

Louis Althusser

On Marxism

Marxism constitutes one of the main currents of contemporary thought. By now, there is no counting the works that set out to expound, combat, or even ‘supersede’ it. It is already no easy task to find the path that cuts through this mass of polemical works and leads to the texts. Moreover, there are a great many of these texts. The (incomplete) French edition of the works of Marx and Engels published by Costes comprises some sixty volumes; that published by *Editions Sociales* more than twenty; the (incomplete) edition of Lenin’s works includes some twenty volumes; the edition of Stalin’s, some fifteen; and so on ... But the fact that there are so many texts is not the only problem. The Marxist canon spans an historical period that stretches from 1840 to the present, and raises problems that have fuelled polemics: the nature of Marx’s early works; the problem of the Marxist tradition. Finally, the very nature of Marxism — a science and a philosophy closely bound up with (political or scientific) practice — represents an additional difficulty, perhaps the greatest of all. If one neglects the constant reference to practice, which Marx, Engels, and their followers insistently call to our attention, one is liable to misunderstand the significance of Marxism entirely, and to interpret it as an ‘ordinary’ philosophy.

Here we would like to provide a few guideposts that may make approaching and studying Marxism easier.

A few bibliographical pointers may be useful. At the end of a work by H. C. Desroches, *Signification du marxisme* (*Éditions Ouvrières, Economie et humanisme*, Paris, 1950), the reader will find an introductory bibliography by C. F. Hubert. This annotated bibliography is divided into two sections. In the first, the author presents us with an initiatory bibliography of selected works or chapters — the compendia of Marxism — by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, organised under four headings: economy, theory of the state, general theory of history, and tactics and strategy. The second section (complementary bibliography) contains a chronological listing of the works of Marx and Engels, together with a very partial list of Lenin’s works. This bibliography is quite serviceable. But it has a number of faults: it tends to sacrifice dialectical materialism to historical materialism; it is not up-to-date; and it does not include works about Marxism (with the exception of a text by Plekhanov and Auguste Cornu’s dissertation [on the young Marx]).

The most comprehensive and interesting historical study of Marx is a book in German by Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx* (1918); it deserves to be translated. Henri Lefebvre, *Pour connaître la pensée de Marx* (Bordas, Paris, 1948), may also be consulted with profit; it is better than the short book by the same author, *Le matérialisme dialectique*, published before the war by NEP (Alcan, 1940). *Morceaux choisis de Karl Marx*, ed. Lefebvre and Guterman (Gallirnard, 1934), has a serious drawback: texts from different periods, including extracts from Marx’s early works, are grouped under the same heading, without any accompanying historical information.

Good accounts of Marxist economic theory may be found in Segal, *Principes d’économie politique* (ESI, Paris, 1936); Baby, *Principes fondamentaux d’économie politique* (ESI, 1949); and, especially, Benard, *La conception marxiste du capital* (éditions SEDES, Paris), and Denis, *La valeur, la monnaie* (ESI).

I. The problem of Marx’s early works

Contemporary philosophers have played up Marx’s early works. These are doubtless more accessible than *Capital*. Moreover, they are ‘philosophical’ works, marked by the pervasive influence of Hegel and Feuerbach.

The importance we assign these early texts (in some respects, Hegel’s work already throws up the same problem) will command our general interpretation of Marxism. If we hold that they contain Marx’s basic inspiration, then they become Marxism’s criterion of validity and the principle that will inform our interpretation of Marxism. Thus, to take two different examples, M. Hyppolite has argued that Marx remains faithful to his original philosophical intuitions right down to *Capital* (see ‘Marxism and Philosophy’; ‘Marx’s Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of the State,’ ‘On the Structure and

Philosophical Presuppositions of Marx's Capital, in Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, trans. John O'Neill, Basic Books, New York and London, 1969). Conversely, M. Gurvitch has defended the intuitions of the young Marx against his mature works, arguing that the inspiration of the latter is different and inferior (see 'La sociologie du jeune Marx', *Cahiers international de sociologie*, no. 4, 1948). The problem of the Marxist tradition and the evolution of Marxist thought is posed by way of these theses. If, however, we hold that these early works reflect the interests of the young Marx, who, like all his fellow students, entered the arena of thought in a world dominated by Hegel's philosophy, but, with the help of internal criticism, historical experience, and scientific knowledge, put this point of departure behind him in order to work out an original theory, then we will regard these early works as transitional, and seek in them less the truth of Marxism than the intellectual trajectory of the young Marx. This is, *grosso modo*, the thesis defended by Mehring, and also by Auguste Cornu in *Karl Marx, l'homme et l'oeuvre: De l'hégélianisme au matérialisme historique, 1815-1845* (Alcan, Paris, 1934). From this standpoint, the philosophical influences of Marx's youth are, in *Capital*, simply starting points he has left behind to forge an original conception of things (Lenin adopts this thesis in *Karl Marx* [1914]). So regarded, the Marxist tradition does not confront us with the same question as before.

We do not wish to deal with this important question here; it is matter for a detailed historical study. Let us simply take note of the judgement Marx and Engels passed both on their own early works and on the influences to which they were subject.

In the Preface to the *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (a text dating from 1859, published by Giard), Marx examines his own development and early works, making the following points. To begin with, he underscores the importance of Engels' 'brilliant sketch on the criticism of the economic categories'. (The reference is to Engels' article 'Outline of a Critique of Political Economy', an empirical [positive] analysis of England's economic and political situation published in February 1844 in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. This crucially important article has not been included in the volume of Marx and Engels' philosophical works published by Costes.) Marx then refers to *The German Ideology* in these terms: 'When in the spring of 1845 [Engels] also settled in Brussels, we resolved to work out in common the opposition of our view to the ideological view of German philosophy, in fact, to settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience' [Marx and Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1968, p. 193]. Marx thus considered all his texts prior to *The German Ideology* to be tainted by a philosophical conscience', and he regarded *The German Ideology* as a critique of this influence, which he had by then overcome. He adds, 'The decisive points of our view were first scientifically, though only polemically, indicated in my book published in 1847 and directed against Proudhon: *The Poverty of Philosophy*' [*ibid.*, p. 184].

These texts of Marx's would seem to make it possible to mark off the stages of Marx's thought as he himself defines them. 1) All the texts prior to *The German Ideology*, including *The Holy Family* and the '1844 Manuscripts' (which were left in the form of notes, and have not been translated in full by Costes), were more or less subject to the influence of German 'philosophy'. 2) *The German Ideology* is a critique of this 'philosophical conscience'. 3) *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) is the first scientific text Marx recognises as being entirely characteristic of his mode of thought [*où Marx se reconnaît entièrement*]. Marx and Engels often re-examined their relationship to, and disagreement with, Hegel. See, in @s connection, *The German Ideology* (*passim*), *The Poverty of Philosophy*, ch. II, 1. 'The Method', the second Preface to *Capital* [the Postface to the second German edition], Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach* (the beginning), and Engels' *Anti-Dühring* (Part 1, ch. XIII, 'Negation of the Negation', a theme taken up and powerfully developed by Lenin in *What 'The Friends of the People' Are*, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1960, pp. 163-74).

One word more about the implications of this problem of Marx's early works. It is certainly not irrelevant to our understanding of Marxism today. This is evident when one considers notions like the *End of history*, bound up in turn with the notion of *alienation*. If Marx and his followers do no more in their works than illustrate and corroborate the still philosophical theses of *On the Jewish Question* or the '1844 Manuscripts'; if they merely attempt to 'flesh out' the Hegelian philosophical notion of the end of alienation and the 'end of history', then their undertaking is worth what this notion is. And, in that case, Marxism sacrifices its scientific pretensions, to become, in some sort, the incarnation of an ideal, which, although certainly moving, is utopian, and, like any ideal, gets entangled in both theoretical contradictions and the 'impurity' of concrete means the moment it seeks to bend reality to its demands. Conversely, if Marxism has nothing to do with any 'philosophical' notion of this sort, if it is a science, it escapes the theoretical contradictions and practical tyranny of the ideal; the contradictions it runs up against are no

longer those resulting from its philosophical pretensions, but simply the contradictions of reality itself, which it sets out to study scientifically and solve practically.

II. Historical materialism

Historical materialism is precisely that science of history of which the early works are the ‘philosophical’ anticipation.

Here again, we would like to provide a few guideposts. Marxism has two aspects, which are profoundly united, yet distinct: dialectical materialism and historical materialism.

Marx and Engels use the term historical materialism to refer to the science of history, or the ‘science of the development of societies’ established by Marx. This term may seem questionable: we do not use the term ‘physical materialism’ to designate physics. In fact, Marx was using the term as a weapon. His aim was to counterpose his enterprise to the idealist conceptions of history of his day. He wished to found the science of history, not on men’s ‘self-consciousness’ or the ‘ideal objectives of history’ (the ‘realisation of freedom’, the reconciliation of ‘human nature’ with itself, etc. — see, on this subject, *The German Ideology, passim*), but on the material dialectic of the forces of production and relations of production, the ‘motor’ that determines historical development ‘in the final analysis’ (see the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*).

In a little known, highly instructive essay, Lenin discusses the scientific method of Marx’s work at length, using Marx’s own terms (*What ‘The Friends of the People’ Are*, pp. 129ff.). Historical materialism, says Lenin, is not an arbitrary conception. The science of history was constituted as the other sciences were; although it possesses its own methods and principles, it must meet the same standards of rigour. ‘This idea of materialism in sociology was in itself a piece of genius. Naturally, “for the time being” it was only a hypothesis, but it was the first hypothesis to create the possibility of a strictly scientific approach to historical and social problems.’ This hypothesis (the explanation of history through the dialectic of forces and relations of production) makes it possible to introduce the criteria of science into history: objectivity, repetition, generalisation.

Now — since the appearance of *Capital* — the materialist conception of history is no longer a hypothesis, but a scientifically proven proposition. And until we get some other attempt to give a scientific explanation of the functioning and development of some social formation — social formation, mind you, and not the way of life of some country or people, or even class, etc. — another attempt just as capable of introducing order into the ‘pertinent facts’ as materialism is, that is, just as capable of presenting a living picture of a given formation, while giving it a strictly scientific explanation — until then the materialist conception of history will be synonymous with social science (*ibid.*, p. 142; translation modified).

As such, Marxism cannot claim to do more than a science does:

And just as transformism does not at all claim to explain the ‘whole’ history of the formation of species, but only to place the methods of this explanation on a scientific basis, so materialism in history has never claimed to explain everything, but merely to indicate the ‘only scientific’, to use Marx’s expression (*Capital*), method of explaining history (*ibid.*, p. 146).

These theses enable us to articulate more precisely the objectives of Marxism and its claims to scientific status.

One further point needs to be clarified in this connection. Modern writers, taking up, consciously or not, a tradition whose representatives include Sorel and Rogdanov, have described historical materialism as ‘the immanent philosophy of the proletariat’ (Daniel Villey), as a theory that is valid for the proletariat and gives expression to its condition and aspirations. This thesis leads to the following conclusion: Marxism is a subjective (‘class’) theory, having no claim to scientific universality and objectivity; hence it is a myth in the Sorelian sense, rather than a science. Others have sought to ground the scientific nature of Marxism, ‘the ideology of the proletariat’, in the essence of the proletariat, the ‘universal class’ whose condition — whose very impoverishment — marks it out for universality and objectivity. Lenin had occasion to discuss this problem in a famous text, *What is to be Done?* (especially chs 1 and II; see Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. 5, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1961, pp. 352ff.). Against the advocates of the ‘spontaneity’ of the proletariat, Lenin defends the absolute necessity of ‘scientific theory’. He quotes approvingly the following passages from Kautsky:

[For the spontaneists], socialist consciousness appears to be a necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle. But this is absolutely untrue. . . . Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge.... The vehicle of science is not the proletariat [this was written in 1902], but the *bourgeois intelligentsia*: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians, who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without ... and not something that arose within it spontaneously (ibid., pp. 383-4). Lenin shows that, 'spontaneously', the proletariat cannot but be influenced by bourgeois ideology, and that Marxism, far from being the subjective theory of the proletariat, is a science that must be taught to the proletariat. Lenin and his followers have often drawn attention to the fact that the proletariat had existed for a very long time, and endured a thousand different ordeals, before assimilating Marxism and accepting it as the science that could account for its condition within the overall framework of capitalist society, securing its future as well as all humanity's. Only later did the proletariat produce, in its class organisations, intellectuals of its own, who developed Marxist theory in their turn.

This text of Lenin's is important for the study of Marxism's relation to the proletariat, class consciousness, the problem of 'economic consciousness' and political consciousness, 'spontaneity', 'partisanship', etc. If we compare it with the second Preface to *Capital* and Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, on the one hand, and the monographs Stalin has written on *Marxism and Linguistics and Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, on the other, we can discern, in these theoretical works, a profoundly scientific conception of history, which rigorously defines its own domain while distinguishing it from others, determines the laws of its object, and submits its results to the test of concrete human practice:

The criterion of practice, i.e., the course of development of all capitalist countries in the last few decades, proves only the objective truth of Marx's *whole* social and economic theory in general, and not merely of one or another of its parts, formulations, etc.; it is clear that to talk here of the 'dogmatism' of the Marxists is to make an unpardonable concession to bourgeois economics. The sole conclusion to be drawn from the opinion held by Marxists that Marx's theory is an objective truth is that by following the *path* of Marxian theory, we shall draw closer and closer to objective truth (without ever exhausting it); but by following *any other path* we shall arrive at nothing but confusion and lies (Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1970, pp. 129-30).

This is doubtless the most profound characteristic of historical materialism: it is a science that not only inspires political action, but also seeks its verification in practice, developing and growing through political practice itself.

But this dialectic between scientific theory and practice brings us to the second aspect of Marxism: dialectical materialism.

Note on Dialectical Materialism

Marxism comes forward not only as the science of History (historical materialism),⁴ but also as dialectical materialism. Engels, Lenin, and Stalin have elaborated upon the latter aspect of Marxism in particular. It too is the object of lively controversies.

What are the most important of the Marxist texts dealing with this subject? The second Preface to *Capital*, Engels' *Anti-Dühring* (Part 1), *Ludwig Feuerbach* (ch. IV), and *Dialectics of Nature* (*passim*); Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (chs I and II), *What 'The Friends of the People' Are* (pp. 163-74) and *Philosophical Notebooks* (Lenin's Collected Works, Vol. 38); Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* and *Marxism and Linguistics*; Zhdanov's *On Philosophy* (in *On Literature, Music and Philosophy*); Mao Zedong's *On Contradiction* (in *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tse-tung*).

I. The dialectic

A few preliminary remarks may facilitate an approach to the Marxist conception of the *dialectic*.

For Marx, Engels, and their followers, the dialectic is the most advanced form of *scientific method*. Marxist theoreticians affirm that they are heir to ‘the Hegelian dialectic’. A first problem: Marxism adopts the dialectic from Hegel, and yet Marx himself declares: ‘My dialectical method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite’ (second Preface to *Capital* [the Postface to the second German edition], International Publishers, New York, 1974, Vol. 1, p. 19). After Marx, first Engels (in *Ludwig Feuerbach and Anti-Dühring*) and then Lenin affirm that the Hegelian dialectic is acceptable only if ‘put back on its feet’. What is meant by this ‘direct opposite’, this ‘inversion’ of the dialectic? We can find a precise answer in a number of different texts.

What Marx, Engels, and their followers reject in the Hegelian dialectic is its *dogmatic* meaning, role, and utilisation — in a word, the *schematism* for which Hegel himself criticised Schelling in a well-known passage of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This dogmatism does violence to reality in order to make it fit the dialectical schema at all costs. What if reality does not conform to the *a priori* structure of the dialectic? It is deformed to bring it into line. In certain cases, doubtless, reality may well conform to the Hegelian dialectical schema: this is why Marx distinguishes analyses that are of genuine scientific interest from ‘the Hegelian hotchpotch’ (for example, the conception of history as process, the critique of abstract ideals, the ‘Beautiful Soul’, and so on). Most of the time, however, the Hegelian dialectic is simply ‘plastered onto’ reality. This utilisation of the dialectic is intimately bound up with Hegel’s absolute idealism. ‘According to Hegel the development of the idea, in conformity with the dialectical laws of the triad, determines the development of the real world. And it is only in that case, of course, that one can speak of the importance of the triads, of the incontrovertibility of the dialectical process’ (Lenin, *What ‘The Friends of the People’ Are*, p. 167). It is precisely this utilisation that Marx rejects: ‘Responding to Dühring, who had attacked Marx’s dialectics, Engels says that Marx never dreamed of “proving” anything by means of Hegelian triads. . .’ (*ibid.*, p. 163).

Yet although they thus reject the dogmatic utilisation of the dialectic along with its philosophical foundations — Marx and Engels retain its ‘rational kernel’, the general content of the dialectic (interaction, development, qualitative ‘leaps’, contradiction), which, in their view, constitutes a remarkable approximation of the most advanced *positive scientific method*.’ This puts us in a position to specify the meaning of the famous ‘inversion’. It is neither reliance on a particular philosophical system, nor a sort of intrinsic virtue, an absolute ‘logical’ necessity, that makes the dialectic indispensable to Marx and Engels. *The dialectic is validated only by its concrete [positif] utilisation, by its scientific fecundity*. This scientific use is the sole criterion of the dialectic. It alone makes it possible to speak of the dialectic as *method*. Marx, says Lenin, did not ‘plaster’ the dialectic onto reality:

Marx only studied and investigated the real process ... the sole criterion of theory recognised by him was its conformity to reality.... What Marx and Engels called the dialectical method — as against the metaphysical — is nothing else than the scientific method in sociology, which consists in regarding society as a living organism in a state of constant development (*What ‘The Friends of the People’ Are*, pp. 163-5).

And Lenin cites the famous sentence from the second Preface to *Capital* in which Marx defines the dialectic: ‘The whole matter thus amounts to a “positive understanding of the existing state of things and their inevitable development”’ (*ibid.*, p. 167; translation modified).

However, if this is the significance of the ‘inversion’ of the Hegelian dialectic, one must go still further. Marx and Engels accepted the ‘rational kernel’, the ‘laws’ of the Hegelian dialectic, only as a remarkable anticipation of scientific method.’ But if its utilisation by science is the criterion of the dialectic, that utilisation also determines its ‘laws’; it alone can confirm, define, and thus modify, by making them more precise, the laws of the dialectic themselves. This requirement is not unMarxist. Since Marx, we have been witness to an interesting effort to specify and define the ‘rules’ or ‘laws’ of the dialectic, an effort that has progressively eliminated the formalistic elements that continued to mark the initial definitions. Thus the ‘negation of the negation’ no longer figures amongst the rules retained by Stalin (see *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*). Thus Mao Zedong’s most recent text (‘On Contradiction’) accentuates two new ideas: the ‘principal contradiction’ and the ‘principal aspect’ of the contradiction; they are intended to specify the concrete structure of the concept of contradiction, which had earlier been too abstract. This ongoing effort of definition, which is consonant with a positive scientific approach [*positivité*], is plainly not unrelated to the scientific nature of the dialectical method.

Another point merits attention as well. If the dialectic is a scientific method, it comprises, like any scientific method, two aspects. It cannot be a method of discovery or investigation *unless it articulates the structure of reality* known to science. *Method of discovery and structure of reality are here closely*

interlinked, as they always have been in the history of the sciences. It is in this sense that Engels could speak of the ‘dialectics of nature’, and could write that ‘in the last resort, nature works dialectically’ (*Anti-Dühring*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1947, p. 33); or that Lenin could say that ‘Dialectics in the proper sense is the study of contradictions in *the very essence of things*’ (*Philosophical Notebooks, Collected Works*, Vol. 38, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1961, pp. 253-4; translation modified); or that Stalin could write, following Engels and Lenin, ‘the dialectical method ... regards the phenomena of nature as being in constant movement ...’ (*Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1941, pp. 4-5). This double aspect of the dialectic - *scientific method and structure of the real* — is at the heart of the definition of the laws of the dialectic given by Stalin in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*.

But, by way of this conception, we have come back round to *materialism*.

II. Materialism

Without a doubt, materialism is the aspect of Marxism that has elicited the sharpest criticisms (see, in particular, J.-P. Sartre’s essay in *Les Temps Modernes*, no.s 9-10 June-July 1946; ‘*Materialism and Revolution*’, in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, London, 1968, pp. 185-239).

Let us, first of all, try to avoid certain misconceptions.

Simply to mention the arguments of the ‘vulgar materialism’ denounced by Marx, which come down to denying the reality of thought, consciousness, and ideals, is to reject them. Marxist materialism refuses to assimilate thought to matter, and attributes a very important historical role to consciousness (see Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, ch. III, *in fine*, the letter to Conrad Schmidt [of 5 August 18901, etc.).

But let us take a moment to consider another argument. Materialism, it is said, is a ‘metaphysics of nature’ that reconstitutes the world by starting out from a material element regarded as an absolute substance (atom, body, matter). In short, it is an ‘Absolute Knowledge’ in which matter plays the role of the Hegelian idea. Marx and Engels criticise this conception, which they call ‘metaphysical materialism’. Lenin, for example, writes: ‘The recognition of immutable elements, of the immutable essence of things’, is not materialism, but *metaphysical*, i.e., anti-dialectical, materialism’ (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, p. 249). One of the essential features of dialectical materialism is precisely that it refutes all dogmatism grounded in ‘Absolute Knowledge’. Materialism radically rejects the idea that there can be any “immutability”, “essence”, [or] “absolute substance”, in the sense in which these concepts were depicted by the empty professorial philosophy’ (*ibid.*, p. 250). It is not for a metaphysics of nature to *deduce* the structure of reality; it is the role of the sciences to *discover* it. Thus only physics can determine and develop the *physical* notion of matter, with which the philosophical notion of matter must not be confused.

Accordingly, Marxist materialism does not have the same object science does. Its aim is not [*il ne répond pas il*] the discovery of the structure of reality. It responds, says Lenin, to *the fundamental ‘epistemological question’*: primacy of matter or mind? Primacy of existence or consciousness? The answer to this question — posed and debated in all the theories of classical philosophy that bear on the problem of knowledge — lies, for Marxism, in scientific practice itself. Defining the materialist standpoint’ in opposition to Hegel in *Ludwig Feuerbach* [Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, p. 6181, Engels shows ‘it means nothing more than’ the scientific analysis of the real world, of facts ‘conceived in their own and not in a fantastic interconnection’. Lenin, echoing Engels, tirelessly repeated that ‘the sciences are spontaneously materialist’ (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, passim*).

Here, as we have seen, the notion of practice comes into play. Indeed, we cannot consider scientific truths apart from scientific practice (itself the most abstract form of human practice in general), which is their basis. Only by articulating the implications of this practice can we propose a valid response to the ‘epistemological question’. For this practice constitutes, *in actual fact*, the origin and criterion of all truth. In *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin energetically addresses this theme, the subject of Marx’s famous second thesis on Feuerbach: ‘The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the “this-sidedness” of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question’ (Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* p. 28).

Thus this position, which is distinct from pragmatism, radically excludes all questions about the ‘possibility of knowledge’, i.e., all transcendental philosophies. Affirming that the fact of practice envelops all questions as to the legitimacy [*droit*] of knowledge, it rejects any *philosophical* reflection that purports to arrive at the truth, the truth of this fact included, by seeking a *de jure* foundation [*un fondement de droit*] for knowledge beyond this *fact*. At this level, rigorous reflection, in conformity with the truth it seeks to attain, can by itself do no more than articulate the reality of the practice that engenders truth.

The theses of materialism consequently do no more than articulate and consciously draw out the implications of the ‘spontaneous practice’ of the sciences, itself a particular instance of human *practice*. This practice involves confronting two terms joined in a profound unity: *the ideas (or the consciousness)* of scientists (of men) — *and external reality*. This confrontation entails recognition of the *primacy of external reality* over ideas or consciousness, which, in this practice, models itself on reality; and the recognition of the objectivity of the laws established, in this practice, by science. ‘The recognition of the priority of nature, not mind, is the distinguishing feature of materialism *par excellence*,’ says Lenin, who insists heavily on the ‘epistemological’ as opposed to the dogmatic aspect of that thesis: ‘One only has to formulate the question clearly to realise what sheer nonsense the Machists talk when they demand that the materialists give a definition of matter which would not amount to a repetition of the proposition that matter, nature, being the physical — is primary, and spirit, consciousness, sensation, the psychical — is secondary’ (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, pp. 133-4). Ruling out all dogmatic definitions of matter, Lenin repeatedly affirms that ‘the sole “property” of matter with whose definition philosophical materialism is bound up is the property of *being an objective reality*. . . .’ (*ibid.*, p. 248); ‘matter is a philosophical category denoting . . . objective reality’ (*ibid.*, p. 116). The basic significance of this ‘epistemological’, rather than dogmatic, conception of the primacy of existence over consciousness stands out even more clearly when Lenin underscores the ‘limits’ of this thesis: ‘Of course, even the antithesis of matter and mind has absolute significance only within the bounds of the fundamental epistemological question of what is to be regarded as primary and what as secondary. Beyond these bounds the relative character of this antithesis is indubitable’ (*ibid.*, p. 134).

Here, however, one might hesitate. Does Lenin’s emphasis on the ‘bounds of the epistemological question’ not justify a transcendental reflection à la Kant? More: is the analysis of what we have called the ‘implications of practice’ not reminiscent of an ‘analysis of essence’ of the Husserlian kind (an explanation of scientific ‘praxis’ as constitution; objectivity as an ‘intentional’ structure)? Undeniably, Husserl too contested the subjectivist, pragmatist, and empirio-critical interpretations of the great crisis of physics at the turn of the nineteenth century. Were not the struggle against dogmatism, the concern to provide a foundation for, and so save, the objectivity of the natural sciences, and the ‘description’ of scientific practice and its ‘claims’ among his major concerns? Manifestly, Husserl’s disciples could have found an echo of their doctrine in certain of Lenin’s formulations taken out of context.’

It is nonetheless clear that Lenin’s analysis is not an ‘analysis of essence’ which refers us to its ideal conditions of possibility, or even, from foundation to foundation, to an original intention. Practice, which, for Marxism, is the source and criterion of all truth, and ‘envelops’ the epistemological question, does not provide a *de jure* foundation for the materialist thesis in the idealist sense of the term. The *fact* of practice points back, not to an originary legitimation [*droit originnaire*], but to *its own real genesis*. It is here that materialism is radically counterposed to all transcendental philosophies. No-one, perhaps, has put this better than Engels, in connection with the problem of the definition of life: ‘From a scientific standpoint all definitions are of little value. In order to gain an exhaustive knowledge of what life is, we should have to go through all the forms in which it appears, from the lowest to the highest. . . .’ [*Anti-Dühring*, p. 1041]. The same holds for practice. It is not the immediacy of an act or structure, but *its own real genesis*. Inseparable from human practice (broadly conceived: social production, daily social practice, class struggle) in its contemporaneous forms, scientific practice, which is the most abstract refinement of practice, can be defined only in terms of its real evolution, that is, its history. That is why Lenin also declares that the answer to the *Fundamental epistemological question* ‘is simultaneously provided by human practice and by the history of knowledge’ (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, pp. 89, 122-4, 143, 147, 217, 239, etc.).

This history defines ‘the limits . . . revealed by practice’ with respect to the ‘objective truth we are capable of attaining’ (*ibid.*, p. 177). Mao Zedong, for example, shows (in ‘On Practice’) that the knowledge a given period is in a position to produce is always subject to the determinate forms of existing practice (*bound up, above all, with the existing social mode of production, i.e., with the dominant mode of the*

transformation of nature). But within these historical limits, the truths acquired through practice are absolute (there is no truth outside them). It is this dialectic of the historical conditions of knowledge which Lenin worked out in his frequently misunderstood theory of relative and absolute truth.

‘The “essence” of things’, writes Lenin, ‘or “substance” *is also* relative; it expresses only the degree of profundity of man’s knowledge of objects: and while yesterday the profundity of this knowledge did not go beyond the atom, and today does not go beyond the electron and ether, dialectical materialism insists on the temporary, relative, approximate character of all these *milestones* in the knowledge of nature gained by the progressing science of man. The electron is as *inexhaustible* as the atom, nature is infinite but it infinitely *exists* (Lenin’s emphasis) (*ibid.*, p. 250).

Whence the conception of knowledge, intertwined with practice, as the progressive ‘adaptation’ of men, in history, to an inexhaustible nature, itself caught up in a process of endless development (see *ibid.*, pp. 174, 175-7, 260-61).

The features of dialectical materialism are perhaps coming into sharper focus. The materialism that responds to the ‘epistemological question’ does not escape the metaphysical dogmatism it proscribes only to succumb to a new scientific dogmatism. The history of knowledge does not constitute, any more than the other sciences do, a new ‘Absolute Knowledge’. It does not contain the ‘absolute essence’ of current practice: it is the science of that practice, and, as such, is itself enveloped in a current practice and its development.

What form, then, does the relationship between *the sciences and the materialist theory of knowledge* take?

Let us, to begin with, make one point more precise. The materialist theory of knowledge is not the ‘science of sciences’, nor ‘a science over and above the others’ (Zhdanov). It is not a set of principles from which we can, by deduction, arrive at scientific findings capable of taking the place of the truths the sciences discover. This point radically distinguishes the materialist theory from the theories of knowledge of traditional philosophy. The theory of knowledge licensed Kant to deduce the laws of Newtonian physics (see *The Metaphysical Elements of Natural Science*), Hegel to deduce the scientific categories of mathematics, physics, biology, history, etc., Husserl to determine, *a priori*, the eidetic regions and the structure of the object of the sciences. The materialist theory of knowledge refuses to substitute itself for the sciences.

Nevertheless, if Marxists do not permit themselves to treat materialism as the ‘science of sciences’, they do say that ‘materialism is verified by the sciences’ (Engels, Lenin, Stalin). What does this statement mean? It must be understood in two senses: materialism is verified by the sciences and in the sciences. The sciences do not verify the materialist theory of knowledge as a set of propositions which they demonstrate, a body of laws they establish in their respective domains. The sciences verify the materialist theory *practically*, inasmuch as they only ever make progress, in the final analysis, by submitting to the authority of reality.

In a different sense, the sciences verify the materialist theory of knowledge *within their own domain*: 1) by showing that lower forms of life (for example, physical corpuscles) have no use for the determinations of higher forms (for example, freedom); 2) by showing, conversely, that the higher forms of life (biological existence, consciousness) come about through the development of their sustaining structures (physical and chemical conditions, biological and social conditions).

Thus the primacy of reality is verified at two different levels by the sciences and in the sciences. It is this double envelopment (*of the progress of the sciences in the principles of materialism, and of these principles themselves in the reality discovered by the sciences*) which makes it possible to understand the philosophical and scientific nature of materialism initially captured in this phrase of Stalin’s: materialism is a ‘scientific philosophical theory’ (*Dialectical and Historical Materialism*).

Thus understood, materialism stands in a fundamental relation to the sciences: reminding them of their true nature, it ensures their survival and progress. We will better grasp the import of this if we bear in mind that materialism implies:

1. *A rejection of all ‘idealist crotchets’* (Engels). This requirement not only entails the rejection of any concept that is not in strict conformity with, and limited to, its scientific content (the problem of the rigour of scientific concepts). It also implies a radical criticism of all idealist philosophies and of philosophy as such in its classical form: the critique of philosophy as pure ‘theory’ or pure ‘interpretation’ which ‘gives an account of’ reality in order not to have to *account to reality for itself*, and which is exempt from the obligation to submit to the criterion of practice and verification — the critique of the

philosopher as the man who rules over the words that, for him, take the place of the world, the fictitious demiurge of a pseudo-world. It is in this sense that Marx wrote: ‘One has to “leave philosophy aside” . . . one has to leap out of it and devote oneself like an ordinary man to the study of actuality. . . . Philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as onanism and sexual love’ (*The German Ideology*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1976, p. 236. On the subject of philosophy, see *ibid.*, pp. 28, 36, 37, 45, 54, 101, 145, 171, 196, 236, 250-52, 282, 293, 330, 449, 461).

2. *Criticism of all scientific dogmatism*, which drags along behind it, like its shadow, the idealist exploitation of science and its ‘crises’. The primacy of reality implies that a scientific theory does not exhaust reality, but remains always approximative (Lenin). Materialism reminds science and human practice of their own limits (not transcendental, but historical), and bars all ‘philosophical’ exploitation of concepts, problems, or scientific or social crises. At the turn of the twentieth century, the philosophers loudly announced the ‘divine surprise’ that the ‘atom had disappeared’. Materialism excludes this self-seeking flight into philosophy (or religion); it understands the crises of the sciences and history, not as a ‘divine victory’ of Spirit, but as a moment in the concrete development of the sciences and history.

3. *The rejection of all abstract formalism*. Materialism reminds every science of its real source: the world men transform. No science can, whether in its history or its object, grasp its own origins within itself or constitute itself as a closed world, exhaustively defined by internal rules. Materialism refers every science and every activity to the reality they depend on, even if this dependence is masked by a great many abstract mediations: mathematics as well as logic, aesthetics as well as ethics and politics.

To safeguard the endless development of the sciences, and, with it, all ‘living human practice’ (Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*), to preserve the sciences from all forms of dogmatism and idealism by reminding them of their fundamental reality — such is the aim of materialism:

You will say that this distinction between relative and absolute truth is indefinite. And I shall reply: it is sufficiently ‘indefinite’ to prevent science from becoming a dogma in the bad sense of the term, from becoming something dead, frozen, ossified; but at the same time it is sufficiently ‘definite’ to enable us to dissociate ourselves in the most emphatic and irrevocable manner from fideism and agnosticism, from philosophical idealism and the sophistry of the followers of Hume and Kant (*ibid.*, p. 123; see also p. 129).

We hope that these all too brief remarks, however insufficient, will give some idea of the characteristics of Marxism, of its rigour and fecundity. ‘A method for science’, ‘a guide to action’, and ‘a scientific and revolutionary theory’, Marxism articulates the most exacting demands of scientific activity and, simultaneously, the living bond that unites them to human history and practice. These are amongst the reasons for the prestige of a doctrine that today deserves better than to ‘be learned about by hearsay’: it merits attentive and meticulous study.

Further reading:

[Organisation of the Logic](#), Jean Hyppolite
[On Contradiction](#), Mao Zedong
[Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks](#)
[Dialectical and Historical Materialism](#), Stalin
[Althusser Internet Archive](#)

Written: 1953

Source: Louis Althusser, *Early Writings*, The Spectre of Hegel

Translated by: G M Goshgarian

Publisher: Verso, 1997

HTML Markup: [Andy Blunden](#)