

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Lenin, *What Is To Be Done*

DIALECTICS AND POLITICS GO HAND IN HAND

In our last column on the history of dialectics, we gave credit to Russian communist G. Plekhanov for his struggle to defend dialectics and materialism. We noted that Plekhanov made major errors in philosophy that reinforced his increasingly reactionary politics. To understand his errors we need to look back to an old form of materialism, before dialectical materialism was developed.

Mechanical versus Dialectical Materialism

In the 17th and 18th centuries, successful developments in the science of mechanics became the model for the philosophy called “mechanical materialism.” Mechanical materialism says that things only change because of external causes that act on them. Some 18th century philosophers applied this idea to human societies. D’Holbach claimed that people’s choices are determined by causes outside of them and Montesquieu claimed that climate and soil largely determine the structure of societies.

Dialectics rejects the idea that all change in things is caused from the outside. Instead, the internal structure and internal contradictions of a system or process are the main causes of how it changes. External factors have an influence, but the changes that actually result from them depend on internal factors.

A key example of this dialectical idea is expressed in the Communist Manifesto: the history of class societies is the history of class struggle. The social relations between classes determine whether or how external influences result in social changes. The kinds of changes that result from natural resources, climate change or drought will be very different in communist society than

under capitalism. Under capitalism, money, profits and capitalist rivalries stand in the way of the best response to external conditions, obstacles that won’t exist under communism.

Plekhanov and Mechanical Materialism

Despite his defense of dialectics as a general theory, Plekhanov’s analysis of the development of capitalism was essentially a mechanical materialist one. He claimed that “the properties of the geographical environment determine the development of the productive forces” of society, and that these productive forces determine “all other social relations.”

The productive forces of society are the people, tools, resources and knowledge that make production possible. Plekhanov’s claim that the “geographic environment” determines these forces is pure mechanical materialism, determination by forces outside society. This is not just bad dialectics; it is a wrong historical explanation. For example, in the last 20 centuries Europe has passed through slavery, feudalism, the rise of capitalism and capitalism’s development into imperialism, with a huge increase in the forces of production. The geographic environment of Europe was similar to other places on the Earth that have had very different development of the forces of production. Europe developed differently because of factors, such as the relative weakness of feudalism, internal to society, not geography.

The second part of Plekhanov’s theory is that the level of productive forces determines a society’s social relations. Marx and Engels saw forces of production and social relations of production—class relations—as influencing each other,

but Plekhanov claimed that the forces of production play the dominant role in social development. This error played a major role in the development of anti-revolutionary politics in Russia and later in the world communist movement.

Plekhanov argued that since Russia’s forces of production were relatively backward, communist revolution had to be put off for a long time. He supported the development of capitalism in Russia and attacked Lenin and the Bolsheviks for their support of the 1905 revolution. Later Plekhanov supported tsarist Russia in its imperialist war with Germany in World War I.

Plekhanov’s errors were not merely philosophical, and the claim that productive forces determine social relations is not merely bad dialectics. We should not expect philosophical criticism to substitute for the scientific evaluation of actual social practice. Social practice in the Russian revolution gives a clear example that the forces of production do not determine everything. Although the socialist revolution in Russia actually produced a form of capitalism, it changed the social relations of production enough to produce a huge increase in the forces of production. The rapid industrialization in the first decades after the revolution made it possible for the USSR to survive and be the main force in the defeat of Nazism in World War II. The social relations produced by the mass mobilization for communism will give the working class even greater power to determine society’s forces of production, without the restrictions on production and planning that money and wages always impose.