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DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

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Introduction

Dialectical materialism is the basic method of Marxism, developed by Marx and Engels for understanding the changes unfolding in the natural world and in society. Trotsky wrote: "Dialectic training of the mind, as necessary to the revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist, demands approaching all problems as **processes** and not as **motionless categories**."

Dialectical materialism is not a **formula** which can be learned abstractly. It can only be understood through the way it is applied in analysing practical questions—unravelling the contradictory strands that are woven together in every concrete situation, and discovering the living dynamic through which every situation is constantly being transformed.

We hope that the articles in this Supplement will be useful to comrades as an introduction to this method, showing its inner logic and demonstrating its use.

The first article is the edited text of a speech given by John Pickard to an audience mainly of young workers at a school organised by *Militant* (Marxist weekly paper in the British labour movement) in July 1982. It gives a basic explanation of what dialectical materialism—which sounds so complicated—is, and how it is confirmed by the findings of natural science.

The other two texts are extracts from Trotsky's writings. *A Petty-Bourgeois Opposition in the Socialist Workers' Party* was written in 1939 in the context of a split that was developing in the American SWP, at that time a workers' party (though a small one) under revolutionary Marxist leadership.

The split arose over the Marxist position of unconditional defence of the Soviet Union against imperialist attack. This position was in no sense based on illusions in the monstrous bureaucratic regime that had usurped power from the working class in Russia. Despite the bureaucratic degeneration that had taken place, it

was the duty of Marxists to defend the surviving gains of the October Revolution—the state-owned economy and the plan of production.

(It is still the duty of Marxists to defend these gains. But today, in contrast to the 1930s, the Soviet Union is a world power, militarily and economically, and there is no possibility of capitalism being restored.)

In the 1930s the Stalinist regime had completely abandoned any policy of defending the Soviet Union through social revolution in the West. In August 1939 Stalin cynically and treacherously signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler (which, within twenty-two months, Hitler tore up and invaded Russia, resulting in 20 million Russian dead).

With the massive wave of anti-Soviet hysteria provoked by the Hitler-Stalin pact among all sections of the bourgeoisie, a minority of middle-class intellectuals in the SWP found it impossible to continue defending the Marxist position in their universities and circles of friends. Buckling under the pressure of bourgeois 'public opinion' their main spokesmen, Professor James Burnham and Max Shachtman, put forward 'theoretical' arguments for shifting to more popular ground: they discovered that the Soviet Union was "no longer" a workers' state of any description.

Trotsky demolished their arguments. In the course of his reply, he showed that their political somersault could be accomplished only through rejection of the dialectical method and reliance on the primitive and superficial impressions of bourgeois 'common sense'.

Subsequent events proved that Burnham's and Shachtman's rejection of dialectical materialism in fact meant a break with Marxism and with the workers' movement itself.

Within months of his polemic against Trotsky over the question of dialectics, Burnham declared himself an opponent of Marxism, and shortly afterwards brought out his well-known book, *The Managerial*

Revolution.

This book falsely claimed that the evils of capitalism had been overcome because production was no longer organised by profit-seeking owners, but by a technical elite of managers, chosen on merit. This open defence of capitalism came to form a central plank of the propaganda of post-war US imperialism.

From here Burnham continued his slide into virulent anti-communism, and by the early 1970s was an editor of the extreme right-wing American journal, *The National Review*.

Shachtman, while nominally remaining a 'socialist', ended up in the Democratic Party—one of the two big parties of US capitalism—eventually supporting attempts at overthrowing the Castro regime in Cuba and defending the US invasion of Vietnam.

The second piece by Trotsky is from his book *Where is Britain Going?* in which he anticipated and analysed the explosion of class struggle in Britain that culminated in the General Strike of 1926. It deals with the undialectical, unscientific method of thinking of reformist workers' leaders—those opposed to the workers' revolution.

Ramsay MacDonald, Labour Party leader, and Prime Minister in 1924, ended up a notorious betrayer of the workers' movement, splitting the Labour Party by entering an open coalition government with the capitalists in 1931.

Trotsky here briefly shows the necessity of the dialectical method in understanding the workers' struggle for socialism.

Similarly, in Southern Africa today, the conscious use of dialectical materialism will be vital in the struggle to orient and re-orient our movement to changing conditions, to identify new political tasks, to expose mistaken ideas, and prepare for the conquest of power by the mass of working people.

Dialectical Materialism

By John Pickard

When we discuss the method of Marxism, we are dealing with the ideas which provide the basis for our activities in the labour movement, the arguments we raise in the discussions we take part in, and the articles we write.

It is generally accepted that Marxism took its form from three main roots. One of those roots was the development of Marx's analysis of French politics, particularly the bourgeois revolution in France in the 1790s, and the subsequent class struggles during the early 19th century. Another of the roots of Marxism is what is called 'English economics'—i.e., Marx's analysis of the capitalist system as it developed in England. The other root of Marxism, which was its starting point historically, is said to be 'German philosophy', and it is that aspect of it that I want to deal with this morning.

To begin with, we say that the basis of Marxism is **materialism**. That is to say, Marxism starts from the idea that **matter** is the essence of all reality, and that matter creates mind, and not vice versa.

In other words, thought and all the things that are said to be derived from thought—artistic ideas, scientific ideas, ideas of law, politics, morality and so on—these things are in fact derived from the **material** world. The 'mind', i.e. thought and thought processes, is a product of the brain; and the brain itself, and therefore ideas, arose at a certain stage in the development of living matter. It is a product of the material world.

Therefore, to understand the real nature of human consciousness and society, as Marx himself put it, it is a question "not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive ... in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates (images—*Editor*) of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first (i.e., non-materialist—*Editor*) method of approach the starting point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second (materialist—*Editor*) method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as **their consciousness**." (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Chapter 1)

A materialist therefore seeks an explanation not only for ideas, but for material phenomena themselves, in terms of material causes and not in terms of supernatural intervention by gods and the like. And that is a very important aspect of Marxism, which clearly sets it aside from the methods of thinking and logic which have become established in capitalist society.

The development of scientific thought in the European coun-

tries in the 17th and 18th centuries displayed some really contradictory characteristics, which still remain typical of the approach of bourgeois theoreticians today. On the one hand there was a development towards a materialist method. Scientists looked for causes. They didn't just accept natural phenomena as god-ordained miracles, they sought some explanation for them. But at the same time these scientists did not yet possess a consistent or worked-out materialist understanding; and very often, behind the explanations for natural phenomena, they also saw, at the end of the chain, the hand of God at work.

Such an approach means accepting, or at least leaving open the possibility, that the material world we live in is ultimately shaped by forces from outside it, and that consciousness or ideas come first, in the sense that they can exist independently of the real world. This approach, which is the philosophical opposite of materialism, we call "idealism".

According to this approach, the development of mankind and of society—of art, science, etc.—is dictated not by material processes but by the development of ideas, by the perfection or degeneration of human thought. And it is no accident that this general approach, whether spoken or unspoken, pervades all the philosophies of capitalism.

Bourgeois philosophers and historians in general take the present system for granted. They accept that capitalism is some kind of finished, complete system which is incapable of being replaced by a new and higher system. And they try to present all past history as the efforts of lesser mortals to achieve the kind of 'perfect' society which they believe capitalism has achieved or can achieve.

Jumble of ideas

So, when we look at the work of some of the greatest bourgeois scientists and thinkers in the past or even today, we can see how they have tended to jumble up materialist ideas and idealist ideas in their minds. For example Isaac Newton, who examined the laws of mechanics and the laws of motion of planets and planetary bodies, didn't believe that these processes were dictated by mind or thought. But what he did believe was that an original impetus was given to all matter, and that this initial push was provided by some sort of supernatural force, by God.

In the same way it is possible today for many biologists to accept the idea that species of plants and animals evolved from one type to another, and that mankind itself is a development from earlier species. And yet many of them cling to the notion that there is a qualitative difference between the human mind and the animal mind, consisting of the 'eternal soul' which leaves the human body after death. Even some of the most eminent scientists jumble up the materialist method with idealist ideas of this kind, which are really backward, scientifically speaking, and are more related to magic and superstition than

to science.

Marxism therefore represents a systematic and fundamental break with idealism in all its forms, and the development in its place of a materialist understanding of what is taking place in reality. **Materialism** in this sense provides one of the basic starting points of Marxism. The other basic starting point is **dialectics**.

Dialectics is quite simply the logic of **motion**, or the logic of **processes**. To think of things as being in motion may seem like common sense to activists in the movement. We all know that things don't stand still, they change. But there is another form of logic which stands in contradiction to dialectics, which we call "formal logic", which again is deeply embedded in capitalist society. It is perhaps necessary to begin by describing briefly what this method implies.

Formal logic is based on what is known as the "law of identity", which says that 'A' equals 'A'—i.e., that things are what they are, and that they stand in definite relationships to each other. There are other derivative laws based on the law of identity; for example, if 'A' equals 'A', it follows that 'A' cannot equal 'B', nor 'C'.

On the face of it this method of thinking may again seem like common sense; and in fact it has been a very important tool, a very important device in the development of science and in the industrial revolution which created the present-day society. The development of mathematics and basic arithmetic, for example, was based on formal logic. You couldn't teach a child a table of multiplication or addition without using formal logic. One plus one equals two, and not three. And in the same way, the method of formal logic was also the basis for the development of mechanics, of chemistry, of biology, etc.

For example, in the 18th century the Scandinavian biologist Linnaeus developed a system of classification for all known plants and animals. Linnaeus divided all living things into classes, into orders, into families, into species. Mankind, for example, is in the class of mammals, in the order of primates, in the family of hominids, in the genus of *homo*, and represents the species *homo sapiens*.

Fixed and rigid system

This system of classification represented an enormous step forward in biology. It made possible, for the first time, a really systematic study of plants and animals, to compare and contrast animal and plant species. But it was based on formal logic. It was based on saying that *homo sapiens* equals *homo sapiens*; that *musca domestica* (the common housefly) equals *musca domestica*; that an earthworm equals an earthworm, and so on. It was, in other words, a **fixed and rigid system**. It wasn't possible, according to this system, for a species to be equal to anything else, otherwise the system of classification would have completely collapsed.

The same applies in the field of chemistry, where Dalton's atomic theory meant a huge stride forward. Dalton's theory was based on the idea that matter is made up of atoms, and that each type of atom is completely separate and peculiar to itself—that its shape and weight is peculiar to that particular element and to none other.

After Dalton there was a more or less rigid classification of elements, again based on a rigid formal logic, whereby it was said that an atom of hydrogen was an atom of hydrogen, an atom of carbon was an atom of carbon, etc. And if any atom could have been something else, this whole system of classification, which has formed the basis of modern chemistry, would have collapsed.

Now it is important to see that there are limitations to the

method of formal logic. It is a useful everyday method, and it gives us useful approximations for identifying things. For example, the Linnaean system of classification is still useful to biologists; but since the work of Charles Darwin in particular we can also see the weaknesses in that system.

Darwin pointed out, for instance, that in the Linnaean system some types of plants are given separate names, as separate species, but actually they are very similar to each other. And yet there are other plants with the same name, of the same species, which are said to be different varieties of the same plant, and yet they are very different from each other.

So even by the time of Charles Darwin it was possible to look at the Linnaean system of classification and say, "well, there's something wrong somewhere". And of course Darwin's own work provided a systematic basis for the theory of evolution, which for the first time said it is possible for **one species to be transformed into another species**.

Species changing

And that left a big hole in the Linnaean system. Before Darwin it was thought that the number of species on the planet was exactly the same as the number of species created by God in the first six days of his labour—except, of course, for those destroyed by the Flood—and that those species had survived unchanged over the millennia. But Darwin produced the idea of **species changing**, and so inevitably the method of classification also had to be changed.

What applies in the field of biology applies also in the field of chemistry. Chemists became aware, by the late 19th century, that it was possible for one atomic element to become transformed into another. In other words, atoms aren't completely separate and peculiar to themselves. We know now that many atoms, many chemical elements, are unstable. For example, uranium and other radio-active atoms will split in the course of time and produce completely different atoms with completely different chemical properties and different atomic weights.

So we can see that the method of formal logic was beginning to break down with the development of science itself. But it is the method of dialectics which draws the conclusions of these factual discoveries, and points out that **there are no absolute or fixed categories, either in nature or in society**.

Whereas the formal logician will say that 'A' = 'A', the dialectician will say that 'A' does not necessarily equal 'A'. Or to take a practical example that Trotsky uses in his writings (see *The ABC of Dialectics*, page 10 of this Supplement—Editor), one pound of sugar will not be precisely equal to another pound of sugar. It is a good enough approximation if you want to buy sugar in a shop, but if you look at it more carefully you will see that it's actually wrong.

If you weigh two pounds of sugar on an extremely accurate machine, you will always find that one is slightly heavier than the other. And apart from anything else, sugar—or anything else—can never stay the same from one moment to another. There are always some bacteria munching away at it, and there are always some molecules being affected by chemicals in the air, and being degenerated to produce carbon dioxide, water and so on. And there are always some grains of sugar falling off or being blown into the air.

So a pound of sugar never stays precisely the same even from one micro-second to another. And the same will apply to any other substance. The approximations of formal logic are good enough for some purposes; but when it comes to a more careful and accurate analysis, we will always find that no two things can be precisely identical to each other, and that everything is

subject to constant processes of change—in other words, that ‘A’ doesn’t really equal ‘A’.

So we need to have a form of understanding, a form of logic, that takes into account the fact that things, and life, and society, are in a state of constant motion and change. And that form of logic, of course, is dialectics.

But on the other hand it would be wrong to think that dialectics ascribes to the universe a process of even and gradual change. The laws of dialectics—and here is a word of warning: these concepts sound more intimidating than they really are—the laws of dialectics describe the manner in which the processes of change in reality take place.

Quantity into quality

Let us take, to begin with, the “law of the transformation of quantity into quality”. This law states that the processes of change—the motion in the universe—are **not** gradual, they are **not** even. Periods of relatively gradual or slight change are interspersed with periods of enormously rapid change—change which cannot be measured in terms of quantity but only in terms of quality.

To use an example from natural science again, let us imagine the heating of water. You can actually measure (“quantify”), in terms of degrees of temperature, the change that takes place in the water as you add heat to it. From, let us say, 10 degrees Centigrade (which is normal tap temperature) to about 98 degrees Centigrade, the change will remain **quantitative**; i.e., the water will remain water, although it is getting warmer.

But then comes a point where the change in the water becomes **qualitative**, and the water turns into steam. You can no longer describe the change in the water as it is heated from 98 degrees to 102 degrees in purely quantitative terms. We have to say that a qualitative change (water into steam) has come about as a **result of an accumulation of quantitative change** (adding more and more heat).

And that is what Marx and Engels meant when they referred to the transformation of quantity into quality. The same can be seen in the development of species. There is always a great variety in every species. If we look around this room we can see the degree of variety in *homo sapiens*. That variety can be measured quantitatively, for example, in terms of height, weight, skin colour, length of nose, etc.

But if evolutionary changes progress to a certain point under the impact of environmental changes, then those quantitative changes can add up to a qualitative change. In other words, you would no longer characterise that change in the animal or plant species merely in terms of quantitative details. The species will have become qualitatively different.

For example, we as a species are qualitatively different from chimpanzees or gorillas, and they in turn are qualitatively different from other species of mammals. And those qualitative differences, those evolutionary leaps, have come about as a result of quantitative changes in the past.

The idea of Marxism is that there will always be periods of gradual change interspersed with periods of sudden change. In pregnancy, there is a period of gradual development, and then a period of very sudden development at the end. The same applies to social development. Very often Marxists have used the analogy of pregnancy to describe the development of wars and revolutions. These represent qualitative leaps in social development; but they come about as a result of the accumulation of quantitative contradictions in society.

A second law of dialectics is “the law of the negation of the negation”, and again it sounds more complicated than it really is. “Negation” in this sense simply means the passing away of one thing, the death of one thing as it becomes transformed

into another.

For example, the development of class society in the early history of humanity represented the negation of the previous classless society. And in future, with the development of communism, we will see another classless society, that would mean the negation of all present class society.

So the law of the negation of the negation simply states that as one system comes into existence, it forces another system to pass away. But that doesn’t mean that the second system is permanent or unchangeable. That second system itself becomes negated as a result of the further developments and processes of change in society. As class society has been the negation of classless society, so communist society will be the negation of class society—the negation of the negation.

Another concept of dialectics is the law of the “interpenetration of opposites”. This law quite simply states that **processes of change take place because of contradictions**—because of the conflicts between the different elements that are embodied in all natural and social processes.

Probably the best example of the interpenetration of opposites in natural science is the “quantum theory”. This theory is based on the concept of energy having a dual character—that for some purposes, according to some experiments, energy exists in the form of **waves**, like electromagnetic energy. But for other purposes energy manifests itself as **particles**. In other words, it is quite accepted among scientists that matter and energy can actually exist in two different forms at one and the same time—on the one hand as a kind of intangible wave, on the other hand as a particle with a definite “quantum” (amount) of energy embodied in it.

Therefore the basis of the quantum theory in modern physics is contradiction. But there are many other contradictions known to science. Electromagnetic energy, for example, is set in motion through the effect of positive and negative forces on each other. Magnetism depends on the existence of a north pole and a south pole. These things cannot exist separately. They exist and operate precisely because of the contradictory forces being embodied in one and the same system.

Contradictions in society

Similarly, every society today consists of different contradictory elements joined together in one system, which makes it impossible for any society, any country, to remain stable or unchanged. The dialectical method, in contrast to the method of formal logic, trains us to identify these contradictions, and thereby get to the bottom of the changes taking place.

The formalist who looks at social processes, on the other hand, will often see only one aspect of it. The formalist might look at the Soviet Union, for example, and see that Brezhnev has just as many cars as Ronald Reagan; that the generals in charge of the Red Army have a standard of living at least as high as the generals in charge of the US army; or that ordinary workers in the USSR have no more rights than ordinary workers in the USA. And therefore, the formalist might conclude, the USSR is a capitalist country.

On the other hand, a member of the Communist Party might answer: “But if you look at the Constitution of the USSR, you’ll see it says that comrade Brezhnev should get no more than two-and-a-half times the average wage of a skilled worker. Workers have got the right to strike; any worker has the right to demand a special conference of his workmates to deselect trade union representatives or even a works manager, if they get sufficient support in the factory.”

It is true that the Constitution of the USSR says all of these things, and a member of the CP could argue that, therefore,

Russian workers have more rights than American workers.

But this argument, and the argument that Russia is capitalist, are both wrong. Both are looking at the situation in a purely formal way, though from different points of view.

A Marxist would start by recognising that there are contradictory processes at work in the USSR. There is, on the one hand, the development of science and technique on the basis of a planned, state-owned economy, which is an enormously progressive thing. And because the origins of the USSR were steeped in Marxism, in the time of Lenin and Trotsky, the Russian constitution still has to pay lip service to the rights of workers.

But there is also a contradictory aspect which we have to take into account, and that is that the democratic rights of Russian workers have been taken away from them ever since the rise of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy in the 1920s. In political terms, Russian workers now have fewer rights than American workers.

The conclusion that Marxism would draw from these contradictory aspects, however, is not to denounce Russia as 'capitalist'. It is to recognise that these particular contradictions can only be resolved through the overthrow of the parasitical bureaucracy by the Russian working class, and the re-establishment of workers' democracy on the basis of the planned economy.

I have elaborated this example to show that Marxists are not embarrassed to say that there are contradictory elements within every social process. On the contrary, it is precisely by recognising and understanding the opposite interests embodied within the same process that we are able to work out the likely direction of change, and consequently to identify the aims and objectives which it is necessary and possible in that situation to strive for from the working-class point of view.

At the same time, Marxism doesn't abandon formal logic altogether. But it is important to see, from the point of view of understanding social developments, that formal logic must take a secondary position.

We all use formal logic for everyday purposes. It gives us the necessary approximations for communication and conducting our daily activities. We wouldn't be able to lead normal lives without paying lip service to formal logic, without using the approximation that one equals one.

But, on the other hand, we have to see the limitations of formal logic—the limitations that become evident in science when we study processes in more depth and detail, and also when we examine social and political processes more closely.

Dialectics is very rarely accepted by scientists. Some scientists are dialecticians, but the majority even today muddle up a materialist approach with all sorts of formal and idealistic ideas.

Social sciences

And if that's the case in natural science, it is much, much more the case as far as the social sciences are concerned. The reasons for this are fairly obvious. If you try to examine society and social processes from a scientific point of view, then you cannot avoid coming up against the contradictions of the capitalist system and the need for the socialist transformation of society.

But the universities, which are supposed to be centres of learning and study, are under capitalism far from being independent of the ruling class and the state. That is why natural science can still have a scientific method which leans towards dialectical materialism; but when it comes to the social sciences you will find in the colleges and universities some of the worst kinds

of formalism and idealism possible.

That is not unrelated to the vested interests of the professors and academics who are paid something like £15 000 per year. It is obvious and unavoidable that their privileged position in society will have some reflection, some effect on what they're supposed to be teaching. Their own views and prejudices will be contained in the 'knowledge' which they pass on to their students, and so on down to the level of the schools.

Bourgeois historians, in particular, are among the most short-sighted of all social scientists. How many times have we seen examples of bourgeois historians who imagine that history ended yesterday! Here in Britain they all seem to admit the horrors of British imperialism as far as the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries are concerned; that British imperialism engaged in slave traffic; that it was responsible for some of the most bloody subjugation of colonial peoples; that it was also responsible for some of the worst exploitation of British workers, including women and children, in the coal mines, the cotton mills, and so on.

They will accept all these iniquities—up until yesterday. But when it comes to today, of course, then British imperialism suddenly becomes democratic and progressive.

Lopsided view

And that is a completely one-sided, a completely lopsided view of history, which is diametrically opposed to the method of Marxism. The attitude of Marx and Engels was to view social processes from the same dialectical standpoint from which they viewed nature—from the standpoint of the processes that are actually taking place.

In our everyday discussions and debates in the labour movement, we will often come across people who are formalists. Even many on the left will look at things in a completely rigid and formal way, without understanding the direction in which things are moving.

For example, if we take the attacks upon *Militant* at the present time, then we see that the right wing are rubbing their hands in glee in the expectation that Marxism will be expunged from the Labour Party once and for all. One swift surgical operation, they believe, will remove this 'horrible cancer' from the body of the Party.

But that is a completely formal view of expulsions, a completely unreal understanding of what Marxism in the Labour Party actually represents—a current of thinking, with deep roots among the activists, that cannot simply be expelled.

However, not only the right wing but some of those on the left as well are viewing the attacks on *Militant* in a mechanical and formal way, although from a different standpoint. They say: "Oh, it's terrible—all the Marxists are going to be thrown out of the Labour Party. What are we going to do now? We're all going to be thrown out of the Party."

A Marxist, on the other hand, would take into account the contradictory aspects of the process taking place in order to understand which way it is going. We have to look at the whole history of Marxism in the Labour Party. We have to understand this witch-hunt in the context in which it is actually taking place, and see it for what it really represents.

On the one hand the witchhunt against *Militant* supporters is obviously a setback that will do damage to the whole labour movement and it may even, in the short term, damage the development of Marxism itself. But there is also another aspect to it. The very fact that the right wing of the Labour Party have at this stage decided to launch this attack upon *Militant* is an indication not of their strength and confidence, but of their weakness, their despair, as a result of the fact that the general

move to the left among the ranks of the Party is removing the ground from beneath their feet.

And we would draw enormous inspiration and confidence from that. We would say that despite the fact that blows might be struck against the Labour Party and against Marxism in the short term, there is no doubt whatever—given the whole history of the Labour Party, given the way the Party is moving at the present time, given the crisis of capitalism in which the working class finds itself—that in the medium and long term Marxism will actually be strengthened by the witchhunts taking place now.

So we would disagree with the formalists, who view the developments in a two-dimensional way, who cannot see beneath the surface and don't understand the nature and significance of the processes that are taking place. Marxists have to use formal logic to an extent; we have to deal with certain categories and facts—the very term “Marxists” is an application of formal logic, because we are talking of Marxists as a given category of activists.

But the essence of Marxism, and of dialectics, is to **understand the limitations of all these categories**. It would be completely wrong to use any category in a blind and rigid way, without understanding the particular context and the particular conditions under which we use it.

Falklands war

For example, at the time of the Falklands war there was a dispute over a remark by Trotsky in 1938, when he referred to the theoretical possibility of a war between Britain and Brazil. In such a case, he said, Marxists should support Brazil.

Now of course the ultra-lefts who supported the Argentinian junta in the war have tried to use this remark as a stick for beating *Militant* supporters, because *Militant* refused to support either the Argentinian junta or the British Tory government. But in fact the use of that quotation was a perfect example of the use of formal logic without understanding its limits. The quotation was taken out of the context in which Trotsky used it in 1938, and applied to a completely different context in 1982, without taking into account the completely different circumstances of the Falklands war.

The Falklands war was started, not by an attack by an imperialist state on a colonial country, but by a desperate military adventure by the dictatorship ruling Argentina. The junta was attempting to divert the developing revolutionary movement of the working class by invading the Falkland Islands, which had been occupied by Britain in the early 19th century.

Inevitably the Thatcher government reacted and drove the Argentinian forces out again. Formally, it was therefore a conflict between an old and decaying imperialist power, and a less developed, ex-colonial capitalist state. It is also true that the Argentinian masses were partially diverted from their struggle

against the regime, and for a period supported the war.

But these resemblances with the type of situation Trotsky was talking about are purely superficial. In fact, the move by the Argentinian junta had imperialist undertones as well, since it also represented an effort to secure new sources of raw materials and wealth for the Argentinian capitalist class.

It would therefore be completely false to compare this war in any sense with the struggle by a colonial people to protect or liberate their territory from imperialist occupation.

So while we have to speak in terms of the categories provided by formal logic, we also have to understand how these categories apply in the particular circumstances which we are faced with.

The right wing in the Labour movement, and also some on the left, believe that Marxist theory is a dogma, that ‘theory’ is like a 600 lb weight on the back of an activist, and the quicker you get rid of that weight, the more active and effective you can be.

But that is a complete misconception of the whole nature of Marxist theory. In point of fact Marxism is the **opposite** of a dogma, of the rigid and unreal concepts of idealism and formalism. It is precisely a method for coming to grips with the processes of change that are taking place around us.

Nothing is fixed and nothing remains unchanged. It is the formalists who see society as a still photograph, who can get overawed by the situations they are faced with because they don't see how and why things will change. It is this kind of approach that can easily lead to a dogmatic acceptance of things as they are or as they have been, without understanding the inevitability of change.

Marxist theory is therefore an absolutely essential device for any activity within the labour movement. We need to be consciously attuned to the contradictory forces at work in the class struggle, in order to orient ourselves to the way in which events are developing.

Of course it isn't always easy to free ourselves from the prevailing framework of thinking in capitalist society and absorb the Marxist method. As Karl Marx said, there is no royal road to science. You have to tread the hard path sometimes in grappling with new political ideas.

But the discussion and study of Marxist theory is an absolutely essential part of the development of every activist. It is that theory alone that will provide comrades with a compass and a map amidst all the complexities of the struggle. It is all very well to be an activist. But without a conscious understanding of the processes you are involved in, you are no more effective than an explorer without a compass and a map.

And if you try to explore without scientific aids, you can be as energetic as you like but sooner or later you will fall into a ravine or a bog and disappear, as so many activists over the years have unfortunately done.

The idea of having a compass and a map is that you can take your bearings. You can take into account the changes in the landscape, you can judge where you are at any particular time, where you are going and where you will be. And that is the fundamental reason why we need to get to grips with Marxist theory. It provides us with an absolutely invaluable guide to action as far as our activities in the labour movement are concerned.

From: A Petty-Bourgeois Opposition in the Socialist Workers' Party

By Leon Trotsky

It is necessary to call things by their right names. Now that the positions of both factions in the struggle have become determined with complete clearness, it must be said that the minority of the National Committee is leading a typical petty-bourgeois tendency. Like any petty-bourgeois group inside the socialist movement, the present opposition is characterised by the following features: a disdainful attitude towards theory and an inclination towards eclecticism; disrespect for the tradition of their own organisation; anxiety for personal 'independence' at the expense of anxiety for objective truth; nervousness instead of consistency; readiness to jump from one position to another; lack of understanding of revolutionary centralism and hostility towards it; and finally, inclination to substitute clique ties and personal relationships for party discipline.

Not all the members of the opposition of course manifest these features with identical strength. Nevertheless, as always in a variegated bloc the tinge is given by those who are most distant from Marxism and proletarian policy.

A prolonged and serious struggle is obviously before us. I make no attempt to exhaust the problem in this article, but I will endeavour to outline its general features.

Theoretical scepticism and eclecticism

In the January 1939 issue of the *New International* (theoretical journal of the SWP—*Editor*) a long article was published by comrades Burnham and Shachtman, "Intellectuals in Retreat". The article, while containing many correct ideas and apt political characterisations, was marred by a fundamental defect if not flaw. While polemicalising against opponents who consider themselves—without sufficient reason—above all as proponents of 'theory', the article deliberately did not elevate the problem to a theoretical height.

It was absolutely necessary to explain why the American 'radical' intellectuals accept Marxism without the dialectic (a clock without a spring). The secret is simple. In no other country has there been such rejection of the class struggle as in the land of 'unlimited opportunity'. The denial of social contradictions as the moving force of development led to the denial of the dialectic as the logic of contradictions in the domain of theoretical thought. Just as in the sphere of politics it was thought possible (that) everybody could be convinced of the correctness of a 'just' programme, so in the sphere of theory it was accepted as proved that Aristotelian logic, lowered to the level of 'common sense', was sufficient for the solution of all questions.

Pragmatism, a mixture of rationalism and empiricism,

became the national philosophy of the United States. The theoretical methodology of Max Eastman is not fundamentally different from the methodology of Henry Ford—both regard living society from the point of view of an 'engineer' (Eastman—platonically).

Historically, the present disdainful attitude towards the dialectic is explained simply by the fact that the grandfathers and great-grandmothers of Max Eastman and others did not need the dialectic in order to conquer territory and enrich themselves. But times have changed and the philosophy of pragmatism has entered a period of bankruptcy just as has American capitalism.

The authors of the article did not show, could not and did not care to show, this internal connection between philosophy and the material development of society, and they frankly explained why.

"The two authors of the present article", they wrote of themselves, "differ thoroughly on their estimate of the general theory of dialectical materialism, one of them accepting it and the other rejecting it There is nothing anomalous in such a situation. Though theory is doubtless always in one way or another related to practice, the relation is not invariably direct or immediate; and as we have before had occasion to remark, human beings often act inconsistently. From the point of view of each of the authors there is in the other a certain such inconsistency between 'philosophical theory' and political practice, which might on some occasion lead to decisive concrete political disagreement. But it does not now, nor has anyone yet demonstrated that agreement or disagreement on the more abstract doctrines of dialectical materialism necessarily affects today's and tomorrow's concrete political issues—and political parties, programmes and struggles are based on such concrete issues. We may all hope that as we go along or when there is more leisure, agreement may also be reached on the more abstract questions. Meanwhile there is fascism and war and unemployment."

What is the meaning of this thoroughly astonishing reasoning? Inasmuch as *some* people through a bad method *sometimes* reach correct conclusions, and inasmuch as some people through a correct method *not infrequently* reach incorrect conclusions, therefore the method is not of great importance. We shall meditate upon methods sometime when we have more leisure, but now we have other things to do.

Imagine how a worker would react upon complaining to his foreman that his tools were bad, and receiving the reply: With bad tools it is possible to turn out a good job, and with good tools many people only waste material. I am afraid that such a worker, particularly if he is on piece-work, would respond to the foreman with an unacademic phrase. A worker is faced with refractory materials which show resistance and which, because of that, compel him to appreciate fine tools, whereas a petty-bourgeois intellectual—alas!—utilises as his 'tools' fugitive observations and superficial generalisations—until major events club him on the head.

To demand that every party member occupy himself with the

philosophy of dialectics naturally would be lifeless pedantry. But a worker who has gone through the school of the class struggle gains from his own experience an inclination towards dialectical thinking. Even if unaware of this term, he readily accepts the method itself and its conclusions.

With a petty bourgeois it is worse. There are of course petty-bourgeois elements organically linked with the workers, who go over to the proletarian point of view without an internal revolution. But these constitute an insignificant minority.

The matter is quite different with the academically trained petty bourgeoisie. Their theoretical prejudices have already been given finished form at the school bench. Inasmuch as they succeeded in gaining a great deal of knowledge, both useful and useless, without the aid of the dialectic, they believe that they can continue excellently through life without it.

In reality they dispense with the dialectic only to the extent that they fail to check, to polish and to sharpen theoretically their tools of thought, and to the extent that they fail to break practically from the narrow circle of their daily relationships. When thrown against great events, they are easily lost and relapse again into petty-bourgeois ways of thinking.

Appealing to "inconsistency" as a justification for an unprincipled theoretical bloc, signifies giving oneself bad credentials as a Marxist. Inconsistency is not accidental, and in politics it does not appear solely as an individual symptom. Inconsistency usually serves a social function. There are social groupings which cannot be consistent. Petty-bourgeois elements who have not rid themselves of hoary petty-bourgeois tendencies are systematically compelled within a workers' party to make theoretical compromises with their own conscience.

Comrade Shachtman's attitude towards the dialectical method, as manifested in the above-quoted argumentation, cannot be called anything but eclectic scepticism. It is clear that Shachtman became infected with this attitude not in the school of Marx, but among the petty-bourgeois intellectuals to whom all forms of scepticism are proper.

Warning and verification

The article astonished me to such an extent that I immediately wrote to comrade Shachtman: "I have just read the article you and Burnham wrote on the intellectuals. Many parts are excellent. However, the section on the dialectic is the greatest blow that you, personally, as the editor of the *New International*, could have delivered to Marxist theory. Comrade Burnham says: 'I don't recognise the dialectic'. It is clear and everybody has to acknowledge it. But you say: 'I recognise the dialectic, but no matter; it does not have the slightest importance'. Re-read what you wrote. This section is terribly misleading for readers of the *New International* and the best of gifts to the Eastmans of all kinds. Good! We will speak about it publicly."

My letter was written on January 20, some months before the present discussion. Shachtman did not reply until March 5, when he answered to the effect that he couldn't understand why I was making such a stir about the matter. On March 9, I answered Shachtman in the following words: "I did not reject in the slightest degree the possibility of collaboration with the anti-dialecticians, but only the advisability of writing an article together where the question of the dialectic plays, or should play, a very important role. The polemic develops on two planes: political and theoretical. Your political criticism is OK. Your theoretical criticism is insufficient: it stops at the point at which it should just become aggressive. Namely, the task consists of

showing that their mistakes (insofar as they are *theoretical* mistakes) are products of their incapacity and unwillingness to think the things through dialectically. This task could be accomplished with a very serious pedagogical success. Instead of this, you declare that dialectics is a private matter and that one can be a very good fellow without dialectical thinking."

By allying himself in *this* question with the anti-dialectician Burnham, Shachtman deprived himself of the possibility of showing why Eastman, Hook and many others began with a philosophical struggle against the dialectic but finished with a political struggle against the socialist revolution.

The present political discussion in the party has confirmed my apprehensions and warning in an incomparably sharper form than I could have expected or, more correctly, feared.

Shachtman's methodological scepticism bore its deplorable fruits in the question of the nature of the Soviet state. Burnham began some time ago by constructing purely empirically, on the basis of his immediate impressions, a non-proletarian and non-bourgeois state, liquidating in passing the Marxist theory of the state as the organ of class rule. Shachtman unexpectedly took an evasive position: 'The question, you see, is subject to further consideration'; moreover, the sociological definition of the USSR does not possess any direct or immediate significance for our 'political tasks', in which Shachtman agrees completely with Burnham.

Let the reader again refer to what these comrades wrote concerning the dialectic. Burnham rejects the dialectic. Shachtman seems to accept, but the divine gift of "inconsistency" permits them to meet on common political conclusions.

The attitude of each of them towards the nature of the Soviet state reproduces point for point their attitude towards the dialectic.

In both cases Burnham takes the leading role. This is not surprising: he *possesses* a method, pragmatism. Shachtman has no method. He adapts himself to Burnham. Without assuming complete responsibility for the anti-Marxian conceptions of Burnham, he defends his bloc of aggression against the Marxian conceptions with Burnham in the sphere of philosophy as well as in the sphere of sociology. In both cases Burnham appears as a pragmatist and Shachtman as an eclectic.

This example has the invaluable advantage that the complete parallelism between Burnham's and Shachtman's positions upon two different planes of thought, and upon two questions of primary importance, will strike the eyes even of comrades who have had no experience in purely theoretical thinking. The method of thought can be dialectic or vulgar, conscious or unconscious, but it exists and makes itself known.

Last January we heard from our authors: 'But it does not now, nor has anyone yet demonstrated that agreement or disagreement on the more abstract doctrines of dialectical materialism necessarily affects today's and tomorrow's concrete political issues...'

Nor has anyone yet demonstrated! Not more than a few months passed before Burnham and Shachtman themselves demonstrated that their attitude toward such an 'abstraction' as dialectical materialism found its precise manifestation in their attitude toward the Soviet state.

To be sure it is necessary to mention that the difference between the two instances is rather important, but it is of a political and not a theoretical character. In both cases Burnham and Shachtman formed a bloc on the basis of rejection and semi-rejection of the dialectic. But in the first instance that bloc was directed against the opponents of the proletarian party. In the second instance the bloc was concluded against the Marxist wing of their own party. The front of military operations, so to speak, has changed but the weapon remains the same.

True enough, people are often inconsistent. Human consciousness nevertheless tends toward a certain homogeneity. Philosophy and logic are compelled to rely upon this homogeneity of human consciousness and not upon what this homogeneity

lacks, that is, inconsistency.

Burnham does not recognise the dialectic, but the dialectic recognises Burnham, that is, extends its sway over him. Shachtman thinks that the dialectic has no importance in political conclusions, but in the political conclusions of Shachtman himself we see the deplorable fruits of his disdainful attitude toward the dialectic. We should include this example in the textbooks on dialectical materialism.

Last year I was visited by a young British professor of political economy, a sympathiser of the Fourth International. During our conversation on the ways and means of realising socialism, he suddenly expressed the tendencies of British utilitarianism in the spirit of Keynes and others: 'It is necessary to determine a clear economic end, to choose the most reasonable means for its realisation,' etc. I remarked: 'I see that you are an adversary of dialectics.' He replied, somewhat astonished: 'Yes, I don't see any use in it.' 'However,' I replied to him, 'the dialectic enabled me on the basis of a few of your observations upon economic problems to determine what category of philosophical thought you belong to—this alone shows that there is an appreciable value in the dialectic.'

Although I have received no word about my visitor since then, I have no doubt that this anti-dialectic professor maintains the opinion that the USSR is not a workers' state, that unconditional defence of the USSR is an 'out-moded' opinion, that our organisational methods are bad, etc. If it is possible to place a given person's general type of thought on the basis of his relation to concrete practical problems, it is also possible to predict approximately, knowing his general type of thought, how a given individual will approach one or another practical question. That is the incomparable educational value of the dialectical method of thought.

The ABC of Materialist Dialectics

Gangrenous skeptics like Souvarine believe that 'nobody knows' what the dialectic is. And there are 'Marxists' who kowtow reverently before Souvarine and hope to learn something from him. And these Marxists hide not only in the *Modern Monthly*. Unfortunately a current of Souvarinism exists in the present opposition of the SWP. And here it is necessary to warn young comrades: Beware of this malignant infection!

The dialectic is neither fiction nor mysticism, but a science of the forms of our thinking, insofar as it is not limited to the daily problems of life but attempts to arrive at an understanding of more complicated and drawn-out processes. The dialectic and formal logic bear a relationship similar to that between higher and lower mathematics.

I will here attempt to sketch the substance of the problem in a very concise form. The Aristotelian logic of the simple syllogism starts from the proposition that 'A' is equal to 'A'. This postulate is accepted as an axiom for a multitude of practical human actions and elementary generalisations.

But in reality 'A' is not equal to 'A'. This is easy to prove if we observe these two letters under a lens—they are quite different from each other.

But, one can object, the question is not of the size or the form of the letters, since they are only symbols for equal quantities, for instance, a pound of sugar.

The objection is beside the point; in reality a pound of sugar is never equal to a pound of sugar—a more delicate scale always

discloses a difference.

Again one can object: but a pound of sugar is equal to itself. Neither is this true—all bodies change uninterruptedly in size, weight, colour, etc. They are never equal to themselves.

A sophist will respond that a pound of sugar is equal to itself 'at any given moment.' Aside from the extremely dubious practical value of this 'axiom', it does not withstand theoretical criticism either. How should we really conceive the word 'moment'? If it is an infinitesimal interval of time, then a pound of sugar is subjected during the course of that 'moment' to inevitable changes. Or is the 'moment' a purely mathematical abstraction, that is, a zero of time? But everything exists in time; and existence itself is an uninterrupted process of transformation; time is consequently a fundamental element of existence.

Thus the axiom 'A' is equal to 'A' signifies that a thing is equal to itself if it does not change, that is, if it does not exist.

At first glance it could seem that these 'subtleties' are useless. In reality they are of decisive significance. The axiom 'A' is equal to 'A' appears on one hand to be the point of departure for all our knowledge, on the other hand the point of departure for all the errors in our knowledge.

To make use of the axiom 'A' is equal to 'A' with impunity is possible only within certain limits. When quantitative changes in 'A' are negligible for the task at hand then we can presume that 'A' is equal to 'A'. This is, for example, the manner in which a buyer and a seller consider a pound of sugar. We consider the temperature of the sun likewise. Until recently we considered the buying power of the dollar in the same way.

But quantitative changes beyond certain limits become converted into qualitative. A pound of sugar subjected to the action of water or kerosene ceases to be a pound of sugar. A dollar in the embrace of a president ceases to be a dollar. To determine at the right moment the critical point where quantity changes into quality is one of the most important and difficult tasks in all the spheres of knowledge, including sociology.

Every worker knows that it is impossible to make two completely equal objects. In the elaboration of bearing-brass into cone bearings, a certain deviation is allowed for the cones which should not, however, go beyond certain limits (this is called tolerance). By observing the norms of tolerance, the cones are considered as being equal. ('A' is equal to 'A'.) When the tolerance is exceeded, the quantity goes over into quality; in other words, the cone bearings become inferior or completely worthless.

Our scientific thinking is only a part of our general practice, including techniques. For concepts there also exists 'tolerance' which is established not by formal logic issuing from the axiom 'A' is equal to 'A', but by the dialectical logic issuing from the axiom that everything is always changing. 'Common sense' is characterised by the fact that it systematically exceeds dialectical 'tolerance'.

Vulgar thought operates with such concepts as capitalism, morals, freedom, workers' state, etc as fixed abstractions, presuming that capitalism is equal to capitalism, morals are equal to morals, etc. Dialectical thinking analyses all things and phenomena in their continuous change, while determining in the material conditions of those changes that critical limit beyond which 'A' ceases to be 'A', a workers' state ceases to be a workers' state.

The fundamental flaw of vulgar thought lies in the fact that it wishes to content itself with motionless imprints of a reality which consists of eternal motion. Dialectical thinking gives to concepts, by means of closer approximations, corrections, concretisation, a richness of content and flexibility; I would even say a succulence which to a certain extent brings them close to living phenomena. Not capitalism in general, but a given capitalism at a given stage of development. Not a workers' state in general, but a given workers' state in a backward country in an imperialist encirclement, etc.

Dialectical thinking is related to vulgar thinking in the same

way that a motion picture is related to a still photograph. The motion picture does not outlaw the still photograph but combines a series of them according to the laws of motion. Dialectics does not deny the syllogism, but teaches us to combine syllogisms in such a way as to bring our understanding closer to the eternally changing reality.

Hegel, in his *Logic*, established a series of laws: change of quantity into quality, development through contradictions, conflict of content and form, interruption of continuity, change of possibility into inevitability, etc., which are just as important for theoretical thought as is the simple syllogism for more elementary tasks.

Hegel wrote before Darwin and before Marx. Thanks to the powerful impulse given to thought by the French Revolution, Hegel anticipated the general movement of science. But because it was only an *anticipation*, although by a genius, it received from Hegel an idealistic character. Hegel operated with ideological shadows as the ultimate reality. Marx demonstrated that the movement of these ideological shadows reflected nothing but the movement of material bodies.

We call our dialectic, materialist, since its roots are neither in heaven nor in the depths of our 'free will', but in objective reality, in nature. Consciousness grew out of the unconscious, psychology out of physiology, the organic world out of the inorganic, the solar system out of nebulae. On all the rungs of this ladder of development, the quantitative changes were transformed into qualitative.

Our thought, including dialectical thought, is only one of the forms of the expression of changing matter. There is no place within this system for God, nor Devil, nor immortal soul, nor eternal norms of laws and morals. The dialectic of thinking, having grown out of the dialectic of nature, possesses consequently a thoroughly materialist character.

Darwinism, which explained the evolution of species through quantitative transformations passing into qualitative, was the highest triumph of the dialectic in the whole field of organic matter. Another great triumph was the discovery of the table of atomic weights of chemical elements and further the transformation of one element into another.

With these transformations (species, elements, etc.) is closely linked the question of classification, equally important in the natural as in the social sciences. Linnaeus' system (18th century), utilising as its starting point the immutability of species, was limited to the description and classification of plants according to their external characteristics.

The infantile period of botany is analogous to the infantile period of logic, since the forms of our thought develop like everything that lives. Only decisive repudiation of the idea of fixed species, only the study of the history of the evolution of plants and their anatomy, prepared the basis for a really scientific classification.

Marx, who in distinction from Darwin was a conscious dialectician, discovered a basis for the scientific classification of human societies in the development of their productive forces and the structure of the relations of ownership which constitute the anatomy of society. Marxism substituted for the vulgar descriptive classification of societies and states, which even up to now still flourishes in the universities, a materialistic dialectical classification. Only through using the method of Marx is it possible correctly to determine both the concept of a workers' state and the moment of its downfall.

All this, as we see, contains nothing 'metaphysical' or 'scholastic', as conceited ignorance affirms. Dialectical logic expresses the laws of motion in contemporary scientific thought. The struggle against materialist dialectics on the contrary expresses a distant past, conservatism of the petty-

bourgeoisie, the self-conceit of university routinists and...a spark of hope for an after-life.

The Nature of the USSR

The definition of the USSR given by comrade Burnham, 'not a workers' and not a bourgeois state', is purely negative, wrenched from the chain of historical development, left dangling in mid-air, void of a single particle of sociology, and represents simply a theoretical capitulation of pragmatism before a *contradictory* historical phenomenon.

If Burnham were a dialectical materialist, he would have probed the following three questions: (1) What is the historical origin of the USSR? (2) What changes has this state suffered during its existence? (3) Did these changes pass from the quantitative state to the qualitative? That is, did they create a historically necessary domination by a new exploiting class? Answering these questions would have forced Burnham to draw the only possible conclusion—the USSR is still a degenerated workers' state.

The dialectic is not a magic master key for all questions. It does not replace concrete scientific analysis. But it directs this analysis along the correct road, securing it against sterile wanderings in the desert of subjectivism and scholasticism.

Bruno R. places both the Soviet and fascist regimes under the category of 'bureaucratic collectivism', because the USSR, Italy and Germany are all ruled by bureaucracies; here and there are the principles of planning; in one case private property is liquidated, in another limited, etc.

Thus, on the basis of the *relative* similarity of *certain* external characteristics of *different* origin, of *different* specific weight, of *different* class significance, a fundamental *identity* of social regimes is constructed, completely in the spirit of bourgeois professors who construct categories of 'controlled economy', 'centralised state', without taking into consideration whatsoever the class nature of one or the other. Bruno R. and his followers, or semi-followers like Burnham, at best remain in the sphere of social classification on the level of Linnaeus, in whose justification it should be remarked however that he lived before Hegel, Darwin and Marx.

Even worse and more dangerous, perhaps, are those eclectics who express the idea that the class character of the Soviet state 'does not matter', and that the direction of our policy is determined by the 'character of the war'. As if the war were an independent, super-social substance; as if the character of the war were not determined by the character of the ruling class, that is, by the same social factor that also determines the character of the state. Astonishing how easily some comrades forget the ABC's of Marxism under the blows of events!

It is not surprising that the theoreticians of the opposition who reject dialectic thought capitulate lamentably before the contradictory nature of the USSR. However, the contradiction between the social basis laid down by the revolution, and the character of the caste which arose out of the degeneration of the revolution, is not only an irrefutable historical fact but also a motor force.

In our struggle for the overthrow of the bureaucracy we base ourselves on this contradiction. Meanwhile, some ultra-lefts have already reached the ultimate absurdity by affirming that it is necessary to sacrifice the social structure of the USSR in order to overthrow the Bonapartist oligarchy! They have no

suspicion that the USSR minus the social structure founded by the October Revolution would be a fascist regime.

Evolution and Dialectics

Comrade Burnham will probably protest that as an evolutionist he is interested in the development of society and state forms not less than we dialecticians. We will not dispute this. Every educated person since Darwin has labelled himself an 'evolutionist'. But a real evolutionist must apply the idea of evolution to his own forms of thinking.

Elementary logic, founded in the period when the idea of evolution itself did not yet exist, is evidently insufficient for the analysis of evolutionary processes. Hegel's logic is the logic of evolution. Only one must not forget that the concept of 'evolution' itself has been completely corrupted and emasculated by university professors and liberal writers to mean peaceful 'progress'.

Whoever has come to understand that evolution proceeds through the struggle of antagonistic forces; that a slow accumulation of changes at a certain moment explodes the old shell and brings about a catastrophe, revolution; whoever has learned finally to apply the general laws of evolution to thinking itself, he is a dialectician, as distinguished from vulgar evolutionists. Dialectic training of the mind, as necessary to a revolu-

tionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist, demands approaching all problems as *processes* and not as *motionless categories*. Whereas vulgar evolutionists, who limit themselves generally to recognising evolution in only certain spheres, content themselves in all other questions with the banalities of 'common sense'.

The American liberal, who has reconciled himself to the existence of the USSR, more precisely to the Moscow bureaucracy, believes, or at least believed until the Soviet-German pact, that the Soviet regime on the whole is a 'progressive thing', that the repugnant features of the bureaucracy ('well, naturally they exist!') will progressively slough away and that peaceful and painless 'progress' is thus assured.

A vulgar petty-bourgeois radical is similar to a liberal 'progressive' in that he takes the USSR as a whole, failing to understand its internal contradictions and dynamics.

When Stalin concluded an alliance with Hitler, invaded Poland, and now Finland, the vulgar radicals triumphed; the identity of the methods of Stalinism and fascism was proved! They found themselves in difficulties, however when the new authorities invited the population to expropriate the land-owners and capitalists—they had not foreseen this possibility at all! Meanwhile the social revolutionary measures, carried out via bureaucratic military means, not only did not disturb *our*, dialectic, definition of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state, but gave it the most incontrovertible corroboration.

Instead of utilising this triumph of Marxian analysis for persevering agitation, the petty-bourgeois oppositionists began to shout with criminal light-mindedness that the events have refuted our prognosis, that our old formulas are no longer applicable, that new words are necessary. What words? They haven't decided yet themselves.

From: Where is Britain Going?

By Leon Trotsky

When the course of events, usually of a catastrophic nature, such as great economic disturbances, crises, wars make the social system unbearable to the workers, they have neither the possibility nor the desire to lead their revolutionary agitation into the channels of capitalist democracy.

In other words: when the masses comprehend how long they have been deluded they carry out a revolution. A successful revolution transfers the power to them, and the conquest of power enables them to construct a new State apparatus, answering to their interests.

But it is just this that MacDonald will not accept. "The revolution in Russia," he says, "taught us a great lesson. It showed that revolution is a ruin and a calamity, and nothing more." Here the reactionary Fabian stands before us in all his revolting nakedness. Revolution leads only to calamity!

But the British democracy led to the imperialist war, and not only in the sense that all the capitalist States were generally responsible—no, in the sense of the direct and immediate responsibility of British diplomacy, consciously and calculatingly thrusting Europe into war.

If the British "democracy" had declared that it would enter the war on the side of the Entente, Germany and Austria-Hungary would no doubt have withdrawn. But the British government acted otherwise: it secretly promised support to the Entente, and calculatingly deluded Germany with the possibility of its neutrality.

Thus British "democracy" deliberately led to the war, with the ruin of which the calamities of revolution cannot, of course, be compared in the very least.

But in addition to this, what deaf ears and shameless face are necessary in order in the face of a revolution which overthrew Tsarism, nobility, and the bourgeoisie, shook the Church, awakened to a new life a nation of 130 millions, a whole family of nations, to declare that revolution is a calamity and **nothing more**.

Here also MacDonald repeats Baldwin. He has no knowledge or understanding either of the Russian revolution or of British history. We are constrained to remind him of that which we recalled to the mind of the Conservative Premier. If in the economic sphere the initiative belonged to Britain until the fourth quarter of the last century, so in the political sphere Britain developed during the last century and a half in large measure with the assistance of European and American revolutions.

The great French revolution, and the July revolution of 1830, and the revolution of '48, and the North American civil war of the sixties, and the Russian revolution of 1905, and the Russian revolution of 1917, all pushed forward the social development of Great Britain and left their marks on her history in the signposts of the greatest legislative reforms.

Without the Russian revolution of 1917 MacDonald would not have been Premier in 1924. It will be understood that we

are not trying to claim that the MacDonald Ministry was the greatest conquest of October. But in any case it was in great measure its by-product. And even the children's books teach us that it is not wise to gnaw the roots of the oak-tree from which you are gathering acorns.

And, moreover, what senseless Fabian arrogance: as the Russian revolution has taught "us" (whom?) a lesson, "we" (who?) will arrange our affairs without a revolution. But why in that case did not all the preceding wars enable "you" to dispense with the imperialist war?

Just as the bourgeoisie calls every succeeding war the last war, so MacDonald wishes to call the Russian revolution the last revolution. But why exactly should the British bourgeoisie give way to the British proletariat, and peacefully, without a struggle, renounce their own property, when they have previously received the firm assurance of MacDonald that after the experience of the Russian revolution the British socialists will never go the way of violence? When and where did the ruling class ever yield power and property on the order of a peaceful vote—and especially such a class as the British bourgeoisie, which has behind it centuries of world rapacity?

Organic evolution

MacDonald is against revolution, but in favour of organic evolution; he applies to society a badly digested biological conception. For him evolution, as the sum of accumulated partial changes, is comparable to the development of living organisms, the transformation of a chrysalis into a butterfly, and so on, while in this last process he ignores exactly the decisive critical moments, when the new being bursts from the old chrysalis in revolutionary wise.

Here, too, in passing it is revealed that MacDonald is "for a revolution similar to that which took place within the womb of feudalism, when the industrial revolution came to maturity". Evidently, in his blatant ignorance, MacDonald conceives that the industrial revolution took place molecularly, without disturbance, without misfortune and devastation. He simply does not know the history of Britain (there is no point in mentioning the history of other countries), and, most of all, does not understand that the industrial revolution while it was still maturing within the womb of feudalism, in the form of trade capital, led to the Reformation, brought the Stuarts into conflict with Parliament, gave birth to civil war, and ruined and devastated Britain, in order afterwards to enrich her.

It would be wearying to occupy ourselves here with the interpretation of the process of transformation of the chrysalis

into the butterfly in order to get the necessary social analogies. It is simpler and shorter to recommend MacDonald to ponder over the old comparison of revolution with birth. Is it not possible to gain a "lesson" here, as well as from the Russian revolution? Since births give "nothing" but pains and misery (the child does not come into the reckoning!), in future the population is recommended to multiply in the painless Fabian fashion, availing themselves of the talents of Mrs. Snowden in the capacity of the unqualified midwife.

We must point out none the less that the matter is not at all so simple. Even the chick, when formed inside the egg, must apply force to the calcareous prison enclosing it; if some Fabian chick, out of Christian or other considerations, decided to refrain from violent activities, the calcareous envelope would inevitably suffocate it.

Shortening beak

British pigeon fanciers, by means of an artificial selection, achieve special varieties, with a continually shortening beak. But there comes a moment when the beak of a new stock is so short that the poor creature is unequal to breaking the egg-shell, and the young pigeon perishes, a sacrifice to compulsory restraint from revolutionary activities, and a stop is put to the further progress of varieties of short-bills.

If our memory is not at fault, MacDonald can read about

this in Darwin. Having entered upon MacDonald's favourite course of analogies with the organic world, one can say that the political art of the British bourgeoisie consists in shortening the revolutionary beak of the proletariat, and so not allowing him to pierce the shell of the capitalist State. The beak of the proletariat is its party.

If we look at MacDonald, Thomas, Mr. and Mrs. Snowden, we have to confess that the work of the bourgeoisie in selecting short-billed and soft-billed has been crowned with astonishing success, for these individuals are not only not fit for the piercing of the capitalist shell, but indeed are not fit for anything.

Here, however, the analogy ends, revealing all the conditionality of this kind of hasty search in the primers of biology as a substitute for the study of the methods of historical development. Although human society grew out of the conditions of the organic and inorganic world, it presents them in such a complicated and concentrated blending that it demands an independent knowledge.

Social organism is distinguished from biological organism by, among other things, a much greater flexibility, and by a capability of regrouping its elements, of conscious selection to a certain degree of its instruments and processes, of a conscious utilisation within certain limits of the experience of the past, and so on.

The pigeon in the egg cannot change its too short beak, and so it perishes. The working class, confronted with the question—to be or not to be—can drive out the MacDonalds and Mrs. Snowdens and arm themselves with the beak of a revolutionary party for the destruction of the capitalist system.

Explanatory notes

Page 3

Metaphysics—term generally used to distinguish abstract philosophy from experimental natural science.

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Eclecticism—Philosophical method of selecting ideas from different systems of thought, without regard to the contradictions between those systems.

Aristotelian logic—The method of “formal logic” (see page 4) was first put forward as a coherent system by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle.

Pragmatism—A variant of ‘empirical’ (see below) philosophy, developed in the USA in the late 19th century, stating that the only meaning of ideas lie in their practical usefulness, seen from an immediate ‘common sense’ point of view. The popularity of this philosophy corresponded to the rapid advance of US industry.

Rationalism—Philosophical approach based on the belief that abstract reasoning, as opposed to sensual perception, can grasp “objective truth”, which was supposed to be eternal, universal and independent of human experience.

Empiricism—Philosophical method which emphasises the part played by experience in shaping knowledge, as opposed to the part played by reasoning.

Eastman, Max—One-time supporter of the Russian revolution and admirer of Lenin and Trotsky, who translated several of Trotsky’s books into English. Never a Marxist, he later shifted to the right and in the 1940s became editor of the anti-communist *Reader’s Digest*.

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British utilitarianism—Theory that an action is ‘right’ if it achieves the ‘greatest good’ of the ‘greatest number of people’. Developed by the British bourgeois philosopher Bentham in the 18th century.

Keynes, John Maynard (1883-1946)—British bourgeois economist who in the

1930s put forward the idea of stimulating the capitalist economy through “deficit financing” by the state, i.e., spending more than its income, through borrowing and printing money. Keynesian policies were adopted in most capitalist countries during the post-war period of economic upswing, but could not resolve the underlying contradictions of the capitalist system and, by the 1970s, had led to soaring levels of inflation.

Souvarine, Boris—Leading member of the French Communist Party who in 1924 supported Trotsky against Stalin. Subsequently expelled from the CP, he succumbed to frustration, broke with Trotsky and denied that any of the gains of the October revolution survived in the Soviet Union.

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Hegel, in his *Logic*—A reference to the book *Science of Logic* in which the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) asserted the dialectical method of understanding the development of ideas. Marx and Engels regarded Hegel’s method as a huge step forward—but they applied it to the material world.

Bruno R.—Bruno Rizzi, an Italian ex-Trotskyist who claimed that the Russian bureaucracy had become a new ruling class, and that the system of “bureaucratic collectivism” in Russia represented an advance on capitalism. These ideas were largely taken over by Burnham in his book *The Managerial Revolution*.

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Fabian—The Fabian Society, formed in 1883 by middle-class social-democratic intellectuals, has served and continues to serve as a ‘think tank’ for the right wing of the British labour movement.

The imperialist war—The First World War of 1914-18, brought about by intensified competition between the rival imperialist powers.

Entente (cordiale)—Alliance between

French and British imperialism established by an agreement of 1904; later joined by Tsarist Russia and Serbia.

Baldwin, Stanley (1867-1947)—Conservative prime minister of Britain in 1923-24 and 1925-29.

Great French revolution—The first and decisive period of the bourgeois revolution in France, between 1789 and 1795, when the regime of the absolute monarchy and the landowning aristocracy was smashed, and the rule of the capitalist class was established.

July revolution of 1830—Overthrow of the reactionary monarchy which had been placed in control of the bourgeois state in France following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. Carried through by armed mass insurrection in Paris, it led to political victory for the bourgeoisie and the installation of Louis Philippe as “citizen king”, subject to parliamentary control.

Revolution of ‘48—Against the background of industrial growth and the strengthening of the proletariat, the economic crisis of 1846 and repeated struggles to extend the franchise, the 1848 revolution in France overthrew Louis Philippe and established the Second Republic. But in June 1848 the working class was defeated and power was eventually seized by Louis Napoleon, who installed himself as Bonapartist dictator in 1851, abolished the Republic and proclaimed himself Emperor.

North American civil war—Fought between the northern states of the USA, where most of industry was concentrated, and the southern states which were dominated by the slave-owning capitalist landowners. The war ended in victory for the northern industrialists and bankers, and paved the way for the emergence of the USA as a world capitalist power.

Russian revolution of 1905, and ... 1917—The Russian revolution of 1905, in which the working class led the struggle against Tsarism but was defeated, was the forerunner and ‘dress rehearsal’ for the revolution of October 1917 when the working class, led by Lenin and Trotsky, came to power. The Russian workers’ victory had a profound effect on the

workers' movement internationally and contributed to revolutionary upheavals and major advances by the workers' parties in many countries.

Civil war (in England)—Revolutionary struggle in the 1640s between the forces of parliament, representing the rising bourgeoisie, and the forces of the king, representing the landowning aristocracy and the remnants of feudal absolutism. The war ended in victory for the bourgeoisie and laid the basis for the development of modern British capitalism

and imperialism.

Snowden, Philip (1864-1937)—Member of parliament for the Independent Labour Party from 1906 to 1931 and chancellor of the exchequer (minister of finance) in the reformist Labour governments of 1924 and 1929, when he was responsible for cutting unemployment benefits and other attacks on the working class. These policies led to the break-up of the Labour government, while Snowden was rewarded with a seat in the House of Lords. **Ethel Snowden**.

(1881-1951), was another leading reformist in the ILP.

Thomas, James (1874-1949)—right-wing leader of British railwaymen's union who played a notorious part in betraying the General Strike of 1926. Served as Colonial Secretary in Ramsay MacDonald's government. Subsequently sacked and expelled, and cut off without a pension, by the National Union of Railwaymen when, together with MacDonald, he joined the 'National Government' with the Tories in 1931.