

From the archive: An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy

We take pleasure in reproducing the first instalment of "An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy" by the late Peter Jefferies (Geoff Pilling). Geoff was a University lecturer and expert on the history of political economy but also a Trotskyist revolutionary and active fighter for the Fourth International. Geoff would have been greatly heartened by the developments taking place in Southern Africa and elsewhere and would have wanted to contribute to the building of the workers movement there.

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Chapter 1. Materialism and Idealism

'PHILOSOPHY.' When many members of the Young Socialists see the word they will no doubt think of something which they imagine strange and difficult, something done by 'wise men', often with long white beards!

So the first thing to get clear about at the start of this series of short articles is that the study of Marxist philosophy is not at all peculiar or over-difficult.

In fact, it is true to say that *everybody* has a philosophy, whether they are aware of it or not, whether they have worked it out or not.

For, by philosophy we mean a general conception of the world and the relationship of man and his thinking to this world.

And all of us have such a conception of the world. If this is the case, you might ask, why do we need to *study* philosophy? Simply because we have to develop a *scientific* and *coherent* conception of the world and the changes taking place within it.

For the revolutionary party, this is a vital question. Only if all its activities are guided by such a conception can it carry out its tasks of leading the working class to power and the establishment of socialism – the greatest change ever undertaken by man.

In *Marxism* lies the highest struggle by man to grasp the nature of the world in the course of his continual struggle to change it.

Hence the urgent need on the part of *every* Young Socialist to begin a systematic study of Marxism, individually and as part of his or her branch.

Now, in considering philosophy, we can start by saying that throughout history those who have been concerned with philosophy have been divided into two great basic camps.

On the one hand there have been the IDEALISTS.

On the other have been the MATERIALISTS.

Marxism belongs to this second great camp. In fact Marxism has developed materialist philosophy to its highest, most adequate level.

When considering these two basic philosophical outlooks, we

come up against an immediate problem which we have to tackle at the start. In 'ordinary language' when we call somebody a materialist, we usually mean someone who is interested in money and material possessions, who is greedy, selfish and vain. On the other hand to be called an idealist is to be praised as somebody with high ideals, who puts the interests of others before himself and so on.

It is no accident that these words should be used in this way. Materialist philosophy has always been the object of abuse by the Church and by the ruling class generally. This way of using the word, is as Engels said, nothing but:

'an unpardonable concession to the traditional philistine prejudice against the word materialism resulting from the long continued defamation by the priests. By the word materialism the philistine understands gluttony, drunkenness, lust of the eye, lust of the flesh, arrogance, cupidity, miserliness, profit hunting and stock exchange swindling – in short all the filthy vices which he himself indulges in private. By the word idealism he understands the belief in virtue, universal philanthropy and in a general way in a "better world" of which he boasts before others'. (Engels' 'Ludwig Feuerbach'.)

So in considering the use of the terms we have to break from this *vulgar* understanding of the terms, used by the capitalist class to discredit materialism and Marxism.

In considering idealism and materialism we are considering the two fundamental answers to the question – what is the relationship of ideas to the world?

Materialism recognizes that our ideas are derived from and reflect the material world. Idealism supposes, on the contrary, that everything material, the world, is dependent upon and reflects some idea which is outside the world.

This is the *basic* opposition between these two conceptions and one which we must keep before us throughout this series and in

the reading material which goes with it.

Engels put the matter clearly in his famous pamphlet 'Ludwig Feuerbach' from which we have already quoted.

'The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of modern philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking to being ... The answers which philosophers have given to this question have split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and therefore in the last instance assumed world creation in some form or another ... comprised the camp of idealism. The others who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism.'

For materialism, therefore, ideas are not something apart from the material world, but reflect the material world and the changes taking place within it.

By 'material world' we mean everything in the universe, or matter in its various forms— chemical, physical, biological.

We grasp the nature of this material world only through our five senses – touch, hearing, smell, sight and taste. The material world, acting on our sense organs, produces sensations. If we put our hand in the fire, we have the sensation of pain and take it out.

This ability to experience sensations depends of course on such things as nerves, retina and above all upon the brain. It depends therefore upon *material objects*. A damage to the brain seriously affects the ability to think; without the retina, sight is impossible.

If we understand this, it is clear that thought is a product of matter. Again we can quote Engels to sum up this basic starting point for materialist philosophy, this time from 'Anti-Duhring' (Part 1, Chapter 3)

'If the question is raised: what, then, are thought and

consciousness and whence they come, it becomes apparent that they are products of the human brain and that man himself is a product of nature which has been developed in and along with his environment.'

Or, the same point, this time from 'Ludwig Feuerbach':

'... Our consciousness and thinking however supra-sensuous are a product of a material bodily organ, the brain. Matter is not a product of mind, but mind itself is merely the product of nature.'

Let us end this opening article in the series by asking the question: Why is it important to grasp the basic point of materialism which we have examined briefly here and to think through every problem and question which we confront in relation to it?

Let us repeat the point once more: materialism understands that the material world exists independently of us and that this independently existing world is the source of all our ideas.

Of course the capitalist class, through their educational system, through the newspapers and television, teach quite the opposite. They teach that ideas are produced by the individual, in isolation from the world. And because of this, everybody is entitled to 'his own' ideas. And there is a further implication: if ideas are produced by the individual, in his head, then the world can be changed simply by changing the ideas in our heads.

This is of course the philosophy of individualism. It is *idealist* because it starts not from the material and social world, but from the individual as something apart from the world.

We will next discuss in more detail the nature of materialism as the Marxist world outlook and the changes which Marx

brought to materialism, compared with the earlier versions which existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Chapter 2. Emergence of Materialism

The first systematic attempt to explain the nature of the universe in a materialist way was made in ancient Greece over two thousand years ago. The Greek materialists saw the world as consisting of hard, impenetrable material particles. They understood all change as arising from nothing but the motion and interaction of such particles.

This theory was revived and developed in modern times. It was however much richer in content than Greek materialism had been. For in the 16th and 17th centuries, scientists and philosophers tried to work out what were the laws of the interaction of these material particles, to present a picture of how all things, from merely physical changes to the life of man itself, were the result of the motion and interaction of the separate parts of matter.

It is important for us to understand that the re-emergence of materialism in this period was a reflection of the rise of the capitalist class in struggle with the old feudal landowning class.

In the feudal period, the Catholic Church – which as the predominant centre of culture and learning – had developed a natural philosophy in which everything in nature was explained in terms of its ‘proper’ place in the system of the universe, in terms of its supposed position of dependence and subordination within that system, and the end or purpose which it existed to serve.

The bourgeois philosophers, such as Bacon, Hobbes and Locke, destroyed these feudal, religious, ideas about nature. Regarding nature as a system of bodies in interaction, and rejecting all the feudal dogmas, they demanded an investigation of nature in order to find out how it really

worked.

These investigations went along with the geographical discoveries of the period, the growth of trade and transport, the improvement of machinery and manufacture. The greatest strides of all were made in the mechanical sciences, closely connected as these sciences were with the needs technology.

We can call these early materialist philosophers, *mechanical materialists* in that they looked upon the world as a giant *machine*. This was the standpoint of the great physicist, Isaac Newton. For him, like the early Greek materialists, the world consisted of particles moving about in empty space. But in his attempt to explain the precise workings of the universe, Newton was not concerned with the question of its origin and development.

He took for granted that it was a stable piece of machinery – created by God. Not how it *originated*, how it *changed*, but how it *worked*, was the question which pre-occupied him.

Such philosophers and scientists treated the universe rather like a giant watch. It consisted of many parts which fitted neatly together; once it was wound up it worked in a predictable, uniform way which was known exactly to watch makers.

This form of materialism was a great advance in man's understanding of nature. It represented a great blow against idealism and all religious conceptions of the universe, that is as something created by God.

The materialists of the 16th and 17th centuries tried to extend to the realm of the mind and society the same mechanistic conceptions which they used in their scientific investigations of nature. They sought to include man and his thinking in their mechanical conception of the world.

They regarded man himself as a machine. The doctrine was

looked upon as shocking by the Church, an insult to both man and God. But the idea that man is a machine whatever its limitations, was a great advance on the idea that man was a wretched of clay, inhabited by an immortal soul – the religious view of man.

But despite these great advances as against idealism and religion, mechanical materialism suffered from a series of grave weaknesses. We shall end this article by considering some of these weaknesses and next week show how the materialism of Marx – dialectical materialism – overcame these deficiencies.

The *first* question which the mechanical materialists could not answer was this: if the world is like a machine, who started up the machine? And because they could not answer this question they were forced to introduce the notion of a 'Supreme Being' as something outside the world who had set it in motion even if this Being no longer interfered with its workings. The mechanical materialists were thus forced back in the direction of God and religion.

Second, while the mechanical materialists recognized change everywhere, because they tried to reduce this change to a series of mechanical interactions – change for them was merely a series of endless *repetitions* of the same kind of processes.

Just like a machine can only work in a fixed manner, according to how it was made, so the world, for these materialists, worked in a fixed way; nothing *new* could emerge within it; there could be no *development* within it. We shall see later how modern materialism (Marxism) has gone beyond this limited conception.

Third, mechanical materialism could never explain the *development of man*. If human activity and thought was merely a mechanical reflection of the world, the question arose: how do man and thinking actually change? But as Marx was later to

show (a question we shall be looking at later) man is not merely a product of the world, but he struggles to *change* the world, in the course of which he also changes himself.

This failure to understand the relationship between man's activity, his thinking, and nature, meant that mechanical materialism had no *theory of knowledge*, i.e. of how man proceeds from error to truth, through the conflict between theory and practice. This, as we shall see, is a decisive question for the proletarian revolution.

In considering the limitations of mechanical materialism we should not fall into the trap of thinking they were a product of the philosophers and scientists concerned. For this would be itself an idealist method. No, the limitations of the mechanical view of the world arose from the limited development of science itself, [despite] the fact that the *mechanical* sciences had made the greatest advances.

Modern (dialectical) materialism could only arise with the further development of science which by the 19th century had begun to investigate more thoroughly the processes of interconnection and change within nature. It was on the basis of these developments that Marxism, a richer form of materialism was to be established.

Chapter 3. Hegel and Dialectics

Now the home of mechanical materialism in the modern world was England. This English materialism was then taken and extended in France during the 18th century where it became the basis for the ideas which inspired the French Revolution.

But the next great development which occurred in philosophy was to take place in Germany at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century.

It is this development which we must consider in this article and its relationship to Marxism.

Before doing this, we must however say a little about economic and social conditions in the Germany of that period. Compared with France and England, [and] the other great countries of Europe, Germany remained relatively backward. Commerce and capitalism had failed to develop to anything like the extent they had in either France or Britain.

In particular, the bourgeoisie (capitalists) had not taken power as they already had in the seventeenth-century Cromwellian revolution in Britain or in the revolution which began in France in 1789.

Germany, in short, remained a backward, isolated country, still divided into a series of feudal and semi-feudal states.

It was this economic and social backwardness which left a profound mark on German thinking. The great German thinkers of that period had to look *abroad* for the inspiration for their philosophies and ideas; to France where the bourgeois revolution was taking place and to Britain where the growth of capitalist industry was proceeding with great speed.

But because material change was so slow in their own country, they inevitably tended to see change merely as change in the realm of ideas.

They tended, that is, to see change in an idealist manner.

(By idealism, we should remember from the first article, we mean the conception that all development starts from the idea; materialist philosophy understands that ideas are a reflection of changes taking place in the material and social world).

As Marx put it, 'In politics the Germans *thought* what other nations *did*. Germany was their *theoretical conscience*'.

The highest point of this idealist thinking was the work of the great German philosopher, Hegel (1770-1831).

Hegel was an idealist: for him the world started with the

Absolute Idea. History, for him, was the working out, the realization of, this Idea. This was clearly an *idealist* standpoint.

But Hegel's genius lay in his efforts to understand and grasp *how* this Absolute Idea developed. For Hegel, unlike the mechanical materialists in England and France, *nothing* was fixed or static.

Deeply influenced by the profound changes then taking place in France, Hegel insisted that *nothing* is immobile. Everything existing had to be studied not as it was at any moment but as it had come into being, in its process of development and change. Furthermore, Hegel grasped that everything was not merely the result of past changes, it also carries the germ of the future within it.

But how did change occur? We saw that the early mechanical materialists answered this by seeing movement and change as something *external* to the thing being investigated. The world was like a machine; it had been set in motion by some 'first impulse' (really another name for God).

Hegel understood however that change was not something *external* to the object, but arose from forces within the object itself. We shall examine this question in some detail in later articles, but at this stage we can only give an example of what we mean.

If we consider ourselves, or indeed any individual, we are a unity of two contradictory forces. For at any one moment in time we are both living and dying. Each moment that passes brings us a moment nearer to death while at the same time extending our life by that same moment.

It is the struggle between these two opposed forces, life and death, which is the source of all the changes taking place continually within us.

And so it is with everything in the universe. Nothing can exist in the material world in a static form. All matter exists in motion. And this motion arises from the struggle of opposites within the material world, including human society.

Hegel grasped that all change took place in this manner. This was his great contribution to philosophy. But as we have already said, Hegel was an idealist; for him these changes occurred within the realm of ideas. The world for him was merely a reflection of these changes. In believing that the world started from the Absolute Idea, Hegel held what was ultimately a *religious* view of the world. The 'Absolute Idea' was in effect merely another name for God

It was one of Hegel's most talented followers, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) who started to consider Hegel's philosophy from the standpoint of materialism. Feuerbach rejected 'Absolute Idea' or 'Substance' or any of the metaphysical starting-points, and insisted that man as a natural being was the necessary starting-point of all ideas. He said that his philosophy 'generates thought from the opposite of thought, from Matter, from existence from the senses'.

In particular, Feuerbach insisted that all the various conceptions of God, including those of Christianity, were created by man himself. Not God had created man, but rather man had created God, in his own image. According to Feuerbach, a truly 'human' world would only be created once these false, religious, conceptions of the world were swept away.

But who was to do the sweeping away? Who was to change the world? It was in answering this question that Feuerbach's weaknesses were most clearly revealed.

For his answer to the question was 'man'. But what was man? A 'man' might be a King, a capitalist, a worker or a peasant. All four have the same organs, the same type of feet, brain,

etc. From a *biological* point of view they are part of the same species. But clearly, there are great differences in their *social position* and wealth.

These differences arise historically. Feuerbach's materialism did not extend to man's own history; i.e. to the struggle in which man makes himself.

In the same way: if we consider 'man' in primitive times he is quite different from 'man' today. Again we don't mean in a biological, but in a social sense. Man today lives in quite a different way; he eats different foods, uses quite different tools, and has quite different ideas.

Thus there is no such thing as *man in the abstract*. Man like everything else, in the universe (of which he is part) is in continual change. This conclusion owed from Hegel's philosophy.

Feuerbach was a materialist. He saw that man was a product of the material world; all his thoughts, ideas are a reflection of nature.

But man is not merely a *passive reflection* of nature as Feuerbach thought. Man does not merely react to the world around him – he is in conflict with it. Our ideas of the world, our struggle to understand, arises only in the conflict with it.

Thus, said Marx, change can never be a passive, an easy process. Change arises from struggle. There is no 'abstract man' because man, in his fight to survive in the world constantly changes himself, becomes a different man.

Marx, in other words took Hegel's dialectical method. He grasped that everything (including man) was in continual change and that this change arises from the struggle of opposites within phenomena. But unlike Hegel, Marx was a *materialist*. Changes in ideas were not the *source* of changes

in the world, but their *outcome*. The great task was not to 're-arrange' the world in the head, but to change it in *practice*.'

But if man 'in the abstract' cannot change the world, which force was to accomplish this change? This is the next question we shall consider. In doing so we shall outline Marx's conception of history, *historical materialism*; and the role of the working class within capitalist society.

Chapter 4. Historical Materialism

The preceding chapters were intended to discuss two important questions: first the nature of philosophical materialism, second the weaknesses of the 'old' mechanical materialism.

Marx was not however content merely to criticize the old materialist outlook. Above all he wished to apply the dialectical *materialist world outlook to a study of society and its history*. He saw his task as one of 'bringing the science of society ... into harmony with the materialist foundations and reconstructing it thereupon'. (Engels, '*Ludwig Feuerbach*.')

In doing so, Marx arrived at what has since become known as the *materialist conception of history* or *historical materialism*. This chapter will be concerned with an introduction to this theory. (At this stage everybody should read and study Marx's famous Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* [1859] in which this theory is outlined.)

What is the basic point in Marx's approach to the study of history? It is this: that the foundation for man's existence is to be sought in his continual struggle against nature for food, shelter and clothing. The study of history is a study of the conditions under which this struggle was carried out and the changes in consciousness or thinking to which it gives rise.

Here is how Marx's life-long friend and collaborator, Engels, put the matter when he spoke at Marx's graveside in Highgate cemetery in 1883:

'Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact ... that mankind must first eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means of subsistence and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art and even the ideas of religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must be explained, instead of vice versa as had hitherto been the case.'

In other words, the study of history does not start from the ideas which men have held at certain times, nor from their 'motives' or 'intentions' but from the material conditions under which they have lived and worked. To explain changes in ideas we must begin from these real material circumstances.

The next question therefore is this: how does man actually produce these means for his survival? He does so of course, *in struggle against nature*, of which he is a part. He takes from nature his food, the means for his shelter and so on.

But we could also say that this was true of any other species of animal. A horse feeds on grass, breathes the air etc. So another question must be considered: if all animals, not merely man, are in conflict with nature, what distinguishes man from the rest of the animal world?

It is of course possible to point to many features which distinguish man from the other animals: the size and complexity of his brain; the use of speech; the shape and dexterity of his hand.

But the crucial question for us is this: man actually, *in practice*, over millions 'of years, separated himself from the rest of the animals *through the use of tools*. Man is above all a tool-making and tool-using animal. And it was through the use of tools that man as a species was able to subordinate the rest of the animal world to his needs.

From a *physical* point of view (strength, speed, sense of vision and smell etc.) man is *inferior* to many other animals. His *superiority* arises only from his ability to carry his fight against nature to a higher point than any other animal through the use of tools and equipment.

These tools and equipment, and the struggle to improve them (which gives rise to technology and science) Marxists know as the *productive forces*.

In primitive times these productive forces consisted (apart from labour itself) of the most simple implements: knives, spears, arrows chipped out of stone. Over thousands of years they have developed into the productive forces of today—atomic power stations, automated production processes, etc.

But how does man actually use these productive forces at different stages in history? We can get a clue to the answer by considering the nature of the productive forces in the world today.

Imagine that you are a steelworker, living in Sheffield. You have been trained in all the skills associated with this job. But how can you actually take part in the activity of steel making? How, that is to say, can you take part in the development of the productive forces?

All the equipment and machinery necessary to produce steel is under the control and ownership of one of the small number of firms that dominate the steel industry in that city. Unless you can get access to this plant, machinery and other equipment you will not be able to use your skills or to take

part in the development of the productive forces.

To put the matter concretely: only if one or other of the steel industry employers is willing to employ you for wages, can you, as an individual, take part in the struggle against nature, at least in the sphere of activity for which you have been trained. Now, as any worker knows, the owner of such a steel mill will only employ you if he calculates that he can make a profit out of you. If there is no profit for him there is no job for you.

So we have arrived at the following conclusion from this simple example: in order to develop the productive forces as a steelworker, you have to enter a definite relationship with the employer such that he extracts profit from the use of your ability to work.

In other words, you have to enter into a set of definite social relationships if you are to take part in the development of the productive forces. *And you have no choice!* How else can you make steel? It can only be made through utilizing the most advanced means of production which are owned and controlled by the capitalist class.

You cannot make steel in your back garden. And even if you could, it would be so insufficient that you would never be able to compete in selling it with that produced in the most up-to-date factories.

It is clear that the productive forces can only be worked through definite social conditions of production which men have to enter into, which exist, 'independently of their will and consciousness'.

But these social relationships have not always been the same. Like everything else they must be studied not as static 'things', but as *processes* changing over time.

Today, in all the big countries of western Europe, America and

Japan, we have capitalist social relations, through which production is carried out. The basic relationship is between the owners of capital, the capitalist class, and those who sell their ability to work (their 'labour power' as Marxists call it) as their only means of livelihood. But in the past quite different social relations of production have existed.

Next we shall examine briefly these past forms of society. We shall also consider the problem: why do certain social relations disappear at certain periods of history, often in the most violent fashion, to be replaced by new social relations of production?