

# A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE HISTORY AND BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM (First of Two Installments)

## INTRODUCTION

In a famous article written in 1913, V. I. Lenin identified German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism as "the three sources and three component parts of Marxism". <sup>1/</sup> More specifically, states Lenin, "(Marx's) teachings arose as the direct and immediate continuation of the teachings of the greatest representatives of philosophy, political economy and socialism." <sup>2/</sup>

Of course, the three sources and three component parts of Marxism were themselves products of previous historical developments in the realms of philosophy, political economy and politics. This work, which is presented in two installments, briefly traces the historical developments in the realm of philosophy preceeding (and culminating in) the birth of the philosophy of Marxism--dialectical materialism. Dialectical materialism's basic principles are then briefly summarized. \*

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<sup>1/</sup> V. I. Lenin "The Three Sources And Three Component Parts Of Marxism" On Marx And Engels (Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1975) pp.62-69

<sup>2/</sup> Ibid., p.63 (Lenin's emphasis)

\* The historical section is presented in this issue of People's Democracy, while the summary of basic principles appears in the July-August issue. Future works will similarly deal with historical materialism (dialectical materialism applied to the history of human society), political economy and socialism.

Undoubtedly, some readers are already asking: Have not all but the U.S. Anti-Revisionist Movement's newest recruits previously studied dialectical materialism, most more than once? Under such circumstances, is it not a step backwards to again propose the study of philosophy for the movement, especially with the movement at such an "advanced" state--with several parties already in existence and several others about to be born, etc? And won't such a study impede the movement's growth and development?

With regard to the latter two questions, neither the numerous individuals comprising the U.S. Anti-Revisionist Movement nor the movement as a whole are at an "advanced" state. On the contrary, the proliferation of "parties", the continuing existence of numerous local groups and independent individuals, and the movement's almost total lack of influence on the life of this society--in a word, the movement's scattered, disunited, isolated state--are irrefutable evidence of the movement's backwardness!

Granted, the majority of those comprising the U.S. Anti-Revisionist Movement have previously studied philosophy, some more than once. However, it is necessary to take into account during what period of time, under what conditions and in what manner philosophy has been studied in the past in order to determine if the past study of philosophy has indeed been adequate.

As pointed out in the previous two issues of People's Democracy, the U.S. Anti-Revisionist Movement has passed through three periods: 1) The Spontaneous Period (1957-1965), characterized by the failure to utilize theory as a guide to practice; 2) The Eclectic Period (1965-1969), characterized by the utilization of vulgarizations of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought (MLMTT) as theoretical guides to practice; and 3) The period of Theory and Line (1969-?), during which MLMTT has been established as the only correct revolutionary theory. In the present period, however, the assimilation of MLMTT's basic laws and principles, the application of those laws and principles to the concrete practice of the American revolution, and the elaboration of the Programme and the development of the strategy for the given stages of the American revolution, have yet to occur. \* Thus, only during the Third Period, a period covering a mere nine years, has MLMTT been the subject of widespread study within the U.S. Anti-Revisionist Movement.

For most Marxist-Leninists, this study of MLMTT has usually

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\* See People's Democracy Vol.1, No.1 pp.47-48 and Vol.1, No.2 p.57

been concentrated into a specific period of time, ranging from several months to a year, during which mass practice has either been ignored or reduced to a distinctly secondary position. Even under the best of circumstances, philosophy has usually only been studied twice (in the form of beginners and advanced courses). Given the complex nature of the subject matter, however, a firm grasp of dialectical materialism's historical development and a rational understanding of all (or even most) of the basic principles of dialectical materialism have not been achieved by the overwhelming majority of the individuals involved in such courses. Nevertheless, the study has usually then passed over to "revolutionary theory and practice", at which time mass practice has assumed a more prominent role, eventually becoming primary. (In the majority of cases, the systematic study of political economy has never even been taken up.) As a consequence, the individual's understanding of the history and basic principles of the materialist world outlook and the dialectical method of analysis, perceptual at best, has invariably declined, since the study of philosophy has virtually ceased. This circumstance has given rise to grievous theoretical, political, strategical and tactical errors on the part of the U.S. Anti-Revisionist Movement as a whole and numerous groups and individuals therein. The internal result of the above errors has been splits, splits and more splits, while the external result has been the entire movement's increasing isolation from the life of American society.

Clearly, then, the movement's problems are the product of inadequate understanding of certain very basic philosophical principles and ignorance of the historical roots of those principles. Rectification must therefore take the form of thoroughly studying the history and basic principles of dialectical materialism on a consistent, long-term basis and integrating that study with concrete practice in the American revolution.

This work, of course, is not the thorough study referred to above. It is merely a brief review of the subject matter and, as such, is designed to serve as a guide to more thorough and more advanced study.

## I. WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Philosophy seeks to explain the general problems of life-- i.e., seeks answers to such questions as: how did the world come into being?; through what process did the human species emerge?; is there life after death?, etc. In other words, "a philosophy is a world outlook, an attempt to understand the world, mankind and man's place in the world." <sup>3/</sup>

Arising out of the fact that a philosophy is a world outlook is the task of "...working out this world outlook systematically and in detail, turning it into a well-formulated and coherent theory, turning vaguely held popular beliefs and attitudes into more or less systematic doctrines. This is what the philosophers do." <sup>4/</sup> However, philosophies do not spring ready-made out of the heads of philosophers. On the contrary, all philosophies "...have a social basis in ideas which reflect the social activities and social relations of the time...." <sup>5/</sup>

Specifically, during the era of human history in which the level of scientific knowledge was extremely backward, the level of technology and of the productive forces was correspondingly low and slavery was the dominant mode of production. The philosophers during that era thus shaped their philosophies to justify and perpetuate slavery's existence. For example, Aristotle, the most encyclopedic and influential of ancient Greece's philosophers, justified slavery by asserting that the institution of slavery conformed to the basic laws of nature, that, in other words, it was in the natural order of things for the majority of humanity to be slaves to a ruling, privileged minority. (Confucius did the same thing in China.)

Similarly, during the era of human history in which the level of scientific knowledge modestly advanced beyond the extreme backwardness of the slavery era, the level of technology and of the productive forces likewise modestly advanced and feudalism became the dominant mode of production. Of course, just as had been done in the previous era, the philosophers of the feudal era shaped their philosophies to justify and perpetuate feudalism's existence. For example, Thomas Aquinas, who was a

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<sup>3/</sup> Maurice Cornforth Materialism And The Dialectical Method (International Publishers, New York, 1971) p.9

<sup>4/</sup> Ibid., p.8

<sup>5/</sup> Ibid., p.9

13th century theologian, defended feudalism by characterizing the entire universe as a feudal domain, complete with feudal hierarchy; God, surrounded by his court of chief archangels, resided at the top, while the various classes of humanity were situated in the "kingdom's" various lower levels.

Today, we live in the era of human history in which the level of scientific knowledge has become very advanced, the level of technology and of the productive forces is at a correspondingly high level, and capitalism (i.e., competitive capitalism in some countries, monopoly capitalism in others), the basis of which is wage-labor, is the dominant mode of production. And just as in the above past eras, the process of shaping philosophy to justify and perpetuate the prevailing "social activities and social relations of the time" occurs continuously during the present era. In the U.S., one of the most notorious current philosophies designed to maintain the status-quo is "the theory of balance":

"The theory of balance often rests upon the moral idea of a natural harmony of interests, in terms of which greed and ruthlessness are reconciled with justice and progress. Once the basic structure of the American political economy was built, and for so long as it could be tacitly supposed that markets would expand indefinitely, the harmony of interest could and did serve well as the ideology of dominant groups, by making their interests appear identical with the interests of the community as a whole. So long as this doctrine prevails, any lower group that begins to struggle can be made to appear inharmonious, disturbing the common interest. 'The doctrine of the harmony of interests,' E. H. Carr has remarked, 'thus serves as an ingenious moral device invoked, in perfect sincerity, by privileged groups in order to justify and maintain their dominant position.'" <sup>6/</sup>

Clearly, then, with the advent of class society, the various philosophies have always expressed a class outlook. Hence, whatever philosophers say about themselves, they always function

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<sup>6/</sup> C. Wright Mills The Power Elite (Oxford University Press, New York, 1956) pp.247-248 (Our emphasis)

as the thinking representative of a class and "...there is no philosophy which does not embody a class outlook or which is impartial, as opposed to partisan, in relation to the class struggle." <sup>7/</sup>

It therefore follows that the dominant philosophy in a given society is the philosophy of the class which rules that society. Thus, for an exploited class to overthrow a society's ruling class, the exploited class "...needs to express its own class outlook in philosophical form, and to oppose this philosophy to the philosophies which express the outlook and defend the interests of the exploiters." <sup>8/</sup>

The philosophy of the most exploited class in modern society, the working class, is dialectical materialism. Before summarizing dialectical materialism's basic principles (which will be done in the next issue of People's Democracy), let us briefly investigate 1) the philosophies standing in opposition to dialectical materialism and 2) the historical development in the realm of human thought leading to dialectical materialism's emergence.

## II. THE TWO WORLD OUTLOOKS

The fundamental question of philosophy concerns the relation of spirit (thinking, consciousness, perceptions of the external world, etc.) and nature (being, matter, the external world, etc.). Which is primary? Which is the basis for the other's existence?

"The answers which the philosophers gave to this question 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 other... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism." <sup>9/</sup>

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<sup>7/</sup> Cornforth Op. Cit., p.9

<sup>8/</sup> Ibid., p.9

<sup>9/</sup> Frederick Engels Ludwig Feuerbach And The End Of Classical German Philosophy (Progress Publishers, Moscow) p.30

Hence, the two world outlooks, the world's two condensing philosophies, are idealism and materialism. "Idealism is the unscientific concept of the world. Materialism is the scientific concept of the world." 10/

### Idealism

An idealist philosophy is "...any doctrine which says that beyond material reality is a higher, spiritual reality, in terms of which the material reality is in the last analysis to be explained." 11/ Numerous such doctrines exist, with each putting forward its own interpretation of the concept that material reality is the product of a higher, spiritual reality. However, all such doctrines share the belief that spirit creates matter and express that belief in a religious form. Mainstream and progressive theology hold that the world exists, that our ideas are a reflection of things existing outside of our mind, and that God created the world. Reactionary theology holds that God only created the illusion of the world, that our ideas create things existing only in our mind, and that the world does not exist outside of our thoughts. Their many theological differences notwithstanding, all idealists share the belief that it is impossible to know the world, since the world is allegedly under the control of forces beyond humankind's comprehension.

The major varieties of idealism are Subjective Idealism, Realism, Dualism and Agnosticism.

Subjective idealism asserts that the material world doesn't exist. All that exist are sensations and ideas in our mind. It is therefore impossible to know anything about (or change) objective reality, since objective reality doesn't exist. This is the most reactionary variety of idealism. Its original advocate was Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753), the "father of idealism".

Realism recognizes the existence of the material world, but maintains that the material world was created by, and is eternally ruled by, God. Realism was popularized by a number of 16th and 17th century philosophers, especially Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and John Locke (1632-1704).

Dualism treats the world of inorganic matter and plant and non-human animal life in a thoroughly materialist manner, by recognizing that spiritual factors play no part in the existence of the above material forces. However, in the opinion of dual-

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10/ Georges Politzer Elementary Principles Of Philosophy  
(International Publishers, New York, 1976) p.13

11/ Cornforth Op. Cit., p.22

ists, the most famous of whom was Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the activities of the human mind and the life of human society are spiritual spheres, in which explanations are to be sought in idealist rather than materialist terms.

Agnosticism attempts to reconcile idealism and materialism. Founded by David Hume (1711-1776) and Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804), agnosticism recognizes the existence of the material world, but holds that it is impossible to know whether the material world came to exist independently or was created by a spirit or God of some kind or another. In other words, the agnostic accepts science and in that regard is a materialist; but the agnostic keeps an open mind on the question of God and in that regard is an idealist.

### Materialism

Contrary to idealism, materialism holds that the material world exists outside of our thoughts, that the brain is the organ of thought, that our thoughts are products of reflections of the material world in our brain. Spirit doesn't create matter, as idealism holds; rather, matter creates spirit. Moreover, matter doesn't need a spirit in order to exist (for example, a rock and all other such inanimate objects have no spirit), whereas in order for a spirit--i.e., consciousness--to exist, it must be encompassed within a living body of matter.

Further on in this work, we will describe the characteristics of the major varieties of materialism--namely, mechanistic materialism and dialectical materialism. Here we need only point out that, despite differences regarding the mode of motion of matter and the basis of change, the contending varieties of materialism share the belief that it is possible to know the world. According to materialists, human knowledge of the world (science) is constantly proceeding onward and upward, though all there is to know about the world will never be known--i.e., absolute knowledge of the universe will never be achieved. In other words, "...materialism is nothing other than the scientific explanation of the universe." 12/

### III. THE HISTORY OF MATERIALISM

By way of introducing this section, it is necessary to point out again that the scientific advances described below and subsequent philosophical advances did not occur in a void,

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12/ Politzer Op. Cit., p.5



but in the context of human society's inexorable advance from lower to higher stages of development. That is, scientific and technological advances and subsequent advances in the realm of philosophy were the objective and subjective products of the advance of a certain mode of production toward a higher, more sophisticated mode.

In other words, the process of advancing beyond slavery gave rise to certain scientific and technological advances and to subsequent philosophical advances that resulted in the eventual dominance of feudalism. The process of advancing beyond feudalism, in turn, led to other scientific, technological and subsequent philosophical advances that eventually resulted in the dominance of capitalism. And in the present era, the process of advancing beyond (competitive and monopoly) capitalism has led (and continues to lead) to still other scientific, technological and philosophical advances. However, as is the case with all processes of development, the advance from capitalism to people's democracy and then socialism has occurred unevenly, being at a relatively advanced stage in several of the world's countries, but a long way from fruition in most of the others (especially in the U.S.).

The necessity of keeping in mind the material context of materialism's historical development having thus been reiterated, let us now briefly trace the history of materialism.

### Greek Materialism

Having always been linked to science and science's development and progress, materialism first arose as a philosophical current in Greece in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C., when the first known studies of science were undertaken by the "Physicists". Heraclitus was the father of dialectics. He "...was the first to try to explain motion and change and to see the reason for the evolution of things in contradiction." <sup>13/</sup> Another Greek thinker, Leucippus, was already discussing the problem of atoms as early as the 5th century B.C. Thales, Anaximenes, Democritus and Epicurus were some of the other Greek philosophers who contributed to the development of early materialism.

Though basically correct, the concepts of these first materialists were eventually abandoned because 1) the backward state of science during Greek antiquity could not provide concrete proof of the materialists' assertions; and 2) the greatest thinker of Greek antiquity, Aristotle, was more of an idealist than a materialist. The first reason, the objective reason for the

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<sup>13/</sup> Ibid., p.54

initial abandonment of materialism, speaks for itself. However, the second reason, the subjective reason, requires further explanation.

Aristotle developed a veritable inventory of Greek antiquity's entire range of human knowledge. He wrote books on virtually every subject, but only the dominant idealist tendencies in these numerous works were retained, while the less-frequent materialist and scientific references were either distorted or completely obliterated by succeeding generations of his disciples. As a result, Aristotle's idealism was a dominant influence in philosophy for twenty centuries--i.e., until the end of the Middle Ages.

Despite being savagely repressed during the two thousand years of Aristotelean domination, materialism nevertheless began to re-emerge in France and England in the 11th century A.D. The catalyst for this re-emergence was a struggle in both countries between opposing wings of the idealist camp--specifically, between the wing denying the existence of material reality on the one hand and the wing asserting the existence of material reality on the other. This struggle was the philosophical manifestation of the conflict between dominant but declining feudalism and embryonic but arising merchant capitalism. In both England and France, the more progressive elements from the wing asserting the existence of material reality gradually embraced materialism over the next several centuries. By the 15th century, two distinct materialist currents--English materialism and French materialism--were undeniably in existence.

#### English Materialism

Francis Bacon, one of the founders of the scientific method of experimentation, is the father of English materialism.

"The real progenitor of English materialism is Bacon. To him natural philosophy is the only true philosophy, and physics is the chiefest part of natural philosophy....According to him the senses are infallible and the source of all knowledge. All science is based on experience, and consists in subjecting the data furnished by the senses to a rational method of investigation. Induction, analysis, comparison, observation, experiment, are the principle forms of such a rational method." <sup>14/</sup>

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<sup>14/</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels The Holy Family Quoted by Engels in Socialism: Utopian and Scientific (International Publishers, New York, 1972) "Introduction" p.10

Prior to Bacon, with the above method of scientific investigation virtually unknown, science was studied mainly by reading books, the contents of which reeked with the stench of idealism. This bookish method of scientific study was called scholasticism. In perusing the following description of this scholastic method of scientific study, we ask the reader to note the similarity between pre-Baconian scholasticism and the method of study employed by certain forces today. In other words, substitute Marx, Lenin and Stalin for Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and "a third work", and you have the scholasticism of our contemporary American dogmatists.

"On a certain subject the passages written by Aristotle were taken up, next the books by Thomas Aquinas, who was a great theologian, were taken up, and what the latter had written about the passage by Aristotle was read. The teacher would make no personal commentary, let alone discuss what he thought about it, but rather referred to a third work which repeated Aristotle and Saint Thomas. That was the science of the Middle Ages, which was called scholasticism: it was a bookish science, because only books were studied." 15/

During Bacon's time, the principal philosophical question being posed was: where do ideas come from? Though for Bacon, the idea existed only because we see and touch things, he couldn't yet prove it, owing to science's backward state. The eventual successor to Bacon was John Locke, the quintessence of empiricism, who asserted that all ideas come from experience, that experience is the only foundation of our ideas.

#### French Materialism

Meanwhile, throughout the Bacon/Locke period in England, a materialist current had been developing in France. The principal exponent of materialism in 16th and 17th century France was the dualist philosopher Rene Descartes. His principal contributions to materialism were his criticism of scholasticism and the introduction of a scientific method of investigation in which all objects are broken down into their simplest component parts. According to Descartes, however, these component parts, as well as the various objects these components comprise, are

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15/ Politzer Op. Cit., pp.55-56 (Politzer's emphasis)

isolated from and independent of each other. This mechanistic materialist view is dominant among the ruling classes and the oppressed masses in the contemporary world's capitalist and monopoly capitalist countries. Hence, Descartes is the father of modern bourgeois philosophy.

Descartes was an idealist in theory and a materialist in practice. That is, to him spirit was responsible for the creation of matter, but matter, in turn, was subject to the laws of physics and mathematical mechanics. Descartes thus held that the laws of physics and mechanical motion applied to all forms of matter--animal life included. He believed animals to be nothing more than machines of flesh and muscle, incapable of all sensations and emotions. However, declared Descartes, the human species is different. It is imbued with a soul and is capable of all manner of sensations and emotions and is thus ruled by a force existing outside of the laws of physics and mechanical motion. Julien Offroy de La Mettrie (1709-1751), a French doctor and philosopher, took Descartes' theory of the mechanization of animals to its logical conclusion--he applied it to the human species. According to La Mettrie, sensations, mental images, ideas and judgements on the part of humans are mechanical functions of the central nervous system.

"This doctrine was looked upon as exceptionally shocking, and as a terrible insult to human nature, not to mention God. Yet it was in its time a progressive view of man. The view that men are machines was an advance in the understanding of human nature as compared with the view that they are wretched pieces of clay inhabited by immortal souls. And it was, comparatively speaking, a more humane view." 16/

At this historical juncture, English materialism, primarily in the form of the ideas of John Locke, penetrated into France. This merger of English and French materialism gave rise to mechanistic materialism, the materialism of the 18th century.

#### The Materialism Of The 18th Century: Mechanistic Materialism

Eighteenth century materialism was embodied in the person of Denis Diderot (1713-1784), the greatest materialist thinker prior to Marx and Engels. Diderot was the leader and moving spirit of the Encyclopedists, militant French writers and philos-

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16/ Cornforth Op. Cit., p.35

ophers who ceaselessly criticized the prevailing social order in their country.

"(Diderot) wrote on the most diverse topics, on natural science and mathematics, history and society, the economy and the State, law and morals, art and literature. Raised in strict Catholicism, Diderot developed with remarkable logic, evolving from deism to militant materialism and atheism, and finally embodying the highest goals of the revolutionary bourgeois philosophy of the French Age of Enlightenment. He exerted the most profound and long-lasting influence on the society of his time. But his thought was not restricted to the narrow limits of vulgar materialism. A number of glimmers of dialectical thought are to be found in his works.... Diderot is justly considered a precursor of Lamarck and Darwin, for he already maintains, clearly and resolutely, the idea of the evolution of organisms and of the initial existence of a 'primitive being' from which, by progressive transformations, the later diversity of the animal and plant kingdoms derived.... Diderot was, moreover, an eminent dramatist and a master of prose. In his struggle for reforms in art and the theater, he advocates naturalism, the uncamouflaged representation of living, concrete reality." <sup>17/</sup>

As previously noted, mechanics was already a very significant part of 16th and 17th century French materialism. What is mechanics? In essence, mechanics is the study of the external motion of an object and the motion resulting from the external collision of two or more objects.

"Mechanics was the science which developed first because mechanical motion is the simplest kind of motion. It is much easier to study the motion of an apple on a tree which is blowing in the wind than to study the change produced in a ripening apple. The effect of the wind on the apple can be more

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<sup>17/</sup> Politzer Op., Cit., pp.159-160

easily studied than the ripening of the apple. But the former study is 'partial' and thus opens the door to metaphysics." 18/\*

Since, by the 18th century, mechanics was the most developed of all the sciences, it was inevitable that the materialism of the 18th century be a vulgar, metaphysical, mechanistic materialism.

"Mechanistic materialism was in essence an ideology, a mode of theorizing, of the rising bourgeoisie.... It arose and developed in opposition to feudal ideology...(and) it was in fact the most radical of all bourgeois forms of opposition against the feudal outlook....

It was typical of the natural philosophy of the feudal period that 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 in that system, and of the end or purpose which it existed to serve.

The bourgeois philosophers and scientists destroyed these feudal ideas about nature. They regarded nature as a system of bodies in interaction, and, rejecting all the feudal dogmas, they called for the investigation of nature in order to discover how nature really worked.

The investigation of nature advanced hand in hand with the geographical discoveries, the development of trade and transport, the improvement of machinery and manufactures. The greatest strides were made in the mechanical sciences,

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18/ Ibid., p.89

\* Metaphysics, the method of analysis standing in direct opposition to dialectics, is characterized by the following views: 1) Nothing ever moves or changes, everything remains immobile and identical--in other words, "there is nothing new under the sun"; 2) All things exist in isolation from one another; 3) The resulting division between things exists eternally; and 4) Opposites mutually exclude each other, two opposite things cannot exist at the same time--in other words, there is no such thing as contradiction. Metaphysics is more fully dealt with in this work's second installment.

closely connected as they were with the needs of technology. So it came about that materialist theory was enriched as the result of the scientific investigation of nature, and in particular by the mechanical sciences....

The world--so thought the mechanistic materialists--consists of nothing but particles of matter in interaction. Each particle has an existence separate and distinct from every other; in their totality they form the world; the totality of their interactions forms the totality of everything that happens in the world; and these interactions are of the mechanical type, that is to say, they consist simply of the external influence of one particle upon another.

Such a theory is equivalent to regarding the whole world as nothing but a complex piece of machinery, a mechanism." 19/

Thus, mechanistic materialism objectively recognizes that a Supreme Being exists outside of the material world (for who else but a Supreme Being would be capable of starting up the "complex piece of machinery"?). Contrary to the varieties of idealism, however, mechanistic materialism generally holds that this Supreme Being only had a hand in creating the world (i.e., unleashing the initial impulse bringing the world into being) but in no way is involved in the day-to-day affairs of life.

The inadequacy of mechanistic materialism is graphically demonstrated in situations involving the emergence of a new quality. For mechanistic materialism only sees change occurring in the form of endless and repetitive mechanical interactions of unconnected particles of matter, thus negating the possibility of a new quality emerging. But "the various processes of nature --chemical processes and the processes of living matter, for example--cannot in fact be all reduced to one and the same kind of mechanical interaction of material particles." To be more specific, chemical interactions are of an entirely different order than mechanical interactions in that "...the changes which take place as a result of chemical interaction involve a change of quality." 20/

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19/ Cornforth Op. Cit., pp.31-33

20/ Ibid., pp.36-37

Mechanistic materialism is based on four dogmatic assumptions:

- 1) The basis of all change is permanent and stable things with definite, fixed properties.

According to this first dogmatic assumption, the world consists of permanently-existing, independent material particles which, in the course of their interaction with one another, manifest such properties as position, mass, velocity, etc. However, rather than consisting of things, the world consists of processes, within which things come into being, arise and develop and disintegrate and die away.

- 2) All change is the product of external causes.

This is simply not the case; on the contrary, before looking for external causes, look for the basis of change within a thing or process itself.

"The fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal; it lies in the contradictoriness within the thing. There is internal contradiction in every single thing, hence its motion and development. Contradictoriness within a thing is the fundamental cause of its development, while its interrelations and interactions with other things are secondary causes." <sup>21/</sup>

- 3) The mechanical motion of particles--i.e., the exchanging of position by particles as a result of the action of external forces on the particles--is the basic form of motion of matter.

While the simplest form of motion is the exchange of position by bodies of matter, not all motion can be reduced to (or explained by) this simplest form of motion. As noted above, chemical interactions are of a higher, more profound nature than mechanical interactions, since the former produce qualitative changes, whereas the latter do not.

- 4) Each thing or particle in the universe has its own fixed nature and is independent of all other things and particles.

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Mao Tsetung "On Contradiction" Four Essays On Philosophy (Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1968)  
p.26 (Our emphasis)



Each thing or particle in the universe experiences the common history of coming into being and, while in existence, constantly moving in space and time and eventually passing out of being. However, these constantly moving things and particles can only be understood in their relation and interconnection to one another.

To sum up. The mechanistic materialism of the 18th century was materialist because it answered the fundamental question of philosophy by saying that (except with regard to the world's actual creation) matter is primary over spirit. However, it was mechanical because it considered the universe to be a complex of fixed, isolated and independent things, and because it studied the motion of these things from the point of view of mechanics.

### From Mechanistic Materialism To Dialectical Materialism

As of less than 200 years ago, the various sciences were still studied in isolation from one another. For example, chemistry, physics and biology were studied separately, since no relation was seen between them. This metaphysical method of study was also applied within the various sciences. Within physics, for instance, the phenomena sound, heat, magnetism, electricity, etc., were thought to be totally unrelated and were thus studied separately.

By the dawn of the 19th century, however, an accumulation of scientific research had clearly revealed the interconnection of the various sciences and the interconnection of the various phenomena within a given science. Later in the century, Darwin demonstrated the evolving nature of the human species and all other animal life. These and other scientific advances during the 19th century--especially, the discovery of the cell and the transformation of energy--provided the objective basis for an historical advance in the realm of human thought--namely, the advance from mechanistic materialism to dialectical materialism.

"Above all, there are three great discoveries which have enabled our knowledge of the interconnection of natural processes to advance by leaps and bounds: first, the discovery of the cell as the unit from whose multiplication and differentiation the whole plant and animal body develops. Not only is the development and growth of all higher organisms recognised to proceed according to a single general law, but the capacity of the cell to change indicates the way by which organisms can change their species and thus go through a more individual development.

Second, the transformation of energy, which has demonstrated to us that all the so-called forces operative in the first instance in inorganic nature--mechanical force and its complement, so-called potential energy, heat, radiation (light, or radiant heat), electricity, magnetism and chemical energy--are different forms of manifestation of universal motion, which pass into one another in definite proportions so that in place of a certain quantity of the one which disappears, a certain quantity of another makes its appearance and thus the whole motion of nature is reduced to this incessant process of transformation from one form into another. Finally, the proof which Darwin first developed in connected form that the stock of organic products of nature environing us today, including man, is the result of a long process of evolution from a few originally unicellular germs, and that these again have arisen from protoplasm or albumen, which came into existence by chemical means." 22/

In order to witness the advance from mechanistic materialism to dialectical materialism first hand, we must journey from France to Germany and focus our attention on the philosophy of Germany's preeminent idealist philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Frederick Hegel (1770-1831).

The essence of Hegelian philosophy is embodied in the statement: "All that is real is rational; and all that is rational is real."

In other words, "...in the course of development, all that was previously real becomes unreal, loses its necessity, its right of existence, its rationality. And in place of moribund reality comes a new, viable reality--peacefully if the old has enough intelligence to go to its death without a struggle; forcibly if it resists this necessity. Thus the Hegelian proposition turns into its opposite through Hegelian dialectics itself: All that is real in the sphere of

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22/ Engels Ludwig Feuerbach... Op. Cit., pp.69-70

human history becomes irrational in the process of time, is therefore irrational by its very destination, is tainted beforehand with irrationality, and everything which is rational in the minds of men is destined to become real, however much it may contradict existing apparent reality. In accordance with all the rules of the Hegelian method of thought, the proposition of the rationality of everything which is real resolves itself into the other proposition: 'All that exists deserves to perish.'" 23/

As Engels goes on to make clear, "the true significance and the revolutionary character of the Hegelian philosophy" is its recognition of the relative nature of truth and the temporary nature of all things and processes:

"Truth, the cognition of which is the business of philosophy, was in the hands of Hegel no longer an aggregate of finished dogmatic statements, which, once discovered, had merely to be learned by heart. Truth lay now in the process of cognition itself, in the long historical development of science, which mounts from lower to ever higher levels of knowledge without ever reaching, by discovering so-called absolute truth, a point at which it can proceed no further, where it would have nothing more to do than to fold its hands and gaze with wonder at the absolute truth to which it had attained. And what holds good for the realm of philosophical knowledge holds good also for that of every other kind of knowledge and also for practical action. Just as knowledge is unable to reach a complete conclusion in a perfect, ideal condition of humanity, so is history unable to do so; a perfect society, a perfect 'state', are things which can only exist in imagination. On the contrary, all successive historical systems are only transitory stages in the endless course of development of human society from the lower to the higher. Each stage is necessary, and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But in

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23/ Ibid., p.14

the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its own womb, it loses its validity and justification. It must give way to a higher stage which will also in its turn decay and perish. Just as the bourgeoisie by large-scale industry, competition and the world market dissolves in practice all stable time-honoured institutions, so this dialectical philosophy dissolves all conceptions of final, absolute truth and of absolute states of humanity corresponding to it. For it (dialectical philosophy) nothing is final, absolute, sacred. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything; nothing can endure before it except the uninterrupted process of becoming and of passing away, of endless ascendancy from the lower to the higher. And dialectical philosophy itself is nothing more than the mere reflection of this process in the thinking brain. It has, of course, also a conservative side; it recognises that definite stages of knowledge and society are justified for their time and circumstances; but only so far. The conservatism of this mode of outlook is relative; its revolutionary character is absolute--the only absolute dialectical philosophy admits." <sup>24/</sup>

The above are the necessary conclusions drawn from a consistent application of Hegel's method. When it came to applying his own method, however, Hegel proved to be downright inconsistent. That is, Hegel "...was compelled to make a system and, in accordance with traditional requirements, a system of philosophy must conclude with some sort of absolute truth." <sup>25/</sup> For Hegel, the concluding point in his system was the realization of the "absolute idea". Thus, according to Engels, Hegel conceived the end of history as follows:

"Mankind arrives at the cognition of this self-same absolute idea, and declares that this cognition of the absolute idea is reached in Hegelian philosophy. In this way, however, the whole

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<sup>24/</sup> Ibid., pp.15-17

<sup>25/</sup> Ibid., p.17

dogmatic content of the Hegelian system is declared to be absolute truth, in contradiction to his dialectical method, which dissolves all dogmatism. Thus the revolutionary side is smothered beneath the overgrowth of the conservative side. And what applies to philosophical cognition applies also to historical practice. Mankind, which in the person of Hegel, has reached the point of working out the absolute idea, must also in practice have gotten so far that it can carry out this absolute idea in reality.... And so...the absolute idea is to be realized in that monarchy based on social estates which Frederick William III so persistently but vainly promised to his subjects, that is, in a limited, moderate, indirect rule of the possessing classes suited to the petty-bourgeois German conditions of that time...." <sup>26/</sup>

In Germany, this contradiction between Hegel's system, permeated with idealism, and Hegel's dialectical method manifested itself in the form of divergent views in the realms of religion and politics by the late 1830s. "Whoever placed the chief emphasis on the Hegelian system could be fairly conservative in both spheres; whoever regarded the dialectical method as the main thing could belong to the most extreme opposition, both in politics and religion." <sup>27/</sup>

Given the existence of an absolutist feudal monarchy in Germany, politics was, according to Engels, "a very thorny field" in which to openly engage. Thus, those comprising the Left Wing of the Hegelian school, the Young Hegelians, initially confined their criticism to the realm of religion, though in such a way as to enable them to at least indirectly criticize Germany's oppressive civil and military institutions. At this point, the practical necessities of their struggle against religion--i.e., the need to learn from similar past struggles--drove the main body of Young Hegelians to re-examine the above-described Anglo-French materialism.

"This brought them into conflict with the system of their school. While materialism conceives nature as the sole reality, nature in the Hegelian

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<sup>26/</sup> Ibid., pp.18-19

<sup>27/</sup> Ibid., p.22

system represents merely the 'alienation' of the absolute idea, so to say, a degradation of the idea. At all events, thinking and its thought-product, the idea, is here primary, nature the derivative, which only exists at all by the condescension of the idea. And in this contradiction they floundered as well or as ill as they could.

Then came Feuerbach's \* Essence Of Christianity. With one blow it pulverised the contradiction, in that without circumlocutions it placed materialism on the throne again. Nature exists independently of all philosophy. It is the foundation upon which we human beings, ourselves products of nature, have grown up. Nothing exists outside nature and man, and the higher beings our religious fantasies have created are only the fantastic reflection of our own essence. The spell was broken; the 'system' was exploded and cast aside, and the contradiction, shown to exist only in our imagination, was dissolved." 28/

Engels continues:

"The course of evolution of Feuerbach is that of a Hegelian--a never quite orthodox Hegelian, it is true--into a materialist; an evolution which at a definite stage necessitates a complete rupture with the idealist system of his predecessor. With irresistible force Feuerbach is finally driven to the realization that the Hegelian pre-mundane existence of the 'absolute idea', the 'pre-existence of the logical categories' before the world existed, is nothing more than the fantastic survival of the belief in the existence of an extra-mundane creator; that the material, sensuously perceptible world to which we ourselves belong is the only reality; and that our consciousness and thinking, however supra-sensuous they may seem, are the product of a material, bodily organ, the brain. Matter is not a product of mind, but mind itself is merely

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Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872)

28/ Ibid., pp.25-26

the highest product of matter. This is, of course, pure materialism." 29/

Feuerbach's "pure" materialism and the materialism of the 18th century were in essence identical. Both were primarily mechanical, since mechanics was still the only natural science that had been thoroughly examined as late as Feuerbach's time. Also, both Feuerbach and his 18th century predecessors were unable to comprehend the universe as a complex of processes, as matter in motion undergoing continuous historical development. This, too, was in accordance with the relatively backward state of natural science at the time of Feuerbach's emergence.

As noted above, providing the objective basis for mechanistic materialism's advance to dialectical materialism were: 1) the discovery of the cell; 2) the transformation of energy; and 3) Darwin's theory of evolution. "Thanks to these three great discoveries and the other immense advances in natural science,...we can demonstrate the interconnection between the processes in nature not only in particular spheres but also the interconnection of these particular spheres on the whole, and so can present in an approximately systematic form a comprehensive view of the interconnection in nature by means of the facts provided by empirical natural science itself." 30/ Unfortunately, however, primarily due to his banishment from the centers of cultural and scientific activity by Germany's reactionary government, Feuerbach was unable to build upon science's advances--i.e., on the basis of the above and other scientific discoveries, to raise mechanistic materialism to the level of dialectical materialism. This was to be done by Karl Marx (1818-1883).

Karl Marx was born on May 5, 1818 in Trier, a provincial city of the Rhineland, which was then part of the kingdom of Prussia. The son of a local lawyer of liberal religious and political views, Marx graduated from the local Gymnasium (classical high school) and studied for a year at the University of Bonn. In 1836, he entered the University of Berlin as a law student. However, he soon abandoned the law and threw himself into the study of history and philosophy.

"At that time German philosophy, renewed by Kant in 1781 in his Critique of Pure Reason

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29/ Ibid., pp.35-36

30/ Ibid., p.70

as a rebuttal of English empiricism and skepticism, was moving rapidly from one phase of speculative thought to another. During that stormy period, the influence was still fresh of the French Revolution, political heir of the Enlightenment, which had proclaimed the triumph of Reason. Philosophical thinking in France as in Germany reflected this optimistic belief, which expressed the political goals of the emergent middle classes. But where in France the middle classes had faced boldly the ancient powers of church and state and thus arrived at materialistic theories, conditions in Germany led to a different outlook since there the middle classes were too weak politically to fight the semi-feudal bureaucracy controlling church and state. In materialistic theories there is always to be found a militancy, and an anti-clerical militancy to boot. But German philosophers took another direction, less militant, more conciliatory to the existing powers. In this process they were able to dig deeply into the realm of pure thought, emerging with philosophies that hid their revolutionary potentials under an appearance of speculative contemplation." 31/

This school of speculative contemplation--or more correctly, speculative idealism--reached its highest point with the emergence of the Hegelian system. For a short period of time, Marx was an avowed--though critical--disciple of Hegel, but instantly became a "Feuerbachian" after reading Feuerbach's Es-  
sence of Christianity. Marx's support for Feuerbach was qualified, however, just as it was for Hegel. That is, just as he opposed Hegel's fetish for the realm of pure thought, Marx likewise opposed the abstract way in which Feuerbach looked at the human species' place and role in the world.

"Feuerbach had developed a materialistic approach to the world, which tried to explain thought from being, mind from matter, and not the other way around, so that man's thought had to be explained

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31/ Dirk J. Struik (Editor) The Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts Of 1844, By Karl Marx (International Publishers, New York, 1973) "Introduction" p.10



from the world in which he lives. But, Marx found, Feuerbach conceived this world primarily as nature, in which an abstract species being lived in equally abstract natural surroundings. This was not enough. Man was a social being, and moreover not an abstract social being but living and above all working under specific social conditions historically determined. This role of labor had already been seen, if only abstractly and imperfectly expressed by Hegel, but was neglected by Feuerbach--one example out of many to show that his materialism, although in principle a step in advance of Hegel's idealism, was also poorer in content. By neglecting man's role as a social being, Feuerbach came thus to an abstract outlook on the world, materialistic in its foundation but leading in the social sphere to an abstract idealistic, even sentimental, theory which he called humanism, the theory of man as he truly should be according to the nature of his species being.

It was to this abstract humanism that Marx objected: for an understanding of true humanism it was necessary to study and understand society, history, politics, and that relatively new science, political economy. Those thoughts led Marx, in particular, to the study of the French Revolution, the contemporary political situation in Western Europe, the writings of Adam Smith and other economists, and of the socialist and communist critics of society. He became conscious that modern industry had created a new class of men, the working class, with new ideals, a potentially revolutionary force for bringing about an entirely novel form of society....

(In summary, then,) Feuerbach's general philosophy of man as a species being had led him to an unhistorical anthropology. Marx, on the contrary, emphasized specific historical types of men, lords and serfs, bourgeois and proletarian. He thus saw his primary task in the analysis of the existing social order, proceeding from there to overhauling the whole of philosophy." 32/

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32/ Ibid., pp.18-19 (Struik's emphasis)

"Overhauling the whole of philosophy" involved two fundamental tasks: 1) Adopting the correct aspects of Feuerbach's materialism and casting aside its idealistic and religious-ethical encumbrances; and 2) Salvaging the dialectical method from Hegel's idealist philosophical system and incorporating that method with the correct aspects of Feuerbach's materialist world outlook.

1) Adopting the correct aspects of Feuerbach's materialism and casting aside its idealistic and religious-ethical encumbrances

As stated above, "Feuerbach had developed a materialistic approach to the world, which tried to explain thought from being, mind from matter, and not the other way around, so that man's thought had to be explained from the world in which he lives." This was the major thrust and the principal correct aspect of Feuerbach's materialism, and Marx embraced it wholeheartedly. However, Feuerbach saw humans as "abstract species living in equally abstract natural surroundings," a view "leading in the social sphere to an abstract idealist, even sentimental, theory which he called humanism." Marx, quite correctly, objected to Feuerbach's abstract humanism. But Feuerbach's abstract humanism was not the only aspect, nor even the major aspect, of Feuerbach's materialism to which Marx objected.

"The real idealism of Feuerbach becomes evident as soon as we come to his philosophy of religion and ethics. He by no means wishes to abolish religion; he wants to perfect it. Philosophy itself must be absorbed in religion....According to Feuerbach, religion is the relation between human beings based on the affections, the relation based on the heart, which relation until now has sought its truth in a fantastic mirror image of reality--in the mediation of one or many gods, the fantastic mirror images of human qualities--but now finds it directly and without any mediation in the love between 'I' and 'Thou'. Thus, finally, with Feuerbach sex love becomes one of the highest forms, if not the highest form, of the practice of this new religion." 33/

Though he continuously advocated "absorption in the concrete", Feuerbach became thoroughly abstract as soon as he be-

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33/ Engels Ludwig Feuerbach... Op. Cit., pp.47-48

gan speaking of any other than mere sex relations between humans. "In form he is realistic since he takes his start from man; but there is absolutely no mention of the world in which this man lives; hence, this man remains always the same abstract man who occupied the field in the philosophy of religion." <sup>34/</sup> Therefore, concludes Engels, "the cult of abstract man, which formed the kernal of Feuerbach's new religion, had to be replaced by the science of real men and of their historical development. This further development of Feuerbach's standpoint beyond Feuerbach was inaugurated by Marx in 1845...." <sup>35/</sup>

2) Salvaging the dialiectical method from Hegel's idealist philosophical system and incorporating that method with the correct aspects of Feuerbach's materialist world outlook

Using dialectics, Hegel developed numerous areas of life (daily life, science, religion, law, morality, esthetics, etc.) into a chain of reasoning until what he referred to as "Absolute Knowledge" was achieved. "New concepts were derived from previous concepts by analyzing their limitations and contradictions, 'negating' every concept until a more embracing one was reached and new light was thrown upon the older concept." <sup>36/</sup>

Hegel described the general application of his dialectical method thusly:

"There are three aspects in every thought which is logically real or true: the abstract or rational form, which says what something is; the dialectical negation, which says what something is not, the speculative--concrete comprehension: A is also non-A. These three aspects do not constitute three parts of logic, but are moments of everything that is logically real or true. They belong to every philosophical Concept. Every Concept is rational, is abstractly opposed to another, and is united in comprehension together with its opposites. This is the definition of dialectics." <sup>37/</sup>

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<sup>34/</sup> Ibid., pp.52-53

<sup>35/</sup> Ibid., p.61

<sup>36/</sup> Struik Op. Cit., p.31

<sup>37/</sup> Hegel Encyclopaedia of Philosophy  
Quoted by Struik Ibid., pp.31-32

As the following demonstrates, Hegel on occasion concretely applied his dialectical method:

"Wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there Dialectic is at work....We say, for instance, that man is mortal, and seem to think that the ground of his death is in external circumstances only; so that if this way of looking were correct, man would have two special properties, vitality and--also--mortality. But the true view of the matter is that life, as life, involves the germ of death, and that the finite, being radically self-contradictory, involves its own self-suppression." 38/

Clearly, what Hegel was referring to in both of the above applications of his dialectical method was the unity and struggle of opposites, the principal characteristic of dialectics. As Marx makes clear, however, Hegel applied his dialectical method idealistically or, what is another way of saying the same thing, stood his dialectical method on its head.

"To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which under the name of 'the Idea,' he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos (creator) of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea.'" 39/

With Marx, on the contrary, "...the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought." 40/ Marx had thus turned Hegel's dialectical method "right side up again". Having done so, Marx, in conjunction with his closest friend and collaborator, Frederick Engels (1820-1895), took the dialectical method salvaged from Hegel's idealist system of philosophy and incorporated that method with the correct aspects of Feuerbach's materialist world

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38/ Ibid., p.32

39/ Karl Marx Capital (Vol. 1) (International Publishers, New York, 1967) "Afterword To The Second German Edition" p.19

40/ Ibid., p.19

outlook.

The product of this overhaul of the whole of philosophy was dialectical materialism.

(To be concluded in the July-August issue of People's Democracy)