

SUMMING UP LENIN'S IDEAS ON DIALECTICS

This column finishes our discussion of Lenin's contributions to dialectical materialism.

The "Law of Uneven Development"

Previously we discussed Lenin's view that dialectics means that change happens by revolutions and breaks in continuity, rather than only by smooth and gradual increase and decrease. Lenin made an important application of this idea in his argument that imperialist powers cannot divide up the world without wars. The economic and military strength of the powers taking part in the division "does not change to an equal degree, for the even development of different undertakings, trusts, branches of industry, or countries is impossible under capitalism. ... Is it conceivable that in ten or twenty years' time the relative strength of the imperialist powers will have remained unchanged? It is out of the question."

Deals that imperialists make about who gets to exploit what labor or resources always break down, because some powers are getting stronger and demand more while some are becoming relatively weaker, but refuse to give up what they control. In the 20th century, Japan, Germany and the US were rising powers, challenging the old empires. Now China is a rising power, challenging the US, in line with the dialectics of imperialist rivalry.

Universal Connection

From his study of Hegel, Lenin put a big emphasis on the idea the "all-sidedness and all-embracing character interconnection of the world." Every actual thing or process has complex connections with many different things and processes

in the world. A full understanding of anything, therefore, requires that all these connections be explored, a process that can never be fully completed.

Lenin took an ordinary drinking glass as an example of the many aspects of a thing. The glass is a cylinder, but it "can be used as a missile; it can serve as a paper weight, a receptacle for a captive butterfly, or a valuable object with an artistic engraving or design, and this has nothing at all to do with whether or not it can be used for drinking, is made of glass, is cylindrical," etc.

Which aspect of the glass is important to us depends on our needs and interests. Someone who wants to get a drink of water doesn't care what color the glass is, but does care whether it has any holes in it. "A full 'definition' of an object," however, "must include the whole of human experience, both as a criterion of truth and a practical indicator of its connection with human wants."

Lenin's Understanding of Idealism

Leaving out important aspects of something or giving too much importance to other aspects is a mistaken way of understanding something that called "one-sidedness." Lenin argued that we should consider idealism to be one-sided, rather than just stupidity or ignorance, as the old, pre-dialectical materialism had seen it.

Lenin concluded that Hegel's "thought of the ideal passing into the real is profound, ... it is clear that this contains much truth." The old, mechanical materialism saw ideas not as causes but only as effects of what is real, and denied that ideas can have results in the world. Lenin saw

that ideas can become real if they motivate people to create something new, a concept central to the fight for communism. The error of idealism was its failure to connect the process of realizing ideas with matter and nature. "Intelligent [i.e., dialectical] idealism," he wrote, "is closer to intelligent [dialectical] materialism than stupid [dead, crude, rigid] materialism."

Dialectic Logic and Practice

Lenin's notes show his materialist reinterpretation of Hegel's ideas about practice, that is, purposeful human action. The path for learning the truth is "from living perception to abstract thought, and from this to practice." Even the principles of dialectics have been extracted from billions of repetitions of practical actions and then "serve people in practice."

Lenin's Influence on Dialectics

Lenin's leadership and his own study and writing about dialectics had a profound influence on philosophy in the international communist movement. Lenin insisted that the party organize study of Hegel, but also of Plekhanov. The Bolsheviks decisively rejected the reformist, anti-dialectical philosophy that had been dominant in European socialism prior to the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. Unfortunately it took long struggles until the early 1930s for the main ideas of dialectics to be formulated and adopted in the USSR, formulations which were subject to decisive weaknesses, as we will see.

Next column: The politics of mechanical materialism in the USSR