

Marxism and Materialism

MARXISTS take the position that natural science logically leads to a materialist view of the universe.

Materialism declares that the world exists outside of, and independently of human knowledge. Matter, it asserts, exists independently of and prior to, though inclusive of, mind. The impressions that we have of the world, according to materialism, are produced in our minds by the world, more or less copies of the world. It is not mind which produces the world, but the world which produces mind and makes impressions upon it.

The more we study animal bodies and intelligence, the more we see that thought is a property of nervous systems and brains. Destroy the brain, and you destroy the mind. Thought, in other words, is the functioning of a brain; and mind is the property of that highly complicated form of matter known as brain.

IS THERE A GOD?

All thoughts of which we have any knowledge exist in the consciousness of animals or human beings with brains, and cease to exist with the destruction of this material organ. No one ever had an idea whose origin cannot be found in the world in which that person has lived. Furthermore, nervous systems and brains have never been found outside of animal bodies. If thought is merely the function of brains, then clearly it is absurd to think that there can be any great mind governing the universe. Otherwise, we would find somewhere the vast nervous system through which that great mind would be functioning.

The more we study the world the more the conclusion is forced upon us that there existed a time when there was no life. For countless centuries there must have been only inorganic (or lifeless) matter, but that out of the innumerable chemical changes which were constantly going on in the earth while cooling from an intensely hot molten mass, some of these changes resulted in the formation of living organic matter, from which have evolved

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the great hosts of plants and animals now covering the surface of the earth. If this picture is correct, then certainly mind did not produce the world or has not even always been found in the world, but was rather itself produced by the world.

KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH

This is the view of materialists, accepted not because the materialists desire it to be true (desire has nothing whatsoever to do with truth) but because the study of science forces that view upon us. We believe that man needs to know whatever is true, for it is only knowledge of the truth which enables us to fashion for ourselves a life more in accordance with our human needs. We believe with Socrates that man should "follow the truth whithersoever it may lead" and with Jesus that "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

Idealists, on the contrary, have always asserted that mind is more fundamental than matter. They maintain that thought produced the world, and that thought now governs the world.

IS THERE A SOUL?

Idealism (the doctrine that the world is governed by ideas) arose naturally from the efforts of primitive man to explain nature. It was natural for early man to believe that everything which moved was alive. Just as we move because of our own feeling or thought, so it seemed natural that the movements of other bodies were produced by feeling or thought. The whole universe seemed alive to primitive peoples.

Afterwards, the doctrine of souls complicated this picture. The only way

man could understand dreams was to suppose that within man dwells another tiny and invisible man, "small like a grain of rice," according to the Hindu Bible, which in times of sleep escapes from the body and roams at will. Since in death and sleep, the body is motionless, it must be the soul which causes all movement. Therefore, every moving body in the universe (and what does not move at times?) must possess within it a soul.

Behind or within the physical world of appearance, therefore, there must exist an invisible or spiritual world. Philosophers refined and developed these primitive ideas into systems of idealistic philosophy.

RULERS USE IDEALISM

Teachings of idealism have always aided the ruling classes. The oppressed classes could not *always* be kept under the watchful eyes of the actual armed forces of the exploiting classes. Consequently, if the people could be led to believe that there existed all-seeing, though invisible beings, who could pierce even the inmost recesses of the hearts of man, and who would punish severely even mere thoughts of rebellion, not to mention actual deeds, then, the population could be terrified into submission through its fear of the spiritual world. Through teachings that this life is but the prelude to the eternal life of the soul in the spirit-world and that the evils of this world would be adjusted in the life to come, ruling-classes have been able to turn the minds of their subjects from thoughts of changing the actual world to thoughts of the more important world of eternity.

As a consequence, exploiters have throughout history furiously opposed the full development of natural science, and have persecuted advocates of the philosophy of materialism, which has always accompanied the growth of natural science.

We have already seen that the early capitalists were primarily interested in the development of science in the interest of trade, navigation, manufacturing, mining, and warfare. They were especially interested in mechanical motion, developing simple machines both for manufacturing and warfare. The laws of mechanics, therefore, assumed

overwhelming importance for them. Biology, psychology, and sociology were greatly neglected, and the view of the world held by the early materialists was tremendously oversimplified. They looked upon the world simply as a huge machine or clock, which, having been set in motion, continues to run by itself until it runs down.

ROLE OF THE MECHANISTS

The mechanistic materialists of the eighteenth century played an enormously revolutionary role in criticising and demolishing the idealistic and superstitious doctrines by means of which the minds of men had been enslaved. They helped undermine the theoretical base of feudalism, and cleared the way for the further development and acceptance of the teachings of science.

However, the picture of the world formed by these early materialists was too crude and simple. To portray the world as a machine is to overlook and leave unexplained all the intricate and complex characteristics of life and human thought. Life and thought can not just be explained purely in terms of mechanics. As a result, large numbers of people rejected materialism altogether and looked to idealism for an explanation.

If the world is a machine, there can be no room for growth or development, for the emergence of new forms. A machine goes on repeating the same

old motions. There is no room for growth or progress. There is only movement in cycles. It was, therefore, an inconsistency for revolutionists, who wished to usher in a totally new society, to hold to purely mechanical doctrines. The limited development of physics at the time, however, made it impossible at that time to advance beyond this mechanical view of the world. The philosophers saw the whole world in terms of the new means of production which the capitalists were beginning to introduce, and when sensitive individuals saw the whole world portrayed as a lifeless machine, they were aghast.

Science in its early stages was necessarily concerned with classifying the world. It broke the world into elements. It was busily engaged in making definitions. This was the only way in which the world could easily be analyzed at the time, for it is difficult to study objects in motion. If we have studied them in repose, it is easier afterwards to study their movement.

MECHANISM INADEQUATE

Thus, anatomy, the study of the body, preceded physiology, the study of the movement and functioning of the organs of the body. Biology at first classified plants and animals into species, genera, and the like. Only later was it able to see that the different kinds of plants and animals are not eternal but have evolved the one from the other and are still in a process of evolution.

Classification, the breaking up of the world into its parts, deepened our understanding of nature. But by itself it was not enough. The knife of the anatomist *kills* the animal he is studying. Tables of classification fit only one moment in the course of the evolution of the world. As the world moves onward, they become outdated.

Tables of classification may thus be described as frozen moments, snatched out of the never-ending movements of the universe. The narrowness of mechanistic materialism arose from its origin during this period of scientific classification. Its view of the world had to be changed when science found that there is nothing fixed or static, but that everything is in constant motion, that out of the ceaseless motion of all exist-



ence new qualities are constantly coming into being.

The physics of this period gave a limited and narrow definition of matter, which the materialists claimed was the substance of all existence. Matter was described as composed of atoms, which were then conceived as tiny and *inert* bodies. The atoms possessed as their sole characteristics mass, weight, and extension in space. Absolutely everything was described as being composed of atoms which possessed *only* these characteristics. Now if matter is entirely inert, how can we explain motion, life, and intelligence? If mass, weight, and extension are the only real properties of matter, how can one explain all the properties of the world which we perceive and feel—color, warmth, feeling, thought?

In order to overcome the first difficulty, some philosophers fell back on the explanation that there must have been a conscious first mover, who set the world in motion and then left it to run its course. This clearly contradicted the basic principle of materialism.

DOES THE WORLD EXIST?

In order to overcome the second difficulty, the mechanistic materialists declared that the only properties of the world which really exist are mass, weight, and extension. These are the *primary qualities*. Everything else which we see or feel belongs to the world of appearance and is an illusion. The things which we see and feel—color, warmth, emotion, thought—are not real, but are only *secondary qualities*. We see and feel them only because our sense-organs are so constructed that in viewing the world, our senses distort the image of the world which they are supposed to reflect, just as when wearing rose-colored spectacles we see the world in rosy hues. That which we know most immediately—our own consciousness—actually does not exist! It is an illusion.

Mechanistic materialism broke down, because it could not give an answer to this question. No consistent philosophy can leave unanswered so basic a question.

But when the capitalists had defeated the aristocracy and themselves gained power, they also found that they needed a philosophy with which to enslave

the minds of the masses. They tried to establish new state-churches of their own; they began to look for new philosophical arguments for idealism, and soon took advantage of the shortcomings of mechanistic materialism.

LOCKE AND BERKELEY

John Locke developed the theory of primary and secondary qualities described above. Following him, there came Bishop Berkeley who sought to extend Locke's teachings and who used the very same principles set forth by Locke as an argument for idealism. Berkeley posed the problem that if the sense-organs deceive us in regard to secondary qualities (color, warmth, etc.), how are we to know that they are not deceiving us in regard to primary qualities (mass, weight, and extension)? All that we know immediately consists of our own sensations. How do we know that the external material world exists at all? Berkeley maintained, therefore, that matter did not exist. It was only an illusion of the unphilosophical mind which had not criticised the perceptions of the sense-organs. The mind, which only *thought* it saw matter, was all that really existed for Bishop Berkeley.

In this way, idealism took advantage of mechanistic materialism as a result of its narrow and limited definition of matter. Bishop Berkeley revealed the desire of the ruling-class for idealism by declaring in one of his writings that even if materialism were true, surely all good men would *wish* that it were not!

Marxism arose at a later date in the history of science, when science was turning its attention more to movement and process, when more attention was being given to organic chemistry, biology, and psychology. Marxism, as the philosophy of the revolutionary working-class, directed its attention mainly to the development of social science. This enabled it to overcome the weaknesses of mechanistic materialism, which had considered primarily mechanics and astronomy. Focusing its attention upon human life and society, Marxism could not fall into the error of viewing the world as a machine.

Analyzing social *movements*, the disruption of old societies, and the revolutionary establishment of totally new societies, it could not fail to give more

attention to development and the emergence of new characteristics. Therefore, it took a dynamic view of the world.

Instead of defining matter as an inert substance possessing only mass, weight, and extension, Marxism offers a broad definition of matter, which leaves room for the greatest possible deepening of the conception of matter with every new advance of physics. During the twentieth century, the great advances of physics have completely upset the older definition of the mechanistic materialists. As a result, many scientists, knowing nothing of the dialectical materialism of Marxism, have concluded that materialism as a whole has been discredited.

MARXISM DEFINES MATTER

However, far from discrediting materialism, the new discoveries of physics have merely further substantiated the teachings of dialectical materialism, whose conception of matter has not been shaken in the slightest by these discoveries. Marxism defines matter merely as that which exists objectively. Matter is *that which exists objectively*, independently of and prior to, though inclusive of, mind, which is merely the property of certain of its highly complex forms, specifically nervous systems and brains. Any new discoveries concerning the nature of matter will serve merely to deepen rather than shake the Marxist conception of matter.

Thus Marxism avoids like the plague any tendency toward oversimplification of the world, which was the great error of mechanistic materialism.

It is clear from the above that Marxism does not outlaw secondary qualities. On the contrary, it recognizes them as properties of more complex forms of existence, and they cannot be ignored if we are to obtain an adequate picture of the world. In the same way, consciousness is certainly not an illusion, but is rather the property of the most complex of all material forms. As a dynamic philosophy, every scientific advance in any field serves merely to deepen and enrich the Marxist view of the universe.

Having seen how dialectical materialism avoids the pitfalls of mechanistic materialism, we shall see in the next article why it is called *dialectical* materialism.