

THINKING AND REALITY

In previous columns we have outlined some of the main ideas of dialectics. (These columns can be found on the ICWP website: <http://icwpredflag.org>) But the communist philosophy is not only dialectical, it is materialistic. This column begins a series which will discuss materialism.

To avoid confusion, it is useful to remember that the word “materialism” gets used in more than one way. Some people describe a person who is greedy and selfish as “materialistic,” since his aim in life is to have more material goods. This is not what materialism means in philosophy.

Probably the most basic topic in philosophy is the relation between thinking and reality. The two most basic views about this question are called materialism and idealism. Materialism says that every thing that exists is something material or a property of something material. Material things include atoms, living cells, plants and animals, human beings, human societies and economic systems, galaxies, and the whole universe.

Most of these material things have properties like weight, color, and size, but things that are more complex have more complex properties. Plants can produce sugar, and animals can produce offspring. Human beings can work, talk and think, and struggle toward goals they choose. Economic systems can produce wealth and poverty. All of these are material properties.

Materialism says that thought can only occur in a brain. A brain is a certain kind of material object that

is subject to specific laws of nature. Although some thinking goes on in animal brains, the only brains that can think at the highest level are human brains. Some kinds of idealism say otherwise, and claim that there are non-material, supernatural beings that can think, like gods or ghosts. This kind of idealism does not see humans as the makers of human history, but as ruled by supernatural forces that humans can hope to influence through prayer and religious observances. All scientific evidence contradicts this, but idealism is not a scientific point of view.

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Materialism says that all thoughts take place in brains. But brains don’t think very well all by themselves. Thinking requires interacting with the world through practical activity and with other people through social relationships. When people learn a common language, they learn many concepts, which are building blocks for their own thinking.

Materialism says that what people think depends on the world around them, which they perceive, think about, work on, and learn from. But most of that world does not depend on what anyone thinks about it. The facts that the sky is blue and that capitalists exploit workers do not depend on individual or collective belief that this is so. Thinking does not create reality and most of reality is not directly affected by

thought. Human thinking can affect reality only indirectly, as part of the goals and plans that are parts of all human labor, including their political struggles.

Idealists sometimes say that thought is a special kind of stuff, completely different from matter and not depending on material reality. They say that certain kinds of thought, which express ideals or moral values, are non-material aspects of the universe that can affect society through their supposed “spiritual power.” Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, who opposed militant struggle against racism, claimed there was a “soul force” that could overcome physical force. Materialists deny this. Racism exists because it serves the material interests of capitalists, and it can only be eliminated by eliminating the capitalist class and establishing communism.

This does not mean that fighting racist ideas is not important. Struggle against all kinds of wrong ideas and lies is a crucial part of fighting for communism. As Marx wrote, “material force must be overthrown by material force, but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.” Thought is a material property of material systems, that is, brains. Ideals are goals that humans choose, and values are created by human brains to express the interests of some social class or group. Once the working class decides to fight for communism and learns how to do it, the force of millions of people can defeat capitalism and keep it from coming back.