

A Brief Introduction to Dialectical Materialism

Excerpts from Dialego's [*Philosophy & the Class Struggle*](#) (1975), a communist pamphlet used widely in the South African anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970's

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”.

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*.

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 foresee 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.

Philosophy and the Concrete Study of Concrete Conditions

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...”

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” or as a pretext for skating over the complexities of a particular situation.

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?

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”...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...

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 huma**, and proceed to add that “the teaching of materialism” is “the teaching of real humanism and the *logical* basis of *communism*”

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.

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”. 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.

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.