

Soviet Russia in the 1920s:

REDISCOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

It was not easy to learn dialectical materialism in the USSR in the 1920s. There were two reasons for this. One was the lack of good study materials. There were very few books that gave simple, correct explanations of what dialectical materialism is and how it can be used in the fight for communism.

The second reason was that much of the writing on dialectical materialism was done by revisionists, especially by so-called Mensheviks. These people still had the old social-democratic politics and a wrong philosophy to go along with it. Some advocated the anti-dialectical mechanist philosophy discussed in previous columns, a view supported by some Soviet leaders. Others advocated dialectics, but their version of it was much more about harmony than Lenin’s dialectics of revolution.

These two weaknesses of Soviet philosophy are closely connected. Since the Bolshevik party lacked a well-developed party position on the main issues of dialectical materialism, they were not in a position to teach it to the masses. This situation only improved after a ten-year struggle, ending about 1932. This column will give a sketch of that struggle.

New Sources

One important weapon in the fight for dialectical materialism was the Soviet publication of previously unknown works by Marx, Engels and Lenin. Marx’s early critique of Hegel’s dialectics,

Engels book on the dialectics of nature, and Lenin’s notes on his study of Hegel were all published in the 1920s. These works were very important for rediscovering what was already known about dialectical materialism, and supporting those fighting for a good line.

The Fight Against Mechanism

The anti-dialectical mechanist philosophy had considerable support among natural scientists and was used in the party’s campaigns against religion. The main struggle against this philosophy was fought by students of the ex-Menshevik Avram Deborin, a follower of Plekhanov. The Deborinites conducted a long campaign against mechanism in books, conferences and academic journals. After a vote at a big conference in 1929, mechanism was declared defeated and condemned by the party leadership.

The Deborinites’ criticism of mechanism was valuable, but their own philosophy had serious faults. Soon some communist philosophy students who had recently graduated from the party’s Institute of Red Professors began to attack Deborinite philosophy and Stalin encouraged them to keep it up. The Deborinites were criticized for a number of things, including: (1) that they hadn’t absorbed Lenin’s advances over the old social-democratic philosophy, (2) that their philosophy was completely removed from the party’s practical work, its political struggles and campaign of economic construction, and (3) they did not see their job as

developing and defending a party-wide position in philosophy.

Unlike Marx, Deborin claimed that Hegel had been essentially right about dialectics, saying that “in general the Hegelian construction must be considered correct also from the materialist point of view.” He endorsed the idea that when a contradiction is resolved, the two sides form a higher unity where “they do not conflict.” Marx’s revolutionary idea that the two sides of a contradiction “fight to a decision” and one defeats the other was dismissed by the Deborinites when it was first published in 1927.

Overcoming the Deborinites

After extensive debate the Deborinites were removed from their assignments in 1931. The students who had started the campaign against them were given the responsibility of developing improved formulations of dialectical materialism and creating new textbooks for wide use. Two textbooks were written, one by a group in Moscow and the other in Leningrad. These books were eventually translated into other languages and established what we still take to be the basic contents of dialectics. Both texts were translated into Chinese and studied extensively in China, strongly influencing Mao Zedong’s writings on philosophy.

These texts were a big step forward, but Soviet philosophy in the 1930s also had serious shortcomings. We will discuss some of them in our next column.