

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM AND HISTORICAL SCIENCE

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DURING the years which have passed since the great October Socialist Revolution, Soviet historical science has had many successes. But among its achievements there is one of fundamental importance, an achievement of principle which to a very decisive degree has made possible all the others. That achievement is its mastering of the method of dialectical materialism. The history of the development of Soviet historical science is the history of the spread of the Marxist-Leninist or materialist conception of history, its victory over historical idealism and its survivals, and over every kind of distortion of Marxism and Leninism. It is with this fundamental question of the method of dialectical materialism in its application to the study of the historical process that I wish to deal in my lecture. My colleague Matkovsky will tell you of the concrete achievements of Soviet historical science, and particularly of the work being done on the history of Great Britain.

Materialist traditions in Russian historical science were already formed by the time of the October Revolution. First place in this heritage of the pre-October period is rightly held by the works of Lenin and Stalin.

Lenin's book, "The Development of Capitalism in Russia," may be considered a model of the application of the materialist method to the study of the economic history of a country. A considerable influence on the further development of historical thought in Russia was also exercised by Lenin's book, "Who are the 'Friends of the People' and How Do They Fight Against the Social Democrats?" This book in no small degree facilitated the understanding of social evolution as the natural history of the development of social and economic formations. No less important for historical science were the economic and philosophical works of Lenin, which powerfully stimulated the reception by our science of the materialist view of the phenomena of social development. Stalin's book, "Marxism and the National Question," by its analysis of the problem of the origin of nations and its characterization of the national movement and its historical significance, laid down the principles which cannot be ignored either by historians of Western Europe or by historians of Russia, or by those of the East. In spite of the existence of these materialist traditions, idealist and vulgar materialist views of history were still extremely influential in the first years after the October Revolution on nearly all sectors of the historical front. A struggle went on in the ideological sphere which reflected the struggle of classes in our country. In order fully to reveal all the new possibilities made available to Soviet historians when they mastered the scientific method of dialectical materialism, it was necessary to subject all these conceptions of history, inimical to its true scientific understanding, to a searching criticism. During these 30 years we have, in fact, put forth a tremendous critical effort which cleared the way for the victory of Marxism-Leninism in our historical science.

What is dialectical materialism? Stalin gives the most profound elaboration and clear exposition of its basic principles in his work, "Dialectical and Historical Materialism." He writes:—

"Dialectics does not regard nature as an accidental agglomeration of things, of phenomena unconnected with, isolated from, and independent of, one another, but as a connected and integral whole, in which things, phenomena, are organically connected with, dependent on, and determined by one another. . . . Dialectics holds that nature is not a state of rest and immobility, stagnation and immutability, but a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development, where something is always arising and developing and something is always disintegrating and dying away."

This movement, dialectical materialism teaches us, is not movement in a circle, a simple repetition of what has more than once occurred. "Nature," says Engels, ". . . does not move in an eternally uniform and constantly repeated circle, but passes through a real history." This movement should also not be conceived of as a simple accumulation of purely quantitative changes, of quantitative growth. In nature gradual quantitative changes lead to qualitative changes, which take place in the form of leaps from one state to another. Finally, dialectical materialism asserts that internal contradictions are inherent in the phenomena of nature, and therefore that the process of development takes place through the struggle of opposite tendencies conditioned by these contradictions.

The whole world presents itself from the dialectical point of view in the shape of a process conforming to law: it must be studied in continuous movement, change, transformation, and development,—in other words, historically. This process of coming into being and disappearance, of constant struggle between what is dying away and what is coming into existence takes place, according to dialectical materialism, outside and independently of our consciousness. It is an objective process taking place in the material world. Matter is an objective reality, it is primary; mind, which is a reflection of matter, is secondary. Matter is not the product of the spirit: the spirit is itself only the highest product of matter.

The fundamental principles of dialectical materialism, being applied to the life of society, for the first time put the study of society on a genuinely scientific basis, and provide research with the key to the scientific understanding of social phenomena. Dialectical materialism teaches us to examine all phenomena in their historical connection. Although social phenomena conform to their own specific laws, nevertheless the general laws of materialist dialectics also extend to the social life of men.

The scientific grasp of the phenomena of social life, just like those of nature, is possible only when they are regarded in their development and inter-connection. "If the world is in a state of constant movement and development, if the dying away of the old and the emergence of the new is a law of development, then it is clear that there can be no 'immutable' social systems, no 'eternal principles' . . . 'eternal ideas'." "Every social system and every social movement in history," writes Stalin, "must be evaluated not from the standpoint of 'eternal justice' or some other preconceived idea . . . but from the standpoint of the conditions which gave rise to that system or that social movement, and with which they are connected."

The process of social development, granted all the respects in which it differs from the processes taking place in nature, cannot be regarded nevertheless as an accidental jumble of events. It is a process which conforms to law. The task of historical science (or, in the narrow sense of the word, the science of the historical development of society) is to discover the specific laws which govern this development of society.

History, to use Lenin's expression, is a process of "natural history." Recognition of this has tremendous theoretical and practical importance. "If the connection between the phenomena of nature and their interdependence are laws of the development of nature," Stalin writes, "it follows too that the connection and interdependence of the phenomena of social life are also not something accidental, but laws of the development of society. Hence social life, the history of society, ceases to be an agglomeration of 'accidents,' and becomes the history of the development of society according to regular laws. The study of the history of society becomes a science."

We know already that for dialectical materialism matter represents objective reality, existing outside the mind and independent of the mind, that dialectical materialism regards mind as the product of matter, as the reflection of existence. From this also there follow conclusions of exceptional importance for historical science. Stalin formulates them as follows in his work "Dialectical and Historical Materialism":—

"If nature, being, the material world is primary, and mind, thought, is secondary, derivative if the material world represents objective reality existing independently of the mind of men while the mind is a reflection of this objective reality, it follows that the material life of society, its being, is also primary, and its spiritual life secondary, derivative, and that the material life of society is an objective reality existing independently of the will of men, while the spiritual life of society is a reflection of this objective reality, a reflection of being."

The task of historical science is constantly to discover the laws of the material existence of society and, basing itself on understanding the process of its material development, to explain its spiritual life, the ideas and political institutions dominant in society.

From the standpoint of dialectical materialism true science is objective science—i.e., science which truly reflects the objective world, and in the case with which we are concerned here, science which truly reflects the objective development of human societies. It is only such historical science that is needed by the working class, by Socialism, for it alone can provide a true orientation amidst the phenomena of social life. It was precisely because the historical teaching of Marx discovered the objective laws governing social development that Socialism was transformed from Utopia into science.

The objectiveness of genuine science is by no means identical with bourgeois "objectivism" which pretends to have risen above any definite country, any definite historical periods, or any definite classes—while in reality acting usually as an apologist for bourgeois reality. The objectiveness of Marxist historical science, far from contradicting partisanship, is, on the contrary, linked with it in dialectical unity. "Materialism," wrote Lenin, "includes in itself, so to speak, partisanship: it obliges one in every evaluation of an event frankly and openly to take one's stand on the viewpoint of a definite group of society." But as that social group is the foremost class of modern society, the working class, and as the objective historical process leads inevitably to the triumph of that class, the materialist, just because of his partisanship, is capable of a much more consistent objectiveness than the bourgeois "objectivist": "He applies his objectivism more deeply and more fully" (Lenin).

Dialectical materialism does more than pose before historical science the problem of discovering the objective laws governing the historical process. Making use of the method of dialectical materialism, Marx and Engels greatly aided the solution of that problem by discovering the fundamental laws of social development. Their teaching concerning the productive forces and their role in the historical process, their teaching concerning relations of production and social and economic formations, their teaching concerning the class struggle and the social revolution—all these great generalisations by Marx and

Engels, reposing upon colossal factual material accumulated by all the preceding development of human knowledge, are in their turn, in the hands of Marxist historians who know how to use them as a powerful instrument in further historical research.

The founders of the materialist conception of history anticipated the possibility of a distorted and incorrect application of their principles, and more than once uttered warnings against such an application. You probably know the observations on this question made by Marx in his letter to the Editor of "Otechestvennye Zapiski": they are printed in his "Select Correspondence." Here Marx insistently points out the necessity of studying the history of the development of every society in all its concreteness, and vigorously protests against the metamorphosis of the conclusions to which he had come in respect of the countries of Western Europe, "into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche generale*, imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself." For "events strikingly analogous, but taking place in different historic surroundings, led to totally different results." And Marx goes on to contrast this barren schematicism with the line of study which he considers fruitful: "By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them, one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon; but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory (explaining everything all at once because it explains nothing), the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical."

We find Engels, too, making a similar observation. "The materialist method turns into its own contradiction," writes Engels in his letter to Ernst, "when it is used not as a guiding thread in historical research, but as a ready-made pattern on which historical facts are cut out and re-made." Just as Marx in his letter to "Otechestvennye Zapiski" pointed out the necessity of studying the concrete facts of the economic life of Russia in order to understand the future of Russia, so Engels in his letter to Ernst underlines how impossible it is to form a correct judgment of Norwegian affairs without studying the concrete history of Norway. In another of his letters addressed to Schmidt, Engels characterises very harshly the people who do not understand the importance of studying historical concreteness. "The materialist conception of history now has a multitude of friends for whom it serves as an excuse for not studying history," he writes.

Lenin also paid great attention to the struggle against schematicism and abstractness in approaching the phenomena of social life, the struggle for "concreteness." Even in his early work, "What are the 'Friends of the People'?" he protested against barren *a priori* arguments, against philosophico-historical theories which replaced the study and analysis of real facts and burst like soap bubbles. In his article "Karl Marx," Lenin emphasised not only the unity of the historical process and its conformity to law, but also its multififormity and contradictoriness. Marxism provided the guiding thread enabling one to find one's way about the seeming labyrinth and chaos of phenomena: it provided important models of historiography. But this is far from signifying that the followers of Marx have no need to study concrete history. Lenin always condemned, in the sharpest possible way, any inclination to seek replies to concrete questions in the logical development of general truths instead of through concrete analysis. "Sociological" meditations of this kind represent, in his opinion, "the vulgarising of Marxism, and nothing but a mockery of dialectical materialism." The basic principle of dialectics, Lenin said, was "to examine concrete questions in all their concreteness." It is extremely significant that in 1914 Lenin had to return once again to the same theme of concreteness, when defending against Rosa Luxemburg the Bolshevik position on the question of the right of a nation to self-determination. "The uncon-

ditional demand of Marxist theory when discussing any social question whatsoever," he wrote, "is to put it in a *definite* historical framework and then, if it is a question of one particular country . . . to study the concrete peculiarities which distinguish this country from others within the limits of the same historical epoch."

History-writing before Marx, even in the age when it flourished most, could not create a firm basis of method for historical science. The historians of the first half of the nineteenth century posed the problem of conformity to law in history, but did not solve it. In recent decades historians have reached a considerable degree of perfection in the technique of historical research and have greatly expanded, thanks to the success of archæology, the chronological framework of history. But the bourgeois historians have almost completely renounced attempts to establish the general laws of historical development. In those cases where such attempts were made, they bore witness only to the impotence of historical thought which could not rise above eclecticism.

The historians who have remained outside the sphere of influence of dialectical materialism are more and more frankly drawing their skirts aside from the past of their science. Many of them zealously emphasize the impossibility of discovering objective laws of the historical process, or the impossibility of even applying the conception of objective law to that process. There is even a "theoretical" foundation for such an attitude set forth in the works of the representatives of the reactionary neo-Kantian philosophy, Windelband and Rickert. The historians infected with this philosophy are capable at best of providing some systematic exposition of the crude facts they have accumulated. The discovery of the laws governing historical development and the inner connection of phenomena is a task beyond their powers to perform. Those of them who nevertheless do attempt it appear unable to go beyond an eclectic synthesis of earlier and long out-dated theories.

By the side of the eclectics, the direct and frank supporters of idealist conceptions, there is in Western Europe and America a small group of historians, for the most part working in economic history, to whom materialist tendencies are not entirely alien. In this group, however, chief place is held by the simplified propositions of so-called "economic materialism," and there is lacking an understanding of the dialectical character of the historical process. The historians of this group, while producing valuable special research, prove unable to conceive of the inter-connection of the economic, political, and cultural phenomena in the life of society, unable to grasp the historical process as a whole.

Experience in the sphere of historical research during the last decades has convincingly demonstrated that the further development of historical science is impossible either on the basis of idealist philosophy or on that of vulgar "economic" materialism. Historical science, as one reflecting the objective historical process in all its concreteness, in all the peculiar variety of forms which it assumes in various human societies, and being at the same time a science which generalises and establishes the laws governing historical development, can be built only on the basis of dialectical materialism.

Of course, the recognition of this truth is not the exclusive privilege of the historians of our country. It is bound up not with national character, but with a definite class ideology—the leading class of our times—the proletariat. And we can record with satisfaction that in recent years the methodology of dialectical materialism has claimed more than a few victories among progressive historians of the West.

Only dialectical materialism provides a reliable guiding thread which allows us to find our way correctly in the seeming chaos of social phenomena and to foresee their further development. And foresight is the main task of social science.

Translated by ANDREW ROTHSTEIN.