

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

LENIN’S FIGHT FOR OBJECTIVE TRUTH

After the failure of the 1905 revolution in Russia, many communists were killed or sent to Siberia, or went abroad. Activist workers were black-listed by factory owners. Demoralized, some communists argued that the party should be abolished. Some Bolshevik intellectuals advocated a philosophy that rejected materialism, promoted a new religion, and attacked dialectics. Plekhanov and other reformists correctly criticized these Bolshevik philosophers.

Lenin recognized that the philosophy these guys advocated would do serious harm to the communist movement. By March 1908 he was hard at work on a book attacking it: *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. This book was a fundamental text for the later development of communist philosophy. In this column we describe the idealist views that Lenin was attacking. In our next two columns we will describe the arguments of Lenin’s book and discuss some of its shortcomings.

Subjective Idealism

The wrong position that these Bolshevik philosophers were defending is usually called subjective idealism, which says that the only things that exist are minds and the sensations or ideas in those minds. Subjective idealism says there is no world outside of individual minds, and what we call rocks, people, classes or mountains are just “complexes of sensations.” Crazy as it is,

this has been a popular variety of capitalist philosophy during several periods in the last 300 years. The version of subjective idealism that these Bolshevik philosophers advocated was called “neutral monism,” developed in Germany, England and the U. S.

“Neutral Monism”

The distinctive feature of neutral monism is that rather than saying that everything is made up of sensations and ideas, it says that everything is composed of “elements.” An element was supposed to be something that is neither mental nor physical, but neutral between the two. The neutral monists claimed that they were neither idealists nor materialists, but had overcome the contradiction between these two positions.

The obvious question is “What is an element?” A little digging shows that for the neutralists, “element” is just another name for sensation. As leading neutralist Ernst Mach put it, “colors, sounds, pressures, spaces, times (what we usually call sensations) are the real elements of the world” and physical things are just “symbols” for relatively stable “complexes of sensations.”

Materialism vs. Neutral Monism

The neutral monists rejected the materialist idea of a real world beyond our sensations and tried to come up with a way to explain how objective knowledge is possible. Bolshevik neutralist Alexander Bogdanov, who was the main target

of Lenin’s book, denied that there is any reality underlying our experience. Objectivity, he claimed, does not mean that our thinking corresponds to reality, as materialism says. It just means that people’s experiences are “socially organized” and “harmonize” with each other. He saw truth as just a matter of consistency and agreement.

It is probably impossible to find anything that everyone agrees on, but it is easy to find completely false beliefs that have been accepted by nearly everyone at some time or other. It has never been true that the earth is flat, that God exists or women are inferior to men, but there has been “socially organized” agreement on these. Since not everyone reads *Red Flag* yet, there are also lots of really important truths that are not yet believed by most people.

Objective Truth and Communism

It is easy to see why Lenin took time out from working on the party newspaper to refute this trash. Truths aren’t necessarily “socially harmonized” beliefs. Contradictions in beliefs are always present, and drive people to revise their thinking. We can’t win the fight for communism if we don’t understand that there are objective truths with profound consequences but that aren’t accepted by most people—yet.

Next article: *Lenin refutes neutral monism*