

SECTION II: BASIC PRINCIPLES OF MARXIST
SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

I. The purpose of this section of study

With this section we begin the first general area of our study: the "Overview of Basic Marxist Analysis" (see Reading List). We will focus on this general area for the next 6 weeks or so. For the greater part of this time we will be examining first one, then another of the fundamental facets of Marxist theory--for example, economic theory, political theory, and ideological or cultural theory. However, to start this general area of study, instead of plunging directly into, say, economic or political theory, it is important to step back and survey the anatomy of Marxist theory as a whole.

Too often people mistake one facet of Marxism for the whole. For instance, many people think that Marxism is an economic theory. They therefore believe that Marxism attempts to reduce all types of social phenomena to simple reflections of the economic processes; they believe that Marxism is a mechanical economic determinism. This view is held not only by those who reject Marxism, but also by many who consider themselves to be Marxists. In fact, this view has plagued the Marxist tradition from its inception: Marx and Engels themselves polemicized against such "economism".

Thus the purpose of this section is to help us avoid the errors of economism, and of one-sided views of Marxism, by looking at it in its totality.

II. Introductory remarks on this section

Marxist theory as a whole is divided into two parts: a science (historical materialism) and a philosophy (dialectical materialism). It is important to understand the distinctions between these two parts. Since our readings for this section don't make these distinctions explicitly clear, we have decided to review them here.

Historical materialism is defined as the science of history, the science of human social development. As a science it aims at producing knowledge of one distinct aspect of reality--in this case the history of human societies. It does this by developing a system of integrated laws and concepts which correspond to and explain its "object", or aspect of reality. This system of concepts is never completed, but must be constantly expanded, reformulated and corrected through application to concrete problems. And finally, historical materialism, as a science, has its own particular forms of "experiment" and validation: ultimately historical materialism is verified through social practice, and the history of social practice.

Marx devoted most of his mature life to establishing the foundations of this science of history, most particularly through his study and analysis of the capitalist mode of production (contained in its most systematic form in Capital). Since Marx and Engels, historical materialism has been considerably extended and enriched in several directions, many of which will be touched on in the course of our study. Economic theory, political theory, and ideological theory are all facets of historical materialism.

Dialectical materialism, on the other hand, is not a science, but Marxist philosophy. It is not science because, unlike historical materialism, its purpose is not to analyze and explain one distinct object by generating and applying a system of inter-related laws--nor can it be directly verified.

However, as philosophy, dialectical materialism is not simply philosophy in the traditional sense. Like traditional philosophy, dialectical materialism is a "world outlook" that corresponds to the experiences and needs of a particular social group--in this case the proletariat. Also like traditional philosophy, it is made up of "principles" and "assumptions" about how the world works. But unlike traditional philosophy, the principles of Marxist philosophy are not the products of speculation, rumination, and intuition. The principles of dialectical materialism are, in contrast, based securely on the sciences, particularly historical science; they are consciously "extracted" and "generalized" from scientific practice and theory.

For example, analysis shows that the logic of dialectics, and the dialectical method, are essential (if sometimes implicit) aspects of all truly scientific practice of any type. Likewise, an analysis of "intellectual history" shows that two basic approaches to knowledge have competed throughout history--"materialism" and "idealism"--with certain determinate results. From such analyses of the nature of scientific practice and of "intellectual history"--analyses which are historical and scientific, and are thus a part of the discipline of historical materialism--general philosophic principles about the material and dialectical nature of all reality can be drawn. These general principles thereby form a part of dialectical materialism.

We realize that the above description of dialectical and historical materialism is extremely brief and schematic. By keeping this description in mind while studying the readings for this section, the distinctions between these two component parts of Marxist theory, and the specific content of each, should be clarified.

(THE FIRST WEEK)

III. The first week's readings for this section

The reading for the first week of this section, Mao Tsetung's On Contradiction, was written in 1937 for the immediate purpose of fighting dogmatism in the Chinese Communist Party. Whereas the Mao essays that we read last week linked dogmatism to particular errors in the method of study (subjectivism) resulting in erroneous practice (sectarianism), On Contradiction primarily seeks to show that dogmatism is a deviation from the basic principles of Marxist philosophy. Despite the polemical-political nature of its immediate purpose, this essay has become the most popular systematic exposition of dialectical materialism ever written.

The organization of Mao's essay is extremely methodical. He proceeds, section by section, to address a particular principle of dialectical materialism. Each section builds on the previous ones. And in each section he defines the principle that he is addressing in an abstract philosophical manner, illustrates it with concrete examples from the natural sciences and from historical science (historical materialism), and draws political conclusions about the failure to apply the principle in question correctly. Because of the clarity of the

essay, it is not necessary to review Mao's main argument, and define his main concepts, here.

There is, however, one place in this essay that people often feel that Mao becomes a bit obscure and repetitive: section V, "The Identity and Struggle of Aspects of a Contradiction." It is felt that Mao is somewhat unclear on exactly what he means by "oppositives" being "identical", and by the "transformation" of contradictory aspects "into each other." We therefore suggest that people read this section carefully with these cautions in mind.

IV. The first week's discussion for this section of study

We suggest that the discussion of On Contradiction follow the same general plan as outlined in Study Guide #1, part III, with these additional comments:

Because of the systematic organizational structure of Mao's essay, the initial phase of our discussion (reviewing the basic themes and arguments of the readings) should move rather smoothly. The only real danger in this phase is getting sidetracked. Many of the illustrations that Mao uses to exemplify his basic argument are very important in their own right. For example, in section IV of this essay, Mao illustrates the philosophic principle of "the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction" by discussing the example of the relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production. This relationship is a central problem of historical materialism, and Mao's discussion of it in this passage has some important insights. Nevertheless, in this essay it is an aside. Therefore, we suggest that a full discussion of Mao's conceptualization of productive forces/productive relations, and of other such examples that he gives, be postponed until the major arguments of the essay have been reviewed--that is, postponed to the second phase of our discussion: review of the secondary points of the essay.

Also, in the third phase of our discussion, when we attempt to critically evaluate the essay, we should address the question of what Mao's essay tells us of the nature of dialectical materialism in distinction from historical materialism. For the discussion of this question we can draw on part II of this study guide above.

(SECOND WEEK)

V. The second week's readings for this section

The major reading for the second week of this section, Engels' Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, is more complex organizationally than Mao's On Contradiction, and spontaneously fits less easily into our study plan. Some of the themes that we want to highlight seem, at first glance, to be less than central to the main thrust of Engels' argument.

Engels' overriding purpose, in this extremely concise work, is to explain the various forms of socialist theory and ideology that arose in the 19th century in terms of the historical conditions that produced them, and to contrast early forms of socialism (utopian) to Marxist "scientific socialism." This essay breaks down into three parts, which are divided by Roman numerals in the text:

In the first part, Engels reviews the theories of three utopian socialists--Saint Simon, Fourier, and Owen--relative to the social experience that conditioned their thought. For our purposes, it is important to consider this part of Engels' essay as a practical example or "model" of the historical materialist approach to "intellectual history." This part contains an implicit sketch of the Marxist theory of the relationship between economic structure, class struggle, and ideology.

The second part of Engels essay is somewhat deceptive. What seems to begin as an "intellectual history" of various philosophers (especially Hegel and the German Idealists) turns out, in fact, to be a summary exposition of the basic principles of Marxist philosophy. Engels review of dialectical materialism, in this part, should be compared to Mao's discussion of this in On Contradiction. (It is interesting to note that, while Engels does not use the term "dialectical materialism" in this essay, he was the one who later popularized it.)

In the third and last part of this essay, Engels gives what is in effect an overview of the central concepts and theses of historical materialism. He summarizes the main conclusions of Marxist historical science as it stood at the time of his writing. It is on this portion of Socialism... that we most want to focus our study and discussion.

It should be noted that Engels' sketch of historical materialism is very concentrated. In the space of a few pages, he covers the fundamental constituent elements of a mode of production (productive forces/ production relations, means of production/property, classes and class struggle), establishes the essence of the capitalist mode of production, discusses the historical tendencies of the latter and the changing forms of class struggle that it generates, and proposes a strategy for socialism. the reading of this part of the essay should be regarded as an introduction to these historical materialist conceptualizations. It would be impossible for us to arrive at a complete understanding of each concept and its inter-connection to the others in one week. Moreover we will be studying these concepts in far greater depth in the coming weeks. The main goal for this week, in this regard, should be to get a strong sense of the Marxist approach to historical analysis in general. Finally, we would suggest that special attention is paid to two key concepts and their function: mode of production and class struggle.

In addition to Engels' Socialism..., there is a second reading for this week: "Engels' Letter to Bloch" (1890). The reason we are reading this famous letter is that it explicitly opposes an economicist interpretation of historical materialism. A superficial reading of Engels' Socialism...--and of other works by Marx and Engels--sometimes gives the impression that, for them, economics directly determines everything. In his letter to Bloch, Engels not only gives a clear general formula for the relationship between the base (economic processes) and the superstructures (political-ideological processes), but also suggests why he and Marx sometimes left themselves open to economicist misinterpretations.

VI. The second week's discussion

Again we feel that the discussions should follow the phases outlined in Study Guide #1. However, as we noted above, Engels' letter and essay do not, for our purposes, lend themselves well to the type of discussion that simply follows the argument of the text, step-by-step (as, for example, Mao's On Contradiction did). The study group leaders will, therefore, be prepared to raise a series of questions and points that will get the main themes out in a more appropriate order, during the first phase of our discussion.

During the second phase of the discussion, study group members should take the lead in throwing out some of the many secondary points and insights that Engels provides.

During the third phase, in addition to critically evaluating Engels' ideas, we should sum-up the two-week section of study as a whole, and sum-up the distinctions between dialectical and historical materialism, so that we can proceed to the next section of study, next week.

And, during the criticism/self-criticism, we should make a full assessment of the study group so far--especially of the usefulness of the study guides, and of the way that the discussions have been conducted.

M.L.E.P.

