

WHAT IS DIALECTICS?

The Last of a Series on Marxism and Science

MANY people become frightened at the word "dialectics," thinking that it refers to some obscure and mysterious doctrine incomprehensible to ordinary mortals. Nothing could be further from the truth, for no people abhor mysterious doctrines more than Marxists.

Dialectic is an old Greek word, which may be freely translated as meaning conversation or dialogue. This was its original meaning.

The free citizens of the Greek city-state of Athens were great conversationalists. Out of their conversations was born philosophy, which has never had a truer home than on the streets of Athens. Of all the Greek philosophers, Socrates was the most perfect dialectician. A very plain and simple man, who burned with zeal to discover truth, Socrates hated all boasting, all pomp, ostentation and conceit.

ATHENIAN WIND BAGS

Athens was full of fat, rich, pompous citizens who took pride in delivering long-winded orations. Socrates was a poor man, and nothing delighted him more than to take the wind out of fat wind-bags who were filled with a sense of their own importance. It was his habit to wander around the streets and engage these men in conversation. He would ask them some simple question. These fellows would always be sure that they knew the answer, and they would almost invariably deliver him a long and complacent speech with such smug self-assurance that, hearing them, one would hardly dare to believe that there could be any doubt but that they knew whereof they spoke.

Socrates never argued with these Athenian Babbitts. He would listen very politely, and when the oration finally came to an end, he would innocently ask another question. Flattered at the opportunity to display his wisdom, the pompous citizen would give another cocksure answer. Socrates continued to

ask questions rapidly and lightly, now from this side, now from that, until suddenly the dignified citizen would say something which flatly contradicted his original statement. Then, Socrates would remind him of what he had said at first, and point out that now he had said just the opposite. Something must be wrong. Either the original statement was false or the latter statement was false.

Socrates would point out that if the latter statement were true, this meant that something must be wrong with the statement made in the long speech delivered in reply to the original question. If so, the proper procedure must be to *correct* that original statement in view of the new truth brought to light by the more recent and contradictory statement. In this manner Socrates would make the Athenian criticize *his own* original reply, correct it, and formulate it adequately.

In this manner, Socrates used to trip up and expose the important citizens of Athens, who frequently became angry, for no one likes to have his ignorance brought to light. Always remaining calm in the face of the anger of his fellow-conversationalist, Socrates would try to soothe his ruffled feelings, explaining that philosophy demands that one not become angry, but that one be willing to follow the argument wheresoever it may lead.

Having made one correction on the basis of a contradiction brought to light in the course of conversation, Socrates still would not let his fellow-conversationalist alone. He would continue the discussion until the second formulation would be contradicted. Then, a third and more correct formulation would have to be made. In this manner, the discussion would continue indefinitely.

One may read some of these conversations of Socrates in the beautiful Dialogues of Plato. There, truth advances by this process: stating a proposition, finding a contradiction to it, correcting it in the light of this

contradiction, finding a new contradiction, and continuing this indefinitely. At the end of any one of these Dialogues, one always feels that if only the conversation had continued longer, still more contradictions and more corrections would have been made, that there would really never be an end to the process were it not for human limitations which make endless conversation impossible.

This method of seeking truth was called dialectic by the Greeks. It involved movement through contradiction, and consisted of three phases, which were repeated endlessly. First, a proposition would be stated. This was the thesis. Then, it would be discovered that this proposition involved a contradiction, which negated it. This was the antithesis, the very opposite of the original proposition. Resolving this contradiction necessitated correcting the original statement and formulating a third proposition, the synthesis, so called because it combined the positive aspects both of the original statements and of that which contradicted it.

BIOLOGY EXAMPLES

As an example, people who know very little of biology are liable to define all animals which have backbones and which swim in the water as fish. They may, at the same time, define all animals who give birth to their young as mammals. When such a person discovers that whales both swim in the water and give birth to their young, he will realize that something is wrong with his definition of fish. He will have to reformulate it as back-boned animals who lay eggs and swim in the water. Then, suddenly, he will find that another characteristic of the whale and of all mammals is breathing through lungs, and will furthermore discover the lung-breathing, sea-swimming porpoise which also lays eggs and has a back-bone. He will realize the need for further deepening of his definition. Fish must be egg-lay-

ing and *gill-breathing* animals with back-bones, while the lung-breathing and egg-laying porpoise must belong to a third variety of animal, the reptile.

Zeno, the father of dialectics, posed a problem which puzzled philosophers until the time of Hegel, in the early 19th century. Zeno pointed out that if an arrow shot into the air moves, it must be both at a given point and not there at the same instant of time. For if it is definitely at a given point, it cannot be moving. If it moves, it must be passing through a given point, which means that it must both be there and not there at one and the same instant of time. This was a clear contradiction. Now Zeno could not see how such a contradiction could actually exist in nature. The Greeks believed that contradictions existed only in the mind and were merely mistakes. Zeno declared, therefore, that either his reasoning must be wrong or that motion could not exist. Since he could find no flaw in his reasoning, he came to the conclusion that nothing really moves, that we only think that there is movement. In this way, he sought to resolve the contradiction he had discovered in motion.

Only one of the ancient Greeks, Heraclitus, came to the conclusion which Marxists hold today, namely that movement is actually contradictory, that contradiction is inherent in nature itself.

In modern philosophy, Hegel enunciated the same doctrine. He declared that the moving arrow is actually both at a point and not there at one and the same time, that this is the nature of motion itself. In other words, movement *is* contradiction. Still more explicitly, everything

that moves constantly negates itself. The very act of movement makes it at every moment of its existence cease to be what it was the moment before. By moving, it constantly destroys itself. One can no more seize the present than he can seize the sea-foam or a shadow. No sooner is it grasped than it is gone. As Heraclitus declared, "Into the same river you could not step twice, for other (and still other) waters are flowing." Motion is the great

CONDEMNED TO DEATH, SOCRATES DRINKS THE CUP OF POISON HEMLOCK



contradiction eternally annihilating everything which is.

Yet there is nothing which does not move. Constant change is the very essence of all existence. There is nothing, therefore, which does not by the very act of being cease to exist. Eternal self-destruction is the law of all existence. Everything, therefore, in its time passes into its opposite. From being, it ceases to be. Everything contains within itself its own opposite in the form of the force which eternally impels it to move, and in moving, to become something different from what it was in the past. In ceasing to be what they were, however, objects do not merely cease to exist. They become something else, and this something else is positive. The past passes over into the present and both determine the future.

Thus movement is not merely negation, but the eternal creation of that which is new. It is not merely self-destruction, but at the same time self-creation. Nothing ever remains the same. New life ever arises from the old, and that which is new is a combination of the old with the contradiction which has destroyed it. But no sooner does that which is new emerge than, in its own turn it destroys itself and becomes something else as a result of its own motion.

LESSON FOR SOCIALISTS

The statements which we make about the world are not found to be contradictory, therefore, merely because we make mistakes, as the Greek dialecticians believed. We find that they become incorrect, because the world which we have tried to explain has changed. What was true, is no longer true. It has been contradicted by life itself. And therefore we must reformulate our statements.

This is a lesson which many Socialists have never learned. In 1914, imperialist nations were at war, and the Bolsheviks formulated a program of turning imperialist war into civil war. Today, the world has changed. Socialism exists on one hand and fascism on the other. Fascist imperialist nations are attacking democratic non-imperialist nations. As a result, the Communists have formulated the program of defending democracy against fascism. Many Socialists do not see why the same formulation, applicable in 1914, does not apply today. They have never mastered the simple truth of dialectics, that history in its course eternally contradicts its past and throws up new relationships.

In 1933, we attacked the New Deal, which was supported by Big Business, as, in some respects, a dangerous tendency toward fascism. Today, we support the New Deal, and some socialists are completely confused. They overlook the new factor, that today Big Business has split away from the New Deal and is its most bitter enemy. This change in class relationships changes everything, and only a foolish pedant or an enemy of the people would apply the same formulations to the New Deal today as in 1933.

Because the movement of the world which continuously contradicts every moment of its existence may be compared to a Socratic dialogue, Hegel declared that the movement of the world was itself dialectical. In other words, he said that we not only think dialectically, but that the course of

the world outside of our minds is itself dialectical. For that reason, the Hegelian philosophy is called the dialectical philosophy.

Conceiving the movement of the external world as a dialogue, Hegel was an idealist. He thought that all the vast movements of the universe are the working out of ideas in the Absolute Mind of God. He conceived of these movements as external to the individual mind of man, as momentary phases of the one Absolute Idea or God, the divine mind, which embraces all.

"HEGEL ON HIS FEET"

Marx and Engels were convinced that Hegel's description of the dialectical movement of the world was correct and corroborated by the conclusions of all the sciences, whose advance increasingly annihilates any static conception of the world. But they were equally convinced that the world was material. They discarded Hegel's idealism, retaining his dialectic and regarding it as a description of the movement of a material universe. Unit- ing the dialectical philosophy with materialism, Marx created dialectical materialism. Engels once declared that Hegel as an idealist had been standing on his head until Marx, the materialist, turned him upside down and set him on his feet.

Dialectical materialism recognizes as two basic laws of motion, (1) that everything eternally contradicts itself and (2) that, in the very force which moves it and thus destroys its past, everything contains within itself, as a part of itself, its own opposite. These laws are known as the *Law of Contradiction* and the *Law of the Unity of Opposites*.

A third law describes in more detail how changes take place. Two varieties of change must be recognized—changes in quantity and quality. The first consists of mere increases or decreases. The second consists of fundamental changes in character, as when substances burn and completely new substances (smoke and ashes) take their places. The dialectical philosophy declares that there is a connection between the two types of change. Gradual changes result from increase and decrease up to a certain point, when for some reason they suddenly result in qualitative changes. These changes in quality are sudden and violent.

This law is illustrated by an old proverb. One may heap burden after burden upon the back of a camel. But finally there comes the time when an additional straw will break the camel's back. In the same way, stresses and strains accumulate in the earth for ages. But finally they reach the breaking-point. The rocks in the bowels of the earth readjust themselves through earthquakes. When we heat water (which is a liquid) the heat rises gradually and steadily, although there is no qualitative change, until suddenly at 100 degrees Centigrade the water disappears into steam (which is a gas). If the process is reversed, then suddenly at 0 degrees Centigrade the water freezes into solid ice. The more we study the world the more we are convinced that everything moves in accordance with this law. There is slow and gradual evolution; then, suddenly, violent qualitative change. This law is called the

Law of the Change of Quantity into Quality.

In the realm of human society, we have the same phenomenon. During long periods of stability, gradual changes in the modes of production accumulate. The embryo of a new society slowly grows within the womb of the old. Suddenly it reaches the point where it can grow no more without bursting the restraining bonds of the old society. Then, in violent upheaval, the new society is born. Quantity passes into quality. The whole character of society becomes transformed. Thus capitalism emerged from feudalism. Thus today we are in the period when socialism has begun to emerge from capitalism.

This law, expressed in the emergence of new societies, is the same law also expressed in thunderstorms, earthquakes, freezing, boiling, birth, the origin of new species, in any qualitative change occurring anywhere within the bounds of the vast universe.

If we recognize that the world moves dialectically; then, the thought with which we seek to understand the world must also be dialectical. In other words, it is necessary that we always *think* in terms of movement, that we always apply our formulations to their proper historical moment.

The dialectic of thought is just one highly complex phase of the dialectic of nature. Thought does not, any more than any other aspect of the world, exist in isolation. Thought is active movement, and, just as every other movement, passes over into something other than itself. Thought is one phase of human life, and as such it passes over into human action, by means of which we change the world and thereby also change ourselves. There can really be so separation between thought and practice even though many people believe that such separation exists. As Marxists, we are thoroughly conscious of this. We know that active thinking guides all our practice. The more conscious we are of this, the more consciously we seek to direct our thinking toward such a mastery of the laws of human life that we will be able to control human destiny.

APPLIED TO SOCIETY

The analysis of social relationships from the standpoint of dialectical materialism reveals to us that our society, capitalism, contains within itself also its own opposite which is arising to destroy it, namely, the exploited working-class. With the working class, which, in destroying capitalism, will create the new classless society of Communism, lies the future of all humanity. With the emergence of Communism, humanity will for the first time become united, and mankind will finally emerge, in the words of Engels, from the animal kingdom into the kingdom of humanity.

Dialectical materialism shows to the working-class its future path and how to hew that path through its own efforts. It reveals to all other members of society that if they would move with history and cast their lot with the future they must identify themselves with labor, the grave-digger of capitalism, the builder of Communism. Dialectical materialism not only interprets the world, but helps us, as masters of our destiny, to change it.