — that historical

materialism is some kind of one-sided “economic determinism” — would lead to a grotesquely distorted understanding of reality.

What the Marxist theory of history argues is this: all factors are important and all need to be taken into account but while the aspects of the superstructure — where people express their consciousness of what is going on — determine the *form* of the development, the economic basis is *ultimately* decisive for it is only here that we can understand why *in the last analysis* society develops at all.

It follows of course that the more clearly we understand the dynamics of history in terms of the relationship between basis and superstructure, the conflict between the forces and relations of production, the more consciously we can control the course of events through the strategies and tactics we adopt for revolutionary change.

(iv) Historical Laws and Modes of Production

The materialist theory of history, as I have so far outlined it, can be said to apply to all societies known to man, for where people produce, so forces of production must determine production relations and a superstructure arise out of an economic base. But although production is a common feature of every society, the character or, as Marx calls it, “the mode” of production differs from one historical period to another. “In broad outline”, Marx writes, “the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the development of society” ^[14] and as economic formations or “modes of production” each is more advanced than the one preceding it — technology has been more extensively developed and new and “better” forms of exploitation have been devised. Clearly we are not talking about “progress” in any straightforward moral sense, for as Engels has pointed out,

every step forward in production is at the same time a step backward in the position of the oppressed class. ^[15]

so that although “potentially” things may get better, in practice they get worse. Let us look briefly at what each of these modes of production entails. In what Marx calls

(a) the “Asiatic” mode (so called because of its general geographical location) the land is still owned by the community but the irrigation system which makes it possible to develop agriculture is controlled

and administered by kings and priests who rely upon slaves to produce some of the wealth; however the use of slavery and the production of goods for sale in a market becomes much more dominant in

(b) the “ancient” or slave mode of production (so called because it existed in ancient Greece and Rome) in which with the development of trade and commodity production, the land itself becomes privately owned, under

(c) the “feudal” mode of production: the exploitation of slaves (in the sense of people owned like cattle by their masters) gives way to the exploitation of serfs who are bound to serve a particular lord by working so many days a year for him, fighting his wars and paying dues to the church, etc. The highest and the most deceptive form of exploitation exists however in

(d) the capitalist mode of production in which not only is the production of commodities the overriding form of economic activity, but people who have no wealth of their own are forced by economic circumstances to hire out their services (or “labour power”) to a capitalist, so that people themselves become commodities who are paid according to the amount of food and shelter they need to continue functioning as wealth-producing machines. When they are no longer required by the capitalist, he simply sacks them.

It is worth remembering that each of these “modes of production” are extremely general categories and no actual society, past or present, will necessarily fit them exactly. They serve only as a *guide* to understanding the development of history and although as Marx puts it, each mode of production is an epoch “marking progress in the development of society”, this does not mean that any particular society either has or has to progress through each of the four stages as though each society is preordained to clamber up the same historical ladder. In fact every society is in its particular form quite unique but these distinct features can only be appreciated when analysed through the general concepts which apply to all societies of a particular kind. Thus for example, the concept of a “capitalist mode of production” — a general term — helps us to identify and explain the peculiar features of apartheid in the South African system. In other words, a general theory of history and society is essential to any “concrete study of concrete conditions” because without it, we would not know

where to begin. The materialist theory of history should never therefore be thought of as a “preconceived scheme” but rather as a guide to understanding historical realities as they really are.

Because, for example, capitalist relations of production had nowhere developed in Africa before the colonial period, this does not mean that before the people can build socialism they must endure a capitalist epoch! What we call the “historical laws” at work in a given mode of production relate to particular forces and relations of production which have developed and there is no reason why societies in Africa which are guided by a Marxist leadership and assisted by the socialist countries, cannot change these forces and relations so that they establish a socialist society based upon a socialist mode of production. There is nothing in the Marxist theory of history which says that everyone has to follow the identical path of development.

What the materialist theory of history seeks to establish is that while every society has its own specific features which fit generally into a mode of production ranging from “primitive communism” to developed socialism, nevertheless particular laws of development are themselves determined by the most basic and general historical law: the adaption of a society’s relations of production to their productive forces. The law lies at the heart of the Marxist theory of history and it explains the development of all societies without exception.

In class-divided societies, as we have seen, forces and relations of production come into sharp conflict, whereas in societies in which class divisions are disappearing (as in the socialist countries), this conflict or “contradiction” between the forces and relations can be relatively smoothly and painlessly overcome (as for example happened in 1956/57 in the Soviet Union when new forms of planning were introduced), for now there are no entrenched class interests or privileged “ways of life” which social change threatens. In a society in which, as Marx puts it, “there are no more classes and class antagonisms”, then “*social evolutions will cease to be political revolutions*” ^[16], but although the state as the embodiment of class conflict withers away, and differences can be settled through persuasion, debate and the direct action of the people themselves, change continues as it always has and always must. There will always be a continual movement in the growth of productive forces, this will require the continuous adjustment of productive relations and society’s superstructure and so we will need to continue studying the particular manifestations of the basic law of historical development which must rank as one of Marx’s great scientific

discoveries.

Those who claim therefore that Marxism contradicts itself by looking towards the establishment of some kind of “perfect” communist society in which historical development “runs out of steam” and grinds to a halt have not really understood what the materialist conception of history is all about. In fact the development first of socialism in which a planned economy is built and then of communism in which class divisions finally disappear and the machinery of the state dies out, represents the *start* of a new history for man — a history in which the forces of production can be consciously regulated and controlled, changes are made without wars or revolution and a new world arises which can be called human in the fullest sense of the term.

Notes

1. “The Manifesto of the Communist Party”, *Collected Works 6*, (Moscow/London, 1976), p.497.
2. *Dialectics of Nature*, (Moscow, 1964), p.182.
3. “Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx”, *Selected Works* in one vol., (Moscow/London, 1968), p.435.
4. “The German Ideology”, *Collected Works 5*, (Moscow/London, 1976), p.42.
5. Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, (Moscow/London, 1971), p.20.
6. “The Poverty of Philosophy”, *Collected Works 6*, op. cit. p. 166.
7. Preface to the *Critique*, op. cit., p.20.
8. *Ibid.*, p.21.
9. *Ibid.*, p.20-21.
10. *Ibid.*, p.20.
11. *Ibid.*, p.21.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*

14. Ibid.

15. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1972), p.231.

16. “The Poverty of Philosophy”, *Collected Works* 6, op. cit. p. 212.

Table of Contents | Marxism in Africa