

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

An Introductory Course

by

MAURICE CORNFORTH

Materialism and the Dialectical Method

1952

**LAWRENCE & WISHART LTD.
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FOREWORD

This book is based on a course of lectures delivered under the auspices of the London District Committee of the Communist Party in October-December 1950. I am grateful to the workers who attended those lectures both for the encouragement they gave me and for the numerous and searching questions which they asked, on the basis of which I have both corrected and expanded the material contained in the original lectures.

I must also acknowledge my debt to my wife, Kitty Cornforth, for her critical assistance in the revision of this book, and to members of the Science Group of the Communist Party for their help in numerous discussions.

The present volume deals with the basic ideas of Marxist materialism and the dialectical method. The second volume will deal with the further development of these ideas in their application to society and the growth of human consciousness — historical materialism and the theory of knowledge.

I have tried to confine myself to a straightforward exposition of the leading ideas of dialectical materialism, so far as I myself have succeeded in understanding them, without burdening the exposition with digressions into more technical questions of philosophy, or with discussions about and polemics against any of the more abstruse philosophical theories, past and present, or with much of the argumentation about particular points which might be necessary to defend them against philosophical opponents.

I have done my best to limit the use of technical terms to the minimum, and to give an explanation of the meaning of all such terms as and when they occur.

MAURICE CORNFORTH.

LONDON, *November* 1951.

In Memory of David Guest

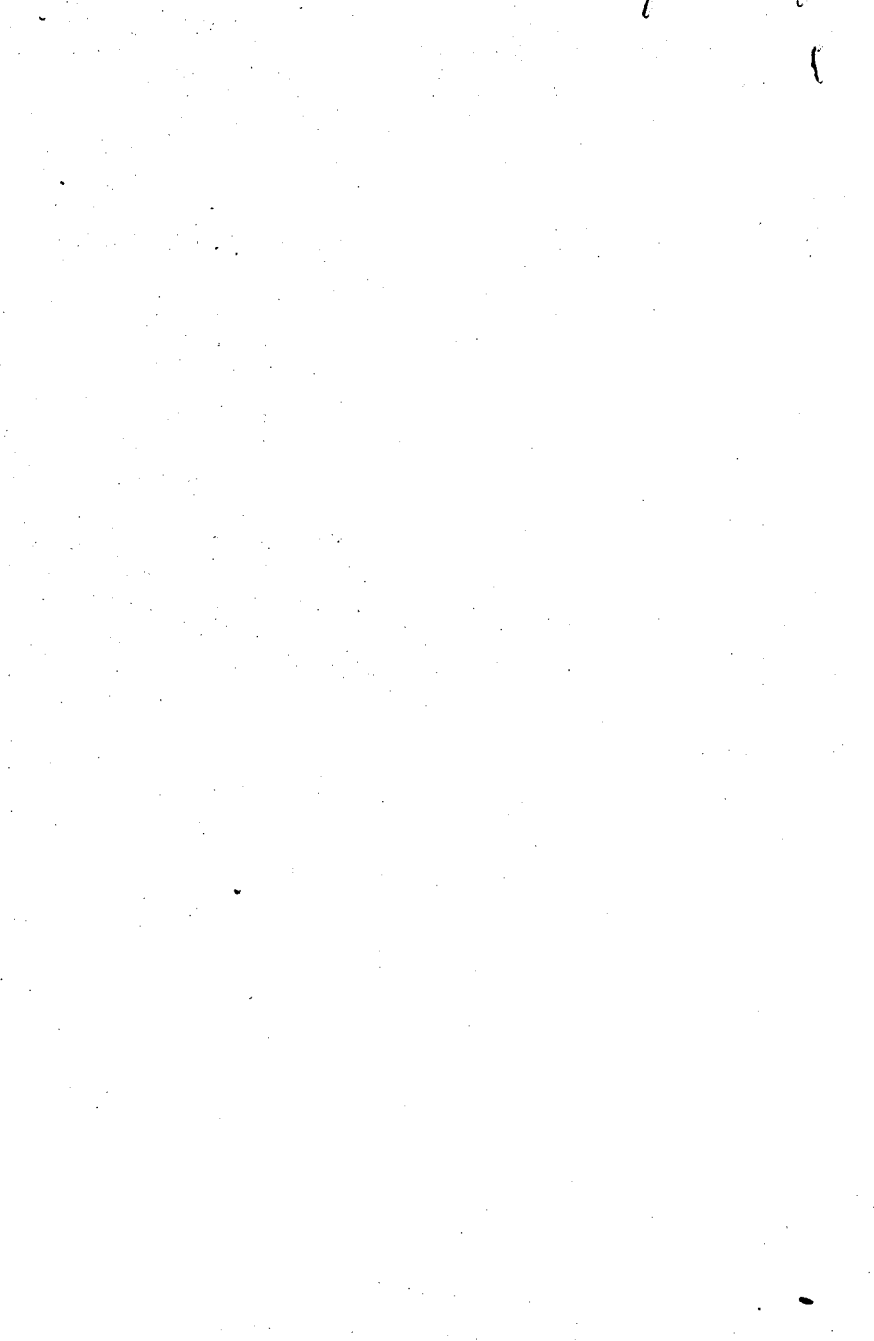
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PART ONE
MATERIALISM

Chapter One

PARTY PHILOSOPHY

Every philosophy expresses a class outlook. But in contrast to the exploiting classes, which have always sought to uphold and justify their class position by various disguises and falsifications, the working class, from its very class position and aims, is concerned to know and understand things just as they are, without disguise or falsification.

The party of the working class needs a philosophy which expresses a revolutionary class outlook. The alternative is to embrace ideas hostile to the working class and to socialism.

This determines the materialist character of our philosophy.

Party Philosophy and Class Philosophy

Dialectical materialism has been defined by Stalin as: "The world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist Party."¹

This definition must appear a strange one, both to many politicians and to many philosophers. But we will not begin to understand dialectical materialism unless we can grasp the thought which lies behind this definition.

Let us ask, first of all, what conception of philosophy lies behind the idea expressed in this definition of party or—since a party is always the political representative of a class—class philosophy.

By philosophy is usually meant our most general account of the nature of the world and of mankind's place and destiny in it—our world outlook.

That being understood, it is evident that everybody has some kind of philosophy, even though they have never learned to discuss it. Everybody is influenced by philosophical views, even though they have not thought them out for themselves and cannot formulate them.

Some people, for example, think that this world is nothing but "a vale of tears" and that our life in it is the preparation for a

¹ Stalin: *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*.

better life in another and better world. They accordingly believe that we should suffer whatever befalls us with fortitude, not struggling against it, but trying to do whatever good we can to our fellow creatures. This is one kind of philosophy, one kind of world outlook.

Other people think that the world is a place to grow rich in, and that each should look out for himself. This is another kind of philosophy.

But granted that our philosophy is our world outlook, the task arises of working out this world outlook systematically and in detail, turning it into a well-formulated and coherent theory, turning vaguely held popular beliefs and attitudes into more or less systematic doctrines. This is what the philosophers do.

By the time the philosophers have worked out their theories, they have often produced something very complicated, very abstract and very hard to understand. But even though only a comparatively few people may read and digest the actual productions of philosophers, these productions may and do have a very wide influence. For the fact that philosophers have systematised certain beliefs reinforces those beliefs, and helps to impose them upon wide masses of ordinary people. Hence, everyone is influenced in one way or another by philosophers, even though they have never read the works of those philosophers.

And if this is the case, then we cannot regard the systems of the philosophers as being wholly original, as being wholly the products of the brain-work of the individual philosophers. Of course, the formulation of views, the peculiar ways in which they are worked out and written down, is the work of the particular philosopher. But the views themselves, in their most general aspect, have a social basis in ideas which reflect the social activities and social relations of the time, and which, therefore, do not spring ready-made out of the heads of philosophers.

From this we may proceed a step further.

When society is divided into classes—and society always has been divided into classes ever since the dissolution of the primitive communes, that is to say, throughout the entire historical period to which the history of philosophy belongs—then the

various views which are current in society always express the outlooks of various classes. We may conclude, therefore, that the various systems of the philosophers also always express a class outlook. They are, in fact, nothing but the systematic working out and theoretical formulation of a class outlook, or, if you prefer, of the ideology of definite classes.

Philosophy is and always has been class philosophy. Philosophers may pretend it is not, but that does not alter the fact.

For people do not and cannot think in isolation from society, and therefore from the class interests and class struggles which pervade society, any more than they can live and act in such isolation. A philosophy is a world outlook, an attempt to understand the world, mankind and man's place in the world. Such an outlook cannot be anything but the outlook of a class, and the philosopher functions as the thinking representative of a class. How can it be otherwise? Philosophies are not imported from some other planet, but are produced here on earth, by people involved, whether they like it or not, in existing class relations and class struggles. Therefore, whatever philosophers say about themselves, there is no philosophy which does not embody a class outlook, or which is impartial, as opposed to partisan, in relation to class struggles. Search as we may, we shall not find any impartial, non-partisan, non-class philosophy.

Bearing this in mind, then, we shall find that the philosophies of the past have all, in one way or another, expressed the outlook of the so-called "educated" classes, that is to say, of the exploiting classes. In general, it is the leaders of society who express and propagate their ideas in the form of systematic philosophies. And up to the appearance of the modern working class, which is the peculiar product of capitalism, these leaders have always been the exploiting classes. It is their outlook which has dominated philosophy, just as they have dominated society.

We can only conclude from this that the working class, if today it intends to take over leadership of society, needs to express its own class outlook in philosophical form, and to oppose this philosophy to the philosophies which express the outlook and defend the interests of the exploiters.

"The services rendered by Marx and Engels to the working class may be expressed in a few words thus: they taught the working class to know itself and be conscious of itself, and they substituted science for dreams", wrote Lenin.¹

"It is the great and historic merit of Marx and Engels that they proved by scientific analysis the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism and its transition to communism, under which there will be no more exploitation of man by man . . . that they indicated to the proletarians of all countries their rôle, their task, their mission, namely, to be the first to rally around themselves in this struggle all the toilers and exploited."²

Teaching the working class "to know itself and be conscious of itself", and to rally around itself "all the toilers and exploited", Marx and Engels founded and established the revolutionary theory of working-class struggle, which illumines the road by which the working class can throw off capitalist exploitation, can take the leadership of all the masses of the people, and so free the whole of society once and for all of all oppression and exploitation of man by man.

Marx and Engels wrote in the period when capitalism was still in the ascendant and when the forces of the working class were first being rallied and organised. Their theory was further continued by Lenin, in the period when capitalism had reached its final stage of monopoly capitalism or imperialism, and when the proletarian socialist revolution had begun. It is being further continued by Stalin.

Marx and Engels taught that without its own party, the working class certainly could not win victory over capitalism, could not lead the whole of society forward to the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialism. The working class must have its own party, independent of all bourgeois parties. Further developing the Marxist teachings about the party, Lenin showed that the party must act as the vanguard of its class, the most conscious section of its class, and that it is the instrument for winning and wielding political power.

¹ Lenin: *Frederick Engels*.

² Lenin: *Speech at Unveiling of Memorial to Marx and Engels*.

To fulfil such a rôle, the party must evidently have knowledge, understanding and vision; in other words, it must be equipped with revolutionary theory, on which its policies are based and by which its activities are guided.

This theory is the theory of Marxism-Leninism. And it is not just an economic theory, nor yet exclusively a political theory, but a world outlook—a philosophy. Economic and political views are not and never can be independent of a general world outlook. Specific economic and political views express the world outlook of those who hold such views, and conversely, philosophical views find expression in views on economics and politics.

Recognising all this, the revolutionary party of the working class cannot but formulate, and having formulated, hold fast to, develop and treasure, its party philosophy. In this philosophy—dialectical materialism—are embodied the general ideas by means of which the party understands the world which it is seeking to change and in terms of which it defines its aims and works out how to fight for them. In this philosophy are embodied the general ideas by means of which the party seeks to enlighten and organise the whole class, and to influence, guide and win over all the masses of working people, showing the conclusions which must be drawn from each stage of the struggle, helping people to learn from their own experience how to go forward towards socialism.

And so we see why it is that in our times a philosophy has arisen which expresses the revolutionary world outlook of the working class, and that this philosophy—dialectical materialism—is defined as “the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist Party”.

Experience itself has taught the party the need for philosophy. For experience shows that if we do not have our own revolutionary socialist philosophy, then inevitably we borrow our ideas from hostile, anti-socialist sources. If we do not adopt today the outlook of the working class and of the struggle for socialism, then we adopt—or slip into, without meaning to do so—that of the capitalists and of the struggle against socialism. This is why the working class party—if it is to be the genuine revolutionary

leadership of its class, and is not to mislead its class by the importation of hostile capitalist ideas, and of policies corresponding to such ideas—must be concerned to formulate, defend and propagate its own revolutionary philosophy.

Class Philosophy and Truth

Against what has just been said about a class and party philosophy, the objection is bound to be raised that such a conception is a complete travesty of the whole idea of philosophy.

Class interests may incline us to believe one thing rather than another, some will say, but should not philosophy be above this? Should not philosophy be objective and impartial, and teach us to set class and party interests aside, and to seek only for the truth? For surely what is true is true, whether this suits some or other class interests or not? If philosophy is partisan—party philosophy—how can it be objective, how can it be true philosophy?

In reply to such objections, we may say that the working class standpoint in philosophy is very far indeed from having no concern for truth.

Is there no such thing as truth? Of course there is—and men are getting nearer to it. For different outlooks, partisan as they may be, are not on a level so far as nearness to truth is concerned. Every philosophy embodies a class outlook. Yes, but just as one class differs from another class in its social rôle and in its contribution to the development of society, so one philosophy embodies positive achievements in comparison with another in the working out of the truth about the world and society.

People are prone to believe that if we adopt a partisan, class standpoint, then we turn our backs on truth; and that, on the other hand, if we genuinely seek for truth, then we must be strictly impartial and non-partisan. But the contrary is the case. It is only when we adopt the partisan standpoint of historically the most progressive class that we are able to get nearer to truth.

The definition of dialectical materialism, therefore, as the philosophy of the revolutionary working-class party, is in no way incompatible with the claim of dialectical materialism to