

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

MORE ON MECHANIST PHILOSOPHY IN THE USSR

In our last column, we began to look into “mechanism” (or “mechanical materialism”), an influential trend in capitalist philosophy for a long time. We saw how the Soviet mechanists’ claim that the sides of a contradiction don’t need to be connected led to completely wrong ideas about imperialist rivalries. The mechanist idea of taking the science of mechanics as a model for all change had far worse results than that, however.

Rejecting Qualitative Change

Typically, mechanists saw mechanics as a science that studies only quantities, that is, things that can be measured with numbers. Since they thought that mechanics is the most basic science, they often concluded that qualities and qualitative changes are not real. Despite the fact that qualitative changes, like boiling water to make steam, are studied in other parts of physics, some Soviet mechanists argued that qualitative change was not an objective scientific fact, but depends on an observer’s point of view.

They claimed that having or not having a certain quality depends on which properties people single out because of their own interests. Thus they rejected the dialectical law of the transformation of quantity into quality. Other mechanists rejected this law because they claimed (falsely) that mechanics has a “law of continuity,” so a sudden qualitative change—like a revolution—is not a real phenomenon.

Fantasies of Equilibrium

Another typical mechanist view was borrowed from thermodynamics, the physical theory of heat transfer. It is a law of thermodynamics that an isolated system, that is, one that does not exchange matter or energy with its surroundings, will tend toward a steady state called “equilibrium.” A system in equilibrium has no tendency to change unless affected by some external cause.

Mechanists treated this tendency to equilibrium as if it applied to all systems, not just isolated ones. They claimed that people and societies always move toward equilibrium unless disturbed from the outside. This means that internal causes, and class struggle in particular, are not the causes of historical change. Mechanists saw social conflicts as tending to die out on their own and reach equilibrium. This is the opposite of Marxism.

The mechanist claim that societies strive toward equilibrium was actually based on completely bogus physics. Physics does not require that non-isolated systems move toward equilibrium. In fact, a human being who is not exchanging matter and energy with his or her surroundings must be dead! A society isolated from sources of matter and energy is impossible. This whole argument was pseudo-science.

Bad Dialectics Matters

The wrong idea that every system tends toward equilibrium really mattered in the debates in the USSR in the 1920s over creating a collective agriculture. At that time almost all food was pro-

duced by peasants. The food supplied to city workers was largely controlled by rural capitalists called “kulaks” (“fists”), who were hostile to the Soviet government. In line with his mechanist ideas, Nicolai Bukharin, an important political leader at the time, viewed the conflict with the kulaks as gradually dying out. He advocated being nice to the kulaks by producing more consumer goods that would encourage them to produce more grain.

Stalin had the opposite view. He eventually recognized that the class struggle with the kulaks would not die out gradually, but would become more intense. This became obvious when the kulaks withheld grain from the cities in 1928 and workers had to be sent to the countryside to take it. The kulaks were exploiters who would resist their class being eliminated and “the resistance of the exploiters cannot but lead to the inevitable sharpening of the class struggle,” as Stalin said.

This conclusion was right in line with dialectics. As long as classes exist, contradictions between classes (and most other contradictions, too) tend to become more intense and can only be resolved that way. The mechanist ideas that qualitative change is not objective, that conflicts tend to die out on their own, or, as we discussed in the previous column, that the opposite sides of a contradiction tend to cancel out, all lead to wrong conclusions and harm the fight for communism.

Next column: The mechanists’ opponents in Soviet philosophy.