

A Charlatan Exposed

A Reply to Chapter One of *G Healy's Studies in Dialectical Materialism*,
'Subjective Idealism Today'

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Foreword

WE ARE PUBLISHING for the first time the full text of David Bruce's critique of the bastardization of dialectics that Gerry Healy foisted on the International Committee (IC) in the 1970s and 1980s. Bruce had joined what was then the Socialist Labour League in the late 1960s and, soon after, the staff of its printshop where he worked continuously until the WRP broke up in 1985. Though 'elected' to its Central Committee early in 1984, he was primarily a technician, not a political leader. He was, however, one of a soon-to-be-notorious group that worked covertly to expose what its members saw as Healy's personal and the wider movement's political corruption. His essay was at the time and remains to this day the most comprehensive and insightful analysis of the philosophical outlook that Healy called 'the practice of cognition'. Yet Bruce's contribution to the attempts to overcome the disorientation within the International Committee in those years has been unjustly forgotten.

For historical reasons, the essay has been overshadowed by the much better-known critique of Healy written by David North.¹ North's piece was written in October of 1982 but was known only to a tiny handful in the leadership of the IC prior to the break with Healy in 1985-1986. Bruce had not read North's piece at the time he wrote his contribution. There is no question that North's piece was historically important, having been one of the key documents that led to the split with Healy. However there is also little question that, were we to judge the two works on theoretical grounds, Bruce's piece is far superior in terms of its clarity and intellectual content. Whereas North makes a number of valid points against Healy, his piece lacks any real understanding of the history of philosophy, more or less consigning all issues to the struggle between materialism and idealism and labeling Healy as an idealist and even a 'left Hegelian'.²

Now Healy may have committed a number of intellectual and political crimes but being a left Hegelian was not one of them.

Bruce on the other hand correctly identifies Healy's philosophical outlook, insofar as there is anything coherent in it, as a form of 'sensationalism'. The *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines 'sensationalism' as 'the doctrine that all knowledge is derived from sensations'.³ It identifies this philosophy with such thinkers as Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume. While he does not use that term, his careful analysis of Healy's text demonstrates that the 'practice of cognition' was little more than a vulgarized form of sensationalism in which concepts are seen as little more than worked-up sensations. Healy's enterprise therefore had much more in common with an empiricist like Locke than with anything remotely to do with Hegel or left Hegelianism, notwithstanding Healy's appropriation and often mangling of Hegelian terminology.

Bruce brings to our attention the following fascinating statement found in Healy's *Studies in Dialectical Materialism (Studies)*:

It [the world] affects the sensory organs, producing sensation in the form of indeterminate mental images. As forms of the motion and change of the external world, these images are processed as concepts of phenomena.

Bruce notes that 'a concept is a form' that is differentiated from a sensation. It was the empirical philosophers who 'argued that concepts develop in the mind of an individual out of his or her experience'. He goes on to make the excellent observation that:

The best that can be said of 'images are processed as concepts of phenomena' is that it is misunderstood empiricism without the clarity of the empirical philosophers.

To bring this into even sharper focus, if Healy's *Studies* was an attempt to read Hegel's *Science of Logic*

‘materialistically’ through the prism of Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*, then it fails miserably in the first place because it begins with a complete misunderstanding of Hegel’s *Logic*. Hegel believed that knowledge is a kind of ladder which must be climbed from the very stirrings of philosophical thought to the highest realm of the Absolute. The beginning of that ladder is the world of sensations or what can be considered immediate experience. And that is how he begins his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. However, by the time he writes the *Logic*, the road travelled by the *Phenomenology* is already presupposed. Hegel viewed the *Phenomenology* as a necessary introduction to the *Logic*. The *Logic* therefore begins not, as the *Phenomenology* does, with sensations but with what Hegel called ‘pure thinking’. Although ‘pure thinking’ may sound mysterious, it can be understood as a kind of thought experiment in which we try to reflect on the content of our thinking without the aid of perceptual imagery.⁴ Hegel’s claim is that if we begin from the very simplest form of ‘pure thinking’, the idea of Being as such without any determination, we will find that this concept dissolves itself into its opposite, Nothing, and that both Being and Nothing are in an unstable unity and give way to the idea of Becoming.

Hegel’s claim is that if you continue this process of thinking about thought eventually you work up ever more concrete categories until you generate the entire edifice of the *Logic*. We gradually learn through a process of negation that, though it at first appears as simple and immediate, ‘Being as such’ cannot stand on its own, that it is anything but simple and immediate. Even the most immediate and simple concept is implicitly mediated. Hegel makes the further claim – and this is probably his most controversial thesis – that the structures of thought that we discover in the *Logic* are identical to the structures of the world and that it is only through the exercise outlined in the *Logic* that we can adequately ground any science that investigates the natural and social world.

One can agree or disagree with Hegel’s enterprise but if it is properly understood then it should be clear that for Hegel it is never the case that ‘images are processed as concepts’ in any sense. Hegel of course recognized the need for images or sensations and, in most of our day to day life, they serve us well. He also peppered his lectures with many graphic examples – images if you will – to assist his students in making sense of the difficult concepts he was presenting. But images, while a necessary crutch on the way to Science, are never Science itself. In fact, the road to Science can be described in one sense as the process of learning to leave behind our reliance on images although in the end any Science worthy of that name must be able to account for those very images. But the gulf between the crutches we may require on the road to Science and the end result is very evident in contemporary physics where theories of ‘hyperspace’ and a universe consisting of ‘N’ dimensions are practically impossible to intuit with any kind of imagery. The sharp difference between ordinary common sense and Science is also a recurring theme in the work of Marx, who was fond of paraphrasing Hegel’s dictum ‘There is no royal road to science’.⁵ Finally, it is also important to remember that for both Hegel and Marx the presentation of truth through images is by no means made obsolete because truth finds its most adequate expression in concepts. The aesthetic dimension also provides an avenue for the expression of what is True in and through the medium of images.

Granted that Healy’s mangling of the difference between concepts and images betrays a lack of understanding of both Hegel and Marx, one may wonder why this work, as well as Bruce’s critique of it, dating back three decades and now all but forgotten, is worth any attention at all today. The answer to that question becomes evident when we look at what passes for science among groups and individuals claiming to have a handle on the laws of motion of our political and economic life. And what we see over and over again, with a few notable exceptions, is that one-sided images are presented as a substitute for serious scientific inquiry. Thus we see Left Keynesians claiming to be Marxists and presenting a picture of the crisis of capitalism as if it can be managed with more insightful and more humane fiscal policies. Or we have impressions of political and sociological developments announcing themselves with the bloated honorific of a ‘science of perspectives’. If Bruce’s critique of Healy helps to clarify the problem with these methods for those actively working to bring about socialism, then it has belatedly fulfilled an important function.

His essay should be carefully read and studied as it contains many important insights. I would like to point out very briefly just a few of these:

- The discussion of the importance of Kant in the history of philosophy is a very useful point. Although Bruce doesn’t say anything in his remarks on Kant that are not well known to those who have studied the history of philosophy, they may come as a surprise to those Marxists whose knowledge of Kant consists of little more than a few quotes from Engels or Plekhanov. More important than the immediate question of how we assess the contributions of Kant to the history of philosophy stands a more fundamental question: the peculiar form of hubris that has infected many would-be Marxists who imagine that having read a bit

of Marx and the Marxist classics that they are then free to pronounce judgments about everything under the sun. When such thinking takes hold in a Stalin or a Mao Tse-tung, malignant individuals who held the power of a state bureaucracy in their hands, then we see proclamations of infallibility the likes of which would elicit envy from the Pope. Stalin was not only the leader of the international proletariat, he was also the world's greatest philosopher, linguist, military strategist, just to mention a few of his titles. In the hands of Healy, this form of hubris led to the absurdity of a 'practice of cognition' where the most superficial impressions replaced 'cognition' and in turn justified a betrayal of the most fundamental principles of Marxism in practice. Furthermore the obscurity of Healy's terminology served as a useful bludgeon to mould recalcitrant party members into accepting and carrying forward his political line. In this sense the mystification of the dialectic, although nonsense from a strictly philosophical perspective, had a certain logic of its own. It provided Healy with the veneer of an esoteric doctrine that only he fully understood. This made it very difficult to challenge him as no one was in a position to claim that they understood what he was saying. Needless to say, this type of butchery of real scholarship has done much to predispose many intellectuals against Marxism. A resurgence of Marxist culture, without which it is hard to see how a revolutionary movement will emerge, awaits an honest coming to terms with this unfortunate proclivity, one that has produced numerous charlatans over the decades. Healy was hardly the first and he has not been the last.

- The untangling of the conflation of historical materialism with a 'theory of knowledge' is a useful antidote both to Healy's tendency to vaporize the study of history or science into his 'practice of cognition' as well as the equally wrong-headed notion that in analyzing history or politics one can dispense with philosophy or reinterpret philosophy in the narrowest sense to be little more than a defense of materialism.
- In general, Bruce did a real service in deconstructing many of the curious word games that Healy created and incorporated into his *Studies*. He demonstrated that in many cases there were very good reasons why no one except Healy understood his version of dialectics. Healy's pronouncements fell into three categories generally: sometimes they were a poor rephrasing of some well-known truisms from the lexicon of Marxism – often plagiarized from the works of Marx or Lenin. Sometimes Healy's pronouncements were simply nonsense. And sometimes they were not non-sense but just plain wrong.
- He makes the very important observation that philosophy and psychology should not be confused. Healy approached the categories of Hegel's *Logic* as if they described the mental states of individuals and he conceived training in dialectics as a kind of gymnastic mental exercise. It is hard to improve on Bruce's own words as he described the intellectual havoc this crude identification of Healy's produced:

Hegel's great conception is perpetually confused with the form of thinking and perception in individuals. The more 'dialectical' the phraseology, the less dialectic gets a look in. *The Science of Logic* is not a psychological text-book: it shows the coincidence of the logical and historical, the complex contradictory relationship between the movement of things and the movement of thought.

In reading through Bruce's exegesis of Healy's mangling of dialectics so many years later, it may seem odd that a work so obviously bad was taken seriously by so many people for so long. A question that comes to mind is why was it left to Bruce, who was by training a scientist and had no background in the history of philosophy, to finally untangle and expose the charlatan Healy? After all, the Workers Revolutionary Party had no shortage of intellectuals in and around the party, some of whom had a background in philosophy. Surely they recognized, at least on some level, that there was something seriously wrong with Healy's obscurantist exposition of dialectics. Yet none of them said anything. Even worse, the leadership of the WRP forced North to retract his initial critique written in 1982 and pretty much buried Bruce's contribution after it was published in internal party discussions in 1985.⁶

To properly answer the question of why no one objected to Healy, we need to consider the dynamics of the degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party. By the 1980s that organization was being led by an unprincipled bloc consisting of Healy, Banda, Slaughter and a few others on the basis of personal and financial relations. The *modus vivendi* that kept that organization together were the slogans 'Live and Let Live' and 'Don't Rock the Applegart'. All these people understood, whether implicitly or not, that any questioning of any aspect of the leadership of the organization had the potential to light up a firestorm. They turned a blind eye to Healy's mangling of dialectics just as they turned a blind eye to Healy's unprincipled relations with dictators like Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein and his personally abusive behavior toward party members. As it happened, once the exposure of Healy's unprincipled relations was made public, it was impossible to reconstitute a new *modus vivendi* within the leadership and the Workers Revolutionary Party fragmented into

several pieces, none of which have survived as a revolutionary organization. It did not however have to end that way. Had the philosophical issues brought to the fore in Bruce's critique of Healy been taken more seriously, it could have played a role in the rebuilding of the movement from the ashes of what Healy constructed and then destroyed.

Bruce's piece is of course not beyond criticism, a point acknowledged in his introduction. It is not my purpose to do that here, but rather to let Bruce speak for himself. However, I cannot defer a discussion of one area where I strongly disagree with Bruce. In his introduction, where he makes a political analysis of the state of the International Committee at the time, he tends to minimize the very real theoretical work that the International Committee had done at one time. This was easy to do at the time Bruce was writing since by 1985 the theoretical life of the movement had long since been buried. But that should not detract from its earlier accomplishments. Perhaps, as Bruce rhetorically indicates, the Congresses of the IC did not compare theoretically with the first Four Congresses of the Communist International. But then again, which organization could be favorably compared to those Congresses, in which Trotsky played a key role in writing up the perspectives documents. As we have pointed out on other occasions, while there were always problem with the IC's theoretical work, it had to its credit some genuine accomplishments in this area.⁷ Without making more of this theoretical material than is warranted, it is wrong to dismiss it altogether.

Bruce defended the philosophical core of classical Marxism through a vocabulary reflecting the times in which it was written. The WRP in the 1970s and 1980s created a certain culture of discourse in which terms like 'the new' were liberally tossed around. The peculiarities of this idiom should not be allowed to distract the reader from appreciating the genuine contribution that the document makes toward our understanding of an important episode in the history of the Marxist movement. We are confident that in publishing it we are assisting a new generation in finding their way to genuine Marxism.

Alex Steiner, April 12, 2011

1 North's critique of Healy's 'practice of cognition', *A Contribution to a critique of G. Healy's 'Studies in Dialectical Materialism*, can be found on the World Socialist Web Site.

http://www.wsws.org/IML/fi_vol13_no2/fi_vol13_no2_full.shtml#anchor02

2 In Item 10, North says of Healy that: '. . . Hegel is approached uncritically, essentially in the manner of the Left Hegelians' and this was characteristic of the 'one decisive defect' in Healy's 'Studies'.

3 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, MacMillan, 1967, Volume 7, p 415.

4 'The system of logic is the realm of shadows, the world of simple essentialities freed from all sensuous concreteness'. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A V Miller, Humanities Press, 1969, p 58.

5 In the Preface to the French Edition of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx writes: 'There is no royal road to science and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits'. In the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel wrote:

Should anyone ask for a royal road to Science, there is no more easy-going way than to rely on sound common sense; and for the rest, in order to keep up with the times, and with advances in philosophy, to read reviews of philosophical works, perhaps even to read their prefaces and first paragraphs. (Miller translation, p 43)

Hegel was in turn paraphrasing Euclid, whose rejoinder to King Ptolemy's request for an easier way to learn mathematics was 'There is no Royal Road to geometry'. Hegel's sarcasm is palpable here and not only stands as an indictment of the indolent intelligentsia of his own times but can serve even more appropriately as an indictment of our contemporary 'theoreticians' who avoid like the plague engaging with ideas that challenge their sense of comfort in their own preconceptions.

6 For the comprehensive account of the split within the IC precipitated by the expulsion of Healy from the WRP, see *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism* http://www.wsws.org/IML/fi_vol13_no1/fi_vol13_no1_vecpdf.pdf and *The ICFI Defends Trotskyism* http://www.wsws.org/IML/fi_vol13_no2/fi_vol13_no2_vecpdf.pdf

I commented on this history in the Conclusion to the *Downward Spiral* series.

http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/downward_spiral_ch08.pdf

7 See e.g. Chapter 2, pps 41-42 of the series *The Downward Spiral of the International Committee of the Fourth International* where I provide a list of articles that appeared in the old Labour Review.

http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/downward_spiral_ch02.pdf

Author's note

I'D THOUGHT IT most unlikely that this paper, now a quarter-century old, would interest anyone other than (at a pinch) students of the factional obsessions of the post-war, western left until I was asked recently by a mutual friend to pass it to folk who, it turned out, had perfectly proper motives.

I am grateful both for their initiative in republishing it (thereby correcting the record) and for Alex Steiner's thoughtful introduction. (No endorsement of each other's general political views is implied though doubtless some will assume it.)

Only when asked to produce the text did I find that all I had to hand were a couple of poor-quality proofs, both with sections missing. This version was made by digitising and merging them.

After all this time I forget exactly why but the conditions under which it first appeared meant that the text had neither been completed nor properly proofed. I have therefore corrected spelling, punctuation and syntactical errors of the sort that would normally be caught in proof reading but have resisted the (strong) temptation to lighten the tone of the purple prose in vogue in the milieu at the time and to drop points I would no longer make. (Out of sympathy for anyone rash enough to read it, I did remove a short paragraph where even I could no longer understand what I had been trying to say.) The only other cuts were references to people no longer in what passes on the left for public life.

To the many who generously helped with what proved to be an important research experience for me, I remain grateful even if their names have no place here.

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Introduction

THE FOLLOWING IS a contribution to the discussion in the movement on the question of method, which has centered on the critique of *Studies in Dialectical Materialism*.

A little explanation is necessary. These notes were written during July and August of this year, after a long period of reading and discussion with others. We all had the dubious privilege of participating in Healy's weekly 'classes' in dialectical materialism. At these ritualised parades of ignorance and sham, any attempt to raise points of difference, even in the form of innuendo, did little more than provide topics for after-hours discussion.

The work is obviously unfinished. What was planned as a critique of the first chapter of the book grew like Jack's beanstalk the more one began to realise the full implications of Healy's 'philosophical' thought. Other events have, since September, forestalled the comparatively leisurely consideration of philosophical issues. Only the first few pages are discussed.

Nonetheless, I am submitting them in this form because I think that there is a certain urgency. I did not read Cde North's 'Notes' until after what follows was written. Without detracting from the importance of the questions he has raised, I have many serious disagreements with what he says which I wish to consider at the first opportunity. I would point out that I was writing at the same time as every branch of the Workers League was recommended 'to organise a study' of *inter alia* Healy's book. (*Internal Bulletin no 1*, p. 38, last par)

My document contains errors, not so much of fact as emphasis. For example, one critic has argued that the distinction between the historical conceptions of thought as the property of individuals and thought as a social and historical process (Hegel) is insufficiently stressed.

He has also taken to task the section on the categories of historical materialism. I accept the criticism. Others have pointed out that the whole is no more than a preliminary study prior to actually getting to grips with what Healy's philosophy really represents as an ideology. I agree.

It was Kant (*Introduction to Critique of Pure Reason*) who first pointed out – at least for me – that no new knowledge arises from analysis alone. The notion of the dialectical relationship between analysis and synthesis was deepened and elaborated by Hegel. Comrades who, with understandable frustration, seek quick and – dare I say it – facile explanations of the problems of the International Committee and the Workers Revolutionary Party could do worse than study what Hegel has to say on this. The concepts and categories of previous periods do not adequately explain the new. The forms of thought have to develop in line with its content.

This key notion of Marxist philosophy must be grasped. It is the philosophical root of many of the disagreements in the party right now. It is why, for example, I would reject the notion that ‘Healyism’ can be adequately subsumed under ‘Pabloism’. Our movement has made many experiences since the battles of the early fifties: the world itself is a very different place. For my money, the ‘Pabloite’ tendencies are different, more degenerate, than they were thirty years ago. (This is not to side one way or the other on the Security and the Fourth International controversy but to consider all aspects of these movements.) To assume that ‘Pabloism’ is an adequate concept without going through a prolonged, detailed study of the whole history of the Trotskyist movement in all its aspects is to cut short the process of the deepening of knowledge.

We have, as yet, no detailed history of an entire decade from the death of Trotsky until the early fifties; a period when the revolutionary movement faced the acid test of defeatism and war. We have still to establish not merely ‘the continuity of Trotskyism’ but also what actually comprises this ‘continuity’.

I would argue that it is not established simply by showing (perhaps we would end by showing the opposite – consider where that would leave us) a thread of integrity through different sections of the International *vis-a-vis* the Permanent Revolution, dialectical method, etc. Rather, the continuity of Trotskyism is based upon the economic and cultural conquests of October and the gains of the working class that have followed. The betrayals of Stalinism and social-democracy have not led to the overthrow of the property relations established in 1917. Millions of Russians did not die in vain in the struggle against fascism. That is the primary determinant of the continuity of Trotskyism. It is the movement of social forces (the major conquests of masses of people) that determines our ideas, not the other way round.

To seek some kind of ‘Holy Grail’ in the interpretation of a selection of documents concerned with small-party politics without, at every major turn, re-evaluating this history, deepening our understanding of it against the backcloth of the real development of the class struggle is to make an idealist mockery of our history; to ‘spit on it’. It is true that many of the ideological gains of Bolshevism have been kept alive since 1940. It is equally important that we examine how.

Much has been lost. Only fools would argue that, for example, the International Committee has today more than a semblance of the rich ideological ferment so vital to the development of revolutionary theory and practice that Lenin’s party had. Do we seriously think that the IC Congresses rank theoretically with the first four Congresses of the Comintern? Should we not ask why not?

No section of the International has carried out an economic analysis of any major metropolitan country that can hold the shortest candle stub to Lenin’s *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. Much talk of ‘the world crisis’ but little of the crises in the world.

One could go on. It has been assumed for decades that the form of Lenin’s Bolshevik party – and a parody of it to boot – adequately expresses the content of its method. The *Theses of the Third Congress of the Comintern*, to which we have belatedly turned an eye, urge us to think differently.

It was historically one of the great achievements of philosophy when it showed that the path to knowledge began with realising ignorance. Socrates saw that some time back. To get answers, we need to formulate the questions. Marx was fond of quoting Terence to say ‘Doubt everything’. Did he ‘spit on our history?’

It is in this spirit that these notes are submitted for discussion.

- One final point. Although these notes are preliminary, I stand by what they say. What criticism they merit is not because they are incomplete. It is because they contain errors, or are simply wrong. Comrades who try to hide inadequate thought or theoretical incompetence behind a bleat that ‘this is only a preliminary analysis’ or ‘these are only notes’ (but I have not bothered to write anything since) are as wretched and cowardly as those too timid to examine their own history. They have much to learn if they want to earn the title ‘revolutionary’.

A Charlatan Exposed

THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE meeting of September 15th 1985 featured discussion on Gerry Healy's *Studies in Dialectical Materialism* in which comrades who voiced reservations about the book were urged to place their criticisms in writing, a position reiterated at a political committee meeting the following week.

I am therefore taking this opportunity to record my own anxieties concerning what I hold to be the fraudulent nature of the 'philosophy' which has passed for Marxism in our movement for years.

This is not academic debate or an abstract polemic. The question of method stands supreme in the Marxist armoury. If the only weapon of the working class is organisation then the articulation of that organisation is its ideology – dialectical materialist thought.

Without clarity on methodological issues, the movement is doomed – full coffers or empty, revolutionary situation or no. To compromise on *these* questions is to embark on the betrayal of the working class internationally.

It is historical experience that the greatest revolution in history was not led by the party which started out with bombs but by the party which started out with dialectical materialism. (*In Defence of Marxism*, p 100)

Those leaders in the party who remain indifferent at best or even choose to defend the method of *Studies – and to the materiality that underlies this fraud* – will have to face the judgement not only of the working class in Britain but internationally. The sophistry exposed in this contribution to the discussion has been perpetrated not only on our own party but on the international movement.

I have confined myself to the first chapter (Subjective Idealism Today) for a number of reasons. First, criticising the book presents many problems. It is scarcely readable – perhaps its only saving grace. It is so full of non-sequiturs, sentences that are without meaning or even self-contradictory that an overall criticism is well-nigh impossible. The established norms of political polemic find little scope. The ignorance of the history of science and above all of philosophy in any shape or form – classical, bourgeois or Marxist – is staggering.

The scale of the task undertaken threatens to overwhelm unless some boundaries are drawn. The temptation to consider aspects, snippets, etc of the whole is strong but it is better to take one decisive section and show that *all that section* is an amalgam of ignorance, error and deception.

The book is a fraud. The central tenet of the philosophy is a caricature of subjective idealism with all of its vices and none of the virtues of honest philosophical debate. But that is not the point. We are not dealing with a *wrong* philosophy, an *idealist* outlook or even an eclectic mishmash. We face the degeneration of thought itself – right in the heart of Trotskyism.

Such a tendency has predecessors but not in the workers' movement. Bernstein's call to go 'back to Kant' was the cover for a retreat into the crass reformism that characterised the growing German social democracy. Lenin fought the Machists against the backcloth of a profound revolution in science in the period of deep-going reaction after 1905. The pragmatic challenge of Burnham and Schatchman reflected the impotence of the petty bourgeoisie in the face of the Stalinist bureaucracy and chauvinist pressure on the Trotskyist movement as America prepared for war.

All this is history. These tendencies and others like them reflected class pressures on the movement. In one way or another, groups, tendencies, call them what you will, pulled away from the revolutionary movement and covered their tracks with a retreat on methodological issues. There was debate, polemic and argument. Questions were fought out in the open in publications, congresses and so forth. The issues were clarified in the course of battle and the movement emerged the stronger the more vacillation was heightened into opposition. Education of the cadre flowed out of the struggle.

But here we have something else. A morass of mystical thought is foisted onto the Trotskyist movement which not only challenges the core of Marxism – dialectical materialism – but *all* of the conquests of Marxism. It is not enough to show that there are errors here and there or even everywhere, or that the method

of *Studies* can be shown to be subjective idealism. Anyone with a modicum of knowledge of philosophy and a dash of intellectual honesty can illustrate its errors.

What has to be shown is that *every line* of the book is a challenge to the intellectual conquests of Marxism. And that is why it should be examined line by line. It is not a book that ‘simply’ reflects the pressure of alien class forces on a section of the revolutionary movement. There is a qualitative difference between the revisionism of Bernstein or Bogdanov and the method under discussion here.

What was Lenin’s method of studying philosophy?

Page 1, para 2

We must call books by the names given by their author or publisher. The use of numbers (Come in no 14, your time is up) conceals that the *Philosophical Notebooks* are a compilation by scholars of rough notes.

Why is it that the only book of Lenin’s consistently studied at the College is the only one of a set of 45 volumes *not* intended for publication in one form or another, i.e. as books, articles or letters written in the course of political activity?

To portray the *Notebooks* as some kind of *vade mecum* of Marxist method – a substitute for the study not merely of Marxist philosophical writing but of philosophy itself, history and science – is not to praise Lenin but to bury him.

It distorts both his work on philosophy and his view of Hegel. According to Krupskaya, he studied extensively in the first exile – Kant, the French materialists, etc. He certainly was not unfamiliar with Hegel at this stage and was thoroughly conversant with Marx and Engels as well as Plekhanov on philosophy.

His method was not just to read Marx on Hegel but to retrace the path followed by Marx in his *negation* of Hegel. It is not only false but reactionary to say – as does [. . .] or her script-writer – ‘without Hegel, no Marx, etc’. A metaphysical progression is not the same as sublation, a cancellation simultaneously to preserve. (In fact, this notion could well be borne in mind in the present struggle in the party.)

Lenin read not only *Science of Logic* but *The Philosophy of History* by Hegel and the works of Berkeley, Leibniz, Feuerbach, etc. Pouring endlessly over ‘Volume 38’ conceals that these are notebooks and masks the content of Lenin’s method with the form.

Nobody would deny the great value of the fragments and aphorisms which the conspectus of *Science of Logic* contains: the richness of Lenin’s dialectical conceptions are a priceless guide to the process of ‘turning Hegel on his feet’ to derive a revolutionary dialectic. But if they are taken in isolation – if ‘the thing’ is divorced from its ground – then the slippery path to mystification looms ahead. It is impossible to grasp the real meaning of the *Notebooks* without reading from the full text of Hegel which Lenin annotates. Further, you cannot understand that most historical of all philosophers without at least an acquaintance with the historical development of the concepts and categories that he discusses, i.e. a familiarity with the works of the principal classical and bourgeois philosophers.

Consider one largely technical question. On p 176 of the *Notebooks*, Lenin considers the movement of the Notion from its formality, via the Judgement to the Syllogism and finally its transformation from subjectivity to objectivity. Lenin does not consider the question of the Judgement in any detail. But in *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels remarks that this is one of the most profound sections of the whole of *Science of Logic* and illustrates his point with a development of thought over millenia from the primitive judgement that friction produces heat to the judgement of universality: the transformation of forms of motion one into the other. (p 223)

Engels’ book was not published while Lenin was alive. One cannot but feel that, had he seen it, Lenin’s instinct would have been to re-consider his *Notes* – after all, he said that every line of Engels contained something of value. To follow the spirit of Lenin would be to re-read *Science of Logic* on the Judgement in the light of Engels’ pertinent points. But a method which takes Lenin’s *Notebooks* as a thing-in-itself and ignores the text about which he writes cannot even see the problem.

Only by looking at the original text can you see that there are forty pages (pps 622-663) that Lenin skips.

Marxism and Opportunism; Dialectical and Historical Materialism

Page 1, para 4

Lenin saw the dividing line between Marxism and opportunism through the way in which Dialectical and historical materialism were correlated within their objective foundation’of the material unity of the world.

1 The dividing line between Marxism and opportunism is not so simple. How could Lenin form a bloc with

the opportunist Plekhanov against the Bolshevik Machists, in spite of his reservations about the inadequate treatment of empirio-criticism in *Materialismus Militans*?

In *One Step Forward*, Lenin points out that the class lines in politics are not revealed directly in philosophical debate or even in discussion about programme, policy, etc. This was precisely the significance of the 'Rule 1' debate in 1903: the profound political differences were only revealed in what seemed to be trivial issues.

As a matter of fact, neither Lenin nor Trotsky tried to explain Plekhanov's opportunism primarily by looking for 'philosophical' flaws in his writings although they did criticise them. They looked rather at the evolution of his social being: long years of exile, isolation from the movement, the undeveloped state of the class struggle during his formative years, etc etc.

- 2 The objective unity of the world is not to be taken for granted, but had – *has* – to be established by 'the long and wearisome development of philosophy and natural science', a *social* practice of mankind over thousands of years whose highest expression is the development of dialectical materialist philosophy. But it is not possible to take 'the highest expression' and junk the rest of science, history et al. Castles cannot be built in the air, in spite of the attempt of *Studies* to try. The second line of paragraph 4 reads: 'But a dividing line does exist between the two and it is important that we understand what it is, especially in relation to the process of Cognition'.

We are given a precursor – on the first page – of the method of the book. Start by pronouncing Dialectical Logic as some special field of study (never mind if we contradict ourselves later on); proceed to pass over historical materialism with plagiarism and distortion of Lenin's *Friends of the People* and hurtle into the world of logical concepts and categories where thought determines thought.

The schematic imposition of logical forms onto the impression of the day guides the party (from one crisis to the next, when social forces really begin to move).

How do we learn to think dialectically?

Page 1, para 5

Dialectical Materialists get to know the world initially through a process of Cognition.

Which is to say that 'dialectical materialists cognise the world initially through a process of cognition'. How the rest of unfortunate mankind manages to avoid falling under the first bus to pass their door remains a mystery.

But this is more than a careless slip. If cognition is the province of the dialectical materialist alone then the cult of infallibility is assured. We can pronounce on any subject we like and how is the rest of mankind – Subjective Idealists to the last man jack – to prove us wrong? Leadership is – in the last analysis – answerable to nobody. What criteria establish entry into the hallowed circles of dialectical materialists? It certainly appears that education is inimical to thought. Take para 3, page 14.

The most enthusiastic purveyors of such class filth are, of course, the upper and lower middle classes, who are groomed for the job in those schools and universities which make the whole affair seem positively decent and respectable from the standpoint of their grubby individual needs.

Perhaps if bourgeois culture in any form has little to offer, then maybe the day-to-day experience of party work selects the chosen few?

The very students who are resisting change, by either failing to respond to encouragement or are, indeed, going into further retreat away from a desired change, must produce the knowledge of how change will be made out of their actual practices in resisting change. (p 77)

Engels' enjoinder to develop the art of thinking in concepts and categories by studying the history of philosophy; Lenin's insistence that Marx's great work on dialectics was *Capital* itself and his recommendation to study Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Mehring; Trotsky's drawing attention to the importance of studying the first four congresses of the Comintern – none of these rate a mention. Let us leave the newcomer to flounder for a moment and see how the dialectical materialist – so called – undergoes this 'process of Cognition'.

Sensation and Concepts: enter Locke, Hume and the lads

Page 3, para 1

It [the world] affects the sensory organs, producing sensation in the form of indeterminate mental images. As forms of the motion and change of the external world, these images are processed as concepts of phenomena. Upon negation through their dissolution from the positive sensation into their abstract negative, they are negated again as

the nature of semblance into positive semblance which is the theory of knowledge of a human being. During this interpenetration process, the images as thought forms are analysed through the science of thought and reason which is Dialectical Logic.

It is inaccurate to say that sensations are the forms of the motion and change of the external world and are images, etc. Sensations are reflections of the world on the organs of sense, processed by the brain to form images. But even to say that they form 'images' is true only in a limited sense. We do not see images but *things*, a distinction of Spinoza's to which e.g. Ilyenkov draws attention. (*Dialectical Logic*, p 38)

But more important is the phrase, 'images are processed as concepts of phenomena', which is simply not the case. A concept is a form, an aspect of cognition: the way in which objects and their attributes are generalised, linked with otherwise dissimilar objects (e.g. both a rose and a pillarbox are red) which have a common substance and which serves to organise the plethora of perception. Man for the most part operates with concepts unconsciously – what Engels calls, after Hegel and Kant, Understanding, that faculty of thought in which the differences with higher animals are quantitative. (See *Dialectics of Nature*, p 222)

The empirical philosophers argued that concepts develop in the mind of an individual out of his or her experience: the gradual accumulation and analytic abstraction of the datum of sense. Images or, as Locke called them, *ideas* are the basis on which concepts are formed. The mind of the child is a *tabula rasa*, a blank tablet on which nature leaves its mark.

The Rationalists, stressing the role of Reason and the ability to conceive of mathematical abstractions, held that concepts could not be developed merely out of experience but were innate or God-given. Hegel, building on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, showed that the question for philosophy was not how concepts developed ontologically (i.e. in the mind of the individual) but historically in society. He distinguished between psychology and philosophy and this distinction is crucial for Marxism.

The best that can be said of 'images are processed as concepts of phenomena' is that it is misunderstood empiricism without the clarity of the empirical philosophers.

The empiricists spoke of 'experience', not mere sensation. Experience is a broader category which avoids rather than tackles the distinction between psychology and philosophy but is none the less more profound than mere 'sensation'. Both Bacon and Locke took 'reason' somewhat for granted and stressed the sensual source of knowledge. The contradictions of materialist empiricism were highlighted by Berkeley (What is matter?) and Hume (*Can we know?*); the empirical tradition ended in subjective idealism and agnosticism where it remained with its positivist and Machist revival. The weaknesses of a one-sided epistemology (Rationalism or Empiricism) were confronted by Kant. His historically-conditioned failure to resolve this problem other than in a schematic fashion in no way detracts from his genius in attacking the contradiction between the sensuous source of knowledge and its suprasensuous form.

Use of phrases such as subjective idealism (just what Kant was *not*), Kantianism, etc liberally throughout the book cannot obscure that an alchemist's brew of befuddled phrases conceals a *wrong* conception of the problem that Kant was trying to solve. Hegel showed the way out of the problem, arguing that the movement of things could be grasped in the consciousness of man only as a social and historical phenomenon. The contradictions in thought – Kant's Antinomies of Thought – are not the *fault* of Reason but actually reflect the contradictory nature of things, their movement and change. The form of thought is historically conditioned and socially manifest. The distinction is between the mechanisms of thought – studied by psychology – and the social history of thought, its concepts and categories which is the province of philosophy.

Concepts and categories develop not simply in the minds of this or that thinker – dialectical materialist or mere mortal – but manifest the entire culture of mankind – Spirit. The study of thought is therefore the study of the appearance (Phenomena as Kant calls it) of this: truly *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The tracing of the path of cognition – social thought in its historical setting – far from being from the individual to society is in fact the other way round. No amount of the quasi-Hegelian phrases which pepper *Studies* can hide this crude error: Hegel's great conception is perpetually confused with the form of thinking and perception in individuals. The more 'dialectical' the phraseology, the less dialectic gets a look in. *The Science of Logic* is *not* a psychological text-book: it shows the coincidence of the logical and historical, the complex contradictory relationship between the movement of things and the movement of thought. To jump from 'sensation in the form of indeterminate mental images' straight to 'concepts of phenomena' and to junk the history of philosophy by the way, is as futile as reducing the 2,000 year history of the Olympic Games to a physiology of athletes' legs written by someone with no knowledge of anatomy.

The question of Semblance: not what it seems

But this little paragraph has more to offer: ‘. . . they are negated again as the nature of semblance into positive semblance which is the theory of knowledge of a human being.’

Let us leave the question of positive or negative semblance, which is a confusion of Hegel’s description of semblance as the nullity of essence – essence appearing as that which it is not. (See e.g. *The Science of Logic*, p 397). For the moment, consider the *category* of semblance which we can only assume is being defined in the phrase ‘positive semblance, which is the theory of knowledge of a human being’.

Semblance is the *illusory* side of appearance: things appear as that which they are not. This point has occupied the minds of the greatest philosophers for over two millenia: how fortunate that the dialectical materialist is so privileged by his ability to cognise that he does not even have to consider it.

As noted, for the empirics the source of knowledge is experience. Hegel praised them in the small *Logic*:

From empiricism came the cry: ‘Stop roaming in empty abstractions, keep your eyes open, lay hold on man and nature as they are here before you, enjoy the present moment’. Nobody can deny there is a great deal of truth in these words. The everyday world, what is here and now, was a good exchange for the futile other-world – for the mirages and chimeras of the abstract understanding. (p 62)

Bacon argued (*The Advancement of Learning*) that the senses are reliable if we trained them, took care to look again and again, not to deceive ourselves etc. But Leibniz and the other rationalists showed that sensation cannot reveal essence. Nobody ever has the same sensation twice nor do two people ever see the same object in the same way. Every one knows what a six-sided cube is but who, without moving, has ever seen more than three sides of a cube? How do we know if the famous stick half-in and half-out of the water is really bent? Only *reason* can overcome the unreliability of sensation. If there is a harmony between what we see in the world and what is in thought – if there can be knowledge – then this harmony is pre-established by God.

But there is still another aspect to the problem: not just the partial but the *illusory* nature of appearance. Hegel argued that semblance was not ‘just’ an illusion but was both there and not there, real in one sense and not-real in another, objective in both. The stick in water appears bent but it is not; there is a real cause for the illusion of bending – an essential reason – but this has to be derived. It is not enough just to keep looking at the stick or scholastically arguing about phenomena – real knowledge has to be won not just about ‘sticks’ but a range of associated things such as the refraction of light at a boundary.

Lenin clearly grasped this when, before quoting Hegel, he said, ‘Semblance is: Nothing, nonexistence (i.e. *illusion*) which exists *and* Being as Moment’:

Thus Semblance is Essence itself, but Essence in a determinateness, and this in such a manner that determinateness is only its moment: Essence is the showing of itself in itself. (*Science of Logic* p 398, quoted in *Notebooks* p 133)

Hegel tackles the sensation/reason contradiction in a profound if idealist form. The percept does reveal only a part, an aspect, a semblance of the essence, but this illusory side of appearance, far from being a constraint or limit on the objectivity of truth, is in fact the *key* to truth. (Hence in itself, i.e. potential, not yet unfolded. The phrase ‘in itself’ was coined not by Hegel, Lenin or even Healy but by Aristotle.) Essential knowledge is shown to be more profound than that which can be revealed in one moment of being. It is the movement of the world which allows real knowledge. To put it crudely, take the stick out of the water completely so it appears straight and the whole problem of refraction is raised for science to investigate.

. . . Essence . . . contains Semblance within itself, as infinite internal movement . . . (*Science of Logic* p 399, quoted in *Notebooks* p 133)

Concepts and Categories: Kant, Hegel – and *Capital*

When Marx described profit as the semblance of surplus value, he showed in materialist thought the great importance of Hegel’s category. He claimed it as one of the most important discoveries of his research – revealed only in the historical analysis of capitalism, that is in the movement of essence, of the totality of man’s social relations.

Previously, economists had used concepts and categories such as profit, rent etc that described only the appearance of capitalism – what Kant calls the phenomena of the thing-in-itself – and so could not grasp the essential nature of capitalist commodity exchange. In that historical sense, Kant was right when he said that the thing-in-itself was unknowable: he correctly described the dilemma of contemporary science.

If by ‘noumenon’ we mean a thing so far as it is *not an object of our sensible intuition*, and so abstract from our mode of intuiting it, this is a noumenon in the negative sense of the term. But if we understand by it an object of a non-sensible intuition, we thereby presuppose a special mode of intuition, namely, the intellectual, which is not that which

we possess, and of which we cannot even comprehend the possibility. This would be ‘noumenon’ in the positive sense of the term.’ (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1929, p 268, emphasis in original)

... and the domain that lies out beyond the sphere of appearances is for us empty. (*ibid*, p 272)

Kant concurred with the empirics in that experience was the only source of knowledge but, trained in the Rationalist tradition, he also saw that there is a non-sensual element in real knowledge. He could not – due to the limitations of the science of his day, as Engels explains – see the path from the sensual world to the suprasensual, from the concrete to the abstract. He had posed the contradiction but could not overcome it. Being and thought remained opposites: the ability to reason, to conceptualise, categorise and synthesise – never previously in philosophy as profoundly investigated as by Kant – still could not be explained through the development of life itself. He had to stress the *a priori* nature of conceptual thought, i.e. the God-given ability of man to grasp the appearance of things. His conviction that nature concealed an essential behind this appearance did not prevent him saying that this could not be understood. Intuitively feeling an identity between being and thought – i.e. that knowledge is possible – he nonetheless could not show the movement from one to the other. He counterposed absolute thought to being, drew a *distinction* between them and placed constraints on knowledge. ‘Awoken from my dogmatic slumbers’ as he put it by the agnosticism of Hume and realising that, if Hume were right, then science was impossible, he could not resolve the problem. But he had identified it.

This counterposing of thought to being is the dualist side of his philosophy. Ironically, he could not see the full implication of his own hypothesis on the origin of the solar system which postulated the aggregation of nebular dust. Nature was no longer seen merely to exist: it came into being and passed away. ‘[The earth] must have had a history not only of coexistence in space but also of succession in time.’ (*Dialectics of Nature*, p 26)

His thought, which to this day remains provocative and profound, has to be studied as a pre-condition for grasping the contribution of Hegel and, more important, Marx’s negation of Hegel.

Hegel was not restricted by the limitations of the largely descriptive science of his day. His starting point was history – and history studied in the aftermath of the French Revolution:

Hegel wrote before Darwin and before Marx. Thanks to the powerful impetus given to thought by the French Revolution, Hegel anticipated the general movement of science. But because it was only an anticipation, although by a genius, it received from Hegel an idealist character. (*In Defence of Marxism*, p 66)

The real refutation of Kantianism in practice was the achievement of Marx in *Capital*. Here, by studying the concepts and categories of all previous political economy – from Aristotle via Petty and Smith to Ricardo – and a mass of new material, the laws of motion of capitalism were laid bare. It was the application of the dialectic of Hegel, his *method* materialistically inverted, to the history of economics and to the history of society itself, the coincidence of the logical and the historical. Through a critique of all previous economics and the thorough analysis of empirical data not available to his predecessors (i.e. because he described developments that had not yet occurred in the time of e.g. Adam Smith), Marx was able not merely to analyse the appearance of capitalism but to penetrate to its essence.

Unlike the categories of the great bourgeois economists, Marx’s economic categories are not given in appearance. You can see profits, rents, even social classes but you cannot see surplus value or the contradictory nature of the commodity. Their real nature is *hidden* by their appearance. In this lies the illusory side of being. Nonetheless, they can be revealed in the historical analysis of society. And in this process of uncovering, we move away from the concrete to the abstract only to bring us actually closer to the concrete.

Profit is that which shows itself – look at any page of the financial press or the director’s car – and its source seems to be the movement of capital itself. It is certainly real: the entire bourgeoisie is in an endless hunt after increasing profits. But the essential nature of capitalist exploitation is *not* this hunt for profit: it is the extraction of surplus value which does not correspond directly to profit. The rate of exploitation can rise precisely because the rate of profit tends historically to fall. Thus while profit seems to be the return on capital, this is a *semblance* of the real process of extracting surplus value, whose source is the exchange of a commodity – labour power. (For a good explanation of this, see Tom Kemp, *Marx’s Capital Today*, New Park, p 77.)

This is a correct outline of a materialist understanding of the category of semblance. Semblance is *not* ‘the theory of knowledge of a human being’: it describes how natural and social phenomena reveal themselves while concealing their essential nature.

Any other definition is wrong.

Some implications of this error

Consider the question of the national liberation struggle especially in the light of Workers League suppressed document on this question. It analyses the tendency to Pabloite revision of the theory of Permanent Revolution expressed in the WRP's attitude to the national liberation movements and the colonial or neo-colonial bourgeoisie. Without accepting every one of the points made, I would endorse the general line of the argument.

Studies holds that the dividing line between Marxism and opportunism is seen through the way in which dialectical and historical materialism 'were correlated within their objective foundation of the material unity of the world'.

Feuerbach was closer to the mark when he said that you can tell a man by his philosophy. The error on the question of semblance – on which so much emphasis is laid – reveals the philosophical revision behind the opportunist adaptation that the Workers League exposed.

The totality of the world crisis of imperialism is expressed in the contradictory, combined and uneven, (NB neither the uneven development stressed in the Sixth Congress resolution nor the combined development which permeates the May Day Manifesto of April 1985 but the combined *and* uneven) development of a world system. This historical phenomenon can only be revealed in the painstaking analysis of the history of capitalist plunder and exploitation itself using the method of historical materialism.

The struggle of the oppressed masses in the colonial and semi-colonial countries is a part – and a profoundly important, decisive part – of the world-wide movement against imperialism. But to the fighters of FATAH or to the proletarians of Soweto, this essential nature of the struggle is not revealed.

He or she perceives a semblance of this essence. It is truly 'in itself', not yet unfolded, potential, developing, etc. They are fighting Zionism, Apartheid, etc – oppression in a myriad of forms. They are real moments of the essential imperialist system – as the policeman's bullet makes brutally clear:

Semblance is Essence itself in the determinateness of being . . . (*Philosophical Notebooks*, p 132)

This can only be grasped by understanding the totality of the world system, with its history dialectically grasped and its laws of motion laid bare. These laws, as tendencies with quantitative and qualitative manifestations, are not given once for all in old books (*Capital*) themselves not deemed worthy of study in our College. They must be constantly reworked, re-evaluated and developed from the living movement of the class struggle world-wide. And more than this: the way in which these objective laws unfold has to be changed through the practice of building the international Trotskyist movement.

Laws are not an absolute which from time to time bursts forth to alter drastically the course of struggle: they are abstractions in the mind of man which reflect the movement of things. They are suprasensual notions of essential relation – approximations to the complexity and contradictory movement of nature and society – which enable man to harness the motion of nature to his own advantage. We can grasp aspects of the law of gravity by standing bare-headed beneath an avalanche of rocks – or we can study the science of civil engineering and consciously mould the mountain to provide the necessities of life.

But what if we disregard all this and call semblance the theory of knowledge of a human being? Or make it more impressive and call it Positive Semblance?

The way in which things appear as that which they are not is ignored and discarded. What is seen – illusory being – becomes what is. A re-hash of Locke's empiricism rules. A mystical theory of perception substitutes for the method of materialist philosophy and the essential nature of the world revolution becomes identified with its appearance. The national liberation movements become the essential factor in the liberation of the oppressed masses. The contradictory historical role of the nationalist bourgeoisie is forgotten as one side of the contradiction becomes an absolute at the expense of the other.

But this has its bedfellow. If national liberation movements are 'progressive', then Galtieri's offensive on the Malvinas is characterised not from the historical analysis of the totality of the world relations of imperialism but from an *a priori* label of Galtieri as a 'dictator'.

There was a bitter struggle in the party leadership on the question of the Malvinas war. I contend that it found its expression in philosophical errors. 'This is not our war' is a political line with a long history and it is not called defeatism.

Page 3, para 2

The second paragraph on page three is an interesting quotation from Lenin taken from his notes on Hegel's discussion of the objective dialectician, Zeno (5th cent BC). Even if a non-sequitur in context, it is a little breath of fresh air.

Being and Consciousness

page 3, para 3

Marxism recognises and insists that the theory of knowledge incorporates the history of the sciences in addition to the knowledge revealed by the Historical Materialist method. Through this method, Marx revealed that the practical activity of all human beings which is known as Social Being exists independently of them and determines their social consciousness.

Passing over how the history of science is incorporated in the theory of knowledge or how a method predominates over its proponents and their activity, consider carefully the last sentence:

. . . the practical activity of all human beings exists independently of them and determines their social consciousness.

Perhaps a protagonist of *Studies* could explain how human beings exist independently of their practical activity as it implies that they can exist without it or, more accurately, it without them. Assuming, as I suspect, that this might prove tricky, perhaps I can re-phrase as follows:

. . . the practical activity of all human beings exists independently of and determines their social consciousness.

Leaving aside the implications of the meaningless as a tool for the precision of science, let us take a first look at the relationship of social being to social consciousness. One cannot better Engels' famous letter to J. Bloch of September 1890 to refute this mechanical materialist – and therefore ultimately idealist – conception of the relationship of being and consciousness.

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence, if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas – also exercise their influence upon the the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner connection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible), the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree. (*Marx, Engels, Lenin on Historical Materialism*, Lawrence & Wishart, p 294)

Social Being and Social Consciousness are not independent: they are dialectically related one to the other, opposites which interpenetrate with being as primary *vis a vis* consciousness. That is Engels' position. And if you examine with a little care the quotations from Lenin reproduced in the section 'Social being is independent of social consciousness' on page 11 of *Studies*, you will find it to be his position too.

Is Historical Materialism a 'theory of knowledge?'

Page 3, para 4

Utter confusion and chaos. On page one, an assertion: 'But a dividing line does exist between the two (i.e. dialectical and historical materialism) and it is important that we understand what it is, especially in relation to the process of Cognition'. On the next page, the paragraph under consideration, another assertion:

In this process of cognition we now have the combined use of three important sciences, i.e. Dialectics, Dialectical Logic, and the theory of knowledge of Historical Materialism. These must be understood as the component parts of the process of cognition as a whole.

Compare this with the aphorism of Lenin, which is taken from the *Notebooks* (p 319) and is quoted in *Studies* (p 68):

In Capital, Marx applied to a single science logic, dialectics and the theory of knowledge of materialism (three words are not needed: it is one and the same thing) which has taken everything valuable in Hegel and developed it further.

Lenin speaks of the theory of knowledge of materialism while *Studies* talks of the theory of knowledge of historical materialism. Historical materialism is *not* a theory of knowledge, although it implies an epistemological element unlike 'positive semblance, which is the theory of knowledge of a human being' (para one, same page). The latter is just nonsense.

If positive semblance is the theory of knowledge of a human being and we have a theory of knowledge of historical materialism, can we syllogistically deduce that historical materialism is positive semblance?

As Engels makes clear – and as one of the propounders of the theory, it is fair to assume he knew – historical materialism maintains the primacy of man’s activity – the production and reproduction of life – over his consciousness, whether as individual will or as the social consciousness of mankind. The development of the means of production and the manner in which this comes increasingly into conflict with the social relations of production is the driving force for social evolution and revolution throughout history.

A theory of history is not plucked out of the blue: anyone who wants to understand how historical materialism developed from other theories which also sought an underlying trend in the seemingly endless turbulence that comprises Man’s social progress could do worse than read Plekhanov’s *Development of the Monist View of History* which discusses just this, especially in the early chapters on French materialism.

Historical materialism is the application of dialectics – general laws of movement and change so brilliantly expounded by Hegel under the cloak of idealism – to the question of Man’s history considered with being as primary. Dialectical logic studies the historical process of the reflection of movement and change in the mind of man: the process of the deepening of knowledge. The laws of nature, the laws of society and the laws of thought – each considered historically and logically – that is the sense in which Lenin speaks of them being essentially the same. And if Engels explains that once in his writings, he explains it a dozen times.

Can we equate science and the theory of cognition?

Page 3, para 5

A scientific grasp of the external world is also the scientific understanding of cognition as a process.

Confusing at best, more likely downright wrong. Natural science is not the same as philosophy nor is every natural scientist a philosopher. A scientific grasp of the external world – leaving aside the question of the relative nature of such a ‘grasp’ – is not the exclusive province of the dialectical materialist. In fact, the opposite is more generally the case: development of dialectical materialist philosophy has been spurred on by progress in science in spite of the methodological weaknesses of most scientists. The notion of the identity of science and philosophy comes from crude vulgarisation by many Soviet philosophers. See, for example, Oizerman, *Dialectical Materialism and the History of Philosophy*, p 8.

For Engels, who showed his respect for science by studying both its findings and its methods, the problem was that those who did most to develop man’s scientific grasp of nature did not have a general conception of the dialectical laws of nature or its reflection in our minds – cognition.

Natural scientists believe that they free themselves from philosophy by ignoring or abusing it. They cannot, however, make any headway without thought, and for thought they need thought determinations. But they take these categories unreflectingly from the common consciousness of so-called educated persons, which is dominated by the relics of long-obsolete philosophies or from the little bit of philosophy compulsorily listened to at the University (which is not only fragmentary, but also a medley of views of people belonging to the most varied and usually the worst schools), or from uncritical and unsystematic reading of philosophical writings of all kinds. Hence they are no less in bondage to philosophy, but unfortunately in most cases to the worst philosophy, and those who abuse philosophy the most are . . . slaves to precisely the worst vulgarised relics of the worst philosophies.’ (*Dialectics of Nature*, p 210)

Need one say more?

Can something real be so irrational?

Page 3, para 6

From synthesis, which is implicit in the science of dialectical perception, Dialectical Logic takes over and reveals concepts and categories for analysis, thereby activating the science and the theory of knowledge and historical materialism. Thus the ever-changing material properties of thought in Dialectical Logic in self-relation between subject and object, co-incide materially with the theory of knowledge.

One of the characters Alice met behind the Looking Glass was Humpty-Dumpty:

‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory,” ’ Alice said.

Humpty-Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant, “there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!” ’

‘But “Glory” doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’ Alice objected.

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty-Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘It means just what I want it to mean – neither more nor less’.

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things’.

‘The question is,’ said Humpty-Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’

Synthesis is defined in the dictionary as the ‘building up of separate elements especially of conceptions or propositions or facts into a connected whole, especially a theory or system’ and is the opposite of analysis, itself defined as the ‘resolution into simple elements’. The two – analysis and synthesis – are inseparable processes not of perception – the action by which the mind refers its sensations to an external object as cause – but of cognition as a whole. Perception is a natural process – a property of a myriad of living creatures. It is dialectical in the sense that all natural phenomena are dialectical and to distinguish dialectical perception is to talk of nothing. Perception is no more a ‘science’ than are walking, sleeping or scratching a pimple. If this still is not clear, we could take a look at Hegel. In the small *Logic*, he writes:

Yet analysis is the process from the immediacy of sensation to thought: those attributes, which the object contains in unison, acquire the form of universality by being separated. Empiricism therefore labours under a delusion, if it supposes that, while analysing the objects, it leaves them as they were: it really transforms them into an abstract. (p 62)

and, later:

The movement of the Synthetic method is the reverse of the Analytical method. The latter starts from the individual and proceeds to the universal; in the former, the starting point is given by the universal (as a definition), from which we proceed by particularising (in division) to the individual (the theorem). The Synthetic method thus presents itself as the development – the ‘moments’ of the notion on the object. (p 286)

So why say, ‘From synthesis, which is implicit in the science of dialectical perception . . .’ What (if anything) does it mean? Mankind in his daily life is confronted by an array of phenomena – appearances of things – which are perceived. Properties are abstracted, brought together; concepts are developed each describing common attributes of apparently unrelated things: i.e., colour, age, propensity to rust or whatever. The thing is broken down – analysed – into its properties. Concepts and percepts can be brought together to synthesise new conceptions, which guide our practice. Every thought and every practice of man and animals contains elements of both synthesis and analysis. As Engels describes in *Dialectics of Nature* (p 222), these are activities of Understanding.

But the philosopher means something more developed. Reason is a property not of man as an animal but of man as a developed social being with a history and a comparatively long one at that. In analysis, we break down the movement and change of natural phenomena and – through the process of thought – synthesise notions whose abstract character brings thought much closer to concrete reality. Laws, tendencies, possibilities, causes and effects: the apparent movement away from reality towards the abstract, towards the synthesised notion, not given immediately in sensation, actually bring us closer to reality.

Could it have ever been thought that philosophy would gainsay the validity of the intelligible essences because they are without the spatial and temporal material of sensuousness?’ (Hegel, *Science of Logic* p 590 and *Notebooks*, p 172)

To which Lenin adds:

Here, too, Hegel is essentially right: value is a category which dispenses with the material of sensuousness but it is truer than the law of supply and demand.

From the first clause in Healy’s paragraph, which uses words to mean just what anyone wants them to mean, we come to the second.

From synthesis . . . Dialectical Logic takes over and reveals concepts and categories for analysis, thereby activating the science and the theory of knowledge and historical materialism.

The cornerstone of materialism is the notion that thought is the reflection of matter in the mind of man. All philosophy grasped that this relationship was more than a ‘mirror’ reflection: the giants of the eighteenth century – Diderot and Rousseau above all – touched on the dialectic of nature and society. Kant placed the contradictory nature of thought fair and square at the centre of his *Critique*. Hegel’s crowning achievement was to show that this dialectic of thought was a reflection of the dialectic of things, which was itself the ‘alienation’ of the Absolute Idea.

What determined the idealistic form of his thought? First, the inability of mechanical materialism to tackle the dilemma of the link between social being and social consciousness and the failed dreams of the Enlightenment which had promised so much but whose actuality was the French bourgeois regime and the

collapse of the Napoleonic empire. Second, the other side of this development – a class which, to end its own oppression, had to end all class oppression – had yet to enter the arena of history.

The material force that lay behind Hegel's great thought – a class that proved the irrationality of all that was real in its sweeping destruction of the sacred French monarchy – proved for a time actually to be the brake on drawing the conclusions that flowed from it. Nonetheless, Hegel's was an *objective* idealism: thought did reflect the world – it was the world itself that had an ideal aspect. Why then parody this and say 'From synthesis, . . . Dialectical Logic takes over reveals concepts and categories for analysis'? In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy*, Engels writes as follows:

According to Hegel, dialectics is the self-development of the concept. The absolute concept does not only exist – unknown where – from eternity, it is also the living soul of the whole existing world. It develops into itself through all the preliminary stages which are treated at length in the *Logic* and which are all included in it. Then it 'alienates' itself by changing into nature, where, without consciousness of itself, disguised as the necessity of nature, it goes through a new development and finally comes to self-consciousness in man. This self-consciousness then elaborates itself again in *history* (emphasis added) from the crude form until finally the absolute concept again comes to itself completely in the Hegelian philosophy. According to Hegel, therefore, the dialectical movement apparent in nature and history, that is the causal interconnection of the progressive movement from the lower to the higher, which asserts itself through all zig-zag movements and temporary retrogressions is only a copy of the self-movement of the concept going on from eternity, no-one knows where, but at all events independently of any thinking human brain. This ideological perversion had to be done away with. We comprehended the concepts in our heads once more materialistically – as images of real things instead of regarding the real things as images of this or that stage of the absolute concept. Thus dialectics reduced itself to the science of the general laws of motion, both of the external world and of human thought – two sets of laws which are identical in substance but differ in their expression in so far as the human mind can apply them consciously, while in nature and also up to now for the most part in human history, these laws assert themselves unconsciously, in the form of external necessity, in the midst of an endless series of seeming accidents. Thereby the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical motion of the real world and thus the dialectic of Hegel was placed upon its head; or rather, turned off its head on which it was standing; and placed upon its feet. (chap IV)

Dialectical logic 'takes over' nothing at all. It is the study of how the world – matter in motion – is reflected in the minds of men. Hegel was right on this score – when we eat, physiology does not teach us how to how to digest. We do it. Just as knowing the physiology of digestion can help to make us healthier people so knowing how the movement of the world is reflected in the development of concepts and categories enables us better to reflect this movement. We can grasp how real truth is reflected not in 'concrete facts' by themselves but in suprasensual abstractions which go away from the concrete precisely to bring us closer to it

Nor does 'Dialectical Logic' reveal concepts and categories for analysis; thought does not determine thought. Concepts and categories are derived from the analysis of matter in motion – nature, society, etc. If this phrase from *Studies* seems to be asserting the primacy of thought over matter, read on. What ' . . . thereby activating the science and the theory of knowledge and historical materialism' means, I do not know though it acquires sense (but little meaning) if it is re-phrased, ' . . . thereby activating the theory of knowledge and historical materialism,'. Let it pass; there's worse to come.

Thus, the ever-changing material properties of thought in Dialectical Logic in self-relation between subject and object, coincide materially with the theory of knowledge.

Two points:

- Thought does not have material properties either in 'Dialectical Logic' or anywhere else. It is a property of matter in motion. As Ilyenkov points out [I learnt later that Dietzgen did so first], thought is a property of thinking matter just as walking is a property of the legs. If something has material properties, it is . . . material, just as a piece of iron with magnetic properties, is . . . magnetic. Iron has magnetic properties but magnetism does not have ferrous properties. If a form of matter in motion – mankind – has the property of thought, it is thinking matter. Spinoza understood that over 300 years ago. But the notion that thought has material properties is a form of thinking whose name has a long history: idealism.
- How can thought, "coincide materially with 'the theory of knowledge' " without the corollary that both thought and the theory of knowledge – a part, an aspect of thought – are forms of matter?

A Little Breather

What, then, are the principal errors on these first two pages of *Studies in Dialectical Materialism*?

- 1 The notion that a trilogy of numbered books, one of which was not intended for publication, can serve as a substitute for the canon of bourgeois and Marxist thought which was the starting point for Lenin's own political development.
- 2 The confusion of the process of cognition with the study of cognition and the idea that cognition is some special privilege of a Marxist.
- 3 A gross error on the question of semblance and the ludicrous notion that semblance is the theory of knowledge of a human being.
- 4 The equally false notion that historical materialism is a theory of knowledge not a theory of history.
- 5 The idea that concepts and categories are revealed by 'Dialectical Logic' and not by the movement of nature, i.e. the idea that thinking determines the course of thinking.

Not bad for well under 1,000 words.

Historical Materialism as a method

A cursory look at the sections in *Studies* on 'Historical Materialism as a method' and 'The great achievement of Karl Marx' will show them as a plagiarism and a distortion of Lenin's 1894 book, *Who 'The Friends of the People' are and how they fight the social democrats.* Let's take a closer look.

Page 4, para 1

Historical materialism is a method for the building of the Revolutionary Party, based upon Cognition of its object, which is society consisting of human beings with the will to go on changing the world independently of each other as individuals.'

Of course it can be said that 'Historical Materialism is a method for the building of the Revolutionary Party, based upon Cognition of its *object*. . .' but it is, nonetheless, a definition so narrow as to be false. All practices of mankind start from 'cognition of its object'; it can be called knowing a little of what we are talking about'.

But wait. The 'object' is defined as 'society consisting of conscious human beings, with the will to go on changing the world independently of each other as individuals'.

This is precisely what historical materialism is not as the quotations on the next page of *Studies* show. The section on historical materialism is self-contradictory from first to last. As Lenin says, 'The mass of people adapt themselves to these relations *unconsciously*.' It is true that people 'consciously' proceed about their day to day lives in so far as they think about what they are doing, lay plans for the future, engage in the struggle of classes and so on.

The next paragraph of this section is a quotation by Lenin from Marx but there is another following the one quoted in *Studies* that explains this point:

From forms of the development of the productive forces these relations (of production) turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations, a distinction should always be made between the material transformations of the conditions of production, which should be established *in terms of natural science* (emphasis added), and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological – forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.

This consciousness is *relative*: the mass of people are *unconscious* of the laws that govern the society in which they live. The historical materialist theory does not maintain that human beings have the will to go on changing the world independently of each other as individuals. On the contrary: the production of the material conditions of life – and the *social relations* that evolve in the course of this production – determine his social consciousness, without regard to will which is itself a product of social being. (The question of will deserves further study, looking at Hegel on the state and the thought of Nietzsche, much admired by Hitler.)

The essential determinant of human history is not the will of anybody; it is the struggle of man against nature which assumes in the course of history a bewildering variety of forms. The great achievement of historical materialism was to show that there were factors hidden beneath the surface of society that gave to these appearances a unity: it was possible to show that, ultimately, the determinant of historical progress was the contradiction between the development of the forces of production and the social relations of production which had arisen as a superstructure on this economic base.

This is the ABC of Marxism. Any other notion is wrong, false, erroneous, idealist and reactionary. But such is the starting point for the discussion in *Studies* on historical materialism and no quotations from Lenin or Marx can conceal this.

Lenin showed that such a development and change was a historically natural process which he placed on a scientific foundation as a source of 'social theory', incorporating the developments in the sciences. The scientific nature of social theory is generated from the essence of the material unity of nature in constant motion, which provides the conditions of life out of which develops the class struggle in society.

- 1 'Such a development and change.' What development and change? Neither development nor change have yet been mentioned in this section. Is this serious scientific writing?
- 2 Lenin showed nothing of the sort. Neither Engels nor Lenin was the founder of the theory of historical materialism. Karl Marx was. And nobody was more willing than Engels and Lenin to acknowledge this. Lenin defended Marx's method against all-comers and applied it to the conditions of his time. That is all.
- 3 A historically natural process was not placed on a scientific foundation by Marx, Engels, Lenin or anybody else. Marx provided a scientific foundation for understanding a natural process: for the interpretation and re-interpretation of history. The negation of French mechanical materialism – i.e. its dialectical sublation and the materialist sublation of dialectical idealism created the ground for Marx first to postulate and then to demonstrate his theory whose starting point was the study of history, something that never rates a mention in this or any other part of *Studies*.
- 4 The scientific nature of social theory is not 'generated from the essence of the material unity of nature in constant motion, etc'. The essential nature of phenomena, whether natural or social, is derived from analysis of the appearance of things and the synthesis of abstract notions: the establishment of relations of cause and effect, the conception of law-governed relations, etc.
- 5 '. . . which provides the conditions of life out of which develops the class struggle in society.' Nature does more than 'provide the conditions of life' – it is the basis for life itself, including, at a late stage of development, human life, which arises as a social phenomenon.

It was the emergence of man as a tool-making animal (a phrase of Benjamin Franklin's which Marx admired) which underlay the development of surplus means of subsistence, the social division of labour, the evolution of forms of property and of social classes. Further development of man's capacity as a tool-maker brought these classes not into relative but into absolute contradiction.

This simple notion is central to the materialist conception of the origins of the class struggle. Any reformist or idealist academic could agree that the class struggle arose out of the conditions of life which is in any case the theme of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality in Man*. We have come a little way since then, surely? Or did Engels have nothing to add in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*?

Even the context of the quotations is distorted. In the extract from *A critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* from which Lenin takes an extensive quotation, Marx is not referring to the historical implications of such essence' at all but to the conclusions he drew from his reassessment of Hegel's philosophy.

The Categories of Historical Materialism

The 'relations of production' are sometimes referred to as the mode of production, whilst the *material productive forces* may be called the means or tools of production. These interacting opposites, as laws, constitute the objective nature of the capitalist crisis.

They can be referred to as anything under the sun but nothing will alter the fact that relations of production are *not* the mode of production.

The mode of production is a contradictory *unity* of the forces of production and the relations of production: what is owned, how it is owned and worked *and* who owns and who works. The forces of production include not only the instruments of production – factories, mines, etc – but the working class; not only the objects of history but its subjects. Revolutions are not made by machines but by people.

The above quotation from the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* can bear a repeat of the first sentence:

From forms of the development of the productive forces these relations (of production) turn into their fetters.

In its early days, capitalism played an historically progressive role nowhere more eloquently described than in *The Communist Manifesto*. As it expanded to a world-wide system, its role became increasingly to act as a brake on the development of mankind's productive capacity. But it has remained throughout all its history the

capitalist *mode* of production. There cannot be capitalist relations of production – as the dominant social form – in unity with subsistence agriculture, primitive hunting and gathering or Greek slave economy – even if there are elements of commodity exchange in any one form of these *modes* of production.

What, but what, is a Law?

These interacting opposites, as laws, constitute the objective nature of capitalist crisis.

If we correct the above (elementary) error and say that the ‘relations of production’ and the ‘forces of production’ are the interacting opposites in question, we can now examine the second half of the paragraph. And it is wrong whatever sense you try to give it.

- 1 The correct category to describe their relationship is contradiction, not interaction. Without the absolute incompatibility of the two sides of the contradiction coming into Existence in the course of historical development, there is no social revolution – and no need for it.
- 2 ‘Law’ is a category that describes the form of essential relation, not the mere existence of contradiction but the course of its movement at different levels of abstraction. Law can be the most general expression of movement (e.g. the law of the interpenetration and transformation of opposites), a precise and limited relation of science (e.g. Ohm’s Law, $V=RxI$) or an expression of tendency that penetrates to the essentiality beneath the appearance of complex phenomena such as the law of the falling rate of profit.

It is always an approximation to the movement of things. No law ever completely describes essential relation: the deviation of law from reality is one of the driving forces of knowledge (negativity as the turning point of the notion). There is nothing novel here. Lenin’s notes on the section of *Science of Logic* on Appearance deals with the point:

Hence Law is not beyond Appearance, but is *immediately present* in it; the realm of Laws is the *quiescent* (Hegel’s italics) reflection of the existing or appearing world . . . (*Science of Logic* quoted in *Notebooks*, p 151)

To which he adds:

This is a remarkably materialistic and remarkably appropriate (with the word quiescent) determination. Law takes the quiescent – and therefore law, every law, is narrow, incomplete, approximate.

The same question is discussed in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, especially the section ‘Causality and Necessity in Nature’. This quotes at length and then comments on Feuerbach answering a critic of his *Essence of Christianity*:

‘Nature may be conceived only through nature itself, that its necessity is neither human nor logical, neither metaphysical nor mathematical, that nature alone is that being to which it is impossible to apply any human measure, although we compare and give names to its phenomena, in order to make them comprehensible to us, and in general apply human expressions and conceptions to them, as for example, order, purpose, law; and are obliged to do so because of the character of our language . . .’

What then is meant by this passage? Nothing more than to distinguish between that which belongs to nature and that which belongs to man; it does not assert that there is actually nothing in nature corresponding to the words or ideas of order, purpose, law. All that it does is to deny the identity between thought and being; it denies that they exist in nature exactly as they do in the head or mind of man. Order, purpose, law are words used by man to translate the acts of nature into his own language in order that he may understand them. These words are not devoid of meaning or of objective content; nevertheless, a distinction must be made between the original and the translation. Order, purpose, law in the human sense express something arbitrary.

So in this paragraph, we have the following absurdities:

- 1 A revision of the basic economic categories of historical materialism.
- 2 A description of *contradictory* opposites as merely ‘interacting’.
- 3 A misconception of ‘law’ which leaves any theory of ‘Scientific Cognition’ looking pretty sick. I would have thought that a hard act to follow but it can, it seems, be done:

These ‘interacting opposites’ (?) as “law” (?) *constitute the objective nature of capitalist crisis*.

That is ‘capitalist crisis? Did Marx write *Capital* or no? Does capitalism as a world system have a *history* or not? The canon of Marxist economics – describing the activities of hundreds of millions of people over centuries, culminating in an epoch of wars and revolutions without parallel in the history of mankind – can be subsumed under a wretched mockery of historical materialism and dismissed in a phrase. This is truly the degeneration of thought.

Page 4, para 6

Lenin recognised that Cognition of such an historically-developing process as the relations between the activities of individual subjects of Cognition involved reflection, embodying the historical materialist method, as distinct from the Cognitive process in general. In a quotation from Marx, Lenin indicated some of the issues raised by this type of Cognition, which occurs when the *actuality* of the process of Cognition emerges.

Let us try to make this convoluted nonsense into plain language to see what it really says. It takes only a second to read but much longer to puzzle out, believe me. Have a dictionary to hand.

Lenin recognised that the faculty of knowing about the history of the activities of individual people, who have themselves the faculty of knowing, involved thinking about it, giving concrete form to the historical materialist method, as distinct from the process of thinking in general. In a quotation from Marx, Lenin indicated some of the issues raised by this type of ‘knowing’, which occurs when the reality of the process of knowing emerges.

And this garbage is supposed to be illustrated by the quotation from Marx that follows! (p 4, para 7)

Just as our opinion of an individual is not based upon what he thinks of himself, so we can not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production. (*Critique of the Philosophy of Law from Friends*, CW 1 p 138)

Marx simply says that, in a revolutionary epoch, ideology is determined by the contradictions in society not that people have revolutionary ideas and therefore change society. He makes the point because he is discussing social revolution. Marx’s historical materialism was one of the great triumphs of human thought and he postulated the theory at that time in history when the conditions for such an intellectual development were present. But the conception is fundamentally simple. It has been illustrated by all the great Marxists – Marx himself, Engels, Mehring, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxembour plus a host of lesser figures such as Morgan, Kautsky, Bernstein and more modern historians like Morton, Hill and Polisensky. They all painstakingly researched or reinterpreted history on the basis of the materialist premise and showed *how* the economic developments underlying the movement of society determined the political, ideological religious, etc superstructure. Nonsense like we have here has one purpose: to conceal with mystification the fact that the author is ignorant of history in any shape of form.

Page 5, para 1

It was common practice for the historians of the pre-Marxist period to study political and legal forms as if these were consciously established by men alone and not by the dialectical law-governed social relations existing independently of men.

Like everything in nature, social relations are both dialectical and law-governed. The historical materialist method consists of *revealing* beneath the complexity of the material the laws that govern the movement and its dialectic. And, for that, the starting point is history itself. You will find very little material to work on if you confine yourself to social relations that exist independent of men. People play a not unimportant role in society. Bolder folk might call it decisive.

Page 5, para 4

Following a quote from Lenin – which doesn’t describe an historical error as claimed but restates the premises of historical materialism – we have a gem:

In singling out ‘production relations’, Historical Materialism provides an objective demonstration that such relations were nothing less than the ‘structure of society’, which distinguished one capitalist country from another.

Take the full paragraph from Lenin from which this is plagiarised to illustrate how the plagiarism is also a distortion.

Hitherto, sociologists had found it difficult to distinguish the important and the unimportant in the complex network of social phenomena (that is the root of subjectivism in sociology) and had been unable to discover any objective criterion for such a demarcation. Materialism provided an absolutely objective criterion by singling out ‘production relations’ as the structure of society, and by making it possible to apply to these relations that general scientific criterion of recurrence whose applicability to sociology the subjectivists denied. So long as they confined themselves to ideological social relations (i.e., such as, before taking shape, pass through man’s consciousness), they could not observe recurrence and regularity in the social phenomena of various countries, and their science was at best only a description of these phenomena, a collection of raw material. The analysis of material social relations (i.e. of those that take shape without passing through man’s consciousness: when exchanging products men enter into production

relations without even realising that there is a social relation of production here) – the analysis of material social relations at once made it possible to observe recurrence and regularity and to generalise the systems of the various countries in the single fundamental concept: social formation. It was this generalisation alone that made it possible to proceed from the description of social phenomena (and their evaluation from the standpoint of an ideal) to their strictly scientific analysis, which isolates, let us say by way of an example that ‘which distinguishes one capitalist country from another and investigates that which is common to all of them.

If the admirers of *Studies* cannot see the plagiarism and distortion here, I cannot help them and do not know who can. The last paragraph of this section is lifted from the next paragraph of the book. Skipping a sentence, Healy writes:

The subjectivists, whilst admitting ‘that all historical phenomena conform to law’, were incapable of regarding their evolution as a process of natural history, precisely because they came to a halt before man’s social ideas and aims and were unable to reduce them to material social relations’.

What Lenin wrote was:

(The subjectivists, *for instance* [emphasis added], although they admitted that historical phenomena conform to law, were incapable of regarding their evolution as a process of natural history, precisely because they came to a halt before man’s social ideas and aims and were unable to reduce them to material social relations.)

Though lifted almost verbatim, it is here that the fraud also becomes a charade. The chapter is purporting to compare and contrast Subjective Idealism as a method and tendency either within the party or petty-bourgeois layers of the workers’ movement or both (it is never clear which with the result that untrained and inexperienced party members become totally confused) with the method of Marxism.

But Subjectivism is *not*, repeat *not*, Subjective Idealism. It has no connection with Subjective Idealism. Neither tendency – and both have a definite, established and prolonged history explained at length in Marxist literature – is defined in any shape or form.

Subjectivism was a tendency in the liberal Narodnik movement in Russia at the close of the nineteenth century whose chief spokesman was Mikhailovsky. Both Lenin and Plekhanov fought fierce polemic with him in the struggle to establish Marxism at the head of the Russian workers’ movement. In *Friends*, Lenin clearly defines it as a ‘wretched imitation’ of utopian socialism. Central to its thinking was a view of history as something ‘moral, just and inevitable’ alongside the idea of the ‘passive’ crowd (unconscious and imitative) and the ‘active’ hero. This is all very clear in *Friends* (See e.g. pps 158-160).

Subjective idealism on the other hand is not a theory of history, politics or sociology but a *philosophical* doctrine. Its most famous protagonist – Bishop George Berkeley – was born in Ireland in 1685 and published his major work, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Understanding*, in 1709. This was followed by a popularised account of his theory (*Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous in Opposition to Scepticism and Atheism*) three years later. He was himself a scientist of no mean competence: his first publication was on the psychology of vision and he keenly followed the scientific revolution of his day. An admirer of Newton and Locke and familiar with the work of both, he was nonetheless repelled by the materialist foundation of Locke’s philosophy.

The great achievement of Karl Marx

Page 5, paras 5 and 6

First a quotation from *Friends*, then another:

With the publication of *Capital* what had once been designated as a historical hypothesis was now proved scientifically. ‘The gigantic step forward taken by Marx,’ said Lenin, ‘in this respect consisted precisely in that he discarded all these arguments about society and progress in general and produced a *scientific* analysis of *one* society and of *one* progress – capitalist.’ (Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 1, p 145)

The quotation is indeed taken from page 145 and is correctly reproduced. More interesting is the introductory phrase. Turn back to page 142, second paragraph:

Now – since the appearance of *Capital* – the materialist conception of history is no longer a hypothesis, but a scientifically *proven* proposition.’ (Emphasis added)

It has a familiar ring but a different meaning. ‘Proven’ means that the qualities of something have been tested – which is true of *Capital*. The analysis of capitalism, its history and development and the notions that Marx evolved – the contradictory nature of the commodity, surplus-value, etc as well as the laws of capitalist

movement – have been tested in the crucible of time. But it is not a ‘proof’ – and cannot be, because as a ‘living thing’ (to use the phrase quoted in *Studies*), it is not subject to ‘proof’ in that sense.

A scientific ‘proof’ is something different: it implies a closed argument, a finished topic. The Earth is round – that has been proved over centuries of observation and only a close reading of *Studies* would call it into question. But even that ‘roundness’ is relative. Asymmetrical oblateness is a more developed notion which ‘proves’ the theory that the planet is round – and whose own ‘proof’ is the result of theoretical thought and scientific technique which has a ‘round’ planet as its starting point. Anybody with a glimmer of the scientific method – even those awful people with their grubby individual needs in the universities – is well aware of the difference between proof and test, of the relative within the absolute of knowledge.

What follows from saying that historical materialism is ‘proved’ by *Capital*? That it need not be reconsidered! Which is just what happens in this book. Historical materialism, Marxist economics and the study of history go out the window. What is left behind is ‘dialectical logic’ – and the ‘dialectical logic’ of a fraud to boot – in which the ignorance of the history of philosophy is rivalled by the parody of Hegel and surpassed by the distortion of Marx’s achievement. To think that the author of *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* is invoked to justify this charlatanry and that the book goes out with the name of the Workers Revolutionary Party emblazoned on the cover! I defy any member of the party (hopefully now the rump) to say that they are proud of what this book represents and to defend it *in writing* in this discussion.