



**MARXIST-  
LENINIST  
STUDY**

**N OUTLINE FOR  
GROUP DISCUSSION**

## **THE ROLE OF IDEAS IN HISTORY**

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EVERY IMPORTANT SCHOOL of philosophic thought falls into one of two broad categories—idealism and materialism.

Philosophical idealism believes in the primacy of spiritual things, ideas over reality, matter. Some idealists claim that matter has no objective existence, being merely a reflection of ideas in the minds of men, indeed of ideas in the mind of an intangible super-being, a god, who has created everything.

Philosophical materialism rejects this mystical concept, the basis of the various religious schools of thought. It insists on the primacy of reality, of matter in all its various forms. Ideas themselves are only true if they correspond to realities of the material world; and ideas are but the product of a special form of matter: the human brain. Marxists belong to the materialist school of Philosophy. They believe in the objective existence of the universe in which we live. It was not created by any supernatural being. It has no beginning and no end. Truth consists in the discovery of all the facts concerning

the universe, in all their innumerable interrelations and interactions for there is no reality but matter. Man has not yet succeeded in discovering everything there is to know about our material universe in wresting all the secrets of nature. But ultimately there are no unknowable mysteries, and with each new advance in science we advance closer to our goal of the conquest of objective truth.

In this article we concern ourselves with the conflict between idealism and materialism in the field of historical and social science.

The idealist conception of history explains social development in terms of *ideas*. Somehow the first impetus of a forward social movement is given by an idea which captures man's imagination. This idea then stimulates the creation of institutions which govern life in the society.

Of course not all idealist philosophers express their theories in this simple fashion. The idealist content of many philosophies is often hidden behind 'clever' jargon which serves to hide its real meaning. But boiled down to their basic premises all idealist schools of philosophy believe that historical change comes about as a result of changing ideas in the minds of men.

By and large this view of history suits those who rule, because men's minds are, in the result, diverted from the real conditions of life which call for radical change. History, according to idealists, does not follow the sort of pattern dealt with more fully in our last article, but is a series of mysterious and accidental events which have their origin in some vague and indefinable 'absolute idea' in the mind of a man or a group of men.

The pure idealist explains the origin of the idea as having been planted in man's mind by an outside, supernatural force—a God.

There are more subtle variations on this theme. But what is common to all idealist schools is the idea as the cause of all social change and—what is more—the 'idea' has a sort of independent existence of its own which is unrelated to the concrete conditions in which it is born. As Engels puts it:

The whole previous view of history was based on the conception that the ultimate cause of all historical changes are to be looked for in the changing ideas of human beings . . . But the question was not asked as to when the ideas came into men's minds.

When this question was asked by idealist philosophers, the answer usually consisted of a reference to some mysterious supernatural being or to some 'absolute idea' floating in the ether. It was never related to the concrete conditions of life which give birth to thought. As against this approach the materialist conception of history:

'seeks the ultimate cause and great moving power of all important historical events in the economic development of society, in the changes

the mode of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes and in the struggle of these classes against one another.' (Engels: *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*).

Or, as Marx puts it:

'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.' (*Preface to Critique of Political Economy*).

We saw in our last article that before society was divided up into economic classes, mankind lived under a system of primitive, communist equality. There was no private ownership of the means of production. This 'social being' determined primitive man's 'consciousness'. His ideas and institutions reflected the objective economic conditions. It was only when his 'social being' altered; when (for reasons already dealt with) the mode of production altered, that man began to alter his 'consciousness'.

The emphasis on communal life and communal property gave way to the proclamation of the holiness of private property and its protection against the community. This process can be explained in only one way. It is not that private greed and selfishness are suddenly discovered to be a desirable thing but rather that the new material conditions of life gave rise to new ideas and new institutions. As stated by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*:

'Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in a word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?'

Do we not experience this process on a smaller scale amongst our own people? We find that the worker in the factory is more receptive to ideas of revolutionary social change than the middle-class shopkeeper. We find the same with the peasant on the land when compared to the government's appointed chiefs. Why is this so?

Since no man is born with the thoughts of a shopkeeper the only possible explanation must be that his particular consciousness reflects his material existence, the way he makes his living.

It is not difficult to speculate what Matanzima's ideas would have been had he been an ordinary peasant living below the bread line on a miserable piece of land, and not a man whose bread is buttered by Verwoerd. No man is born a 'good boy' or a 'running dog' of his master. He can easily become one if his material conditions are such that he can live more comfortably that way. The fact that there are exceptions to be found amongst some chiefs and other privileged individuals who throw in their lot with the people's struggle does not

disprove the rule. All who genuinely side with the struggle are, of course, more than welcome. But it remains generally true that (few exceptions apart) the most militant and revolutionary fighters for freedom are to be found amongst those groups whose material existence has given them a revolutionary consciousness.

The materialist conception of history enables the scientific revolutionary to determine which is the most revolutionary class of society. Under capitalism there is no doubt that it is the working class because—deprived of all property—it has nothing to lose but its chains. Hence revolutionary consciousness in a worker does not demonstrate his superior mental qualities but rather his receptiveness to revolutionary ideas because of the material conditions of his life.

The scourge of racial prejudice and racial discrimination in Africa, as in other colonial territories, cannot be properly understood without a thorough grasp of the materialist conception of history.

We know only too well that all the ideas and institutions which have been developed by the white state in South Africa, have as their purpose, a continued subjugation of the non-white people. Every instrument of propaganda from the church to the newspapers; from Bantu Education to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, has been mobilised to propagate the idea of the inherent superiority of the white races and the inferiority of the non-whites. We know enough about South Africa to realize that the origin of this type of racial religion is in the fat profits which can be made from a system in which cheap black labour gives a life of wealth and luxury to the minority.

It follows that racial arrogance and racial prejudice is economic in origin. The 'consciousness' of the whites is determined by their social being and not the other way about.

When the white man first landed at the Cape of Good Hope he did not come with the sort of barbaric mental attitude towards other races which is too typical of him in South Africa today. In fact in the early stages van Riebeeck, the official father of the 'white nation' was so lacking in modern type prejudice, that he and his colleagues freely entered into marriages and other intimate relations with the indigenous peoples. Many leading government men of today, including Cabinet Ministers, originate from this stock. As the potentialities of the wealth that could be made by the exploitation of cheap labour became more and more obvious, the stage was set for the creation of institutions from which the Africans have been suffering for over 300 years. And on this foundation grew the religion and the rationalization that whites are 'superior' and born to rule, whereas blacks have from time immemorial been ordained by the Almighty to be hewers of wood and drawers of water.

Of course, in the process the origin of the idea is deliberately blurred. The process appears to be reversed. A number of well-meaning people begin to believe that the cause of the trouble is due to the backward and wrong ideas which people have on the question of race.

People who think like this have fallen for the crude propaganda of the ruling class. And here one can see how the idealist serves the master and the oppressor. Instead of tackling the problem at its root the 'liberal', mesmerized by idealist philosophy, wastes much of his energy in activity which might change the outlook of the few isolated individuals but which will leave the basic structure unaffected. More than that, by creating the illusion that the cause of race oppression is to be found in the first place in wrong *ideas*, he creates the further illusion that re-education instead of struggle, will end white supremacy.

Thus, whatever his motives, he in fact assists the white rulers to perpetuate the evil of white oppression.

The Communist, imbued by the teaching of Marxism, understands the historical truth that, whatever frills it is given, race oppression is basically a product of economic exploitation in general and capitalist class exploitation in particular.

The 'white' man as a whole creates and supports the ideas and institutions of the white state because he benefits economically from it.

Thus, from a long term point of view, there is only one real guarantee for the abolition of race discrimination and incorrect ideas on race and that is to remove the economic system which nurtures these false concepts. It is only under socialism that the barbaric ideas of racial superiority will begin to die because under socialism the conditions of material life will suffocate these thoughts until they are finally thrown on to the rubbish heap of history.

If one approaches this vital problem from a correct historic standpoint a great deal of confusion about the emotion-packed problem of race falls away. One sees it as a relation between what Marx calls the 'basis' and the 'superstructure'.

The 'basis' is the objective interests and economic necessities of life which a group acquires as a result of the existence of a given social system with given relations of production and distribution. The 'superstructure' is then built up on this 'basis' and consists of the development of a special set of ideas and institutions including religion, art, philosophy, politics and organisations to preserve the system and to propagate and develop these ideas. The basic institution is the State, which in the last resort imposes ideas favourable to the ruling class by force. (The precise role of the State will be dealt with in a future article.)

Once the 'basis' is altered the old aims, outlooks and beliefs cannot

in the long run survive because they no longer answer the needs and interests of the new relations of production.

Indeed the dramatic advances in the field of the abolition of racial and national oppression in socialist countries like the Soviet Union and China, have in real life proved the correctness of the Marxist thesis. Russia before the revolution was known universally as a prison house of nations. Today, the real equality of all racial groups is undisputed.

Are the Russians more moral people? Yes and no.

Yes, if one means to convey that the new 'basis' of socialism has laid the foundation for a higher morality in all fields including the question of the abolition of race discrimination. No, if one means to convey that there is something inherently superior in the Russian character which makes it less susceptible to ideas of race conflict.

Whenever you find a conflict of ideas or different standards of political or social morality, the explanation is usually found in something more basic than mere intellectual differences of opinion.

An approach which starts off with the idea as a thing in itself; as the mystical starting point, is usually fraught with so much confusion that it is of little value in our endeavours to tackle the problems of real life.

We know, for example, that the whites in South Africa, faced with the danger (for them) of true democracy are tending to overlook some of their differences and are all creeping into their backward laager. But we also know that for a long time there have been differences amongst the whites on the best methods of maintaining white supremacy.

These differences have been the subject of many learned tracts by professors and journalists. Sometimes they are related to inborn variations of the character of the Afrikaner as compared to the Englishman. At other times rural as opposed to urban origin has been the attempted explanation. Of course, the history of a group and its tradition often give a particular stamp to the precise form in which an institution develops. But we must not confuse form with substance. To really grasp the essence of the more 'liberal' approach of the secondary industrialist towards the question of pass laws and even wages and skilled jobs, one must look to the different positions occupied by the secondary industrialist in the productive machine as compared to the rich farmer.

The rich farmer relies on forced labour which the pass laws divert to his lands, whereas the secondary industrialist has, like most big urban capitalists (except the mines which operate on a different level altogether) an interest in easing the flow of labour reserves from one part of the country to another.

Thus again it is not a question of superior morality but the idea is related to basic economic interests.

It is vital to grasp this approach, not only because it is important to understand which are the most revolutionary groups in our society which make for fundamental change, but also to be able to make use of the differences which may, even temporarily, appear in the ranks of the enemy.

What of the future? If our analysis is correct, then the approach based on a grasp of materialism as opposed to idealism in philosophy, gives us some pointer to the real possibilities of the future. Those who would have us look at racialism as an inborn diseased idea which is unrelated to its economic base see the future in terms of an inevitable local and even world conflict between the white and non-white races. This approach has nothing in common with scientific thinking and, whether it comes from the ranks of the enemy or from a few misguided individuals who claim to be in the camp of the forces of national liberation, it must be fought.

From a long term point of view the achievement of national liberation and socialism will lay the basis for a final smashing of backward racial ideas and for the creation of one South Africa working for the good of all.

As stated in the programme of the South African Communist Party, *The Road to South African Freedom*:

The system of colonial domination over and robbery of the non-white masses is not in the genuine, long-term interest of the workers, small farmers, middle-class and professional elements who make up the bulk of the white population. White domination means more and more police and military expenditure to burden the taxpayer and divert men and resources from useful production. It means that the poverty-stricken masses are unable to form an adequate market for South African industry and agriculture. It means more and more dictatorial police-state measures, the extinguishing of civil liberties for whites as well as non-whites. It means a South Africa despised and shunned by the whole world, subjected to economic, diplomatic, cultural and other forms of isolation, boycott and sanctions. It means a future of uncertainty and fear. The maintenance of white supremacy involves ever-increasing repression and violence by the government, resistance by the oppressed people and the steady drift to civil war. Only the complete emancipation of the non-white peoples can create conditions of equality and friendship among the nationalities of South Africa and eliminate the roots of race hatred and antagonism which are the greatest threat to the continued security and existence of the white population itself. The national liberation of the non-whites which will break the power of monopoly capitalism is thus in the deepest long-term interest of the bulk of the whites. Progressive and far-seeing whites ally themselves unconditionally with the struggle of the masses of the people for freedom and equality.

## **MECHANICAL MATERIALISM**

As is the case with all general systems of thought and, in particular,

those which have an important bearing on man's social development, we must continuously be on our guard against a dogmatic, mechanical and over-simplified application of general propositions.

Big historical changes in society do not originate from changes in men's ideas; they spring from the practical needs and problems of man's social, and above all, his economic life. It is precisely these needs and problems that bring about changes in men's thinking and ideas. But that does not mean that the ideas of every society and group accurately reflect its real economic and other interests. Nor does it mean that ideas play no part whatever in the bringing about of social change and revolution. People who believe these things are not Marxists, they are vulgar or mechanical materialists. Everyday experience proves they are wrong.

For example, in many parts of Africa which have long passed the period of tribalism, we find tribal ideas and customs persisting. Although many of these ideas and customs are no longer useful—indeed they may actually be harmful to our cause of a united, modern and progressive Africa—people cling to them because they once played a useful and essential part in the past. Old prejudices, superstitions and errors die hard, it is only by conscious education of the most advanced sections and by being tested in the fire of experience by the masses, that the old ways of thought can be overcome. We shall make a great mistake if we imagine that automatically, overnight, the day after independence, Africans will cast off the wrong ideas of subservience which colonialism has inculcated, or the individualistic, money-grabbing, self-seeking code of conduct which capitalist development cultivates. These wrong ideas, harmful to African freedom and socialism, must be consciously and tenaciously opposed by our freedom-fighters and socialists. Even today in the Soviet Union, after nearly a half-century of workers' rule, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union still fights a hard daily battle to overcome the relics of centuries of capitalist and pre-capitalist Russian history, and to mould by education the new socialist man imbued with socialist ideas, the builder of communism.

As we all know, from our own experience, ideas do play a powerful and indispensable part in the process of historic change. During the French and other democratic revolutions in Europe long ago, the ideas of 'liberty, equality, fraternity' seized the minds and the imaginations of men; they fought and died for them, and overthrew the old feudal tyrannies. And today the ideas of African independence, unity, freedom, are a powerful and necessary factor in our great continent-wide revolution. However, these ideas are only powerful and valid because they answer the real needs of our people in the circumstances



of today, because they are understood by the masses, because they are capable of being put into practice, now. There is no force so powerful as an idea which meets these requirements, an idea, 'whose time has come'. But to put forward an idea, even a good idea, in a context where it is irrelevant to the practical needs of the people, means it will not become a valid historical force.

For example, Communism is a great and wonderful idea, the noblest vision of man's future, and the road of the future for all mankind. It would be a poor Communist, however, lacking in deep understanding of Marxism-Leninism, who would attempt to advance 'the building of Communism' as an immediate plan in a society where the basic requirements for this task were lacking, and where the energies and thoughts of the masses were absorbed by quite different, though historically progressive tasks. Imagine a poor, undeveloped country, a prey to colonialism and neo-colonialism, with little or no industries, where the landless peasants were starving, the people crying out for land, food, education, democratic rights. Anyone who started a movement in such a country concentrating on preaching abstract socialism or communism, and neglecting the vital needs of the people for unity in the national liberation fight, would not be acting as a Marxist-Leninist, nor would he be successful. Instead of an important movement, helping the people forward, he would be starting a sect. Instead of helping the cause of Communism, he would discredit it by giving the people a false idea of what Communism, Marxism-Leninism, stands for.

Marxist materialism differs from mechanical materialism because it takes into account all the factors of a given phenomenon, including the role of ideas in social development. And ideas, it should be noted, are themselves the product of matter—the human brain.

Marxism also adds another important element, the study of the process of change—a dialectical process of inner conflict and contradiction. We shall turn our attention to the dialectical process in our next discussion.