

LENIN AND REFLECTION

In previous columns we discussed Lenin’s defense of materialism in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, a book that later became a fundamental source for Marxist philosophy in the USSR. Although the book’s case against idealism is a good one, its explanation of how people learn from experience is fundamentally flawed. In this column we explain this flaw and discuss its importance for communist politics.

The Theory of Reflection

Marx and Engels often used the term “reflection” to express the important materialist idea that reality is the source of our ideas. As Engels put it, “All ideas are taken from experience, are reflections—true or distorted—of reality.”

Ideas that reflect reality don’t have to be true, however, but can be completely wrong. Engels wrote that “All religion . . . is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the earthly forces assume the form of supernatural forces.” The fact that forces are reflected in some people’s minds as supernatural forces does not mean that the supernatural actually exists. Illusions promoted by capitalist propaganda reflect the reality of capitalist domination, but that doesn’t make them true.

Lenin’s Copy Theory of Reflection

In Lenin’s version of reflection, knowing is copying reality, and our “perceptions and ideas” are “images” of reality. “Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality,” he wrote, “which is given to man by his sensations, and which is copied, photographed and reflected by our sensations. . . .” It isn’t just sensations that copy reality, but theories: “The recognition of theory as a copy, as an approximate copy of objective reality, is materialism.”

Lenin’s “images,” “copying” or “photographing” metaphors express the true idea that sense perception and theorizing can provide true or approximately true information about reality. Talking about copying or photographing suggests, however, that coming to know is a straightforward or automatic process, which certainly isn’t true. Some ideas and even some sense perceptions are not like copies at all. The smell of a rotten fish warns us not to eat it, but the smell is not a copy or an image of the fish or the chemicals that cause the smell. Knowing something about reality isn’t necessarily copying it.

Lenin’s copy theory leaves out two critical aspects of knowing: (1) the practical and mental activity of the knower and (2) the dialectic of theory and practice.

Activity of the Knower

Whether an individual or group of people can learn from experience depends on what they already believe and what they actually do. False beliefs, racism, superstition, dishonesty, laziness, arrogance and other defects inside a person can prevent people from knowing by keeping them from gathering the right experiences or drawing the right conclusions from them. (How many leftists have drawn the correct conclusion from the evidence that socialism cannot lead to communism?).

Learning from experience is not very much like copying or photographing. Even seeing correctly requires action, paying attention and getting into the right position to see, like a soccer referee. Fixing an old theory or thinking up a new one is not copying, either.

The Dialectic of Theory and Practice

Lenin understood that success or failure in practice tells us whether our ideas are true or not.

He wrote: “Things exist outside us. Our perceptions and ideas are their images. Verification of these images, differentiation between true and false images, is given by practice.”

What is missing here is the role of practice in allowing us to find true theories and the role of theory in guiding our practice. Better practice makes possible better theories, which make possible even more successful practice. This dialectical process is not copying reality, it is interacting with it. Knowing is a two-way process in which people change the world to understand it and understand it to change it. Lenin’s book focused only on the effect that nature and society have on the knower, which is a mechanical materialist approach, not dialectics.

Later Developments

Many of the points made here were recognized by later Soviet philosophy, which developed a better theory of reflection that included the activity of the knower. Lenin also brought dialectics into his later philosophical ideas. In China, Mao Zedong explained the dialectics of theory and practice.

Soviet philosophy textbooks never faced up to the errors of Lenin’s book, however, since they wanted to portray him as a great genius who was right about everything. In China’s Cultural Revolution, Lenin’s book became the bible of pro-capitalist philosophers. It was useful to them because if knowledge had to copy reality, then we couldn’t know about communism since communist reality doesn’t exist yet.

We can know about communism, however, not by copying, but by combining the theoretical and practical knowledge gained in past revolutions and putting it in hands of the working class.

Next time: Lenin’s later philosophy.